

“Help Mum, I can’t get in,” wailed Karen in her small sleepy voice.

Karen’s mother looked up from her reading, startled. It had not been even 30 minutes since she finished reading her daughter a bedtime story and tucked her in.

“Can’t get into where, Karen? You are supposed to be in bed.”

“I can’t get into the story.”

“What story?” asked her confused mother.

“I can’t get into the ‘Karen and the Little Red Shoes’ story. You know, by Hans Christian Andersen.”

Karen’s parents looked at each other. It suddenly dawned on them, their little girl was in the middle of a dream, and was sleep walking.

Her mother put down her book, took Karen’s hand and led her back to bed.

“It’s only a story, Karen. Of course you can’t get in. Nobody could. You *can’t* get into story books. Back to bed.”

Karen, unsteady on her feet, and followed closely by her amused mother, walked back down the hallway to the bedrooms.

The bedroom she shared with her sister was small, not big enough for two beds, and so the sisters slept in a bunk bed. There was much fighting over who would sleep in the top bunk, and with no resolution found, their father said that they must take turns, night about.

Tonight was Karen’s turn to sleep in the top bunk. Her mum groaned with the thought of lifting her sleeping 10 year old onto the top bunk. To her surprise and Karen’s sister’s horror, Karen crawled into the bottom bunk.

“Karen get out, it’s your turn to have the top bunk, remember.” Tina’s annoyance was evident.

“Shhh Tina, she’s sleep walking, you hop in the top bunk tonight, I really do not feel like lifting her up there.”

Tina was delighted and did not argue. Imagine, getting an extra turn on the top bunk! She sprang out of the bottom bunk and climbed to the top bunk at lightning speed; afraid, Karen might wake and change her mind.

“Good night,” their mother whispered, as she, for the second time that night, left her children’s bedroom.

Karen woke and looked around her room. She felt confused. It was morning but the view was very different to the view she was used to. The furniture was old and chipped, her bedcovers were in tatters, worn bare in many places. Looking up, she noticed her sister was not sleeping above her. In fact there was no bed above or below her. She was not sleeping in a bunk at all! She began to feel really scared, as this was, obviously, not her room.

Karen nervously climbed out of the hard, uncomfortable bed. She was freezing. “No wonder,” she said, as she gazed at her nightdress, it was as thin as a single layer of tissue paper. She could see her shivering, goose bump covered, skin through it. “What was I thinking, wearing a nightie so old? I should have thrown this out. Where is the new one mum bought me last week?”

She rummaged through the few clothes in the cupboard but couldn't find any of her clothes anywhere. All the clothes in the cupboard were in no better condition than the nightie she was wearing, all worn and holey. In desperation she took the thin blanket from the bed and wrapped herself in it.

Walking to the door she cautiously peered into the next room. "Good morning darling, I was just coming to get ya. Come, breakfast is on the table. Ya slept late this mornin." Karen looked up and saw an unfamiliar, old and tired looking, lady with a beaming smile looking down at her.

She followed the lady over the cold, dirt floor to an uninviting kitchen. Unpainted boards around the walls had cracks between some of them. The cracks had been papered over in some places, but Karen could feel the draft from the remaining cracks. Still searching for answers, she looked around.

"What's wrong with ya this morning girl, ya look like you've never seen the place before."

Karen wanted to say, she hadn't, and why did this lady steal her from her home and family to bring her to this awful place? And to take her home right now!

Instead she decided not to say anything, as she did not know what danger she was in. She decided it might be better to just go along with this stranger, and pretend.

She sat at the table trying hard not to let the disgust she felt from the sight of breakfast, show on her face. On the table were a small glass of milk and a spoonful of porridge in a bowl with a large chip in its side. Her mother would never have allowed her to eat from a bowl like this. She longed to go home.

“Hurry, eat up girl. The shoemaker's wife will be here soon to collect this mending. Don't want the breakfast things all over the table then, do we girl?” asked the old woman.

Karen forced herself to eat the tasteless, leather like, porridge. Thankfully there was only a spoonful.

Watching the old woman sitting by the fire, fixing holes in socks, Karen cleared the breakfast table ready to wash up. She didn't even get as far as running the water, as there were no taps.

"Where's the water?" she asked nervously, in a very soft voice.

"What's come over you, girl? The water's where it's always been."

Karen, close to tears, just stood there.

"In the well, child."

Karen took a saucepan from the bench and went out the wooden door, hoping the well was visible from the door. She was relieved to see it was just a few footsteps away.

She had never drawn water from a well before. In fact, she had never seen a well in real life before. If it wasn't that she had seen them in books, she would have not known what one was. She stared down into the well in desperation. She was grateful and relieved to see a bucket floating in the water below and tied to a rope attached to the top.

It was obvious to the young girl, what was needed to get the water out of the well and into her saucepan.

Karen took the water back into the house. The old woman was still sitting in the chair, but appeared to be sleeping. Karen was relieved.

This would give her a chance to look around to try and find out what she was doing here, and more importantly, how she could escape and go home.

She quietly wandered around the rundown house. How was anyone able to live in such ruins? No one, these days, had dirt floors!

Karen jumped at the loud knocking. Still in her blanket-covered nightie, she walked past the sleeping old lady and opened the door.

In front of her stood a well dressed, friendly-looking, lady. She reminded Karen of a picture of her great grandmother which hung on the wall in the dining room at home. Oh, how she longed to be home. Maybe this nice lady would help her.

“Hello Karen, has your mum finished mending the clothes I brought yesterday?” The lady spoke with a very ‘posh’ sounding voice. Karen thought she sounded a little like the principal of the private school Karen should have been attending this morning.

How did this woman know her name, and what did she mean about Karen’s mum mending clothes? Karen’s mum didn’t even mend her own clothes; she was too busy working at the magazine company.

Karen’s thoughts rambled on, as she stared up at the caller. The lady was becoming impatient with Karen’s silence. She looked past Karen to the drab kitchen and saw the old lady sitting in the chair. She walked through the door.

“There you are, Victoria, I have just come to collect the mending.”

A look of sudden concern swept over the well-dressed woman’s face.

“How long has she been like this?” The concern in her voice startled Karen.

“Since breakfast. She fell asleep while I was getting the water for the dishes. She must be really tired to sleep through the noise of our voices.”

“She’s not asleep, love.” The lady took Karen’s hand between her two hands and looked at Karen the same way Karen’s puppy did when it wanted to come inside, but wasn’t allowed. “She’s dead.

Oh you poor thing, you have no parents left to look after you. You will need to live in an orphanage.”

Karen’s fear grew. This was not her mother; she did not have to live in an orphanage. She had two loving parents and a sister at home, if she could only discover how to get there.

Too stunned to say anything, she was led down the hall and dressed by the woman, in the old clothes she had seen earlier.

“I’ll take you to the clergyman and he will find a suitable orphanage for you. Are these the only shoes you have? They are too small for you.”

Karen just nodded and fought back tears.

Karen was lifted into a carriage drawn by two beautiful white horses. She always wanted a horse and under different circumstances she would have been mesmerised by them. Not now. Now, she had to think of a way out of this nightmare.

At the church, Karen was in state a shock and did not notice the beauty of the grand old building.

She was taken into the clergyman's home and introduced to his wife, who took Karen into the kitchen and made her a glass of warm milk and gave her some cookies.

Having not eaten anything substantial for breakfast, Karen devoured the small meal. She longed to remove the shoes, as they hurt her feet so badly.

The rest of the day was a blur. Karen spent most of it lying on the spare bed in the clergyman's house, crying. To make it worse her feet ached and were scarlet red from wearing the, 'too small,' shoes.

Karen heard the shoemaker's wife talking about her as she left. "That poor girl, it must be hard to lose both your parents when you are so young. The thought of spending the rest of your childhood in an orphanage must be heart-wrenching."

Breakfast the following morning was different to the one Karen had the day before, but still nothing like the breakfast she should be having at home with her family. Nothing came out of a packet, everything was home made.

She was struggling to cope with her longing to go home, a desperate feeling that felt like an ache.

Karen was dressed in warm clothes, donated by a family from the church. The shoemaker's wife came with some shoes she had sewn last night for Karen from scraps of leather. They were not, what you would call, well sewn, and were a hideous red, but they fitted perfectly and were very soft and comfortable.

“You can't walk barefoot beside your mother's coffin, nor can you wear those small shoes, they will kill your feet.”

“Thankyou,” was all Karen could manage to say. At last she realised what was happening. She was inside the book. She no longer had a strong desire to return home. This was her chance to change the sad ending as she had so often wished.

Karen walked beside the coffin all the way to the graveyard. She kept sneaking glimpses down the street for the 'great carriage' with the lady who would save her from a life in an orphanage.

Karen and the clergyman heard the trotting of horses and the rolling of the carriage long before they saw it. Karen was too afraid to look up in case someone noticed her delight. She was supposed to be in mourning, for her dead mother. She felt a pang of guilt; she had not even shed a tear for this woman everyone thought was her mother.

The wealthy woman in the carriage, as Karen expected, (from the book), pleaded with the clergyman to give her the poor child to care for.

So it was arranged, just as in the book on Karen's bedside table at home. Karen didn't go and live in an orphanage, instead, after the funeral; she went to live with this lady.

The hideous red shoes were tossed and replaced with a new pair of comfortable black shoes, and warm respectable clothes, which Karen wore happily.

When the Queen travelled through the country with her daughter (the princess), Karen admired the princess's beautiful red shoes. She smiled when she remembered how much the storybook Karen had wanted her own red shoes after seeing the princess's shoes. She was sure the story would have a much better ending now she was in it.

When the old lady informed Karen, she should have new shoes for her confirmation, Karen was nervous and excited at the same time. The old lady bought Karen the stunning new pair of red shoes (not realising their colour, due to her poor eyesight). These were the same shoes that got the storybook Karen into such a lot of trouble. The old lady would not have approved of their colour, because red shoes were not a suitable colour for a confirmation.

Karen wore her new shoes provocatively, knowing that it was these very shoes that stood between a sad or happy ending to the story.

People whispered about the shoes, and it did not take long for the shoes to become lifelike and begin to dance. Karen at last suspected the danger she was in. Like the original girl in the story, she also could not stop the red shoes from dancing. When the coachman seized her and took the shoes off, Karen nearly decided not to wear them ever again.

“There must be a way,” Karen murmured to herself. Surely she would not be trapped by the shoes. After all, she already knew what they would try to do to her.

So thinking, Karen wore the shoes to the ball, and began to dance.

Trapped!

Just like the story book Karen, Karen could not stop dancing. Her feet became sore, then her legs and body became weary. How she longed to stop dancing and sit down. But the shoes kept on dancing, and she could not take them off.

They welded themselves to her feet and would not budge.

“Oh, how could I have been so stupid?” Karen wailed. “I can’t do magic, what was I thinking, thinking that I could stop these shoes from having their way?”

Closing her eyes as she danced, Karen concentrated on the shoes and tried to force herself to stop dancing. For a split second, the shoes slowed, and Karen thought she had won, but no. After the momentary pause the shoes danced faster than ever, and this time she couldn’t stop them.

Karen had never liked the darkness of night, and the shoes seemed to sense this. They took her away from the lights of the village and into the darkness of the thick forest, where it was pitch black, and very scary. It was so dark, there were no shadows, (which Karen was grateful for), but the strange spooky noises made up them.

The following Sunday morning, the shoes danced Karen to the church door, and flaunted Karen to the congregation. An angel stood at the door, looking stern, with both hands holding a large sword. She pleaded the angel for mercy and freedom from these evil shoes. He just laughed and said, ‘Thou shalt dance.’

She begged as the shoes began to take her away, “Please, there must be something I can do.”

The angel began to respond, but the shoes danced her away so quickly she couldn’t hear what the angel said.

There was no hope. Karen was about to follow the same path as the girl in the original story. These shoes would lead her down the path to her death.

Just as she was feeling sorry for herself, it struck her, the shoes always did exactly the opposite to her wishes. She really wanted to know what the angel said as she left the church, so she begged the shoes to never take her near the church or the angel again.

As she suspected, the shoes did exactly what Karen asked them not to do, and took her directly back to the church and the waiting angel, to Karen's loud protests. In front of the angel she demanded the shoes dance faster, so she could impress the angel. The shoes immediately stopped dancing. Karen looked the angel in the eye and without words, in case the shoes realised what she was doing, Karen pleaded with him to tell her the way to avoid certain death.

The angel told her the promise she must make to break the spell of the red dancing shoes. Before the shoes knew what was happening, Karen made the angel's promise and the shoes became lifeless.

The angel and the exhausted Karen sat on the church step and discussed the promise Karen had made.

"I can only use the shoes for the good of others and not for my own personal gain and I will be free from the spell."

“That is correct. You and the shoes will work together to raise money for poor parentless children in orphanages around the world.”

“I have to wear these shoes?” Karen was frightened of a repeat of past events.

“Yes, the shoes will never come off, and they will grow as your feet grow. But now, instead of the shoes controlling you, you control them. They will dance until you tell them to stop.”

“And they will stop when I ask them?”

“Yes.”

“Thankyou, I nearly went to live in an orphanage. I was fortunate a wealthy lady took me in. I will be glad to help those who aren’t so fortunate.”

And so it was agreed that Karen and the little red shoes would perform at concerts around the world to raise money for children with no parents.

“I am so tired; I have danced for over a week, day and night. Can we start the concerts tomorrow? I just want to sleep right now,” Karen asked the angel.

“Of course,” replied the understanding angel.

Karen’s mother read the last words of the bedtime story.

“The sheer dancing brilliance of Karen and the little red shoes became famous worldwide. People flocked to the shows, and there was never a seat unfilled. Millions of dollars were raised for orphans. Karen and the shoes danced and danced, but when the show was over, the shoes always stopped, and Karen was always grateful.”

“You know, girls, I have read this story many times, as recently as last night, but I don’t remember it ever ending like that,” said Karen’s mother, confused.

Karen just smiled and thought “I wonder if I could change the endings of other sad stories?”

“Mum, tomorrow night could you read the Little Match Girl?”

“Oh Karen, that is such a sad story, or at least, I think it is....”