

Athletic Shoes
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2001

“Boy! These shoes will never do!” screamed coach Wilson as if his life depended on my shoe selection. “They are not acceptable for PE. You’ll hurt yer’self if you don’t get some laces in them.”

“But coach,” I timidly spoke, “I do not have shoelaces that will fit.”

“Sounds like YOU have a problem. Head back to the lockers and make it work.”

When I headed back to the lockers, I wondered what I could use as laces. I surveyed the room noticing how different the isles looked without crazed students running around. My eyes landed on a mop. Mop string I thought! The mop was cold, damp and a strange fluorescent liquid ran off the string as I laced it through the shoe. No time to complain. Coach Wilson and all.

“What’s this glowing stuff all over yer shoe?” bellowed the coach.

“I don’t—”

“Doesn’t matter. At least yer ready to go. (Gonna give me a heart attack one of these days.)”

* * *

“Wilson,” said the custodian.

“Yeah, Doc. What can I do for you?”

“Tell your students to avoid the mop in the locker room. I cleaned up quite a mess of liquids from the chemistry room last night. No telling what I cleaned up. Kinda gooey.”

“Sure thing, Doc.”

* * *

“Watch out Josh!”

I turned, but it was too late. The scene faded and turned to black. A building pain, like a headache, spread throughout my head. I had been hit by a basketball.

“Thanks for losing the game for us Josh.”

The bell rang, bringing 7th period to a close. I sat just outside the three-point line and watched my unhappy teammates shuffle into the locker room. No one turned to look at me. I wouldn’t have looked at me either; I was pathetic. I changed my clothes in silence, put my books in my backpack, and put a hat on my head as I pushed the cold metal bar on the door leading out the back of the school gym to avoid the crowds of admiring basketball fans.

Brenton was waiting for me. Somehow he always knew what I was thinking and sometimes before I did. He smiled and told me that life was not over.

“See you Brenton.” I started off toward home as I waved good-bye to my friend and locker partner. He’d warned me many times about crossing Wilson. Standing there all by myself on that chilly afternoon, I suddenly did not want to walk home. It’s so boring. At that moment it felt like something was pulling my legs toward the alley. I

froze. Or at least tried to because my legs kept on moving toward the alley. I felt the urge to yell *stop* but the words would not form. *Stop. Stop. Whatever is going on, please stop.* I stood, stopped, looking down the alley.

“Curious,” I said to myself quietly as I looked around to see if anyone was watching this strange display. I checked my watch and saw that I was late getting home. I’d better hurry. At the precise moment those thoughts formed in my head, my legs were jolted down the alley carrying my body reluctantly along with it. I looked down and saw the fluorescent liquid on my shoes glow.

Being the capable student that I am, I put it all together and surmised that there must be something in the liquid that allows my shoes to pick up on my thoughts. To test this idea, I thought, *Jump*. And I did. Cool. Very cool.

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“Not Josh,” the squat kid with thick black glasses said. “He’ll lose the game for us.”

“We’ll take Chris.”

“Josh,” the other team captain reluctantly said as I walked embarrassed to join my unhappy teammates. All eyes from the opposing team were on me. The eyes of my team were diverted.

The first fifteen minutes of the basketball game was like a game of keep-away. Away from me. Neither team was amazingly better than the other. However, our team was down by three baskets.

Then it happened. Mike passed the ball to Cameron. The other team knocked it away before Cameron got it and the ball landed at my feet. Frozen, watching the hordes of players about to converge on my spot, I grabbed the ball and headed to the basket. I could feel the blood pounding in my ears as the squeak of the sneakers on the gym floor were alternately amplified and then muffled with each burst of blood. Thoughts flew through my mind. I fixated on the inevitable. I was going to mess up. The ball would not go through the hoop. But wait—

As these thoughts formed in my head, my feet were moving closer and closer to the basket as if guided by an invisible force. Up I went and before I realized it, I had slammed the ball into the hoop.

Gyms are not usually quiet places. But at that moment it was. All eyes were silently on me in disbelief.

Thank goodness Brenton was there to break the silence in the way only he can. “Hey Josh, eat your Wheaties today?” Brenton said with a smirk while he punched me in the arm. “Move along. Move along. Nothing to see here. Wimp makes basket. Stranger things have happened. Move along.”

* * *

Whispers at lunch went from table to table the way kids do scrounging for change for the candy machine. The whole tone of lunch was a bit off. The lunch ladies did not place the mashed potatoes on the tray with the same mechanical rhythm. The group of seniors who hang out by the soda machine accosting every one who passes were not their usual self.

People pointed and stared. My small group of friends were comforting. “You suck at basketball. Where did you learn moves like that?” Stuffing another bite of cheese zombie into my mouth to avoid an answer, I gave the weak reason—

“I’ve been practicing at home.”

“Sure. You’re a lame basketball player. Worse than my sister. It was a fluke.”

“Yeah, a fluke,” I mumbled through my apple hoping the conversation would end.

* * *

“Okay, same teams as yesterday. And please,” the coach said shaking his head, “don’t make me regret being a PE teacher.” He blew the whistle. Back and forth the ball was tossed. The opposing team would pull ahead one or two points, but we would soon counter with our own baskets.

I felt like I was part of the game; my teammates trusted me with the ball. Perhaps they just wanted to see if I could repeat yesterday. Whatever the reason, I did not care. I was invigorated. With each basket I made, the ball was passed more often to me. The jocks congratulated me or gave me that “nice job” sock in the arm. I owed my newfound happiness to my shoes.

Sitting on the hard wooden locker bench between two rows of freshly painted lockers threading the mop string through my shoe, I saw the kneecaps of three guys. Cautiously, I looked up. There stood Brock, Todd, and Rick—three members of the varsity basketball team. There were the epitome of high school cool—they played every sport, had gorgeous girlfriends the likes of which only I could dream, and they each had a car. It was a tragedy that so much coolness could be placed on a few individuals.

I guess the look on my face was telling because Brock said, “Don’t worry Josh. We aren’t going to beat you up. My name’s Brock and this is Todd and Rick.” He pointed left and right.

“I know who you guys are. Everyone does,” I managed to say while standing up. I was a skinny twig in comparison to them. “But what do you want with me?”

“You showed some great moves out there on the court. It was like you were a different person. We didn’t know you were that good. Anyway, us three and some buddies play ball after school every day. You want to join us today?”

The moment seemed to take forever. Like when you jump off a cliff, time stops or at least moves at a snail’s pace. That is what it was like before I uttered, “Sure.”

Arrg. That was my chance to be cool and all I could say was, “Sure.” What about a simple, yet cool, version like, “Sounds great. Where and when?” Or even a more adventurous version like, “I hope your buddies show because it’s going to take more than you three to keep up with me.” No, that would have been my chance to get in with the cool crowd. And it would have worked if I had said pretty much anything other than, “Sure.”

Trying desperately to improve my cool kid rating I searched for something else to say. Nothing.

“We’ll meet you at the Sundial Park after school,” one of the three said without looking back.

* * *

“Wait up Josh!” I glanced behind me and Brenton was running up to me with his duck tape reinforced backpack bouncing from side to side with each stride. Crap, I was supposed to go skateboarding with Brenton after school. “You ready Josh?”

“I’m sorry, dude. I have to go home to help my mom around the house. Maybe tomorrow?” I lamely said.

“Oh, okay.”

I could see that he was upset. We planned this all week long. “Maybe I’ll call you,” he said as he headed the other direction.

“Sure.”

As I walked through the nearly deserted parking lot, Brock pulled up in his truck. It was the type of truck that said the owner either had too much money or too much free time. I did not recognize the passenger.

“You want a ride to the park?”

“Great. Nice truck. Does it have four-wheel drive?” I asked trying to show an interest in my new friend. The passenger opened his door, leaned forward moving the freshly cleaned vinyl seat ahead for me to jump in.

“Hi, I’m Justin.”

Grabbing the handle, I lunged into the truck. The truck grumbled as if it wasn’t ready to move as Brock forced it into gear. Through the foggy back window, I noticed Brenton on the other side of the lot, sitting on the steps. I felt sick like I was going to throw up. I lied to me best friend.

* * *

Basketball yesterday afternoon at the park was great. I had proven myself to Brock and his friends with my swift footwork. Playing basketball with these shoes was almost too easy. Suddenly, I felt guilty. It wasn’t me playing basketball. It was the shoes. I was lying to the guys, I had lied to my best friend, and I was lying to myself. I wasn’t good at basketball.

My thoughts were interrupted by my mom calling me for breakfast. “Hurry up. Your eggs are getting cold!” The smell of sausage floated up the stairs and through the hall. While I laced up my shoes, I saw an old pair of sneakers on the other side of my room. There was a moment there where I considered putting them on today. But I couldn’t. I had gotten so used to the glory from these special shoes. It was like drugs.

Stumbling down the steps, I made my way to the kitchen.

“What’s wrong, hon?”

“Nothing, mom.” I lied. It seemed like I was doing that a lot lately. How could I face Brenton.

I played a lot with my food that Saturday morning. I was right in the middle of a great sausage sculpture when the phone rang. I searched my brain for excuses and reasons like a student looking for that one assignment in their binder. I wished I wasn’t there.

“It’s for you. Brock, I think his name was. I did not know you had a friend named Brock,” my mom inquired.

“He’s just some guy from school,” I said taking the phone and walking away as far as the cord would allow.

Keeping my voice down, I said, “Yeah, I’ll be there at two.” I placed the phone back in its cradle and looked at the clock. I had about thirty minutes before I had to leave. A walk would be good for me and help to clear my head so I grabbed a chilled bottle of water out of the fridge and called out to my mom, “See you later this evening.” My mom responded, but I had already raced out the door, leaving whatever she said in the house.

* * *

Yesterday was fun, but my life was spinning out of control. I was not making decisions based on the long-term effects. I had lived the last two weeks for short-term returns and the immediate fix. These were the thoughts going through my head as I pulled up a chair to sit with my friends at lunch.

“What up, Josh?” a guy next to Justin said as he flicked a pea across the lunchroom and hit a kid in the back. “Bingo!”

He went for another pea and then Brock cut in, “I have two questions for you buddy. We are having a party this Friday at my house. My parents are gone. Whadda you say, show up around eight o’clock? And coach Wilson asked me to see if you are interested in joining the basketball team. What do you think of that? From dork to stud.”

“The party sounds great, but—“

“I will see you there then.”

I was caught so I nodded my head. Across the table, Brittney was smiling at me. “I hope you can make it to the party, Josh. I would love to talk with you.”

With scarlet warmth spreading across my face, I forced out a, “Yeah, I’ll see you there.”

* * *

It was Friday and in biology class the lab equipment was laid out on the tables like an operating room. “In your lab groups today,” said Mr. Fran. I found my group at the last table. I walked up and in the cheeriest voice I could muster, I said, “How’s it going?”

No response.

I should have expected this. I sat down on the tall stool and put my notebook on the dark slate table. Taking a pencil out of my bag, I started to organize my area for dissection. Bill, Jim, and Jason were giving me the cold shoulder. They spoke to each other as if I wasn’t there. The waxy, fermented smell emanating from the frog was getting to me. The frog laid there splayed out with its limbs held down with pins on a grey chunk of wax. I watched the clock waiting for the hands to move while picking at the frog.

“Josh, this isn’t a sushi joint. You’d do better to be careful with the organs,” Mr. Fran instructed as he pulled up along side and then left just as quickly. The three at my table chuckled under their breaths.

Lockers opened and closed with a metallic click as students loaded their backpacks with books for the weekend. Everyone around me seemed to be having a great time. People were clustered around lockers chatting about the weekend and setting up plans. I fumbled with my locker combination. I was concentrating on everyone around me too much to get the combination right the first time.

“Having problems with your combo, cool guy?” It was Jim with Brenton and Bill not far behind. “These guys said I was wasting my time, but I thought I would ask anyway. We’re going to the show tonight at the Sityricon. Are you coming?” He said this in a I-dare-you-to-not-say-yes tone.

“I’ll try. I have a lot of homework this weekend.” It was a lame excuse and they knew it.

In a gruff voice, Bill said, “Have fun with your *homework*. When you realize that your *homework* is not what you hoped and *it* drops you, I hope you remember that we gave you a chance.” The three of them turned and left, talking as they walked out the metal double doors and into the afternoon sun.

The music could be heard down the block as I rounded the last corner to Brock’s house. Light from the street lamps wandered around the leaves of the old oak and maple trees and found its way through, escaping to set upon the sides of the houses. Houses on either side of me reached up into the night sky. Colorful rooms called from inside the houses through picture windows. Century old trees stood guard in front of some of the houses. Circular driveways could be found on either side of the street. *Number 25 East Washington Street*. It was clearly marked on the brass placard on the brick light post. But I did not need that to tell me I was at the right house. Between the music, the lights, and the fifteen or so kids on the wrap around porch the house, was obvious.

Making my way down the long cobblestone walkway to the front porch, I stepped over legs as I stared at the door. Before I could grab the doorknob, the door opened and a drunken guy in a letterman’s jacket stumbled out with a girl in tow by the arm. I made my way through people and people looking for someone I knew, some island of familiarity. I found the kitchen after walking through at least six other rooms. There I saw Brittney laughing while Brock whispered in her ear.

I stood and watched in disgust. These weren’t my friends. I turned and quickly found my way out.

It was a clear night. I looked up at the sky as I walked home. There seemed to be more stars out than usual. Not only the bright ones you are used to, but also thousands of new ones scattered across the sky like salt. The cold air sent shivers through my body with each gust of wind. The smell of the wet leaves collecting in piles was my companion home.

* * *

I awoke Sunday morning with the frightening realization that I had an essay due tomorrow in first period, writing class. If I have learned one thing, it is not to forget your writing in Mr. Warren’s class. He won’t yell at you, but he’ll give you this talk about how important it is to show the world your quality in everything you do. We all know he

means well and he is sharing his experience with us. It makes you feel bad because you can see in his eyes that he knows you are capable of so much more.

Throwing the warm sheets aside, I slipped my feet into my fuzzy slippers and stumbled my way to the desk. My desk was covered with stacks of comic books, jars of pens and pencils, and various half finished art projects. Tinfoil crowned the top of a jar filled with black shiny beetles. I reached around the jar and pushed an orange button. The computer hummed into operation, the monitor zapped into life, and I logged on to the Internet. My mailbox was empty. Normally it is filled by this time. I scanned the Buddies List in the upper right corner: Sea_squirt111. Brenton was online. I needed his help badly.

Click-click-click-click the keys on my keyboard chatted away as I sent him an IM. The IM window sat quietly for a moment awaiting a response. The sound of a door closing came from the computer and I saw that Brenton was no longer online. He logged out. I was once again without friends. I scrolled through the toolbar to write an email to Brenton. Hopefully he would read it.

“Okay class, please pass your essays toward the front of the room. We have worked real hard on how to write an essay and I look forward to reading your marvelous creations.” Each sentence and snippet of wisdom uttered from Mr. Warren's mouth was harder and harder to take as the piles of essays were passed toward the front. I had let myself down.

The shrill of the bell snuck up. The period had gone quickly. “Josh,” asked Mr. Warren, “Can I see you for a moment?” I let the class file out before I got out of my seat.

“I know, I know. I am sorry about not turning my essay in.”

Mr. Warren looked into my eyes and stated, “There is no need to apologize to me. It is not me you let down.” He said this knowing that I would understand its importance. “Josh, I asked you to stay after because I wanted to know if everything was okay.”

“Yeah.” I was at a loss of words in front of my favorite teacher.

“The reason why I asked is because I noticed that you have been acting differently these last two weeks. I wanted to see if there is anything that I can do for you.”

“Nah, I’m fine. I guess I am just a little lost, but I will figure it out.”

Mr. Warren started to straighten up the pile of essays as he walked to his desk at the back of the room. He paused before setting the papers down holding them by the fingertips and said, “I hope you find your way. The path you choose will have life changing effects. Choose wisely.”

PE went well that day. Too well. I scored many baskets and secured my place among Brock and his friends. I still hadn’t given word about joining the basketball team. I guess I was avoiding it. Lost in thought, I noticed the several layers of paint on the bench. Each layer of color could be seen in a section where a chunk was broken off. Glossy and thick, the paint just laid there quiet letting a new layer cover it each year. Suddenly, but knowing it all along, I knew what I needed to do.

I headed out the door to the back of the school. I have not used that door in awhile, but today I wanted to slip away unnoticed. I grabbed the cold metal handrail covered in scratches from skateboarders and quickly made my way down each step. At the bottom of the steps there is a row of tall bushes that I go through as a short cut to the

main street. I pushed aside the prickly evergreen bushes and saw Brock's truck slowly pulling up to Jeremy. Jeremy was this kid in my math class who seemed pretty cool, but was having trouble making friends. He had just transferred from another state and I used to invite him to lunch with Brenton and the gang, but that was before the shoes. I guess I forgot about him.

The truck crept up to Jeremy like a wolf sneaking up on its prey. When it was along side Jeremy, someone inside the truck bed stood up and dumped a bucket of dirty water on him. Everyone in the truck laughed as the vehicle sped off. Seeing this, I ran out to where Jeremy stood wet, steam rising in the cold winter afternoon.

"Jeremy! What happened?" I asked as if I hadn't just watched the whole event from behind the bushes.

Soaking the water off his face with his coat sleeve, Jeremy turned and in an angry voice said, "Leave me alone. I do not want anything to do with you or your friends!"

"But—" I was cut off just as I started the sentence.

"Didn't you hear me? I want you to leave me alone."

I watched Jeremy walk away. I was torn to follow him and see if I could make him understand that I had nothing to do with this, but I knew that he wouldn't listen. I deserved this. I realized that I was more interested in showing that I didn't do it than I was in helping Jeremy. I disgusted myself.

* * *

Brenton has his own phone line to his bedroom. He and I used to call each other after school every day. I dialed up Brenton's phone number fully expecting Brenton to not answer it; he has caller ID. No response. I put the smooth white phone back into its cradle on the wall next to my bed and sat there thinking. What was I going to do? I needed to make some choices.

"Mom! I have to do something quick. I'll be home in time for supper," I yelled from the front door as I grabbed my board and dashed out. Taking a giant leap off the top step, I place the board under my feet and landed with the distinctive sound of bearings spinning wildly. Down the street I went heading for Brenton's.

* * *

I turned and skidded down Brenton's driveway where the marks of many visits still remained. Snapping the tail of the skateboard, I popped it up in the air and grabbed it as I made my way up the side steps. At the door, I pause making sure I had my plan all figured out. I did. Knock-knock-knock.

"Hello Josh, hon. I haven't seen much of you lately. Where have you been?" Brenton's mother asked as she wiped her hands on a towel.

Looking her in the eyes, I honestly said, "I have been away for awhile. I'm back now. Is Brenton home?"

"He's up in his room. Why don't you head on up and I will fix you boys some snacks."

"Thanks, Mrs. Reid. I really appreciate it." And I did. She was always so nice to me.

I wandered through the kitchen and turned left, walking passed the crackling fireplace. Its warmth was penetrated my clothes and caressed my skin. I walked confidently up the staircase. Brenton's room was the last one in the hallway. A red city stop sign bleached by the sun, held in with two bent nails, adorned the door. The first knock I hesitated. The second knock was louder. I heard some stirring in the room. Finally, the door opened with a creak to show a darkened room with a single light on above the computer desk.

"Brenton, I have some—"

Before I could finish, he said, "I'm glad you're here. I was wondering how long it would take you to show up at my house. Well, better late than never."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Brenton threw aside the clothes on a chair and motioned for me to sit down.

"What's on your mind, buddy?"

I spent the next hour telling him about the shoes, how I found the mop string and what it did to my shoes, and how I took advantage of the situation to get in good with the athlete crowd. He quietly listened to the whole story, nodding occasionally or asking for a small bit of clarification.

"I knew something was up with you. First, you become this amazing basketball player and then you ditch all of your friends for those jerks. All of your friends are pissed at you. What's your plan?"

"Are you pissed at me?" I hesitantly asked.

"I was at first, but then I thought about it and most of us would be tempted by hanging with the cool kids. I figured something was up. I just did not think it would take you two weeks to show up at my door. But the rest of our friends have written you off. You are going to have to work hard to get back in the good graces of the group."

My stomach churned with the thought of crawling back to my old friends, but it was what I had to do. "Here is the start of my plan." I said while pulling an old pair of sneakers out of my backpack. "First thing I need to do is get rid of these shoes." I took off the shoes with the mop laces and put them on the floor.

"So that's them. They don't look special."

"Yes, but they have caused me more trouble than I ever want to have again. I brought my skateboard. You want to go skate?" I asked while lacing up my beaten up old pair of shoes.

"I would like that." Brenton grabbed his helmet and board and we walked out of his room talking.

"Wait, I forgot the shoes. I need to take care of them." I went back into the room and was impressed that I was not tempted to put them on. I was secure in my decision. My life was starting to return to normal.

On our way to the driveway we passes the garbage can. "Time for step two of my plan." I lifted the garbage lid with my head to the side preparing for the rotten smell. With the other hand, I tossed the shoes in. "Good riddance."

"You sure you want to get rid of those shoes? They gave you a lot of popularity. Aren't you going to miss that?"

I dropped the lid with a clang. "No. Popularity always looks good from a distance, but I am happy to have my life and best friend back. You know, I guess I realized that I

would not change a thing in my life . . . expect, maybe to pull off an ollie kick flip,” I said as I pushed Brenton out of the way and headed for the lit driveway.

* * *

My old sneakers did not help me skate any better, but at least I earned the tricks I could do. There is a pride that comes from doing something yourself. With false skills, you realize that you are a lie. And when the cool friends are gone, you become aware of how fleeting the glory of a lie is. It doesn't last long. I told Brenton good-night and headed home for supper. I was smiling as the dingy old laces on my shoes danced in the wind.