

Journey on a Dime



Toby Olson

There was a man who had plenty of money and could spend it freely and without worry, and he did. He had a fine apartment in the city, a new car parked in an expensive lot, invitations to exclusive parties to which he brought elegant gifts and left early -he was not sociable-, a charming country house paid in full, more money than he could ever spend, time on his hands. And yet he valued none of his possessions very highly, these things money could buy him -take it or leave it-, but for his shoes. In the past he had been a poor man and couldn't afford good shoes. Then he found his efficient broker and the stock market and he could.

Crockett & Jones, John Lobb, Testoni, Martin Dingman, and of course Adidas Micropacers, Hogan, Bottega Veneta, a hundred pairs at least, for the man was a walker in this city; he couldn't sit still. He walked in the parks, along both rivers, around the lake, down boulevards, into narrow back streets, through aisles in the supermarkets and the massive specialty food shops out on the docks. He tried never to retrace his steps, and so he went. And once he went to a podiatrist on the far side of the city, walking there, because his feet had begun to ache from walking, only to find out his feet

had become flat feet, the arches fallen, and he needed orthotics. So he was fitted for a set, which felt good; then because money was no object, he bought a set for each of his hundred or more pairs of shoes, but for the one he valued above all the others, which for some reason didn't seem to need them. It's ironic, because he'd purchased these shoes at the end of a flea market Saturday, when the prices fell drastically, for one thin dime. A lark to buy them at that cost, but in a way pragmatic, for he could then tell the story of his purchase, which might be worth much more.

They were goofy shoes, old-time tennis sneakers, black, with red flames on the sides, a little ragged, but when he worked his feet into them, dancing in place before the seller's table, then laced them, they fit perfectly and he was sure they would deliver him wherever he wanted to go, at any time. Of course, they were magic shoes. Well, not magic actually. They didn't *do* anything. And yet at times they did seem to have a mind of their own, taking him places without his conscious volition involved. And yet walking had often been like that anyway, the mindless perambulation of a rich man with nothing to do.

Then one day, out walking, he was approaching an uptown bar and his shoes turned and took him down steps into a darkness in which he had to squint until his eyes became accustomed to the dim light and he found the story. It was an old time tavern, like his shoes, and when he shuffled up to the bar he saw a woman sitting where the bar turned at the end. He ordered a beer. And by the time the beer came he had smiled at the woman and she at him. So he lifted the frosty mug and moved down the way to join her.

At first she seemed an old woman, then she seemed a young one in her old woman's disheveled hair, clothing, and the demeanor he found in her face, which was slightly soiled by what he took to be experience. There was no money on the bar beside her half-full glass, so he ordered a second round for both of them, though he guessed it was not drink or poverty that had brought her to this condition.

They talked, his shoes resting on the bar-stool ring, about the hot weather, not good for walking, though they soon heard rain on the street above, about life on the city streets in both rain and sun, about music, painting and the stock market, small talk leading to moments of silence, and in one of these she asked if he might like to come to her

place for more. His shoes shuffled on the ring, for he had no desire for her, but he agreed.

Her place was a hotel room, only a few doors down, but it was raining hard and they were soaked through by the time they got there. He sat in the couch across from the bed, and she went into the bathroom and then came out in a robe, carrying another. Her dark hair had been toweled dry and looked fresh and clean as it fell around her face in soft waves and her face had been scrubbed into a glow and seemed no longer soiled by any care. He took the offered robe and went into the bathroom too and removed his wet clothing, even his shoes, and got into it. And when he came out carrying his shoes, she was sitting at the bed's edge, her legs crossed, the robe fallen away to reveal her knees. They were long, lovely legs, and he placed his shoes on the floor and sat down in the couch again facing her. Then they talked.

They talked for hours, she had a slight accent, and in this talk of politics, finances and travel, of history and the uprooting of settlements, even of cabbages and kings, they came to a place that seemed to him an oasis, and he told her his life's story, which ended too quickly because there was so little in it, that going from being poor to being rich, like walking mindlessly through the city streets, but for the realization in telling it that it might not even have started yet. She told him almost nothing about herself, but that she had been born in Italy. Then the talking ended.

It was very late, still raining cats and dogs, the rain beating hard at the window making the room seem a shelter in the storm, which it was, and she asked him if he'd like to spend the night there, what remained of it. She'd take the couch. He could have the bed. He said the couch was fine, and she handed him a pillow and a blanket she'd fetched from the closet, then smiled at him and turned out the light. He slipped out of his robe and got under the rough blanket. It felt good against his skin, and he left the story and fell asleep almost immediately, only to wake in the morning to bright sunlight in the room and the empty bed. She was gone and so were his shoes.

What can happen now, but anything? For this man, like all men, is nothing but a figment of his own mind and has now come out of it, much in the way he might have come out of the mind of a writer

sitting before a keyboard who has no idea where the man might be going, or even just walking, next.

Sitting on the bed the man is nothing, might as well be among the dead, but should he move or should his mind move, he'd come alive in a story, experienced or lived through or thought about, which is the only living to be counted on.

What should he do? What should his mind make himself do, or observe himself doing? All that walking around with all that money, getting nowhere, might well have been a searching for a story, but to find the start of a story implies its ending, and the man had only his shoes and the woman to get him there, and now they are both gone.

This is not a problem, he thinks. I have money, the rain has stopped, my socks are still here and my clothes are dry. I can call a taxi, then walk the few yards in my stocking feet. I'll be home in under an hour, then under a hot shower, then drinking good coffee.

Okay, fine, but what will he do then, where will he and the story go? He has no shoes and he has no woman. Suddenly, he's exhausted, and he crawls back under the blanket to forget everything and goes to sleep.

The woman left the hotel room bright and early, nothing but a large shoulder bag and his shoes, which she wore, having stuffed her own worn and flimsy ones down into the bag. He'd told her he had money. It had been there in his life story and she'd seen some of it in the bar. So how could he miss such raggedy tennies? She didn't have even a thin dime, but the sun was warm on her face and her feet felt light and delicious in these new shoes. They were magic shoes. Well, not magic actually. They didn't *do* anything. And yet at times they did seem to have a mind of their own. They were dancing shoes. They had once been worn by a mysterious dancer in practice sessions, and the woman herself felt like a dancer in them.

So she began to dance. At first it was on the street near the bar for dimes, then after long walks through the city reconnoitering, in discovered places, in front of museums and downtown art galleries, where she was thought of as some sort of artist herself, and quarters and dollars were forthcoming. And she found out, through the dancing, that she was quite good at it, even better than that thought the man who approached her one day and offered her a position in a new avantguard company he was forming.

She danced there awhile, awkwardly at first when she had to take her shoes off and put on more conventional ones, then better as she regained her recently acquired dexterity and picked up movements and routines that stood her in good stead when she moved up to dance with an established troop.

And soon she was out front, the other dancers only a chorus behind her. She danced her way across the country, in places to great acclaim, and after a few years of this, she was invited to dance alone, in Italy, accompanied by a full symphony orchestra in Rome. Many important dignitaries were in attendance, though not the Pope, though her dance numbers did have a religious flavor, one that seemed even more universal than Catholicism.

After the concert photographs, the flowers and the reception, she slept like a log and the next morning, refreshed, slipped on the old shoes and went out for a long walk through the ancient city. She walked for hours, and in the afternoon she stopped for an espresso at a breezy outdoor café. She was not tired from all the walking and was enjoying the coffee and her new view, when a well-dressed older man came to her table and introduced himself. He had been at the concert and was an admirer, and he asked her quite formally if she might consider coming to his villa for dinner the following evening. It would be no more than a small gathering of friends. She might enjoy their company. She liked the look of his clothing and his demeanor, and she agreed.

At the party the guests were generous in their praise of her dancing, though only two had been to the concert and they were not among the royalty in attendance. She counted a Conte and Contessa, a Principessa, a couple of young Ducas and an ancient Marchesa, and her host revealed in private that he himself was a Visconte, seventy-six years old, and that his wife, the Viscontessa, had died just the winter before and that he was lonely in that magnificent villa of fifty rooms, marble staircases and fountains, paintings by famous artists, a ballroom with a mahogany floor fit for dancing, and numerous ancient vases and figurative sculptures placed casually throughout the rooms.

After the other guests had departed, he took her to sit beside him on one of the many tile terraces overlooking fields and rows of stately junipers marching down to the sea. They drank brandy there and talked

into the early morning, until she grew tired and told him that, and his car and driver arrived to take and deliver her back to her hotel. She was hardly back in the room, when the phone rang. He'd called to ask if she might wish to accompany him on an evening cruise on his yacht the next day, and after a few months of conversation, cruising, eating fine meals among friends and royalty at his villa and attending concerts and other theatrical occasions, she agreed to marry him and she did.

Their marriage lasted a full year, and then he died without other heirs, and she found herself in possession of the villa, the yacht and all his money, which was a considerable sum, most of it invested in the stock market. She had all this, and yet she valued none of it very highly. Take it or leave it. The only thing she really valued were those shoes that had carried her along all the way and had brought her to where she now was. She felt she owed them something, but how provide recompense to shoes? So she wore them often, regardless of the weather or the occasion, and because of this she became in the eyes of others at best curious, at worse eccentric. She stopped dancing, and while not a recluse, she kept to the villa on most afternoons and evenings, after her long walks through the city and through that beautiful countryside near the sea, where the villa was so perfectly situated.

Then one afternoon, while she was sitting in her lounge chair on that same terrace on which her husband had keeled over and died a year ago, she saw a figure approaching who seemed no more than one of those occasional country walkers that came in sight of the villa and moved closer, though were never bold enough to intrude on her privacy. It was a man, and he seemed familiar in his posture, which she really couldn't discern properly at her distance from him. His feet hurt, for he had been walking all over Italy looking for his shoes.

They were magic shoes. Well, not magic actually. They didn't *do* anything, and yet why else would he set out on such a seemingly impossible journey? Years ago he had awakened finally, called a taxi and gone home, took a hot shower, then drank coffee. Then he had just sat there. Nothing to do. What could he possibly do without that woman and his shoes? Well, he *could* go out walking as before. He had plenty of shoes and orthotics in all of them after all. But where exactly would he go, and for what reason? He'd been everywhere in the city and there was no untold story to be entered into there. But wasn't the woman

Italian? Hadn't she spoken with a slight accent? He'd never been to Italy, and he supposed he could walk into something new there. So here he comes.

And shuffling through the story in her memory, she recognizes him at about the same time he recognizes his shoes resting on the tile beside her chair where she had stepped out of them before settling in, legs crossed at the ankles, with her tea and cookies. There's another chair beside hers, and she smiles and gestures toward it, offering him respite in his journey, which will be over when he sits down, the shoes on the tile between them. He sits down.

Is this closure? They have come back together after separate journeys in which they have both walked and danced their way through the world, well at least parts of it, and surely this reconnection and stasis is some kind of closure if that word can hold any meaning at all in its current popularity. Which is much like the popularity of the word hero and its variants, both words standing as markers of time's passage from a time, in that uptown bar perhaps, when they were not popular.

Now it's the man stepping from the twisted wreckage of a train, who is a hero searching for closure as the sole survivor. It's the brave writer who makes an heroic choice of subject matter, risking the difficult journey to closure. It's people leaping to death from tall buildings, rather than burning in the inferno, all heroes. It's the president sending children to death, uselessly, in a foreign country, his heroic decision. One might wish some closure when it comes to that, perhaps as a rope closing around an offending throat to close off blather. Still, in each case, even the writer's, there's travel.

So they sit there beside each other, talking, as shadows come down over the villa, the marching junipers, and finally the sea. She tells him the story of her travels and successes, and he speaks of his journey in search of his shoes, which was a meandering, and no story at all. Perhaps the stock market has crashed back in America. Maybe her yacht is sinking out there on the dark sea, her dead husband's investments dissolving into dust. There may be a crucial fault in the villa's foundation, and it will break free of this terrace and slide down the hill into ruin, taking everything she now owns with it. Maybe that uptown basement bar has been set aflame by an arsonist. She doesn't

care. He doesn't care. They are both tired from the talking, from lack of motion, from the telling of stories rather than living them. The shoes sit on the tile between them, and as in a story, continuance might depend on which one of them falls asleep first. But as luck would have it, they both nod off at the same time and there's no motion or thought, or motion in thought anymore. And this is where the story begins and ends.