FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Going Away Shoes
Jill McCorkle
Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill
978-1-56512-632-9
(September 22, 2009)

By necessity, short story writers must craft details with precision, distilling a character into a few spot-on sentences. This is a skill well-honed in Jill McCorkle's work, and although she plays with larger themes throughout the stories, it's in the seemingly minor details where she truly shines. McCorkle is the author of three short story collections and five novels, and leans easily toward blending humor and pathos, a tricky feat that is particularly notable in this collection, her first in eight years.

Going Away Shoes shares a common thread of women twisted up in the nuances of love, both romantic and familial. In the title story, a caregiver, Debby, puts her own life on hold to tend to her mother, but watches her two sisters become increasingly self-absorbed and neglectful. It's as if Cinderella were transported to a small town to care for her stepmother, and finds comfort in soap operas and "Sunrise Pilates" classes on the local cable channel.

McCorkle writes, "'Caretaker' sounds like Debby might be wandering some lovely rose garden, snipping away thorns and breathing in a heavy heavenly perfume. Instead she is changing Depends while trying not to humiliate this woman who gave her life just in case there is a moment of consciousness and clarity, the desire to make amends or to offer something that might resemble love."

Debby imagines leaving, but she won't until her obligation is done, and her own comparison to Sisyphus is tinged with sadness and longing, but also a ribbon of optimism. She calls herself the cobbler of her own heart, in recognition of her introspection and self-healing.

The other women captured here share this minor but vital emotion of unvarnished hope; all of them believing, if only for a few moments, that the future might be uncertain, but it definitely has to be better than today's reality.

They make plans and daydream, and it's the dreams themselves that make the women stronger. One keeps driving on the highway when she should be turning for home, another finally opens her heart to a daughter-in-law without saying a word.

These small moments, which suffuse everyday life with meaning, are what make

McCorkle’s stories so powerful. The characters drive their lives not with action, but with intention, and the writer’s ability to keep playing with that subtle difference gives the collection its distinctive spirit.

Elizabeth Millard