

Shoes 1967

Green suede boots, with thick square cut suede laces. I was five. It was a snowy winter. I loved them, the smell of them, the colour, a dark olive khaki. Crepe soles. Cut up to my ankles. I was in reception at Tetherdown Primary School. My brother David is four years older than me. He's in the Juniors. A big boy.

I am like an attention seeking missile. I want the big boys to notice me, to look at me in my new green boots.

Of course it ends badly. They want me to go away, they are busy playing wars or something. I insist. So they steal the laces, the lovely square cut suede laces and I only ever got one back.

I still loved those boots with their one shoe repair shop lace. But never quite as much.

No Shoes 1976

I am fourteen, it must be summer. I am meeting my mother – a teacher – and a young family friend at the Houses of Parliament. We often meet there because one of my parent's lodgers – Heulwen - is the secretary to Plaid Cymru, the Welsh Nationalist Party.

I have come from school; apparently, I must have stopped off at home in north London to change. School uniform was very restrictive, flat shoes, black or brown or navy blue.

A bus ride, the 102 from Fortis Green to East Finchley, a tube ride, the northern line, change at Charing Cross, escalators, platforms thick with cigarette butts and chewing gum, exit at Westminster, walk west.

In those days at the Houses of Parliament there was just one policeman, no security checks or queues or patting down, none of that. Even then I am late, my Mum and Iwan are in St Stephens hall, the one you see on the telly in the background. All gothic tiles and statuary. I run in. I have no idea what I am wearing, beyond the fact that my glasses are NHS metal rimmed.

My mother sighs inwardly but says nothing. She must see, she must look down. Does Iwan speak? He is twelve, up from the country; he must think I am some kind of idiot. He must laugh. He doesn't. This must be my normal behaviour.

We have tea with Heulwen, we go home.

Later, much later, twenty-four years later, in fact, my Mother tells me how mortified she was, how embarrassed.

I had come all the way completely and totally barefoot.

Catherine Johnson