



The Shoes

by Constance McCutcheon

Money was tight and there were so many things Monica needed which were probably extravagant, a pair of black pumps, for instance. She only wanted to be able to wear a skirt to work for once, to look neat and Frenchy in black, individually cagey, attractive and feeling wonderful. She could do it; other women managed to do it and they were by no means models of beauty, but they were themselves, in an individually cagey sort of way. That's what she wanted to be. That was why she wanted to get the shoes. She needed the shoes to do it. She needed black pumps to pull it off. The good black pumps that were necessary, though, would cost well over three hundred marks, and she couldn't afford to pay that much for just one pair of shoes.

On her way to work, she stopped into a magazine shop and bought the thick weekly newspaper in which people all over the city of Munich advertised to sell things they didn't want, could no longer use, or could no longer afford to keep: couches, coffee machines, cars, horses, clothes, shoes. First thing at work, Monica flipped through the paper to the section *Clothing: Women's*, folded it back and laid it in her bottom desk drawer, ready for easy access when the coast was clear.

Monica shared a roomy office with a young man named Ralf on the fourth floor of a building occupied solely by the software company for which they worked. The building looked as if it had been bent out of a single layer of used metal, with dingy windows gouged out of it to give the grieving inside a look out onto the major highway that provided passage for traffic streaming eastwards out of the city all day long, and, regrettably, for traffic streaming westward into the city all day long, too. From the outside, the building looked like an unappetizing place to have to sit all day. From the inside, it wasn't so bad.

"Whoa! Look at that!" Ralf leaned over his desk to stare out the window and down at the narrow one-way street four floors below. It was on this small street that the company actually resided, overwhelmed though it was by the elevated, parallel highway. "Unbelievable. They're trying to move a bridge and can't make the turn!" He giggled delightedly. Monica leaned over her desk to look down.

There in front of the building sat a long, pale-gray monolith the size of a bridge because, as Ralf had correctly observed, it was a bridge. The construction lay inert in the curve that led up to the highway, so gargantuan that the two trucks lashed to either end of it almost went unnoticed, like two barnacles exposed on the side of a shipwreck. The leading truck stood perched sideways in the middle of the road on the far side of the curve, thick dark tracks showing where it had, with equally gross ingenuity and finesse, attempted to ease entry of the bridge into the curve by cutting straight across the grassy bank. The second truck sat backwards, bearing up its end of the bridge as well as it could seventy yards away on the small side street; it hadn't even gotten to the curve. Its mandate was straightforward if impossible: to inch along

backwards mirroring the hedging, minute movements the leading truck made in the curve seventy yards away. The backwards strategy afforded the nerve-wracked driver the small advantage of slightly better visibility. Instead of staring up at a bridge that constantly moved with him, he could give his neck a good wrenching by staring backwards at it for hours at a time and or ruin his eyes by peering into the rearview mirrors. It didn't matter anymore anyway. They hadn't moved much since the train yards early that morning where and when they had been lashed fast to their load. Now they weren't moving at all.

Snagged at the first curve they had come to and indifferent to the fact that they were blocking traffic on the little road, they had left their trucks to stand sunk deep in conversation on the ruined grassy lot nestled inside the curve they couldn't negotiate with their load. Having reached a decision, the two harried drivers slammed themselves back into their truck cabins. During the next several hours, they ran back and forth between the trucks, hopped in and out of the truck cabins, looked backwards and forwards, gesticulated furiously and called out abrupt, hoarse commands to each other, their heads and elbows angled far out of the windows as they kept on the lookout for trouble while executing the complicated and hazardous exercise of inching their trucks, and thereby their load, out of the curve and very slowly down the only avenue possible to them, the rutted dirt lane that served as unfinished extension to the side street they were on. By late afternoon, they had disappeared from view and were seen no more.

When Ralf looked for them yet again and found them gone, he could not suppress his giggles. Monica looked up inquiringly. He explained: "They drove straight down that farm lane bordering the train tracks. Clever tactic. Very clever indeed." He smiled contagiously.

"So?" Monica inquired, not understanding what was so funny.

"It's a dead end!" He exclaimed, cackling openly now.

"I knew that," she answered, thoughtfully.

"Well, you know not to drive a bridge into it."

“They went in backwards, didn’t they?” she mused aloud.

“The last truck did.”

“So can’t they drive out again?”

“Then what? This is a one-way street!” The boyish cowlick of his fine, orange-colored hair shook as he doubled over and laughed out loud. “The only legal way out of here is around that curve they can’t make. They’ll be stuck here forever.”

His high-pitched laughter finally infected Monica, who laughed outright with him.

“What if they’re trying to turn around?” Ralf lost himself to convulsions of laughter. Before he left the office for the day, Ralf brought up the subject again: “They never reappeared.”

“Who?”

“The two trucks and the bridge. They never reappeared.”

“Didn’t they?”

“No!” he said, exasperated by her indifference.

“I forgot all about them.”

“I couldn’t think of anything else. I bet they’re sitting down there waiting for it to get dark so they can start sneaking back down the road with their bridge. I bet they’re scared.”

“Of what?”

“The law,” he intoned deadpan, accompanied by a dramatic hush-hush gesture before he doubled over, erupting in giggles all over again.

“Oh, well,” she answered vaguely.

“It’s a good thing it didn’t happen to you, Monica. You wouldn’t even know you were stuck,” he retorted straightening up, piqued by her inability to grasp the hilarity of the matter, which meant she couldn’t grasp the fact of it either. “You’d probably be offering them overtime at this point.”

“Wait a minute Ralf. There’s a whole section on camera equipment in this paper. Do you want it?”

He grabbed the section held out to him, his light blue eyes shining in his healthy, freckled face, folded it, bent down to insert it into his green canvas backpack, hoisted the pack onto his shoulders over his coat, and left for the day with a little wave and a smile to Monica.

Shoes were listed in section 7430, the section following *Clothing: Women’s*. With a red ballpoint pen, Monica marked an ad for a pair of black pumps, probably just what she wanted, which were going for only DM 150. They must be very good, she decided, for anyone to bother selling them again and for that much money. Then her eye caught a much more attractive piece of text. Over a hundred pairs of shoes in sizes 34 to 36 being sold cheap. Monica’s shoe size was 34 or 35. Only Italian and French shoes commonly came in her size and they were not easy to find in Munich. She rang up.

“I saw your ad in the *Kurz und Bündig* newspaper,” Monica explained when a man’s voice answered. “Uh ... what kind of shoes are you offering. Italian?”

“Yes,” the man confirmed after a thoughtful pause. “Italian.”

“And do I have to buy all of them, or can I just take the ones I want? I mean, do you intend to sell your stock to another store?” she asked as an afterthought. “Or just some shoes to individuals?”

“You can just buy the shoes you want,” he said.

“And how much are the shoes? In general?”

“Oh, anywhere between ten and fifteen marks a pair,” he supplied after another thoughtful pause.

Monica reiterated her interest in looking at the shoes. The man gave her the address which was in one of the northernmost sections of the city, and they agreed that she come by at nine o’clock the following morning.

On the following day, a balmy March day with an occasional very brisk wind, Monica set out on her bicycle for the address given her. The ride turned out to be much longer than she expected, but she enjoyed being outside and finally had time to give herself over to the consideration of what shoes she would pick out for herself. She would not pick out any shoddy, half-right shoes this time; she would only get the shoes that absolutely delighted her; the shoes that completed the picture she was trying to establish for herself as that neat Frenchy woman in black. The shoes had to be black.

The street she sought seemed to wander ever farther northward as she pedaled harder and harder against the wind, racing against her watch to get there on time. Any thoughts of shoes were gradually replaced by the worry of how tardy she would be. On stopping to consult her map, she was irritated no end to see that the street now lay south of where she was. On furiously pedaling south, she wondered how it was possible for her to still be fighting the wind. Once on the right street, she was again dismayed to find that her ride would involve another time-consuming, tedious stretch because, as luck would have it, the street itself was endlessly long, the address much further east than she was, and the wind once again against her. When she finally came to the blocks bearing the 1100 numbers she was looking for, she found herself in a section of the city completely unknown to her. Massive old buildings lined the wide, deserted street. Everything seemed well-swept by the strong, perpetual wind, but unnaturally still.

Monica's destination sat on the corner of Rhein and Mainzer, a solid old structure. The faded front door was of wood that looked at least half a foot thick shot through with long, horizontal hinges of beautiful iron work. Her heart pounded. She was still out of breath from her mad cycling against the ubiquitous wind. The buzzer sounded in answer to her ring, unlocking the door to admit her. She pushed and suddenly was inside with the massive door clicked shut behind her. Was all this was a ruse? she wondered, her fears expressing themselves a half beat too late.

The dark spaces of a large, high-ceilinged main hallway yawned before her. The staircase gleamed from out of the shadows, softened by thousands of footfalls, the banister burnished over the decades by thousands of hands sliding up, sliding down.

Taking care not to slip, Monica ascended the low, slick steps through a velvety, murky silence when another question occurred to her: Who knew where she was? She had told no one about the shoes, no one about the arrangement, certainly not a soul knew the address of the building into which she had just disappeared. Even Ralf had no idea why that paper had lain open on her desk the day before. All he knew about was a bridge that had disappeared down a one-way dead-end street.

She turned the corner of the first landing. No hello sounded, no door opened, no hand waved to hail her. She climbed up and around to the next landing and again looked warily about her. Nothing but silence greeted her from a series of narrow, faded apartment doors, sealed as tight as lips on cadavers. As she stepped out onto the third landing, a door moved. Weightless as the hallway air, Monica floated forward to peep into a crevice magically created between door and wall. A melancholy eye met hers, staring out at her from a large, swollen face which lacked a forehead. There was nothing above those melancholy eyes but dim, empty space. With relief, then concern, Monica discerned the cause: a flat black hat merging with the shadows sat unusually low over those luminous, grave eyes. Yet the hat was very flat. There wasn't enough room under it to contain the part of the head such a voluminous face must surely possess. The long-suffering eyes told all: the top of the head had been sliced right off by that hat which now hid the gaping wound, the vacant eyes expressing the somewhat dreamy sorrow of a man missing his gray matter. No, Monica chastised herself, that was the solemn look of a shut-in whose head had caved in from wearing the hat too long for fear of draughts. Now he didn't dare take it off.

The dreamy, dark eyes continued to monitor Monica from out of the swollen face in a silent, sticky sort of way. No word was uttered.

I'm not going in there, Monica thought. In the next instant, the man's face transformed into that of a woman's and everything seemed a shade safer although the missing portion of the head did not materialize. Coming ever closer to those eyes, Monica asked quickly if this was where the shoes were. The woman fell back, the door opened slightly, and Monica slipped quickly inside. In the

next moment, the door clicked shut and Monica was shut up inside another hallway as dim as the hallway she had just quitted. But here she couldn't move. She stood on one side of the door and the hatted woman leaned heavily against it, with the entire floor in front of them strewn with tumbled cartons. In the cartons, round about the cartons, and strewn all over the floor between the cartons were shoes, used shoes.

My god, Monica thought to herself, *I've come all this way for nothing*. She was about to turn away in disgust when the immaculate heel of a light brown boot gleamed up at her from out of the closest heap and Monica had already stooped to examine it. At that moment, a man in blue jeans, white tee shirt, and black vest appeared at the far end of the hall, having come soundlessly from somewhere in the back. He did not move beyond the shadows there. There was no room.

"Are you Mr. Caesar?" Monica asked looking up at him from her crouched position, her hand still on the immaculate heel.

"Yes. Yes."

"And these are the shoes," Monica commented, letting a hint of disdain ring in her voice as she looked down at the heaps of crinkled, crimped, buckled, strapped, heeled, and toed leather.

"Just pull them out," he said, bending down to the box closest to him. "We haven't sorted them yet." In the same moment, the woman, who was also clad in an ankle-length wool coat buttoned up to her chin, gathered her coat about her, bent over, and wordlessly began to pull out shoes and search for their mates. She made no attempt to take off the heavy coat. The hat stuck to her head as if matted to the clotted blood of her massive head wound.

"How did you get all these shoes?" Monica asked, picking up the brown, beautifully crafted boot that had piqued her interest. It was just as gorgeous as its gleaming heel had promised. She began to pick around at the other shoes. There were indeed a hundred pairs of them, all different, and boots, wonderful boots with thick heels which appealed to her immediately.

"They were my wife's."

“And,” Monica hesitated, her hand hanging suspended over a dusty strap, “what, uh, happened?”

“She died.”

“Oh.” Monica wondered whether it was appropriate to pick through a dead woman’s shoes. But as she didn’t know what else to do and kept coming up with prize after prize, she continued her poking. “She certainly had a lot of shoes. Is it possible to turn a light on in here?” she asked, twisting around to peer up at the ceiling. “I can’t really see anything. Isn’t there even a window somewhere?” she persisted when no one made a move towards a light switch. But the room seemed to be shut up tight.

Monica was discovering that the shoes weren’t all between the sizes of 34 and 36. In fact, none of the shoes were size 34 or 35. Some were size 36, but most were size 37, with several examples turning up that were size 39. Had the dead woman’s feet swollen lengthwise from time to time?

There was no stool to sit down on, only a narrow margin between the cartons of shoes and the wall free to balance in, and the wall too dirty to lean against for support. This made popping shoes on and off very awkward although Monica managed it, setting aside those pairs she found appealing in the dark, dusty corner where she had gingerly laid her bag. The woman loomed about under her strange hat as attentive as a vulture, always quick to find the mate of any shoe Monica held in her hand for longer than a few seconds, presumably heating up all the while in that long, thick coat. The man stood by and watched, smoking.

It took only ten minutes for Monica to look through the mass of shoes rather thoroughly and pick out the fourteen pairs of boots and shoes she felt were worth having. The heels of some were a little too high, but she thought that walking in high heels might be a Frenchy touch she could acquire, and for ten marks apiece it was no great sacrifice getting one or two extra pairs. Besides, they were pretty and in pretty good condition. The woman had had a taste similar to her own, yet Monica would never have spent money on such shoes. That was part of the attraction. Monica had a chance to acquire someone else’s shoes, profit from someone else’s decision about shoes, put the shoes on and step a little outside of

herself in someone else's style with the reassurance that she didn't look too ridiculous because someone else had already found them fit to wear in public and had done so. The worn-down aspect of the shoes convinced her of that. With such shoes, she could do a little pretending at elegance that she would normally—inhibited as she was by a rather narrow sense of what was appropriate—never have dared.

“Well, I think that's about it,” Monica said breathing out noisily, straightening up, and addressing Mr. Caesar directly for the first time. In contrast to his youthful costume, he was well over sixty, looked haggard, a little dissolute, and had a slightly bloodshot gaze. “I should first extend to you my consolation,” she said, taking in his grieved appearance. “Your wife certainly had a lot of shoes.” And this puffy-faced woman, she wanted to ask, who is she? Is she your sister? You two don't look alike.

In divorcing her attention from the shoes, Monica took in more of the room and was shocked to see what a terrible state it was in. Grief would do that, though, she realized. The wife dead, the man abandoned, paralyzed with sorrow, forced to take care of the horrible details of death's aftermath: her clothes, her laundry, her shoes; confronted with an apartment suddenly much too large or intolerable due to floods of memories. He was probably faced with the unexpected decision of having to move out as well, a huge task, hence the total disarray of shoes and, instead of moving them, sell them; why not? But at least the chores distracted. That is to say, these were things Monica had heard people say about the experience of coping with the death of a spouse.

“How much do all these cost?” she asked, looking at the heap, and counting out again the fourteen pairs of shoes and boots.

“Two hundred and fifty marks,” the man answered.

Monica exclaimed involuntarily. “Oh, that's way too much! I'll take some out.” They were, after all, just a bunch of used shoes.

“Well, two hundred marks, then,” the man said immediately. Monica hesitated then agreed, saying she hoped they would accept a check. They would. To write the check Monica, after a moment's hesitation, slithered between the shoes and the ghostly

wall towards the single table at the back of the room, but stopped when she saw how filthy it was. At the edge of the table sat a plateful of food which must have been there for days. The sight was particularly unappetizing.

“I don’t feel exactly right going ahead with all this so businesslike when your wife just uh died.” She hesitated then, after gingerly pushing the plate away, bent to the table and wrote out the check. When she held it up to him, the man tucked it neatly and swiftly into his vest pocket.

“No reason to feel that way,” he said.

“No? Well, uh, when did she die?”

“Two years ago.”

“Two years ago!” The filthy table where Monica imagined the man had eaten on the run or in the insomnia of his grief held not just one plateful of dried food. It was piled high with dirty dishes. Had he been leaving his half-finished meals there for two years? Ashtrays full to overflowing were scattered about. Empty bottles and dirt-clouded glasses stood in ranks among the plates and ashtrays.

A door swung to. On looking up, Monica caught sight of deep purple walls covered with huge white circles and spiral designs, a bright green mattress on the floor. The next moment, the door clicked shut, quiet and fast. The woman with the swollen face glided back to them like a ghost to complete the melancholy trio among the cartons of shoes alongside the table laden with desiccated garbage.

“This isn’t because your wife just died, then, is it.” It wasn’t a question. An explanation was perhaps not necessary. Perhaps Monica shouldn’t indicate she had taken in anything of her surroundings, but her surprise was too fast for her. All her assumptions, laboriously and forgivingly developed, were obviously completely wrong and now she couldn’t pull any of the room’s extreme circumstances or the strange couple into focus. The woman’s badly swollen face, the discolored skin below her eyes, the melancholy, slightly vacant look of those eyes had not, then, been achieved through mourning and grief. But some critical

temperature had apparently been reached. The woman popped like a kernel of popcorn:

“It’s been just unbelievable!”

“What ... has?” Monica asked.

“A nightmare!” the woman howled softly.

“Bad luck,” the man muttered. “Extreme bad luck.” Some reserve had dissolved, a barrier was down.

“A bad *tenant*,” the woman corrected.

The man stared down at the floor.

“He seemed like a nice young man. Quiet. A *student*,” the woman sneered, then looked up in astonished outrage: “He never paid a single month’s rent.” She looked dolefully at her companion. “All we got was his deposit.”

“Couldn’t you get a lawyer?” Monica asked, surprised but flattered that the unusual pair would take her into their confidence.

Mr. Caesar scoffed. “That’s when it got expensive.”

“Hearings,” the woman recalled.

“*Hearings*,” Mr. Caesar repeated the word bitterly.

“He never showed up,” the woman explained to Monica. “So they kept having hearings.”

The man grunted. “And we kept paying for them.”

“Try! Try! Try! To get His Highness out of your apartment if he’s not willing to go.” For some reason, the woman was beside herself. Her mournful eye never stopped coursing over the dark heaps the dismal, shadowy apartment presented. “And why should he go?” she said, her voice now low and trembling. “He knew he had us. He knew.”

“The lesson we’ve learned is,” Mr. Caesar relieved his companion’s diatribe with a statement promising sober common sense. But he stopped and thought for a long time. Apparently, the lesson they had learned wasn’t that clear after all. Finally he heaved a sigh and finished: “Don’t ever get a bad tenant. The laws

of this city protect them and are against us, why I don't know." Another lengthy pause followed before he came out with his next wisdom: "*We* can go to the devil."

The woman answered with a vigorous, doleful nod of her round, swollen, amazed-looking head.

Mr. Caesar turned to Monica. "We're despised in this society and ridiculed by the laws. Despised and ridiculed. Why I don't know. We had no idea. You *can* have no idea until it happens to you. Because until it does, you don't believe it. But believe it. It's true. We're to blame," he growled and tapped his chest with his two fingers, the cigarette burning away between them. "Us. The scum. And who pays through the nose—for everything? We do. The scum. Through the nose for fines, damages, court costs, postage, spit. You name it, we've paid for it. But none of it gets results so the lawyers go through it all again. Why not? We're footing the bill. They're making a living. The best way they know how. You tell me if we believe any of that crap now. They just keep at it until we go bankrupt or finally get enough sense to tell them to stop, which is illegal, of course, and who gets fined? We do. The scum. That's the game. It goes round and round."

The woman grunted. "Abuse."

"Abuse from the law," the man supplied quietly. "That was getting pretty obvious. The tenant's just their excuse." His tired eyes rose to his companion. "Lesson number two." He paused and with the adroit motion of a single hand exchanged his dying butt for a new cigarette, pulling the new cigarette into a glow from the butt with intense concentration, then tamping out the butt in one of the ashtrays, the fresh cigarette hanging loosely from his lips. He took a deep drag as if tapping mountain air. Refueled, he waxed philosophical:

"You have to realize. These people are vermin. The have-nots. The butt ends of society. And who do they blame for it?" He tapped his chest again. "The only guy they can see, the one smashed into this mess right above him, the guy they're supposed to hand their rent over to. He doesn't see the rest of the heap, he just sees us, and he resents it. He thinks we're it."

Monica grew uneasy. She was a tenant. Would he be telling her all this if he knew?

“If you let them—and they are letting them—they’ll overrun the neighborhoods and the cities of the world just like the infiltration of rats they are.” He pronounced the words very quietly, as if his logic was the clearest and most obvious in the world. “The city knows all about it because they’ve got people like us complaining about it—paying through the nose to beg for their attention. Paying through the nose to get some help, but we get no help. The city chooses to support *them*—don’t ask me why—so of course there’s no hope for *us* and never will be. We’re made out to be the culprits, the scum. But this won’t go on much longer. People like us are gonna disappear, because how long do you think we’re going to take this?” After lifting his bloodshot gaze to his companion for wordless confirmation, Mr. Caesar summed up: “Evict a nonpaying tenant? That’s a joke. You’ll wait years ... *years.*”

“Two years?” Monica asked, her nose wrinkling.

“Could be,” he answered absently. “Maybe more.”

“And all this?” Monica asked.

“Their doing,” Mr. Caesar’s sullen reply.

“The neighbors kept calling the police about the noise,” the woman lamented. “We knew the place was getting wrecked! But what could we do? We couldn’t get in. They wouldn’t let us in!”

Mr. Caesar stared down through the smoke of his cigarette, took another drag, and with a smoky exhalation declared: “We were supposed to ask ... *them.*”

“Them?” Monica asked.

“There was a mob in here. A mob,” Mr. Caesar enlightened her. “As soon as the student was in, he invited his friends. And they said why, no, we couldn’t come in ... when they answered. That was once. The upshot according to the law: If they didn’t *want* us in, there was no way in hell we could *get* in. So we had to stand by while we got reports of the destruction going on.”

“But you’re in now,” Monica observed.

“Our single bit of luck,” Mr. Caesar explained, “was they decided to abandon the place. Why I don’t know. When we found out, we came right over and had the locks changed on the doors.”

“Immediately after that,” his companion spelled him, “they came back, broke the lock and hammered the door in with who-knows-what—” The woman indicated with horror the splintered front door panel. It had been hacked at with something sharp and heavy.

“But that’s the wrong side,” Monica murmured.

“To have one last big party,” the woman deplored, paying no attention to her. “At our expense.”

“Rage,” Mr. Caesar confirmed quietly. “Simple rage.”

“Spitting in our faces!” The hatted ululation.

“Then left it the way it is now. Moved on to abuse and cheat someone else, somewhere else. Who can say where?”

“Look at what they’ve done!” the woman cried. “Here!” She pointed to the wall just at her elbow and, sure enough, there was a large burn mark on it, unmistakable once pointed out, brutal-looking when Monica knew it was the result of a malicious act. “That!” The woman merely swung her arm to the adjacent wall and there, again, were huge dark stains. Something terribly copious and dark had been spilled or thrown or shot out there, wine, or vomit or ... “Here,” the woman limped gloomily towards a corner and pointed down to a sizeable puddle of thickly scattered broken glass. Just above it, a heavily curtained area had been taped fast to the wall. A broken window? Is that why it was so dark, so stuffy in there? “And ... and ...” The greatest outrage of all was coming. The woman tapped with a weak foot at a spot on the parquet floor. Monica followed with wide eyes. Someone had gouged out a ragged hole in the wood all the way through to something fuzzy below. As Monica raised her eyes in perplexity, the woman shrugged. “A campfire, we think.” She threw up her hands. “Think of what they’ve done! Think of it! Perversity and destruction.”

Cigarette jammed between his fingers, the man delicately pointed out other examples of vandalism. “Rage,” he repeated. “A butt end’s rage at his mean lot in life. What you do when you’re squished at the bottom.”

“Isn’t this all just a little ...” Monica stared at the marks on the door. “One-sided? I realize you’ve had a bad experience, but I can’t believe—”

“Ha!” The woman spit out.

“Just how we used to talk,” Mr. Caesar growled.

“Joke!” the woman uttered.

“Why do we always land on the wrong side of it?” the man mused sulkily and took a powerful drag on his cigarette.

“They have no consideration for *anyone*,” the woman wailed.

“Consideration?” Monica asked, alerted by the woman’s strange choice of words. “You certainly weren’t expecting ... I mean, from a tenant ... consideration’s never a part of it.” Her remark drew intense, baleful looks from the pair. “But they must have some decency,” Monica faltered immediately. “Pay their rent ... and respect other people’s property? Especially if they’re living here ... using it.”

“They have no decency whatsoever!” the woman retorted fiercely, adopting Monica’s term. This time it was the woman’s vehemence that jarred Monica. Her cry rang of bitter disappointment, betrayal, and worse. Something more was amiss in that airless hallway than a hacked door and a campfire in the floor.

“Still ...” Monica paused. Her better sense told her not to continue. “Still,” she continued, “I don’t understand. If she died two years ago—your wife, that is ...”

The two stood regarding her silently. She had their full attention.

“Why sell the shoes ... now? Were the shoes ... *here* the whole time?”

“Yes,” answered the woman.

“Yes,” answered the man.

Monica gestured toward the unholy disorder all around her. “And that’s why they’re all so mixed up and ... different sizes?”

“Yes,” answered the woman.

“Yes,” answered Mr. Caesar, who then added easily: “You must realize that we came in from outside Munich to check the apartment and brought the shoes in with us to make it more convenient for anyone interested in looking at them. We must apologize. We had no idea the apartment would look like this.”

“But ... but ...” But they *had* seen the apartment. They had been in to change the locks. He had said so. “Did most of this, then, happen during their last break-in? I mean the rotten food, too?”

“Yes,” answered the woman.

“Yes,” answered Mr. Caesar.

Monica tossed her head as if in sympathetic rumination, and with the movement, caught sight of the arm the man never smoked with. It was heavily bandaged. She hadn’t seen it until now. He must have taken care to stand with it away from her. Monica rolled her eyes casually towards the door, unwilling for some reason to let them know she had noticed it. As her eyes flitted past the woman’s face, it came into focus as well and Monica knew what was wrong with it. It had been beaten. Perhaps vermin had been at work on it, or the scum himself? And the reason for the coat? Monica grew sweaty. It was time to go. She didn’t know what she knew, but she knew something and they knew that and they would try to stop her. Stop her at all costs. Panic took over. She had to get out—never mind the shoes—out past the door ravaged on the wrong side, fly down those low, slick steps, and burst out into the pure, honest March air. Claustrophobia gripped. There were layers between her and freedom, layers and layers, and she was getting squished down at the bottom of it all.

But wonder of wonders! The woman was holding up a mashed, hardened clump she had unearthed from under the shoes. In breaking apart the brittle plastic clump, she produced a deformed, brittle plastic bag into which she shoved as many of the shoes Monica had paid for as possible. She caught sight of a second and a third such clump in corners and in closets. She held up each in

turn, shaking off dust, sometimes wiping it directly onto her coat to get something off and, if she was able to pry it apart without its sides ripping, shoved in more of Monica's purchases. When she had finished, to Monica's irrepressible joy, she held out four bulging bags of used footwear, toes and heels sticking up and out in complete disorder. The woman wanted her to go. They wanted to get rid of her. Hurriedly Monica shouldered her own cloth bag, reached out to grasp the four bags any way she could while maneuvering awkwardly along the strip of dusty hallway in her haste to get out. Once outside, she turned to take a last puzzled look at the strange couple, but the door was nearly closed, a dark, mournful eye gleaming lifelessly out through the crevice until, a second later, the door clicked softly shut.

After hurriedly discarding the filthy plastic bags in which she had conveyed them, Monica positioned the pairs of shoes and boots on her living room carpet in a splendid semicircle in the full sunshine streaming in through the south-facing picture window. But as she surveyed her booty, she felt increasingly ill at ease. Somehow, in some way, she had been snuck down a one-way dead-end street and only begun to suspect things were very wrong when she hadn't a prayer of getting out on her own. But she had gotten out, unscathed, and now stood safe at home in the sunshine to admire her haul of gleaming footwear, not a single pair of black pumps among them and not a single pair her size.

