

ON BUYING A PAIR OF SHOES

Dirty city. Noise, bustle, more noise. Harsh roaring, dusty, dirty, suffocating not fit for a fragile child. Unstable, uncertain, tentative. Small hand in my big hand – don't hold too tight don't crush his fragile fingers...

Coming to buy shoes. Shop smells of perfume. Trying to find the right place. It is too big for an uncertain the little boy, a very little boy with large, fearful eyes. Seeing the world from his height, all the counters are tall and grey and hard-edged. Where is the shoe department? Why isn't it signposted? Is it up the escalator? Should we take the lift? Why can't we find it? He is too tired we should go home but he needs some shoes and this was a big day for him. I am very agitated. Why is the shoe department so ridiculously hard to find?

Finally, there it is. It's very small, maybe they won't have his size. I lift him up and hold him on a seat that has no back and no arms nothing to support him. Being so high off the floor must feel strange, scary. He is looking around wondering where we are and why we are here.

The assistant asks what we are looking for and goes to a shelf with lots of boxes. How does he know what is in the boxes. Will it be toys? No, it is shoes. Many shoes get put on and taken off until finally one pair fits. I lower him to the floor and he starts to walk slowly. He is wobbly and looks for help but gets bolder, more certain as he walks the long distance from me to the assistant. Will he get there? What a huge achievement. The day will be good after all. Another milestone reached. It was worth it and I am glad we didn't go home.

But then the assistant says *"Turn round and show your mum how you can walk in those shoes"*. Stabbing pain - he knows I am not his 'mum'. He looks puzzled and stops walking

Screaming silence as the world stops turning.

Will it always be like this? Outsiders always getting it wrong? Having to make endlessly repeated explanations about the fact that he is adopted? Having to watch his confusion and the terrible fear that it will go on being like this and what he will have to cope with... alongside a growing panic about the forever of the responsibility of adopting him. Did I know what I was taking on? Have I the strength to live this day after day after day after day?

He has stopped walking and seems shocked, but then he looks up at the assistant and says in firm clear voice as if he is the adult and she is the child: *"That's not my mum, that's my Ros"*.

I breathe again. The world turns again. In that first experience of buying shoes I have learnt my first important lesson about being an adoptive parent: that the word 'mum' doesn't matter but the word 'my' does.