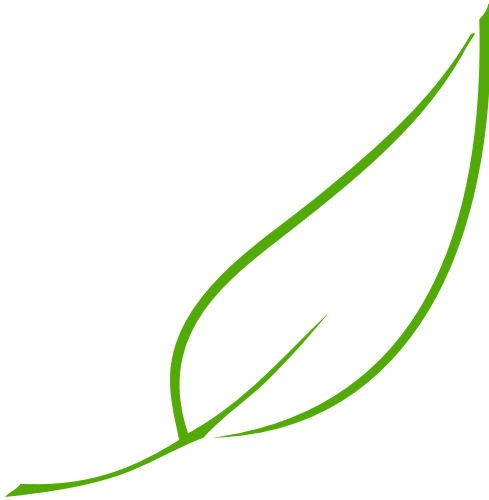


THE SOUL OF THE MATTER

by Ken Bradbury



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MRS. SHOE: *(Mrs. Shoe, a warm and gregarious lady, busies herself around her house, singing to herself as she dusts, sweeps and cleans. She's never met a stranger. The thought of withholding anything that's on her mind, has never crossed it.)* What? *(shouting off)* Get off that tongue! I've told you a million times! You wanna bust your head? I know it's fun to slide but I'm tired of picking you kids up off the toe! Now get down! *(back to her work)* Kids. God love 'em. Somebody's gotta.

MS. PRISS: *(entering, an overly officious lady, prim and proper)* Excuse me?

MRS. SHOE: Hello, luv!

MS. PRISS: Are you ... *(consulting her notes)* Mrs. Shoe?

MRS. SHOE: I misses you, too, but what can you do?

MS. PRISS: I beg your pardon?

MRS. SHOE: It's a joke. "Mrs. Shoe. Misses You." An old family joke. From a very old family. Get me? *(Priss stares blankly)* I guess you don't. Well, come in, deary, and have a seat. *(Shoe dusts off a chair and offers it to Priss)*

MISS PRISS: I'd rather stand, thank you.

MRS. SHOE: Suit yourself. Can I help you, deary?

MISS PRISS: Do you live here?

MRS. SHOE: Live, work, play, eat, sleep, drink, and laugh. Lots of laughin'.

MISS PRISS: In this ... this shoe? You live in this shoe?

MRS. SHOE: *(laughing)* I must answer that question twelve times a day. Yep! I'm a shoe-dweller! Live, work, play, eat, sleep ...

MISS PRISS: In this shoe?

MRS. SHOE: Why not? My family have been shoe people for thousands of years. My earliest ancestors lived in sandals ... drafty and a tad damp when it rained, but they stuck it out.

MISS PRISS: But ...

MRS. SHOE: Then we moved into boots ... boots were good. Lots of room. ‘Course, the families were bigger back then.

MISS PRISS: Do you mean to tell me that ...

MRS. SHOE: My cousins moved west durin’ the California Gold rush. Lived in cowboy boots ... all the kids grew up with pointy heads.

MISS PRISS: What?

MRS. SHOE: That’s a joke.

MISS PRISS: Your family has always lived in shoes?

MRS. SHOE: Yeh ... except for Uncle Harris. He lived in a sock. Harris was about three toes short of a full sneaker, but we loved him.

MISS PRISS: You can’t be serious!

MRS. SHOE: Wish I wasn’t ... crawlin’ around in that sock all day long. (*sees something offstage and shouts*) I said “Stay off that tongue! You’re gonna bust your head!”

MISS PRISS: Who’re you talking to?

MRS. SHOE: The kids. I got so many I don’t know what to do.

MISS PRISS: And that’s why I’m here, Mrs. Shoe.

MRS. SHOE: You want one? (*shouting off*) Jimmy! Come in here! I told you I’d give you away some day!

MISS PRISS: No, please ...

MRS. SHOE: Don’t want Jimmy? I don’t blame you. Ornery little cuss. Maybe it’s his name. Who’d want to grow up as “Jim Shoe?” (*laughs*)

MISS PRISS: I want to talk to you about your children.

MRS. SHOE: You do? (*sitting*) Well that’s just dandy ‘cause they’re my favorite topic of conversation. I could talk about them kids all day long.

MISS PRISS: Aren’t you even curious who I am?

MRS. SHOE: No, but if it’ll make you feel better, just who are you?

MISS PRISS: My name is Priss. Miss Priss from the Bureau of Child Welfare.

MRS. SHOE: Priss? You related to the Prisses from Padukah?

MISS PRISS: I don’t think so.

MRS. SHOE: Good. Never liked ‘em. A hoity-toity bunch, always stickin’ their noses into my shoes.

MISS PRISS: I'm here concerning the welfare of your children ... their health and safety.

MRS. SHOE: Lord knows they're a healthy bunch ... sometimes I wish they wasn't, nearly run me to death, and as for safe ... *(standing and calling off)* Marvin, stop swingin' from that shoestring! You wanna break your neck?! *(without missing a beat)* They're plumb safe, far as I can tell.

MISS PRISS: I would hardly call this a normal environment, Mrs. Shoe.

MRS. SHOE: *(chuckling)* Me neither. There ain't nothin' normal about my little brood.

MISS PRISS: And just how many children are in your ... uh ... "little brood?"

MRS. SHOE: When?

MISS PRISS: Uh ... today, of course.

MRS. SHOE: Don't know. Ain't counted 'em today. I always do that after they're in bed at night. It's the only time they're still.

MISS PRISS: Do you mean to tell me that you have no idea how many children you have?

MRS. SHOE: Do you?

MISS PRISS: Of course not!

MRS. SHOE: See what I mean. Hard to keep track of.

MISS PRISS: *(furiously scribbling away)* This is highly irregular!

MRS. SHOE: Irregular? No, they eat good. I told you, they're never sick a day.

MISS PRISS: But ...

MRS. SHOE: You see, I take in all sorts of kids ... lost kids, runaways, strays, some that don't fit no category at all. Jimmy's one of them kind. *(shouting off)* Marvin, get down off the toe! You're gonna break your neck!

MISS PRISS: Do you always talk to your children like that?

MRS. SHOE: No. Sometimes I shout.

MISS PRISS: *(again, writing)* "Shouts at children."

MRS. SHOE: I'd mail 'em a letter but it'd take too long. So what is you want? Can I get you a cup of tea?

MISS PRISS: No. Mrs. Shoe, I'm afraid you'll be hearing from my agency.

MRS. SHOE: Good. It's always nice to have company.

MISS PRISS: I mean, you don't fit any of our criteria.



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