

## Little Red Boots

By Francie Healy



**Little red boots**, shiny in a store window, bring me to a place I'll never forget.

I can feel their rubberiness, and their soft flannel insides. Too small for my hand, and one size too big for his chubby little feet.

He loves these boots. He wears them in the house. He wears them in the heat of summer, runs with them through the grass, takes them off and puts them on again as if they are treasures beyond value.

I can't remember the exact day he stopped wearing them. Was he tired of them? Did he mourn their passing? Did he know when he stepped out of them for the last time he was entering a whole new

world?

Little red boots sit at the bottom of an old pine blanket box now, tossed there for posterity, awaiting the time I re-discover them and weep for what can no longer be.

Those pudgy feet are large and angular now. They fit into great big tattered running shoes. They go where they want. They hitchhike across a nation, climb on scaffolding, jump from roofs, beat the pavement on a hot summer day. They settle into a car and drive to Calgary and tap to the music of a hundred guitars.

I thought putting away those boots was the hardest part. Little did I know the really tough stuff was to come later: saying goodbye, hearing him go, watching those great big feet march towards a new horizon.

I used to tell him: I believe those boots make you run faster. I believe they make you taller, and stronger.

I didn't say: I think they're going to break my heart.

Little red boots in the store window now: pulling me, hurting me, making me laugh. If only I could freeze time and place, and find those pudgy little feet again.

But maybe this is the way it's supposed to be. You wait. You watch. You hope and you pray. They grow up, they go away and leave you with the memories.

I remember the day he left. He waved to me from his pickup truck and headed out to his new life in Vancouver. He was smiling, proud, confident. I smiled back. And then I went into the house and wept as though I'd never stop.

I couldn't believe it was over. I couldn't believe I had given birth and nursed and coached him through all the joys and pitfalls of his life, that I had giggled over those wonderful little red boots...and now everything had stopped. He was gone. He was all grown up. My job was finished.

He came home for a visit a couple of months ago. He seemed to be taller. There was a look on his face I hadn't noticed before. I think it was a look of pride, of accomplishment.

He pulled out his guitar and he played me a song we had written together. I looked down at his shoes. They were a step up from his last pair. They were leather -- scuffed, of course.

"Do you remember," I asked, not expecting him to, "those little red boots?"

"Of course," he said, still playing his guitar. He didn't miss a note. "That was one of the best times in my life."

We didn't say any more about it. We had a good visit. He left again and called me when he got there to say he was safe.

I opened up the old pine blanket box for the first time in years. Somewhere near the bottom, I found his little red boots. I held them in my hands. It was the moment I both savoured and feared.

But I didn't weep, as I thought I would.

I held those little red boots in my hands, and I smiled.