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# Shoes and Other Stories

by Robert Herrmann

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# Shoes

*and Other Stories*

*Robert Herrmann*

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## Table of Contents

Madeleine .....	9
Neglect.....	44
The Wind Change .....	59
Zigzag .....	117
The Blanket.....	126
Out of Season.....	151
Shoes.....	174

## Shoes

Who's putting sponge in the bells I once rung  
And taking my gypsy before she's begun  
To singing the meaning of what's on my mind...  
Neil Young (Nowadays Clancy Can't Even Sing)

*He died alone in his bed in the retreating darkness of the morning. He had barely made it up the stairs, the work boots untied and slipping and thudding against each step. His knuckles rubbed along the walls of the hallway in the blackness of night until his legs were against the bed. He had turned and sat on the bed and pulled off his hat. He fell back and was asleep as his head hit the pillow. The snoring had stopped a few hours before his death, had tapered off to a steady rasp from deep in his throat. His last breath was a deflated exhale with a soft airy rattle that startled a bird outside on the windowsill.*

*At noon, the old woman slowly crept up the stairs. She stopped on the landing by the window, feeling the warm September sunlight wash the side of her face. She turned and looked above the remaining three steps, beyond the slant of dust-speckled light, down the dark hallway. The two empty bedroom doors were closed. At the end of the hallway the remaining door was open. On the bed she saw the worn soles of the work boots leaning against each other. The stench grew stronger as she grasped the handrail and climbed the rest of the stairs and proceeded down the hallway.*

*“Raymond,” she called. “Raymond, what did you do in there?”*

*A forlorn anger arose as she entered the bedroom. Her son’s eyes were wide open, giving her cause to turn and look at the ceiling, but in that small instant she knew there was nothing to see and the prophecy that she had expressed to him daily, had come true.*

- - -

People in the village find it ironic that I own a liquor store even though it’s never been said to me. I believe this because I too, find it ironic and I know that even the least insightful among us have a natural faculty to recognize irony and a strong desire to express it. An obvious example is John Stetson, our assistant fire chief, who in 1953, at the age of twelve, had burned the front porch off his parents’ house. This tidbit of local history rises from time to time in taverns or living rooms. It receives an expression of feigned bafflement, similar to first hearing that Einstein had failed elementary math.

That I know my fellow citizens are aware of the irony of my profession doesn’t concern me. The fact that I was once a drunkard lends to history, and when I look at that part of my life, it is as if someone else had lived it. If the information emerges in conversation, I assume it is in context to something in the far past, otherwise it is meaningless, like someone gratuitously pulling a rabbit from his hat. On the other hand, my classmate Roger Strang was a bully and a thief and continued in adulthood as a bully in his capacity as a village cop. He was the first one to tell me of Raymond Sir’s death, making the news more disturbing.

“Well, Shoes has finally killed himself,” he announced in the doorway of my store.

Roger Strang was tall and very fit. His hair was cut short and his facial features within the squarish parameters were

small and restrained, didn't move much when he spoke. The voice came from deep in his chest, had weight and authority. He reminded me of Sterling Hayden and at that moment I could imagine putting a bullet in his forehead like Al Pacino did to Hayden in the *Godfather*.

"His mother found him lying in his own shit and piss."

"How?" I managed to ask.

"How what?" Strang replied. His face was vacant, his gray eyes wide and looking past me as if he couldn't free himself from the vision of the corpse.

"How did he kill himself?"

"Booze," he said. "Dope." His eyes returned to me as he waved his hand toward my vodka selections. "What else?"

"So, he really didn't die by his own hand?"

"Well no, not directly," Strang said. "But you can't tell me he didn't know what he was doing to himself," he quickly added. "In my mind he was hell-bent on killing himself. Imagine that," Strang continued, his voice softened, became reflective: "From the top of the class to worm feed."

I didn't bother reminding Officer Strang that we were all destined to become *worm feed*. With Strang, as well as others whose conversations I find tedious, I've learned to not offer comment and especially not to ask unnecessary questions. Unfortunately, he must have taken my silence as an expression of shock and I guess he's seen quite a bit of that in his line of work. Strang continued at first delicately, recounting Mrs. Sir's futile attempt to clean up her son's body and air out the room before the police arrived. His tone changed and his voice hardened like cheap pulp fiction as he described the condition of Shoes' body and his living quarters. I followed along, nodding until he began introducing his own opinions on Shoes and his life. It sounded like the work of a poorly prepared sports

announcer. I picked up a rag and dusted wine bottles. When Officer Strang left, he trailed off with, "What a waste."

In the following days I would hear the same exclamation repeatedly: "*You know, he was at the top of his graduating class...what a waste!*" accompanied by looks of head-shaking disbelief. Some still referred to him as Razor, a high school nickname, although there is confusion as to its origin. Was it based on his razor-sharp intellect, his cutting ability as a halfback, or the slight deviation of his name? I find it strange that this debate emerges every once in a while as it hardly matters; the nickname was replaced in 1984 with Shoes.

- - -

*Razor had clomped into the local department store at the plaza on the eastern edge of the village in his old muddy sneakers. A cold October rain saturated the sneakers in a wooded area behind the plaza where he drank a quart of warm beer. The store, a large sprawling structure, part of a regional corporate chain, had opened the week before. There was much heated debate in the village when the store had been proposed, but it passed by a four to three vote by the village board. Razor hated the idea of the store; saw it as the beginning of the end.*

*Each step oozed bubbly mud through the holes in his sneakers. A clerk named Robby Johnson, standing smartly behind a counter in his black pants, white shirt, and the red vest with the store logo and ROBBY stenciled on the front, watched as Razor trailed mud over the spotless sheen of the white floor. Robby was a shy boy, seventeen years old. It was his first day at his first job. He thought it odd as Razor sat on the floor and pulled off his sneakers. He watched as Razor struggled to his feet and gripped the edge of a shelf to steady himself. Slowly he made his way down the aisle, one hand on the shelf, his wet socks slapping the floor, leaving a more bestial track than the sneakers. He stopped and pulled a pair of high top work boots*



*off the shelf. As he attempted to lower himself, Razor lost his balance and sat down hard. His long wet hair swung around his face and settled on his shoulders. Robbie Johnson came from around the counter and approached Razor.*

*"Can I help you, sir?" he asked.*

*"Call me Ray."*

*"Can I help you?"*

*"Yeah, come here," he said. "Stand right there."*

*Robby moved to the spot.*

*"Now brace yourself," Razor said, as he arched his back and swung the open end of the boot over his toes. He pushed the sole against the young man's knee. Robby's knee wobbled and he quickly grabbed the boot with one hand and Razor's leg with the other.*

*"That's good," Razor said. He extended his arms behind and spread his fingers on the floor. "Give'er a push."*

*Robby pushed and felt the resistance of the wet sock. He pushed harder and felt the foot settle with mushy finality. After they put on the other boot Razor slid back against a shelf and laced them up. He extended his arm and Robby grasped it and pulled him to his feet.*

*"How do they feel?" Robby asked.*

*"They're okay," Razor replied. He high-stepped in a small circle, looking down at his feet. "Not as good as the ones I got at old Duncan's on Main Street. Those were worth the money."*

*Robby started to nod, but felt a sudden twinge of guilt. It was his first test of company loyalty.*

*"I bet these are cheaper," Robby softly blurted out.*

*"Might be," Razor said. "Have to see how they ride."*

*He pointed to the wet sneakers in a puddle on the floor.*

*"You can dispose of those."*

*Razor walked down the aisle toward the front of the store in solid pronounced steps as if he were crossing a creek on a*

*narrow log. There was a faint squish with every step. Robby picked up the sneakers, hooked them on two bent fingers and carried them behind the counter and dropped them in a trashcan. He watched Razor maneuver past the strategic maze of shelves to the cashier's aisle where he paused, said something to the cashier and continued out the automatic door.*

*Robby was stunned. He raised his arms and looked around. There were no witnesses. He headed to the front of the store. The cashier was cashing out a customer, doling out change.*

*"Did that guy pay for his boots?" Robby said as he came behind the cashier.*

*The cashier, a young woman named Grace was startled, spilling coins on the counter.*

*"What guy? What boots?" Grace asked as she swept up the coins and dropped them in the customer's hand "Sorry," she said to the customer and turned to Robby.*

*"The guy with the long stringy hair!"*

*"That weird guy?"*

*"Yeah," Robby said. "He had new boots on. I saw him say something to you and walk out. It didn't look like he paid."*

*"How was I supposed to know he had boots?" She asked. "You think I look at people's feet?"*

*"I don't know," Robby said. "What did he say to you?"*

*"It was something like: 'It is a great art to saunter,'" Grace said. "And then he laughed a real strange laugh and walked out.*

*"Robby went to the front window. The parking lot was busy and there was no sign of Razor. Robby informed the manager who called the police. Within a half an hour Officer Strang had picked him up.*

- - -

*I was at the Yellow Horse Tavern that evening. It was one of many corner watering holes in the village and was known by*

the locals as Old Yeller. Happy hour offered half-priced drinks and I was getting my money's worth on that Friday night. I was comfortably situated on a cushioned stool on the curve of the horseshoe shaped bar. Old Yeller was packed, the room loud and smoky and smelling of beer, cigarettes, fried food and rain soaked clothing. A hockey game was on the TV and the Sabres were tied with the Rangers in the first period. Eyes would dart from conversation to the screen, sometimes in mid-sentence at a breakaway or a fight. If you didn't care about the hockey game and cared about what you were saying, the interruptions could be annoying, but the majority of the patrons didn't care. Winning that elusive cup seemed like a legitimate possibility in the early season.

News of Razor's arrest had come over the police scanner behind the bar in the late afternoon. I came in around 3:30 pm. I had finished painting a house on Lawrence Avenue. Luckily all I had to do was touch up some shutters in the garage and refasten them. It was a single story ranch and I didn't mind the rain as I secured the shutters, cleaned up and loaded my van. After a quick shower I went to Old Yeller, paid my tab with a couple crisp one hundred-dollar bills, ordered a burger and sipped on a bourbon and coke. The police scanner said a man had walked out of a local store with a pair of shoes. It didn't become noteworthy until Jimmy Franks from the DPW had come in and said it was Razor.

"You believe that?" Jimmy said. "Just walks in, puts on a pair of brand new shoes and walks out."

It was actually hard for me to believe. Razor and I went back many years. We graduated from high school together in 1968. He was first in our class of one hundred and eighty-nine while I barely made the top third. My family had moved to the village in the summer of 1963 and the guidance counselor convinced my mother that I would meet the right people by

joining the eighth grade chorus. I found the counselor's recommendation questionable as I couldn't carry a tune and I felt the same inadequacy as a polio victim would, being placed on the track team. Razor was next to me and he had a beautiful voice and he was often selected to perform solos while I mouthed my way through most songs. What puzzled me was how such a wonderful voice could be so horrifically distorted in laughter. Razor's laugh was hard to describe because it was a strange and energetic convergence of many noises. It was once described as sounding like a pigeon with a bad case of hiccups. I remember a classmate saying it made you think twice before saying something funny in his presence.

I, on the other hand, welcomed the strange arrangement of sounds. Razor was a popular guy – an athlete, a scholar, a leader in student government. As I look back, I realize he was revered for the right reasons and not for the usual superfluous qualities, like being a trendy dresser or an overzealous jokester, that we teenagers seemed to find attractive. He always wore a white shirt, gray flannel pants and white bucks, like Pat Boone. There was nothing flamboyant about him, but he maintained a steady and uplifting manner that had its own appeal. I sensed in him an inherent kindness, and in my frightened status as the new kid, I embraced him, trying to find things from within that deemed me worthy of his attention. I discovered my goofy, self-effacing sense of humor would make him laugh, so I stoked that fire constantly and took the erratic throttling of his laughter as a reward and a form of acceptance.

He had been unusually kind to me, exercising patience not typical in adolescence. I had been nervous and insecure finding my way in the new school and as a result I'd sometimes been silly and immature, looking for the cheap and easy laugh from those who gave it without much discernment. Razor had a way of ignoring the less ripened fruits of my mind, which had

resulted in my being more selective in what I offered him. But virtue was not always easy to recognize at that age and for a brief time, mine had taken a dive and impacted our developing friendship.

My parents would divvy out a modest allowance each week and by mid-week the money was usually used up on Royal Crown Cola, ice cream sandwiches, stick candy and baseball cards. There were a couple classmates from my neighborhood that I had unwillingly walked home with after school a couple times. One of them was the before-mentioned Roger Strang who lived a block past our house and the other was Dave Press who lived across the street from Strang. My first encounter with Strang had been on my first day of school. As I made my way down the unfamiliar hallway, he had approached me with a group of other boys.

“Hey look,” he said. “A new guy.”

He had stuck out his hand and as I offered mine to complete the handshake, he quickly pulled his away and raked back his hair. His buddies all laughed and I smiled nervously and put my hand in my pocket.

“Hey four eyes,” he said, moving closer and tilting his head and examining my glasses. “Let me clean those up for you.”

Strang licked two fingers and rubbed them on my glasses. There was more laughter and I could sense other students looking at me as they filed by, picking up their pace and moving with a deliberateness so as not to become victims themselves. To this day I can still feel the heat of embarrassment and the isolated shame of my fearful paralysis as I stood there looking through saliva streaked lenses and hearing the dissonance of the mocking laughter. I’ve found myself in the safety of memory, building an attractive fantasy – rearranging the scene and striking out at Strang, with imagined bravery, knowing I would get my ass kicked and possibly being thrown out of school on

my first day. But of course there's no changing what happened, and as far as redemption goes, well, forget that because I was even more cowardly in the following weeks.

I had managed to avoid Roger Strang in school, but one day as I was walking home I heard a distant voice behind me: "Hey four eyes!"

I turned, and half a block away I saw him and David Press waving at me. I waved and turned away, but I heard Strang say, "Hey four eyes, wait up."

Neither of them carried books and their arms swung in a carefree arc, back and forth, the motion rustling the fabric of their open jackets. I noticed this because I was afraid to look into their faces, the one slight glance that I stole at Strang revealing a menacing sneer. My leg started to shake and I cast my eyes downward to see if my baggy chinos were hiding my trepidation. The cuffs rode the tops of my wingtips in slack stillness. I shifted my books from one arm to the other as I watched them approach.

"Where ya headed?" Strang asked me.

"Home," I replied.

"Where's that?"

"Down here, on South Grove across from Griggs Place," I said.

"Eddie Belcham's place?"

"Yeah," I replied. "The Belchams lived there."

For many years after, our house would be referred to as the Belcham place. I found this village quiriness as interesting as a woman who'd been married for many years, still being addressed by her maiden name. I hadn't met the Belchams, but I remembered my parents saying their name. Strang however, was excited that I lived there.

"Right next door to Jodie Cameron," he said.

"I don't know," I said.

"You live right next door to Jodie Cameron and you don't even know it?" Strang said. He shook his head and rested his hands on his hips. "She's only the hottest chick in high school. Eddie Belcham used to watch her dress from his bedroom window all the time. She never pulls her shade down."

"Nice tits," Press piped in.

"I'll say," Strang said. "Nice everything. I stayed over one night at Eddie's and we saw her come out of the shower. Totally fucking naked!"

I can't say my curiosity wasn't aroused with this information and I have to admit, afterward I did spend some long moments on many evenings in the darkness of my room, with my chin resting on the windowsill, peering across the yard into the golden rectangle of light and the glorious movement of flesh inside. But at that moment on the sidewalk I was struggling for composure. Sudden concerns like Strang asking me to stay overnight entered my mind and fueled my anxiety.

"We're stopping at Riker's," Strang said. "Wanna come?"

Riker's was a delicatessen across the street from the park on our way home.

"I don't have any money," I said. It was Thursday and I'd already spent my allowance.

"Don't worry about it," Strang replied.

I felt the pressure of his hand on my back and I turned with the prodding and walked in front of them. As we continued down the sidewalk I felt uncomfortable. Behind me I heard Strang and Press whispering and intermittent bursts of muffled laughter. I was afraid to turn around, but I did one time when Strang stepped on the back of my shoe.

"Sorry," Strang said, but there was challenge in his face as I bent over and secured the shoe.

I was relieved to reach Riker's. Strang told me offhandedly to leave my books on the newspaper box out front. The bell

rang on the door as we entered and old Mr. Riker greeted us from behind the counter. The store was small and dimly lit and there were no other customers. Strang went up to the counter. He pulled some change from his pocket and began making selections of candy from the wall behind Mr. Riker. Press nudged me with his elbow and directed me with a tilt of his head to another counter. Quickly he snatched a handful of baseball cards and stuffed them into his jacket pocket. I was shocked and looked over to the counter. Mr. Riker was bent over, picking candy low on the shelf that Strang had singled out. Press gave me another nudge, his eyes darting urgently toward the baseball cards. I grabbed some and stuck my hands in my pockets.

“Dave,” Strang said over his shoulder. “Want cinnamon or butterscotch?”

“Butterscotch’ll be good,” Press replied.

Mr. Riker put the candy in a small bag and Strang paid him and we thanked the old man and filed out the door. Outside, I picked up my books and followed Strang and Press across the street and into the park, feeling the lightness of relief. We went over a shaded hillock and down the other side to a picnic table.

“Let’s see’m,” Strang said.

Press pulled a stack of packages from his pocket and dropped them on the table. I added mine. There were thirteen and Strang divided them – five each for Press and himself, and three for me. We sat down at the table and Strang and Press tore off the wrappers and stacked the cards in one pile and the gum in another. I was coming to grips with the fact that I had stolen something, because I had never done it before. I asked if it bothered them and they laughed and Strang said, “Did you see that Cadillac sitting in the driveway next to the store? I’d say old Riker’s doing all right. My old man says he oughta be tarred



and feathered and ridden outa town on a rail for the prices he charges.”

The pilferage had ambushed me and I’ve wondered if Strang had masterminded it that way when he saw me walking alone on the sidewalk. It was a ballsy improvisation, he not knowing how I would react in the store. Since then I’ve often reflected on the darkness of Strang’s heart and his stealthy arrogance as I see him cruise by in the shiny patrol car. But that day in the park, as the nefarious thrill of the illegal act wore off and we shuffled through the baseball cards and made some trades and I found Tom Tresh of the Yankees in my hand, it was as if a thin soothing veil had settled on us. A passerby would see three boys hunched over at the picnic table, their crackling voices reciting player’s batting averages and qualities as they negotiated.

The next day after school we repeated the crime, but I found the whole experience to be deeply troubling. I can understand why lawyers argue the degree of premeditation to a jury – that it has a substantial bearing on a case. An offender who actually plots and carries out a surreptitious and devious act is quite measurably more evil than one who just happens to randomly become involved. I say this with the authority of one who has done both.

Strang and Press had waited for me across the street in front of the school. Neither of them had books again and they both had their hands in their jacket pockets. They greeted me in an easy and friendly manner, but there was no warmth in Strang’s eyes. His look gave the impression of calculated appraisal and I felt myself shrinking under his gaze.

“We’re stopping at Riker’s,” Strang said. “You with us?”

I guess I’d thought there was some measure of ambiguity in the question with the naïve hope that we’d make a legitimate purchase, but deep down I knew he was offering me a partnership in another crime.

“Sure,” I replied.

I tried to regulate my voice with a tone of natural casualness, but I could feel the movement of dread inside, like the dark cold crawl of a glacier. They turned and walked side-by-side down the sidewalk and I wondered if my new position of trailing behind them was a sign of acceptance. If that was the case, I can’t say I reveled in the elevated status, although I preferred it to being out front. I had followed a few steps behind them and each step carried the heavy burden of condemnation. I would have welcomed any excuse to escape, but none came to mind. Even the vague hope of my mother driving by in our Pontiac station wagon, running some errands, gave me cause to scan the road ahead. I followed along, watching congealed blades of hair slither like a wet paintbrush over the upturned collar of Strang’s jacket as he strutted along.

Inside the store the scene was re-enacted as if the day before had been a dress rehearsal. Again, there were no customers and Mr. Riker greeted us and Strang had gone up to the counter as Press and I moved to the counter behind him. I watched Press grab a handful of the cards and he looked at me and I did the same. I couldn’t believe it when Strang turned his head and asked as he had yesterday:

“Dave you want cinnamon or butterscotch?”

“Butterscotch’ll be good,” Press said.

“Doesn’t the other guy ever get a choice?” Old man Riker asked Strang.

“He’s allergic to butterscotch,” Strang replied.

The old man nodded and looked my way through the top half of his bifocals that angled forward on his long nose. His forehead was slightly furrowed as if he was expressing concern for my fabricated allergy. I felt the grip tighten on the thick stack of cards in my pocket and I wondered if my face was glowing. I made a mental note to never purchase butterscotch

candy in Riker's even though it was one of my favorite flavors. As we exited the store I was the last one and as Mr. Riker bid me a good day my shoes resounded heavily on the old wooden floor and I wished for some fluidity in my gait that had become stiff and teetering as if I was on stilts.

At the picnic table I couldn't shake the deep feeling of remorse. Strang and Press were as unfazed as yesterday. We made a few trades and if there was anything that brightened the moment, it was finding Bobby Richardson in my stack. I already had him in my collection, but I knew that Razor wanted this card badly, as it would complete the full team of the Yankees for him. Press also was looking for Bobby Richardson and he had offered some tempting cards, but I was excited to give it to Razor. Press tried to muscle me, but Strang intervened and overruled him, made it seem like baseball cards were on a sacred level, not to be messed with. Press had backed off. I guess it's true sometimes when they say, "There is honor among thieves."

On Monday at lunch I slid my tray across the table from Razor in the cafeteria and sat down. "Hey Ray," I said. "How's it going?"

Razor nodded, chewing a bite from his sandwich.

"I got you something," I said. I pulled the card from my shirt pocket and flipped it across the table. We both watched Bobby Richardson's face spin along the surface and stop against Razor's hand. With a flick of his finger he sent it back across the table.

"It's yours," I said. "You can keep it."

"I don't want it," he said.

"What, did you get him?" I asked.

Razor shook his head.

"Ray, it's yours," I said. "It's a gift."

"I don't accept stolen goods," Razor said, looking me squarely in the eyes.

It was the first time I noticed what would become a familiar pose. As his eyes affixed to mine there was an upward shift of his head and a small but pronounced ascension of his chin. His eyes remained straight, focused on mine as he scratched his bottom lip with his teeth. I struggled to hold his gaze and I felt a nervous smile stretch across my face and I averted my eyes downward.

"Dave and Roger were bragging about your robbery in science," Razor said. His face remained in the perched position, his chin riding high. "They're jerks."

That small episode back in 1963 had a huge influence on me. Never again did I steal and my shame was so tortuous that I paid back not only what I had taken, but also the sum of my cohorts. For a succession of weeks, I casually went into Riker's and left part of my allowance next to the lettuce in the produce section, an area I thought safest from other potential thieves. I didn't think of it then, but I've since wondered if old man Riker had discovered my exercise in redemption and knew all along. After school I avoided Strang and Press by leaving the building from the furthest point away from them, and walking many blocks out of the way which took me about twenty extra minutes to get home. The incident never came up again between Razor and me. I told him of my plan to pay back Mr. Riker and he simply nodded.

Over twenty years later I sat in Old Yeller and the news of Razor's theft dribbled in with the gathering crowd of happy hour drinkers and I eased myself into my usual state of inebriation, but without the sense of peace that I habitually sought and seldom found. There always seemed to be some obstacle to nullify the journey. That night my mood was slipping with updates of Razor's crime. Much had changed in

Razor's life since 1963, but one thing I knew was constant – he was not a common thief. I knew this without any doubt and I would stake my life on it. But my fellow villagers (at least the ones in Old Yeller) didn't seem to believe it.

"Doesn't surprise me a bit," Herb Roster said. He owned The Village Diner on the other side of Main Street. "Can't tell you how many times I caught him stealing garbage from my dumpster out back."

"How can you *steal* garbage?" I asked Herb.

"Well it's my property and my food and he didn't have my permission," Herb replied. "He's like some filthy raccoon scrounging around back there in the dark. One time he said he was having a midnight snack and he laughed that stupid laugh of his, like he was in a fancy fuck'n French restaurant."

Herb had conveniently left out the fact that for a long time Razor cleaned for him after hours and one of the perks was leftover, perishable food that would have been thrown out. I don't know how much Herb paid him, but I'm sure it wasn't much. During that period Herb's diner was the cleanest it's ever been. They had a falling out when Razor pointed out some health hazards that Herb found too "cost prohibitive" to remedy.

Rusty Petrowski was sitting on the other side of me, nodding vigorously. I wasn't sure if he was agreeing with Herb or responding to some inner voice from the swampy basin of his washed out brain. He worked in a local factory and the rest of the time he drank himself into oblivion. He usually worked four ten-hour days, from Monday through Thursday and I knew he was still at it from the night before. On my way in I saw his brother passed out in Rusty's car in the parking lot. It was a weekly routine that carried them to all the village and rural taverns and then to Rusty's mobile home until the bars reopened Friday morning.

“Thou shalt not steal,” Rusty announced and pointed a greasy finger toward the ceiling. Suddenly, as if something above had let it go, his arm dropped with a thud on the bar. Rusty picked up his arm and rubbed the elbow until he set it down to pick up his drink. “Razor’s been bad,” he said to me in a small childish voice.

I noticed Al Pecora inside the doorway. He was the day shift dispatcher at the police station. Al cut through the crowd and I made room between Rusty and myself.

“You still got Razor over there?” I asked him.

“Izz Razor in-car-zer-at-ed?” Rusty asked.

Al looked at Rusty and turned his back on him, facing me. He rolled his eyes and ordered a drink. I paid for his drink and waited while he took a sip.

“The guy’s a real piece of work,” Al said.

I didn’t know if he was referring to Rusty or Razor.

“Did Razor say why he did it?” I asked.

Al shook his head and took another drink. I waited while he looked around the room. Al always spoke carefully. I’ve often wondered if it was his nature or the result of dealing with emergency calls that he responded to daily.

“All Razor would say was, ‘*We are all guilty*,’” Al said. “The store manager came down and filed charges. I think if he would’ve offered an explanation or some remorse, charges would’ve been dropped. But Razor would only repeat, ‘*We are all guilty*.’”

“Is he still at the station?” I asked.

“No,” Al replied. “The chief had me call his mother and she came in to get him. It was kind of funny because she showed up with an old shopping bag with Razor’s work boots. They were almost new. Why in the hell would he steal another pair?”

“I thought he stole some shoes,” I said. “That’s what the scanner said.”

“Boots? Shoes?” Al said. “Who cares?”

I guess I didn’t care either, although I found this misinformation to be annoying. I’d gone over the peak, beyond the point where my liquor intake was fueling a smooth upward voyage. I could feel that powerful surge from inside that the threshold of drunkenness offers – distorting vision and making the mind slippery, unable to focus. There are some that can recognize this place beforehand and turn away, but I never could. In retrospect, as a sober person, I can see the milestones of the journey, but then as I lived it, I never really deciphered where I was. I started at one place and simply ended up at the other place – drunk. The rest was like automatic pilot, an unconscious connecting of dots. The afternoon had become the evening and happy hour had ended and Old Yeller remained packed with Friday night drinkers, my dismal self among them.

Sometime later Razor had come in. I was still at the bar. It’s remarkable how long you can sit in a place with a drink in your hand, disregarding your state of mind. I heard a few exclamations, some loud greetings and I turned and saw Razor standing there with the old felt hat pulled tightly down to his ears, rainwater dripping from the collapsed brim.

“Shoes,” someone yelled. “Shoes!”

And then someone else said it and another said it and heads turned and saw him and joined in until the place thundered with the new chant; “Shoes...Shoes...Shoes...Shoes...”

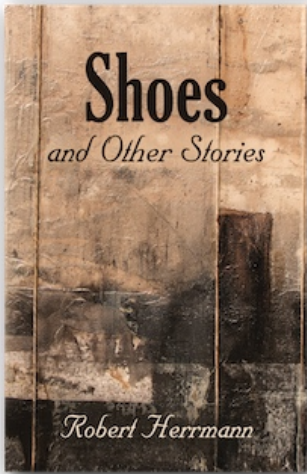
The name stuck in that mysterious way that nicknames can. And strangely Shoes never felt the need to explain why he had stolen the boots. I knew it was an expression of civil disobedience in a foggy, vague manner, but I’m sure he knew that people perceived it as nothing more than the ridiculous act of a drunk and ridiculous man. I know the dynamics – the pure and naked reality of a drunk’s life from the inflated glory of inebriation to the flip side – the dreaded hangover. It arrives

with remorse at half-assed recollections that suddenly blossom into focus throughout the day. You stop apologizing, hating the sound of your voice as it exercises the empty gesture. I don't think totally sober people know how much the alcoholic regrets his life on a daily basis – the constant eruptions of trouble from every possible direction and the resolve in the morning to change and the inevitable betrayal that follows.

Within a few days the theft receded behind the upstaging of more recent crimes and scandals – new pages in the fat book that adds color and texture to the seemingly flat drabness of daily life. Shoes paid a fine and performed some community service, spearing wrappers in the village park. Originally he'd been ordered to help out at the local Boys and Girls Club, but a few parents orchestrated an outcry to protect their precious children. Shoes methodically traveled the park in search of litter. He bummed cigarettes from teenagers who didn't frequent the Boys and Girls Club.

Back in the early fifties, my father established the store where I now stand. He had never considered my getting involved in it, knowing my addiction to the product. I understood that and I did well enough with my painting business even with a hangover. I kept it pretty simple and never took on anything too involved. Shoes had worked for me during those years, not in a steady way, but if I had a big job going he was usually available. We weren't fast friends, but we were old friends with a good measure of history and an understanding. Shoes was usually pretty beat up in the mornings and he never charged me for his first hour on the job. "Working out the cobwebs," he said. He would be productive for a few days and then he wouldn't show. I took it in stride, accepted what he had to offer as his best and deep down I was glad he didn't burden me with his worst.





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by Robert Herrmann

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