

With Nails
and Cord
and Leather


by Bobbi Kyle

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*To my loving family, from Mom and Dad, Cindy,
Robyn, Mitch and the kids - all the way back
to William Whelpie...
for always having the courage to dream.
~ B.K.*



Isabella walked alone through the streets of St. Albans. The wind from the North Sea blew hard as she gathered her scratchy wool wrap tightly around her shoulders. A basket of warm, sweet bread dangled from her arm. A dinner that would warm her belly, although her heart felt cold and empty.

Passing through the front door of her humble stone cottage, she glanced up at the black cotton swag draping the portal. “God rest ye, William,” she sighed. Her hot breath fogging in the night air.

Alice and Little Will jumped up at the sight of their mum, leaving their chores behind. Alice's broom made a loud crack as the wooden handle smacked against the stone floor. They ran to her, hugging her legs through her skirts. "Children, children," Isabella scolded, "it's only your poor mother." But she smiled and pulled them close. They had so little time, she mused sadly. So little time to learn to love their father as she did. So little time to understand all the good and hope in his frail, frail heart. She could see William in their eyes.

Her mind wandered back. How young and mischievous he had been, that glowing afternoon over ten years before when he had kissed her on the way home from chapel. “The world is mine, Isabella,” he had screamed out to no one. “And I want you to see it with me. I want to walk and journey until my shoes wear thin as glass.” But he was a poor cordwainer’s son and the world seemed so far away. She remembered the light in his eyes though, and she could see it still as she tucked Alice and Little Will beneath the downy quilt given to her on their wedding day.

“Finally, time to myself,” she thought, lowering the gaslight in the cottage. She took up Alice’s dress to mend, but even as her hands grew still, her mind raced with thought of her husband. She remembered the walks and the elaborate plans he had made for traveling across the sea to France and Rome and to Constantinople and to the bazaars to smell the spices. She too could almost smell the saffron, the curry, the sweet cardamon. She hadn’t even known what they smelled like, but like their names, she knew they would be foreign and exotic on her tongue. “Follow your bliss,” he would say again and again, tightly squeezing her plump hand.

“He would have made it too,” she thought, never letting her doubts steal the passion for travel from his heart. “He would have.” But although filled with love and hope and passion, his heart grew weaker as his dreams grew stronger. It was almost as though his heart couldn’t hold all that he could dream.

It was after his first bad spell and after the doctor had told him he would have to be happy to make St. Albans his world - that she found him in the potting shed in the middle of the night. The cordwainer trying to be cobbler. “What are you doing, William?” she had asked, pulling a blanket over his shoulders.

“Making shoes,” he answered, staring at the boot sole that sat on the bench before him.

“But we all have perfectly fine shoes,” she replied, confused.

“I know,” he answered, slowly, thinking of the places where these shoes would go, the miles that would be walked, the places they would see.

Isabella took up her mending, almost believing that he was back in the shed that very evening, nailing and tying cords, and molding leather. Always a talented cordwainer, his skills were in building wagons and in working the ropes that held them together. But why shoes, she had wondered. Why now? And why did he need to stay away from her and away from the warmth of the fire? But every night he had sat by the dim light for hours, and each morning he had gone blurry-eyed to work to bring home food for his family.

She sobbed silently by the fire,
remembering the tired eyes that sat above his
never-ending smile. Eyes that knew he was
getting sicker and sicker, but never
complained, never said it was unfair.

On that last night when he finally made his way to their bed, he held her tight. She had awakened to feel his arms around her and had kissed his rough hand. “Were you dreaming?” he had asked.

“Yes,” she answered quietly, “of such great places and amazing things.” He held her close to him and spoke to whomever was listening, “If you cannot follow your dream...” and he fell into a deep and final sleep.

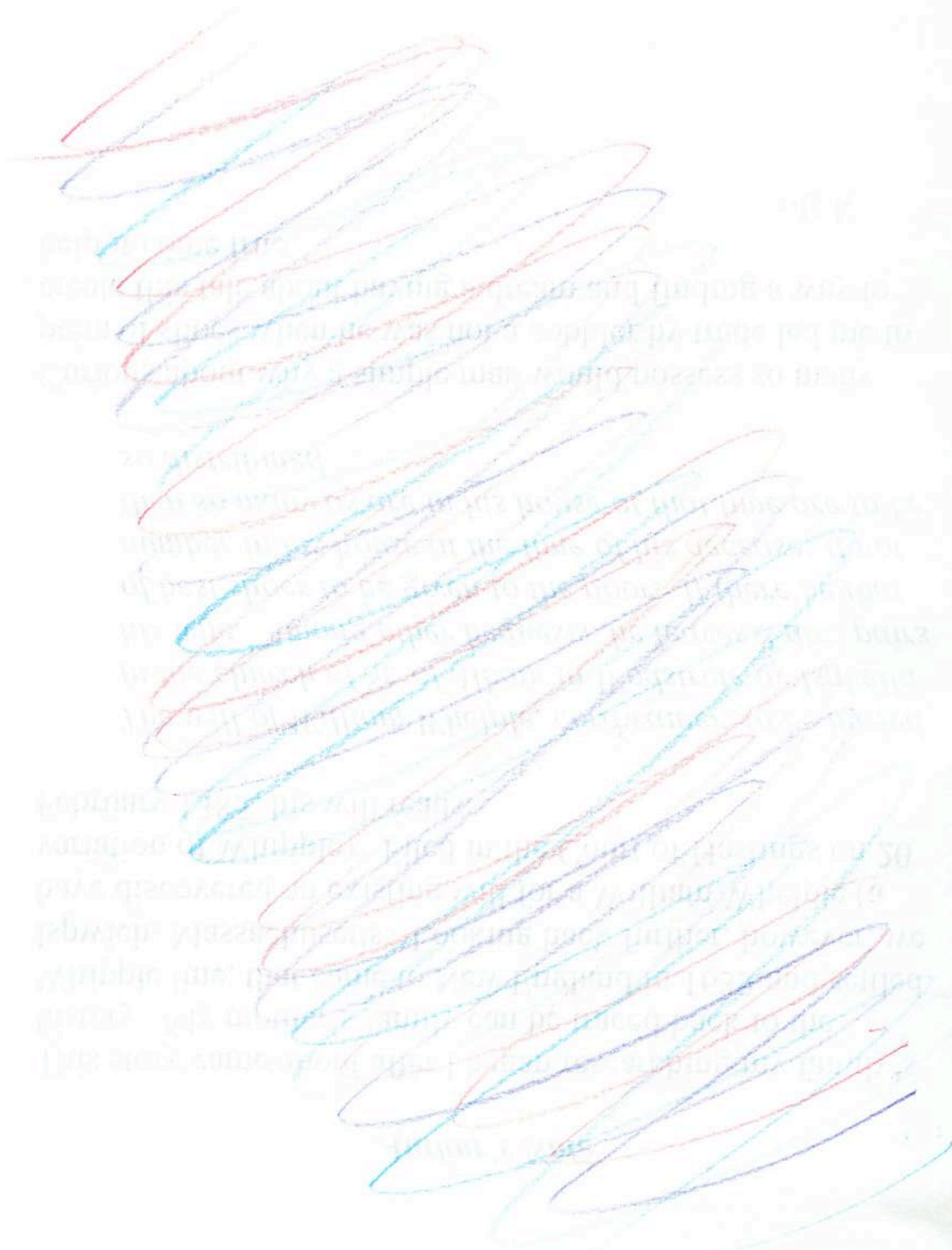
Isabella dried her new tears on the corner of her muslin apron. Stirring the last log as the embers burnt out, she felt comfort in the darkness. She stood on the back stoop looking out at the potting shed, its shadow on the grass cast by the February moon. She smiled when she thought back to the words read aloud in the Court of Hastings only a week before. Words from her husband's will:

*Among other bequests, he leaves
8 dozen pairs of best shoes to be
given to the poor.*

The people in the court had looked puzzled and amazed. “William with 96 pairs of shoes?” With a shrug, Master Thomas Baker had continued..... But Isabella hadn’t shrugged. She said then as she will always say when she crawls into her bed at night:

“If you cannot follow your dream,
make it possible for other to do so.”

And so he did.



Author's Note

This story came about after I began researching my family's history. My mother's family can be traced back to the Whipple line, that came to New England in 1632 and settled Ispwich, Massachusetts. Looking back further, however, we have discovered an existing will for a William Whelple (a variation of Whipple). Filed in the Court of Hastings on 20 February 1385, his will reads:

The will of William Whelple, cordwainer, to be buried in the church of St. of Alban, in Wodstrete by Isabella his wife. Among other bequests, he leaves 8 doz. pairs of best shoes to be given to the poor. If there be that number in his house at the time of his decease; if not then so many as are in his house at that time are to be so distributed....

Curious about why a simple man would possess so many pairs of shoes when he was not a cobbler by trade led me to create this tale about having a dream and finding a way to help it come true.

~B.K.