

Running Shoes

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Part I

'My name, is Berry Augustine.'

'I'm thirty five years old and I'm a sick man.'

'I'm also now, dead.'

'At the age of twenty nine I was surprised to find there was a woman who would marry me. My lovely wife Dana; she must have been sick too. No sane and healthy woman would ever get involved in my situation.'

'She is sad that I've gone, but she's also the strongest woman I've ever met. She'll never stop loving me or forget me and the void I've left in her will be filled quickly. She is just that kind of person, a survivor. Not like me. I was weak.'

'You see, they told me I have obsessive compulsive disorder. The three letters OCD would somehow define me to a lot of folks. I'm a person ya' know? I'm not just an ATM for the pharmaceutical corporations, and it isn't like I'm contagious.'

'I ask them why it is wrong to have unexplained feelings toward certain things in life. Is the feeling of uncertainty in love no different? Is the unexplained superhuman strength of the mother who lifted a car to save her child any different than what I feel?'

"Yes, Mr. Augustine it is different. You have a sickness and we can help you," they say.

'I really never saw any problem with my supposed illness until

it killed me. Even then I only saw it for a few seconds and that is pushing it. You're asking your self two questions right now. The first being how I died. The second is most important.'

'What exactly was my diagnosed OCD a result of?'

'So I'll answer quite simply.'

'Sometime in my early twenties I became unable to wear a pair of shoes more than once. I couldn't help it, deep down it just felt wrong. It felt wrong to me like rape and murder feel wrong to you. It just wasn't something I could ever do. Even fleeting thoughts of, Re-use as I came to call it, made me sick. Sometimes I would actually manifest physical illness in myself. Some places I couldn't ever go into, say a bowling alley, not that they wanted me there anyway. Every time I tried it always ended in a violent torrent of projected sickness on the walls of the entrance. I don't remember the day or the moment I started to feel this way, it just was. Maybe my brain has blocked out some painful memory to save me from the real cause.'

'Imagine waking up everyday and having to lace up a new pair. The house you live in smells of new machined rubber. You have a room with three hundred sixty five boxes of all shapes and sizes; the year's cache of footwear. Nike, Vans, Airwalk, Reebok, Adidas and a lot of no name Super Store knockoffs fill this room top to bottom.'

'Even at twenty dollars a pair it is a little over seven thousand dollars a year. This personal eccentricity was a large financial burden on me. There were stretches of time when I didn't eat so that I could just leave the house. When Dana came along it was easier. Both our incomes kept me comfortably in shoes. I was

mystified to the very end why she stayed with me - eternally, I will always be grateful for her.'

'It was hard to deal with the part of myself I had no control over. The lurking annoyance of unwelcome rules made me a slave. Martial law had been declared in my brain and I would rather die than break it. So I did.'

'Being dead, is a lot like being in jail. Everyone you meet in this place is only interested in the event that got you here. Here's how it went down for me.'

Part II

"Babe lets go," Dana shouts at me while holding open the back door in our kitchen.

"Just a sec, putting shoes on. You know these runs cost us a lot of money," I shouted back down the hall.

"Running is good for the heart and soul, especially when done first thing in the morning. Worth the investment if you ask me."

"My little stock broker never misses a good investment does she?" I sprinted past her and out the door.

"Cheater," she shouted. We were off to the park to run our laps.

This had become our routine for a while now. My psychiatrist suggested that regular exercise would be a good thing for my depression. Didn't help. Not one bit. Only thing it did was get me

good at running and cost me an extra pair of shoes four days a week.

We came upon a sharp turn in our imaginary race course. Dana was gaining on me so I figured I'd play it sly like. I pulled a low in and high out to get in front of her. I got about half way around the sloped embankment when my legs were promptly swept from under me. The hit was powerful and I got some good air time sliding to a stop on my behind. It hurt and I probably bruised my tail bone. When I sat up to get a look at my attacker he ran over and licked me across the cheek.

"This is why there are leash laws. Get away from me you mutt."

I pushed the massive black lab with both hands. Pushed a little too hard, I guess. The fella lost his footing and fell over. At least now he knows how it feels. I wasn't that sorry. I got to my feet and knew I was lopsided; sloping down more than the grade of the hill, uneven, and not balanced.

"Damnit, shoe came off."

"Looks like you're one legging it home, Captain Ahab style," Dana smiled and picked up my shoe.

"I can go get the car if you want."

"Nah, I'll be alright. Let's just walk home," I said.

"Let's take the bus. The stop is right here," she suggested.

We sat down on the bench and waited.

Waiting at a bus stop is like being in a room of Gladiators before the main event. You know you all have to kill each other, but who will strike first? The buses in this city can get full sometimes so you need to establish your spot in line at the moment the bus is in sight. In our case the bus was elusive and came with little warning. Like a small quarterback behind one of his linemen, the bus came quick behind a cement truck. We all jumped up from our seats.

I lost my balance forgetting I only had the one shoe on. I tried to stop myself but ended up sprinting a few steps forward and falling off the curb. Lost my other shoe too, 'thanks Gravity.' I landed on my back and time slowed down. This seems to be pretty consistent with most people's recollection of their death. It is like God's last evil prank is to mess with your perception of time at the worst possible moment in your life. Of course he couldn't ever do that for the moments you'd want to remember forever. Dana and I's first kiss, our wedding day, any of those big life moments you wouldn't forget if only you had a little more time to soak it all up.

Dana locked eyes with me for the last time. In that brief moment I was reminded of our wedding vows, 'forever and ever, our eyes said to each other.' She moved toward me instantly but it was too late. I heard a high pitched squeal long enough to register the sound, was indeed, brakes being slammed. I turned my head just in time to get a face full of rubber. By the time the cement truck came to a stop, the road looked like Paul Bunyan had stepped on a large packet of ketchup, forcing it to explode.

'Good bye Dana, I love you.'

'Well, that was it for me - headless, shoeless, and lifeless. I sometimes wonder if it was rubber itself that had it out for me.'

Maybe those rubber-band balls I made as a kid weren't such a hot idea, and maybe, just maybe, it wasn't in my best interests to squeal my tires or, drag my feet on the cement. I suppose my soul will be reincarnated soon. I can only hope I don't come back as a bird nested high in a rubber tree, because if I do, I have a feeling I'll fail my first flight test.'