

Wrestling
with
Angels

Carolyn Arends



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Shoes

(it's the one I don't
think it is)

I am five-and-three-quarters years old, and I'm under a lot of pressure. I am trapped in that claustrophobic space we kindergartners call the "Cloakroom"—an area carved out behind the blackboards for hats, coats, shoes, and the sweaty children who must wrestle them on. It is the end of the day, and once I have accomplished the supposedly simple task of putting on my outside clothes, I'm free to leave this murky place and head for the glorious freedom of the schoolyard.

It's the shoes that are giving me trouble.

The air is thick with chalk dust and fear. I am staring at my sneakers. It's not that I don't know how to tie them—I've been proudly demonstrating my ability to produce double rabbit's ears for months. It's just that I'm encountering some difficulty distinguishing my left foot from my right. It would be far too humiliating to ask my teacher, the ironically named Mrs. Shoemay, for help. I know I can do it myself.

But the shoes are just lying there, maddeningly similar to one another. And the clock is ticking. Most of my classmates have left, fully and properly clothed.

Weeks of this daily ordeal have forced me to develop a system, one that has evolved through trial and excessive error. I repeat this simple yet cunning mantra under my breath: "It's the one you don't think it is."

Experience has taught me that in almost all cases, I choose the wrong shoe first. But applying this wisdom is difficult. I decide to start with my left foot.

I focus in on a shoe. I'm pretty sure it's the left.

Aha! If my instincts tell me this is the left shoe, then it must really be the other sneaker I need.

I set my sights on the other sneaker. It's definitely the left. Why didn't I see it before?

But wait. If I think that's the one, then of course it's the other shoe—the one I don't think it is. OK. But now that I think it's *this* one, it must be *that* one. Which means it's really *this* one...

I stare at my shoes through increasingly tearful eyes, lost in this hopeless game of mental tetherball, until pity (or

frustration) drives Mrs. Shoemay into action. She finally slips the correct shoe onto my left foot, and I sigh knowingly.

It's always the one I don't think it is.

I am filled with a longing to be older, to know with a Mrs. Shoemay-like certainty my left foot from my right. I am yearning for the day I don't sometimes print my *bs* as *ds* and, also, it would be nice to cross the street by myself. I can hardly wait to be the Grown-Up, and when I close my eyes I can picture myself smiling a gentle but confident smile, listening to some hapless child's endless questions, and patiently responding with all of the answers.

Except that already, in my darkest and scariest moments, I have found myself wondering for just a crazy, precarious fraction of a second if maybe there's an answer or two the Grown-Ups don't actually know. I reject this heretical notion the second I think it, squeezing my eyes and fists until it's gone. But there remains a vague uneasiness I can't banish completely.

Ever since the pastor's wife taught her cheery Sunday school lesson on heaven, I have been troubled by the concept of Eternity. "God has always been," she told us in her happiest voice, "and He will always be. Like the rim of this glass. We can't see where the circle begins or ends." I didn't put up my hand when she asked if we had questions. I was a dutiful participant during Coloring Time, taking extra care not to make the Streets of Gold glitter outside the lines. But now there are nights when I lie in my bed, staring at the purple-fringed canopy above me (I am the only girl in kindergarten with a canopy bed), and I think about circles

with no beginning or end, and about God, and about living with Him forever. And I panic.

It's not that I don't believe in God, or heaven. As long as I've known even my own name—maybe before—I've known that Jesus loved me. And there was a time, at my Nana and Granddad's house—a whole year ago now—when I knelt down with my mom by the plastic-protected sofa and prayed with all my might that Jesus would come into my heart. And He did.

It's just that I can't make any sense of Eternity—of time never coming to an end. I wonder what we'll do for forever, and it makes me feel strange and uneasy to try to imagine it. It's not that I favor the alternative—I don't want my life, or my parents' or grandparents' or neighbors' lives, to suddenly stop someday. Heaven is definitely the better option. But when I think about Eternity I get the queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach that there are Really Big Things I don't know—not bad things, necessarily, just impossible-to-understand things. And I don't like it.

Twice now I have tiptoed to my parents' bedroom and crawled under the covers with them, waiting for the smell and feel of them to calm me and slow my pounding heart. They have murmured sleepy reassurances and stroked my hair, and it has helped. I've been willing to overlook the fact that they really haven't explained Eternity to my satisfaction. I imagine they are waiting until I am a little older, a little better able to understand. Maybe once I'm six they'll feel I'm ready.

In another 24 hours I will sit in that miserable cloakroom wondering once more if I can trust my instincts. I will

learn, of course, that I often cannot. My left sneaker will continue for at least a few more months to masquerade as my right, and it won't be the only thing in my life that isn't what it seems. Even when I finally am a Grown-Up (or at least a person old enough to impersonate one), I will sometimes turn right when I should go left. Even when I have been crossing streets by myself for years, I will occasionally cross the wrong street altogether. And even when I have my own child to reassure, I will lay in my bed and wonder about Eternity and demand answers I am not yet ready to understand.

But for now, Mrs. Shoemay has freed me, and outside in the sunlight, my mom is waiting. She'll take my hand, and we'll cross Porter Street together, and she'll tell me more of what she knows about shoes and streets and cars and the sun and the moon and the Jesus who lives in my heart.

Reaching

*There's a time I can recall
Four years old and three feet tall
Trying to touch the stars and the cookie jar
And both were out of reach
And later on in my high school
It seemed to me a little cruel
How the right words to say always seemed to stay
Just out of reach
Well I should not have thought it strange
That growing causes growing pains
Cause the more we learn the more we know
We don't know anything
But still it seems a tragic fate
Living with this quiet ache
The constant strain for what remains
Just out of reach*

*We are reaching for the future, we are reaching for the past
And no matter what we have we reach for more
We are desperate to discover what is just beyond our grasp
But maybe that's what heaven is for*

*There are times I can't forget
Dressed up in my Sunday best
Trying not to squirm and to maybe learn
A bit of what the preacher preached
And later lying in the dark*

*I felt a stirring in my heart
And though I longed to see what could not be seen
I still believed
I guess I shouldn't think it odd
Until we see the face of God
The yearning deep within us tells us
There's more to come
So when we taste of the Divine
It leaves us hungry every time
For one more taste of what awaits
When heaven's gates are reached*

*We are reaching for the future, we are reaching for the past
And no matter what we have we reach for more
We are desperate to discover what is just beyond our grasp
But maybe that's what heaven is for
I believe that's what heaven is for*

*There's a time I can recall
Four years old and three feet tall
Trying to touch the stars and the cookie jar
And both were out of reach¹*