




NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



Anne Lamott
Blue Shoe



A novel by the author of TRAVELING MERCIES

"Messy, brave and weirdly lovable...
a substantial literary pleasure."

—The New York Times Book Review

blue shoe

anne lamott

Riverhead Books
New York

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO

Douglas Foster

and

Steven Barclay

I am not I.

I am this one
walking beside me whom I do not see,
whom at times I manage to visit,
and whom at other times I *forget*;
who remains calm and silent while I talk,
and forgives, gently, when I hate,
who walks where I am not,
who will remain standing when I die.

JUAN RAMÓN JIMÉNEZ

o n e

The world outside the window was in flames. The leaves on the pistachio trees shone fire-red and orange. Mattie studied the early-morning light. She was lying on the side of the bed where her husband should have been sleeping. Those trees were one reason she'd moved back into her parents' old home after leaving Nicholas, these trees and the sloping grassy hillside behind the house. Also, there was no mortgage: her parents had paid it off during the course of their marriage. She and her brother, Al, had grown up playing on the hill and in the buckeyes with their low, broad branches; her six-year-old, Harry, played there now, and her daughter, Ella, two, would also climb one day soon. The leaves of the delicate Japanese maple between Mattie's window and the wobbly fence were still green, but elsewhere in the garden were russets and butterscotch-oranges, other trees giddy with color, almost garish, like gypsy dresses. When she strained to listen, she could imagine them saying, We gave you shade, and now we'll give you a little kick-ass beauty before we die. A choir of chickadees and finches sang above the sounds of a

quiet neighborhood waking up, the cars of people heading to work and school, the clatter and thumps of the recycling truck, a dog barking, leaves rustling in a gentle wind, silence. A moment later she heard the rats in the walls begin to stir.

Her mother, Isa (it rhymed with “Lisa”), who still owned the house, had failed to mention that there were rats in the walls. Rats, and the green rug in the master bedroom that for many years had been peed on by Isa’s cats. A faint odor of urine clung to it despite Mattie’s every effort at eradication. Isa had been planning to sell the house as a fixer-upper in the wildly inflated San Francisco Bay area real estate market, but a month after she’d reached the top of the waiting list for The Sequoias, a retirement community where she hoped to grow old, she’d moved out. She had some money socked away from her husband Alfred’s small life insurance policy, which, coupled with Social Security, was enough to pay for her expenses in the new apartment.

Her unwanted stuff was still on the shelves, and in the garage and attic. The house looked much as it always had, or at least for the nearly twenty years Isa had lived there alone, after Mattie and Al had moved out and Alfred had died. Isa had taken one couch with her to the new apartment, a few chairs, a dresser, and Al’s old twin bed, and had sent the rest of her furniture to the dump or Goodwill. There were mirrors in every room of the house. Isa had always liked to look at herself, striking movie star poses. Mattie avoided the mirrors whenever possible. What she saw when she did glance at her reflection was chestnut-brown hair, which she usually wore in a braid; tired eyes, so dark that the pupils didn’t show; fair English skin and a broad snub nose from her mother; black lashes and brows from her dad, as well as his big teeth; and full lips, set off nicely by a white ring of scar on her chin from a rock Al had thrown at her when they were young.

Isa had left her house vacant for six months at Mattie's request, while Mattie got up the nerve to leave her husband. She'd been planning to break away from Nicky in spring, because she'd had it with his mammoth inconsistency—his hilarious and brilliant conversations, interspersed with brooding narcissism; his charming and amiable contributions to the business of raising children together, wedged in between immobilization and depression, for which he would not seek help; his inexhaustible interest in her thoughts about the world, progressive politics, and the arts, marbled into the slow, cold gaze with which he looked up from his secret phone calls when she entered his study; the silent, wounding way he stopped making love to her for weeks at a time, right after nights of hot, tender sex. Then, in March, when the world was wild and green, full of blossom and fragrance and mud, Mattie's best friend, Angela, had told her gently that she was moving to Los Angeles, to live with Julie, the woman she'd recently fallen for.

"But you're my only real friend!" Mattie wept, and Angela had cried too. They had been talking in different kitchens for years now, ever since the night they met over a stranger's stove during a party for Nicky, when the College of Marin made him an assistant professor of literature. Minutes after meeting, the two women broke off entirely from the others. They sat on the kitchen floor and talked like teenagers about their mothers and their bodies and God, to whom they were both devoted, and their pets, to whom they were also devoted, and Nicky, about whom they were both ambivalent. Angela worked with him at the college, where she read and graded papers for the entire English department, and while she enjoyed his sense of humor, she disliked his elitism. He liked to discuss books and politics; he had no patience for stories of real people trying to get through the day.

Angela and Mattie started getting together several times a week, to hike or cook or help each other around the house. Nicky accused Mattie of being in love, of going gay. At the same time, he had dropped hints that he didn't think Angela was a real lesbian: she just hadn't met the right man yet, it was a phase, and would pass. And a few years ago, Angela noticed that Nicky had taken off after classes with one of his students, a beautiful twenty-two-year-old black woman. Mattie was six months pregnant with Ella at the time. Several years before, he had had an affair that nearly ended the marriage, although he had never given Mattie further cause to doubt his fidelity. But one day after she and Mattie had become inseparable friends, Angela followed Nicky and the young woman to the Tamalpais Motel, and then she told Mattie. Mattie confronted Nicky, and he broke off the affair, and while Mattie eventually forgave him, without forgetting, Nicky never forgave Angela, and Angela never forgave Nicky.

Angela sometimes wore her short honey-colored hair in two vertical tufts, like velvet giraffe horns. Her wide eyes were steel-blue. She was Jewish, expansive and yeasty and uncontained, as if she had a birthright for outrageousness. She knew things. Mattie couldn't live without her.

The smell of wet soil, blossoms, and grass wafted through the kitchen window as Mattie heard Angela's news. "But you're not going to have to live without me," Angela said, crying. "We'll talk every day, and I'll come up every chance I can."

Mattie went back into therapy to deal with the devastation of losing Angela. The therapist pointed out gently that some of her grief must be related to her deteriorating marriage. In some ways, losing Angela was harder. It was like the death some years before of Mattie's old cat, who had loved her the way her parents

were supposed to have loved her: purely, without conditions. In any case, for a few months Mattie didn't have the strength to bear both her friend's departure and the end of her marriage. And then one day, she did.

When the leaves began to blaze and the days grew shorter, she brought her children and their things to the house she had grown up in. She brought some furniture, their dog, two cats, a couple of porno movies stolen from Nicky, and his bottle of Valium. He did not ask her about them. It was assumed that the children would live with her, and visit him on the weekends. He adored them but would not have been willing or able to share custody, even if Mattie had been willing. As it was, he took them most weekends, often late Saturday morning, then dropped them off Sunday nights with an air of weary heroism, like a firefighter returning the engine to the firehouse after a particularly difficult outing. The children were grief-stricken that he did not live with them anymore. Mattie prayed with them every night, then prayed separately for their hearts to heal, even prayed for Nicky's happiness and half meant it. After a month of weekend visits with Nicky, the children's distress lessened.

Mattie hadn't worried so much about Ella, who had ways of comforting herself and a generally sunny disposition. But Harry was sad and concerned. He was erratic, like Nicky: sometimes he acted so mean to Mattie and Ella that Mattie wanted to strike him, and at other times he could be utterly charming, especially with his sister. He'd carry her around from room to room as if she were an animated grocery sack, making faces and wisecracks to amuse her. Mattie saw how much he wanted Ella to disappear sometimes, but that he also listened for her when she was in her crib. He put his face right into hers to make her laugh, and she chortled, pleased that something was so grabbably close. Then

he'd pinch her and make her cry. He took things from her, and she wailed, while he looked blank and innocent. He hugged her too tightly, he loved her too much, he hated all the same things he loved about her—her ineptitude, her cuteness, her messiness, her smells.

Mattie stopped seeing the therapist, and paid for Harry to go instead.

It helped; time's passing helped. Nothing really helped. And the house—it had been a mistake to move back in. It was falling apart, revealing mold and memories and ghosts. Mattie's beloved father had died of a heart attack in the laundry room, twenty years before. He was fifty-one and had never looked better than in the moments before his death. He had looked a lot like Mattie's brother, Al, did now, but trimmer, tall, with thicker brown hair, and the huge teeth that hardly fit in his mouth. Everyone had loved her father, including, about half the time, Isa. Still, it had been a miserable marriage, a shifting, malignant lava-lamp of a marriage, although it always looked great from the outside, two tall handsome parents well-known in the town for their willingness to serve on the city council, the school board, liberals who agitated for the poor, who had an air of being with it, hikers in the days when knapsacks were avant-garde. They were people to whom others turned for advice. But inside the house, which they had bought for \$20,000 in 1963, slammed doors and loud silences filled the spaces between exquisite meals and good California wine.

Mattie had thought she was getting such a great deal when she moved back in—free rent on a house with a bedroom for each of her children. But it didn't take long to notice the secrets and memories tiptoeing around, holding their highballs, debonair and amused at first, then hissing in the master bedroom as her

mother had when her father returned from his monthly trips to Washington, D.C. Harry was now sleeping in the bedroom where Al had grown up, where at fifteen he had started doing drugs while Isa and Alfred pretended he was doing homework; Ella slept in Mattie's old room, the one with the slanted ceiling and eaves, behind which all manner of nightmares had waited quietly.

The laundry room where her father had died looked almost exactly the same as before, with its old washer-dryer from Sears, lots of sunlight and trees outside the window, and space to move around. Isa had spent hours here, pawing through her husband's clothes, looking for clues to his absences, searching her teenage son's pockets. What did she think she would find—needles, bindles, a treasure map? She'd searched her daughter's clothes here too, for cigarettes and birth control pills, which she'd found and seized like a customs inspector.

Why, in the current crisis of divorce and bottomless loss, had Mattie run back to the past, to her parents' home, her husband's side of the bed? She hadn't known where else to go. It was free and it was familiar.

"Where else can I go? Nicky owned that house before we got married. It's his. Otherwise, he doesn't have much money, I don't make much. He'll help us, but I can't afford to rent anything as nice as this. With a yard."

When Mattie moved in, Angela, who called herself a Newj, for New Age Jew, flew up to perform an exorcism, a deep-smoke smudge with Native American herbs that made the house smell for days as if the Grateful Dead had been practicing in the garage.

After the first autumn rains, Mattie discovered just how much damage her mother had been disguising over the years with paint

and caulking and cabinets. Isa had evidently installed cabinets wherever rot or cracks or mold had appeared. So there were cabinets everywhere, which was great for storage. But if you removed even one section, you discovered that behind the shelves were moldy patches of Sheetrock, exposed live wires in broken sockets, ugly swatches of bore beetle infestation. Mattie shuddered to think what was behind the cabinets in the damper areas—the garage and laundry room.

The rats' scratching grew louder. She asked her mother to pay for an exterminator. Mattie was barely getting by with child support and a little extra from Nicky and the money she made as a fit model for Sears: she was a perfect size 12. But she had forgotten to get an education.

"Oh, for Chrissakes," Isa had said when Mattie asked her for the money. "What is it with you? Why don't you count your blessings for a change?" Mattie did count her blessings, all the time. She always had. She'd always believed in a freelance God, but kept it to herself, as her parents and brother were devout atheists. A few years into her marriage, she'd found a church nearby, where she staggered like Monsieur Hulot into a relationship with Jesus. And she had come out of the closet as a believer. Her brother referred to it as her blind spot. Her mother refused to discuss it, as if Mattie believed in pyramid power. Mattie didn't care. She thanked God several times a day for what she had, and trusted Him for what she needed. She thanked Him for two healthy children, for her church, for a house with a yard. She thanked God for helping her finally get out of her marriage, and for helping her more or less survive the pain of Angela's leaving. She even thanked God for giving her such a difficult mother, because she believed that while it had been nearly life-threatening to survive Isa's mothering, the price she and Al had

paid was exactly what it cost to become who they were. She thanked God, and her mother, for giving her Al. And she prayed to accept and believe that she had everything she needed. But she also had rats.

Ella lay in her crib one afternoon playing with her belly button, in the room where Mattie had grown up. Ella had just woken from the nap she took every day after a vigorous morning at day care. Mattie couldn't take her eyes off Ella—her blond hair, pudgy limbs, sweet and self-sufficient character. When Ella was born, she'd been colicky and had to suckle all the time; when she wasn't nursing, she'd needed to suck on Mattie's fingers. She'd graduated to a pacifier for a while, then found her thumb. The discovery of her belly button at a year and a half had marked the start of a new relationship, one of pleasure and comfort.

Whenever her shirt and pants gaped open, she'd put her finger inside. She twiddled the belly button, played it as if thumping the twangy connection between her and her mother, her belly a guitar.

Her belly button was an extra sense organ: if something had a nice texture, if it was slippery, say, or warm, she put it against her tummy; her voice would grow thick and furry, and she would say clearly, as if there could be any mistake, "My belly." Mattie had to make sure she had access through her clothes so she could find it. When she did, her whole body went soft and she let out a sigh.

Mattie reached down in the crib and lifted Ella out. "Let's go make something with blocks. Harry will be home soon, and we'll have grilled cheese sandwiches." Both of them missed Harry when he was at school—he had just started first grade—but life was much more peaceful in the hours when he was gone. Harry

was busy, and loud, and lived in movement. He took life by the throat and shook it. He had his father's temper, his gift for instilling fear in others. He'd made an instant friend of the boy who lived next door, right after they'd arrived in the house. While she walked one afternoon with Ella and Harry, Mattie had noticed a towheaded boy, a year or so younger than Harry, in costume chain mail, a wooden sword dangling from his belt, in the yard next door. He'd been watering a hydrangea bush, as his blonde mother watched from the back step with a dish towel draped over her shoulder. Mattie stopped and waved to the mother, and the boy had whipped around, still holding the hose, so that Ella and Mattie had been sprayed. The mother had come running, with everyone laughing but Ella. Mattie wiped Ella's face with her T-shirt while Ella tried to decide whether to cry, and the boy's mother handed Mattie the dish towel. The two boys faced off, staring at each other as if seeing themselves in a mirror.

The mother's name was Margrethe. She was from Denmark, but had only a faint accent. The boy was named Stefan, and he only whispered. He could hardly contain himself; he had something marvelous hidden in his fist behind his back. His mother urged him to share it.

"No, no, is my little itty tro," he said with great pleased worry.

"Show Harry your itty tro," said the mother. Mattie was alarmed to see the agitation on Harry's face. He seemed to be in a battle to restrain himself from knocking the boy over, as if he was about to say, "I'm going to shoot it out of your hand, boy."

Stefan peered into the opening of his fist.

"Is my itty tro," he chirped. "My little itty tro."

"But what is it?" asked Harry. "What do you do with it?"

Stefan moved his fist through the air like a toy plane. "Zah! Zah!"