

Devil Tree

by Michael Channing

I was running in the park, I was fat, and, unfortunately, I was It. I ran hard as I could, but the space between me and the guys kept growing. Even Chester, who carried an inhaler, was faster than me. I tried to call them, but my voice was weaker than a gnat fart. My heart, however, roared like a gorilla in a cage. And then I tripped.

But I didn't just trip. Something grabbed my foot, and I stumbled right out of my shoe.

I ate some dust and scraped my knee. The guys either didn't notice or didn't want to give away their hiding places. Or maybe they just didn't care. I got up and brushed off, spat out dirt, wiped my bloody knee. Then I tried to find my shoe.

It was gone. It should have been right behind me, laces still tied, but it was nowhere. I turned in widening circles, scanning the ground, and that's when I saw it, not my shoe but something else. Out of the corner of my eye, something flexed. Opened and closed. When I looked straight at it, it was still. A brown root with a frayed

end like fingers. I can't explain how I knew, I just did: That root had grabbed a hold of my shoe, ripped it off, and pulled it down under the dirt. And now the root was back for more.

Only it didn't just want shoes. I knew that too, the way you can tell a hole's got a snake in it just by the way it seems to hum with danger. The root wanted the feet in the shoes, the shins and knees all the way up to the barbershop crop on my head.

I looked around and memorized the spot. Then I went home. The guys seemed to have forgotten me, so I forgot them. Just left hiding them out there. I didn't much feel like finding any of them.

I came back the next morning with a shovel. The root was gone, but I sunk the shovelhead right where I'd seen it. And I started me a hole.

The guys didn't want to help. Chester had piano practice. Phil said he'd rather blast monsters on his computer. And James got drug off to Sunday school.

So I dug by myself. I didn't know what I'd find. Maybe my shoe full of dirt and chewed around the edges. Maybe nothing. But it felt good to dig in the heat and get sweaty. It felt good to move my muscles with the sun on my skin, but I wasn't built for digging. My heart revved up,

and soon my pudgy arms were too tired to sling the shovel. So I climbed out of my hole, which was about waist-deep by then, and drank some water from the canteen I'd brought along. It was warm and tasted a little like metal, but right then it was better than a snow cone.

I'd given up on finding my shoe. Yesterday, when she saw me quickstep across the kitchen wearing one shoe and one dirty sock, my mom poured on the guilt. I got to hear again about how hard she worked and saved, and how my brother never wasted shoes or anything else for that matter 'cause he at least knew the meaning of work. I nodded in the right places and said "Yes, ma'am," when it was my turn to talk, then I went to my room and shut the door. My brother was a hero over in Iraq. One time he sent me some sand from the desert, and I put it on a shelf 'cause I knew he'd want to see it when he got home. But I didn't like keeping it. It was a little bottle of guilt, sun-bleached and hand-raked.

I stood in the playground, looking at the pyramid of dirt I'd pulled out of the ground and turned upside down and thought maybe I'd mail it to my brother. That'd be funny.

Back at it. I stabbed the shovel down, and it punched through into nothingness. Another hole opened at my feet.

Dark, deep. I tested it with the shovel the way you'd test an unfamiliar lake. I couldn't touch bottom.

As I stared into it, I slowly realized the hole wasn't black. It was the deep purple-blue of the sky just before sunrise. A smell blew up from this new opening, charcoal and spent match heads. And dropping downward from the lip of the hole was a wooden ladder, stretching into the murky depth.

One time my dad left me sitting in the car while he went out to do something, and I pushed in the cigarette lighter. When it popped out, I looked at the heating surface and noticed it wasn't glowing red like I thought it would be. It was only an ashy white. So I pressed my thumb against it.

Another time I found a mousetrap in my granny's closet, still cocked and ready to spring. I'd never seen a real mousetrap up close before. But I had seen Tom and Jerry do this a million times, so I reached my hand out to the smear of peanut butter on the trigger.

And then there was the time I discovered a hive full of bees hanging at one end of our trailer, just in front of my parents' bedroom window, and a nice, round rock the size of my palm happened to be lying at my feet.

What I'm saying is, I don't always think before I do,

and what I did next I did without a shred of thought. I went down the ladder.

The ladder turned out to be nailed to the side of a tree as big around as a building. Below were the branches, spreading out and shaking their leaves in a breeze I couldn't feel. And dangling from the limbs like fruit were shoes, hung from their laces, some singular, some in pairs.

I stood at the bottom of the ladder, exhausted, wiping my face with my shirt. There was no real darkness underground. All around was that bruise-colored light.

I wanted to take a look at the shoes. I figured one of them had to be mine. Slowly, carefully, I slipped down to the next limb, then I crept hand over hand out to the first pair I saw. They were Keds with purple, puffy dinosaurs on them, the kind a little kid would wear. The heels probably lit up when you walked.

"I took those on a kindergarten playground."

My fingers squeezed tighter around the limb, and my heart took a roller coaster ride in my chest. I didn't want to see the owner of that voice. It sounded like three voices at once, one nice and calm and grandfatherly, another real low and angry and full of glass, and a third crying and hitching like someone being beaten.

"Hello, Timothy," said the three voices, "have you

come to bring me your other shoe in person?"

I had to look. Him calling me by name like that, it was like he'd taken my face in his hands and turned my head to meet him. It was the Devil. He wore a brown suit and had a shiny badge pinned to his lapel, a pair of half-moon glasses perched on the end of his nose above a soothing smile. He looked exactly the way I thought he would.

My mouth suddenly dry as chalk dust, I managed to stammer, "Why do you want my shoes?"

"Why do you hate missing a single issue of Spider-Man? Why does it bother you to know there are Magic cards that you don't have?"

I tried to listen to just the nice voice, but they kept fading in and out, taking turns being the loudest.

"I'm a collector," the Devil said. "And there's nothing worse than having half a set." He looked down at my shoes. "They won't be a matching pair, but that doesn't matter. They'll both be yours."

He smiled such a good smile, such a reassuring smile that said everything was the way it should be. "And then you'll be mine."

I inched further out, the tree shaking with every move, and took my eyes off that easy smile. There were hundreds of shoes, thousands. Now that I was paying

attention, I saw that a lot of pairs were actually two different shoes, even two different sizes. There was a tennis shoe matched with a muddy work boot, a canvas runner paired with a woman's high heel. Then there were the singles, stirring with the leaves in a breeze that still didn't touch my skin or blow my hair. Where was my shoe? I came to get it back, but that was beginning to look impossible.

"I'm not giving you anything," I said. It didn't come out sounding like I wanted it to. I felt as small and powerless as a fly.

"Of course you will. There's hatred in your heart, Timothy. I can smell it boiling in the liquid rush. It's too big for a little boy to tame, so you've come to ask me for the leash and the whip. Here it is, my boy. Here it is."

I thought he was going to give me something, but instead he waved me forward and pointed at the trunk of the tree.

He retreated as I slid along the branch, back to the trunk. Around the other side was a place where the bark had been stripped away, the smooth core exposed. It looked like a wooden mirror.

I stared till I could see through the grain at what

the tree wanted to show me. My friends, not at home or piano practice or church. My friends at our tree house, laughing and drinking Dr Peppers and playing cards and trading comic books. They were laughing at me. I couldn't hear, but I knew. Better off without him, they said. Faster without him. A lot lighter without him, they said. And laughed.

Then I saw my brother. Standing near a tank, guarding the desert, watching the sunset. The sun went down because he let it go down. The world was right because he made it that way, made it safe, made it better. I watched him scoop up a handful of sand and siphon it into an empty Coke bottle. He'll send it to me later, saying this is the earth I give you. This is the ground I fight to let you have.

"Isn't this true?" said three voices behind me.

"Yes, it is."

"You have something for me," the voices said, angry and hurt and comforting at once.

"I do," I said.

On my slow climb back up, I felt the wind for the first time. It was cool against my moist skin. It wove through my hair and snaked through my clothes, rubbed my stomach and kissed my cheeks. It boosted me up the ladder,

quickened my climb. As I rose into the light of day, I could hear the soft rustle of leaves beneath me.

"I can't believe you lost another shoe," my mom said when I got home. "You don't appreciate the sacrifices I make to buy you nice things, do you?"

"I didn't lose it. I gave it away to a guy who didn't have any shoes. But he only had one foot, so I didn't have to sacrifice that much."

I brushed past without waiting for a reply, but I caught her reaction, that smug crown of hers knocked off kilter and threatening to fall.

I grabbed the bottle of sand from the shelf and took it outside. Mom was flitting around the house like a deflating balloon, the last sputters of "I work too hard," and "you don't do enough" flapping out of her mouth.

In the backyard I took off my remaining shoe and both socks and stood by the drainage ditch that ran the length of the trailer park. The place smelled of snakes and mud water. I uncorked the bottle and poured all the guilt out. I felt lighter without it. The thing in my heart, let loose in my blood, had given me strength and lent me its voice.