THE RUBY SLIPPERS

J.T. Townley

IMAGE: Katerynna Bortsova

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for D. B.

1. I set out to find the ruby slippers. They worked for What's-Her-Name, so why not for me?

2. I didn't know where to start.

3. I walked down the block for a slice of pizza. The guy in the apron served me one cheese-and-mushroom and a bucket of scorn.

4. On the curb, a pair of red Velcro shoes were poised to step out into traffic.

5. The shiny-feathered ravens swirled and cawed, blacking out the sky.

6. The ruby slippers would work for me, too. If only I could find them.

7. This was my quest.

8. My feet already ached from walking.

9. A man in a tin suit was panhandling on the corner: "Ain't you got no heart, brother?"

10. I was sure he meant *home*.

11. Overhead, blue Chuck Taylors tied together with white laces dangled from a power line.

12. On the third floor, a toothsome twenty-something danced a samba in the window sporting nothing but a warm smile.

13. I enjoyed the view.

14. Until this dumpy old lady with wings fluttered down over my left shoulder. She wore a floral frock and black schoolmarm boots. "Get your mind out of the gutter." "Who are you?" "Your fairy godmother." "But I don't have a—" "Wanna belt?"

15. I returned to my quest.

16. Soon my dogs were barking. I rented a skateboard from the Rent-a-Skateboard rack and kicked my way down to the river.

17. The cherry blossoms bloomed. Old men took pictures of blooming cherry blossoms with folding cameras.

18. My feet kept aching.

19. Then a kid blindsided me with his pogo stick and ran off with my skateboard. "That's a rental," I shouted. He flipped me the bird, then ollied off a park bench, crushing fallen cherry blossoms beneath his wheels.

20. I rubbed my head where the pogo stick had kissed it.

21. A pogo stick?

22. I bounced toward the Brompton Bridge.

23. A sliver of rainbow shimmered for a moment, then was gone.
24. Halfway across, a woman's wedge (purple with a gold buckle) interrupted my progress. The bridge screamed up at my face. My palms slapped the pavement.

25. I had not found the ruby slippers.

26. I chucked the pogo stick into the river.

27. A pair of beat-up cowboy boots perched on the railing. Would they jump? I did not try to talk them down.

28. I was on a quest.

29. Crusaders with lances and coats-of-arms clattered across the bridge, going the opposite direction. I ignored them. Their quest was not my own.

30. On the east bank, my fairy godmother lit a Montecristo and blew fat gray rings at my face. "The glass ones, Einstein. The glass ones."

31. A high-top skate shoe, green corduroy, lingered alone in the gutter.

32. A lovely lady in a white lace bra brushed her teeth on a motel balcony.

33. But the ruby slippers were nowhere in sight.

34. My feet felt like ground chuck.

35. A man smoking weed on a fire escape yelled, "Give it up, bro." His sleeve tattoos depicted scenes from *Siddhartha*.

36. I considered his advice, then flipped him the bird.
37. On the curb, a strange woman's shoe—pump? spool heel?—made of glass.

38. I hurled it at a graffiti-covered wall. The shoe shattered in a rainbow burst, and shrapnel cut my cheek.

39. I limped along the tracks, certain my shoes were filling with blood.

40. A curvy woman in a scarlet bustier was roped to the railroad ties. A villain with prominent mustachios lurked in an alley strewn with green glass. An engine hissed. A horn blared. The woman shrieked.

41. A man with a shiny-feathered afro sipped elixir in the sunlight. "Mind your bidness," he cawed, his words blacking out the sky.

42. He was right. It was none of my business.

43. My business was a quest.

44. For the ruby slippers.

45. Would I find them? Wouldn't I? What if I didn't? What if I did?

46. Blood congealed on my face.

47. A freight train rumbled down the tracks. From an open boxcar, a scarecrow played a jangly rhythm and sang, "I was born a long way from where I belong, but now I'm headed home."

48. Stiletto zipper boots lounged on a filthy park bench.

49. My fairy godmother was tagging a Lewis and Clark statue with crimson spray paint. "Are you hard of hearing?" she asked. "Short of memory? Bereft of brains?"

50. "What are you driving at?"

51. *"The glass ones,* I told you. *The glass ones."* She shook her head between sprays. "You really screwed the pooch now."

52. "But there's no place like home."

53. She aimed her can at my face. "You can never go home."

54. "Home is where the heart is."

55. When the siren yelped, my fairy godmother passed me the spray can. Her face looked wan in the swirl of red and blue. She shook her head. "Flubbed, botched, bungled, butchered."

56. I ran.

57. My dogs barked some more.

58. Cowardly lions scurried away like frightened alley cats.

59. My tongue swelled, thick and furry. My lungs burned.

60. I panted and heaved.

61. When I could see straight again, I spotted them.

62. Across the boulevard.

63. The ruby slippers.

64. The object of my quest.

65. I'd almost given up. Perhaps I should have. I was beaten and bloodied and wanted for vandalism.

66. Now I looked left, right, then left again.

67. I traversed the boulevard.

68. To Sassy's Exotic Dancers.

69. The ruby slippers cradled the feet of a svelte lovely in a G-string and down jacket. They had more heel than I remembered.

70. "Sassy?" I called.

71. A thick-necked bruiser with one eye flung open the windowless door. His suit jacket strained at the seams. The ruby slippers sashayed toward him.

72. "Sassy!" I yelled.

73. She shimmied like a twenty-something naked in the window.

74. The bouncer nodded, and the ruby slippers carried Sassy inside.

75. They were playing hard to get.

76. I didn't care for that game. The rules eluded me.

77. When I dashed across the pitted asphalt, my dogs howled and yelped.

78. Now a meaty paw thumped my chest. The bouncer was four feet wide if he was a foot. He flashed his gold teeth and said, "Sorry, buddy. We're closed."

79. "Sassy?!" I hollered.

80. "Her name's Dorothy," he said, shoving me to the ground. "Now I suggest you go home."

81. "But what about the ruby slippers?"

82. He pointed at my barking dogs. "You mean those?"

83. My feet felt like pulled pork. Blood oozed onto the toes of the ruby slippers. They had more heel than I remembered.

84. I heaved myself off the asphalt.

85. The bruiser shook his head and ran a mitt over his mug. "You should really go home," he said.

86. He was right. Wasn't that the whole point?

87. I took a deep breath, then clicked the heels together and muttered the magic words.

88. But nothing happened.

89. I tried again, with more gusto.

90. Still nothing.

91. "They don't work," I said and wrenched them off my mangled feet.

92. I looked at the bouncer. He looked at me. Then I hurled the ruby slippers beneath an oncoming bus. A sparkly thud, followed by another.

93. "Good riddance," I said.

94. The bouncer rubbed his chin, then flashed his golden smile. "Where thou art," he said, opening his arms to embrace Sassy's, the city, the entire universe, "that is home."