

## Hallie's Ballet Slippers

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They were plain ballet slippers, size 6.5, model 2028 from Capezio. Well-crafted and sturdy, if you were concerned with such things. Made of muted pink canvas, with supple leather split-soles for a nice grip on the floor. A small ribbon was threaded through the opening, designed to be pulled taught and tied off in a bow. An elastic band meant to be sewed on by hand came in the box also, hidden under a layer of white tissue paper.

They were nothing remarkable, certainly. No *real* ballerina would be caught dead in them. Still, their model was quite a popular sell at Miss Laura's Dance Bag in downtown West Chestnut, Georgia. Especially with the set of young girls who'd begged and begged their parents for ballet lessons at the studio down the street, and then quit after a week.

But to Hallie McFarlane, they were more than shoes. So much more, to the point they were objects worthy of worship. They were transcendent. Sacred. Magical.

When Hallie wore her shoes, she was a glowing angel gliding down in an impeccable arabesque from her perch high in the heavens.

When Hallie wore her shoes, she was a sorceress twirling a mystic, ancient circle around a burning pyre in the middle of a deep forest, sending curling smoke signals in cryptic patterns from two sticks of incense gripped in her palms.

When Hallie wore her shoes, she was a lithe ballerina cloaked by rich red velvet, dancing in a decadent, gilded theatre proudly in front of hundreds of nobles and czars.

When Hallie wore her shoes, she had a snobby aristocrat's nose and expensive, starched-white dresses with matching sweaters and two doting parents who paid for a private tutor to come teach her Latin on the weekends.

When Hallie wore her shoes, she was a spoiled pop-star on the cover of every glossy magazine, bathed in glitter and sequins, looking perfect from every angle that the spotlights and flashbulbs could catch of her.

When Hallie wore her shoes, she had legions of pretty friends who positively showered her with adulation and compliments, but secretly harbored smoldering jealousies for Hallie's beauty and popularity.

When Hallie wore her shoes, she was going on a trip by private train car to New York City where she would visit all of the pricy shops one by one, gaze pityingly upon the working-class scum from behind the safety of her horse-drawn phaeton's window, and take her tea daily at the Four Seasons.

When Hallie wore her shoes, she was a princess in an invented land who danced like a fairy at all of the lavish balls her parents threw on her behalf, but could shoot an arrow better than any of her stalwart brothers.

When Hallie wore her shoes, she was stunning. Enchanting. Breath-taking. She was marvelous, exciting, and rich. Adored by everyone who met her. Absolutely perfect.

Most importantly, when Hallie wore her shoes, she was anyone from a selection of thousands of make-believe people out there – anyone who *wasn't* Hallie McFarlane, the oldest daughter of two lower-class parents in a forgotten town, just west of Atlanta and south of nowhere.

But Hallie was dreaming on stolen time. The precious shoes were starting to grow tight around the toes and show the clear signs of use. The leather was worn down and dark as the dust they'd danced in off the floor of Hallie's shared bedroom.

The shoes had to come off eventually. They had to be untied and placed back in the nice, makeshift box Hallie had found in the neighbor's recycling bin.

It was a shame, really, that Hallie hadn't taken the nice cardboard box the shoes came in. Then she could've had the two elastic bands to sew on, and the crinkly tissue paper that made the shoes seem a hundred times more glamorous than they really were. Maybe, if she'd been able to take the box, the shoes would have held up better. Anyway, there was no use worrying about it now.

Hallie still remembered the day she got her shoes. She was going grocery shopping with her mother. It was a Thursday afternoon, and Mrs. McFarlane had made the huge mistake of taking along the whole army of children after picking them up from West Chestnut Lower School. (That was when Hallie was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and still went to the elementary school and couldn't walk home by herself.)

Hallie's mother had begged her to take Kara and Sue-Anne out of the grocery store, because there was no way the woman could keep her eye on five loud, ill-behaved children at once. She had always trusted Hallie, and for good reason. Hallie played her role as the oldest child perfectly, also doubling as peacemaker, babysitter, and stand-in parent.

Taking her wayward sister Sue-Anne by the chubby hand, and letting Kara ride piggy-back, Hallie made her way down the sidewalk, past the old insurance office and abandoned lot that the neighborhood kids used to play tag in before Game Boys were invented. Hallie expertly steered her fleet into the dance shop, because it was always so nice in there. The owner had tinny

classical music drifting from the overhead speakers, and something about the racks of tulle and velvet that crowded the place seemed to hush dull roar of the outside world. Sue-Anne eagerly ran over to get her grimy fingers all over the purple leotards, and Kara sat on a bench in front of the wall lined by shoes, patiently sucking her thumb and watching her older sister take down a box of shoes from the wall.

The owner, Laura Roland, walked over from behind the counter and asked Hallie lightly if she needed any help. She knew, from the shabby second-hand clothes that the three girls wore, that they wouldn't be purchasing anything today. But it was a nice thing to do, and the shop was having a slow day anyway. Hallie shook her head no, and tried on the shoes she'd pulled down – which fit her small feet just perfectly.

It wasn't out of spite or greed or plain meanness that Hallie took the shoes for her own. She hated stealing, and thought it was a miserable thing to do. When she walked out of Miss Laura's Dance Bag with her sisters in tow and the canvas shoes stuffed in the kangaroo pocket of her faded, out-sized sweatshirt, she didn't feel the least bit guilty. If there was anyone in the world who deserved those shoes, it was Hallie. In a way, they belonged to her more so than if she'd paid for them.

She loved them and treasured them like nobody else would have. She kept them as her most precious secret, her own icon of happiness and material pleasure that didn't have to be shared.

Eventually Manda, Hallie's newest sister, would start crying from her spot in front of the TV, or her brothers would fight over a half-broken toy they both thought they had the rights to, or her dad would start shouting and smoking out on the rotting wood porch, or her mother would be out too late at work to make dinner, or something around the house would need to be cleaned up and

fixed. Hallie had to take off the shoes eventually, carefully hiding them on the highest shelf in the closet (the one Kara couldn't reach).

Sometimes, Hallie would think of the shoes in embarrassment. They represented the childish dreams she religiously clung onto, like a threadbare blanket or special doll. Hallie was thirteen now – far too old for dreaming. There was barely time for it anymore, with homework and family and a life crumbling around her in desperate need of repair.

*But, still,* Hallie thought each time she tucked back her precious, stolen ballet slippers into their box. *There isn't much hope in life without dreaming, is there?*