

## The Shoes

It had been a long time since I'd been back to the old neighborhood. My father had sold the house years ago to a young married couple. The last time I was there I remember the strange feeling I'd had, knowing that someone else was living in that house. It used to be our house. *My* house! I'd grown up in it after all.

It was a corner house and I was standing on the sidewalk—not the one in front of the house but the one on the side. The house was old but still in good condition.

A low hedge separated the sidewalk from the yard. Here was a line I could not cross, the border to a forbidden land I could never reenter. A cherubim guarded the garden with a flaming sword and would kill me if I tried.

I murmured to myself, "Once you've left, you can never go back."

Now the house belonged to someone else. It no longer belonged to our family. It no longer belonged to me.

As I stood there on the sidewalk, my childhood replayed itself like a movie on the screen of my own backyard. There was the maple tree my sister and I used to climb, the grape arbor I'd hidden behind when we played hide and seek, the garage window I'd broken with a wild pitch.

My eyes shifted from one side of the yard to the other and then returned to the house. I noticed that the side door, the one leading to the basement, was unlocked and slightly ajar. I saw myself running through the door, calling out to my mother, "I'm home!"

Before I could catch myself, I had already put one foot over the hedge. I quickly drew it back, however, not letting it touch the ground. It was no longer my house, after all. My mother was not there. And I was no longer a child.

I stood there for a moment, wondering where the strange impulse to walk across the yard and pass through that door had come from.

"Can I really do this?" I asked myself. "What if I get caught?"

I wasn't sure if anyone was in the house but figured that someone must be if the side door had been left unlocked.

I took off my shoes and socks and, holding them in my hand, put my right foot over the hedge again. It came down this time on the soft green grass of the yard. The grass felt just like the grass I'd run through in summer when my sister and I used to squirt each other with the hose.

The cherubim did not kill me when my left foot joined the right one on the other side of the hedge. I began tiptoeing to the side door, looking constantly at the side window to make sure no one was watching me. When I reached the door, I opened it slowly, quietly, remembering the many times I had opened and closed it with a bang when I was a child. It seemed so strange now to have to sneak inside my own house.

Just inside the door was a landing. The steps ahead led up to the kitchen. The steps to the left led down into the basement. The house was quiet. Perhaps no one was at home after all. Perhaps they'd simply forgotten to lock the side door.

I took the steps to the left, carefully placing one bare foot after the other on each of the old wooden steps so they wouldn't crack and make a sound.

When I reached the foot of the stairs, the basement looked just the way I'd remembered it, with the same stone walls and peeling white paint. It even smelled the same—damp and musty, with the odor of coal dust.

When my sister and I were young my mother always told us to put our muddy shoes under the steps when we came home. Instinctively I placed the shoes I'd been carrying onto the floor beneath the steps. They weren't muddy, of course, but in the dim light they looked just like the shoes I had put there as a child.

I felt as if I had really come home.

I hesitated, but only for a moment, before starting to climb back up the steps. When I had almost reached the landing, I suddenly heard footsteps in the living room. Someone was at home after all! The footsteps paused, followed by a moment of eerie silence. Had I been heard, I wondered?

The footsteps resumed and were heading towards the kitchen. I saw the fleeting shadow of a woman on the floor of the landing as she walked past the open doorway. Once she was in the kitchen,

I heard a cupboard door open and then the clatter of pots and pans.

I stood there on the top step just below the landing, completely frozen. I knew that if I moved even one inch towards the outside door the woman would hear me. I was trapped. I thought: I can no longer leave my own house.

What if the woman found me there? I imagined her screaming. I imagined her calling the police. I imagined myself explaining, "It's not what you think!" I imagined her not being able to understand. I imagined the police coming. I imagined the police not being able to understand. I imagined myself being arrested for breaking and entering. I imagined myself being thrown into jail. I imagined myself losing my job over the incident. I imagined my wife not being able to understand. I imagined getting divorced over the incident. I imagined myself not being able to pick up the pieces again. I imagined myself sleeping in a cardboard box on the streets of the windy city.

But none of these things happened. The pots and pans had stopped rattling. The woman was walking again towards the living room. I couldn't stop myself from peeping my head around the corner of the landing just as she was passing the doorway. She turned her head and looked directly at me.

But somehow she didn't see me. It was as if I'd become invisible. I had caught a glimpse of her, however. It was my own mother. She was young and she was beautiful, just as she'd been when I was a child.

I heard her footsteps ascend the stairs to the second floor and then the gentle sound of the bedroom door closing behind her.

I quietly slipped out the side door, leaving it slightly ajar, just as I had found it. I sprinted on tiptoe across the yard back to the hedge, and over the hedge to the sidewalk. A thistle was growing out of a crack in the sidewalk and I stepped on it. A thorn pierced my bare heel. Blood oozed from my skin as I removed the thorn.

But I had returned. The cherubim had let me back out. I no longer had my shoes, of course, but I still had my socks. As I was putting them on, I looked back across the yard. I saw the maple tree, the grape arbor, and the garage, and thought to myself, "I will never need to come home again."

I suppose that the couple who lived in the house eventually found my shoes under the steps in the basement. But they'd never know who they belonged to.

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