

Old Shoes

The postal lady tooted the mail truck's horn up by the road when she brought the small wrapped box. Jack turned from where he stood at the edge of his garden and walked up the hill. He took deep breaths, so that he could say hello to the woman without having to gasp for breath. The cool autumn air was much easier on him than the hot humid summer had been. The old man appreciated the woman waiting for him to come get his package and he wanted to thank her. She was always helpful and patient, unlike her predecessor, a man who acted like he could hardly wait to finish the mail route and take the afternoon off.

"Hello, Annie." Jack managed to get the phrase out without having to breathe between the two words. "How's that garden, Jack?" "OK," he said. He took a breath. "Best year yet." He wondered why he was lying about it. He'd had a terrible garden this year, and was barely able to work in it most days. At 87, he was finished. With gardening, anyway. It was all over.

"You been waitin' for this?" Annie asked. He knew that was an invitation to tell the woman what was in the box. Annie wasn't nosey, just interested because Jack had been outside waiting for the mail for the past few days, signaling his anticipation. But he didn't really want to discuss it, so he said, "Oh yeah, kind of," and let it go at that.

When she climbed back in her truck and drove off, Jack took the box and a few pieces of junk mail across the lawn and heaved himself up the one step to his front porch. Sitting down in the rocker, he carefully removed the layer of brown paper and untied the red string wrapped once around the box.

He lifted the cardboard lid and drew out a pair of new shoes.

The leather was shiny new and smelled wonderful. Sewn to the bottoms were strong, thick soles to provide a superior platform for his old feet, and to help steady his walk. The smart striped laces pulled the ears together over the tongue. The shoe uppers were made from substantial thick leather. The stitching was large and neat, as one would expect in leather goods assembled by craftsmen using excellent materials. Jack's new shoes were of a style an older person who liked the outdoors would appreciate. And they were exactly like the old shoes he was wearing.

The old man leaned over stiffly and removed his shoes. He worked at the task for a few minutes, a knot giving him trouble and his breath becoming short when he stayed bent over too long. He laced up the new shoes and put them on, tying a neat knot on each. Jack leaned back in the rocking chair and stuck out his feet, flopping them left and right, admiring the new shoes. Then he carefully placed the old pair in the box among the tissue papers, arranging everything as neatly as it had been at the factory. After looking at the old shoes for a moment as they lay nestled in the box, he sighed and placed the lid back on.

Jack stood up slowly, wobbling a little, and gave himself time for the dizziness to pass. Then he turned and walked through the front door of the house and made his way to the kitchen. Searching around in a drawer, he found a roll of wide packing tape and carried it with the box and paper wrapping to the kitchen table. This was his work station these days, used for most of his small daily tasks, now that meals were sparse and he was alone in the house. Jack reached across the table for a pad of writing paper and a pen. He flipped through the pad and found a clean sheet of lined yellow paper, and then he began to write.

Dear Fred,

I'm sending you these shoes. I have had many good days in the garden with them and I decided I wanted a new pair, which just arrived today. They're exactly the same. I love these old shoes and wanted nothing better, just newer. I also bought new canvas pants last week and a new shirt, too. They're just like the pants I have, and

the shirt is like all my other shirts. Fred, I don't want to be old anymore. I want to be new.

I won't be getting dirty or wearing out my clothes any longer. I'm too old. Sitting around reading or cooking my supper won't be like gardening in the mud. So now I can stop when I pass the mirror and look at myself and feel new in my new clothes. You could say I'm trying to be a new person. Your sister would have told me to start on the inside, but I started from the only place I could.

I took my old pants and shirts down to the church so the pastor's wife could give them to someone less fortunate than myself. She looked at me as if it would be tough finding anyone like that.

I wanted you to have my old shoes. These are the very same you gave me for Christmas nine years ago, when your sister was still alive. How I miss her. I didn't like the shoes then and I said so. Told you they were the dopiest shoes I'd ever seen. A little too much Christmas Cheer in me, maybe. You got mad and threatened to take them back. I called you a name, maybe a few. I don't remember much of that evening, except for you getting up from in front of the Christmas tree and walking out of the house. We never spoke after that, but I don't blame you.

I told your sister I'd never use the goddamned shoes, but eventually I wore them in the garden in the mud. At first I just wanted to ruin them. Then I kept wearing them because they really were comfortable. Since your sister's funeral, I wear them to remind myself that I can be pig-headed. She always told me that, but I never could see it until after I'd lost her. I wonder why that is.

These shoes have kept my feet comfortable, but they've made my heart uneasy. When I walk to the garden wearing them, I think it's a shame you and I are no longer friends. I miss telling each other terrible jokes or going fishing or loaning each other our books. It's too bad we're not growing old together and can't tell each other how we miss our wives or to laugh about our aches and pains.

So, the new me is saying I'm sorry, Fred. And I'm sending you the shoes to prove that I really kept them and used them. You can feel the creases and the wear on them. You can see the mud in the cracks from years of tending my asparagus patch and planting cabbages and cauliflower and string beans. You will know that you gave me a very useful gift, and you can trust I thought of you often while I wore them. Your old friend,
Jack

Jack folded the note and put it in the box on top of the old shoes. He retied the string and carefully wrapped the brown paper around the box exactly as it had been. He taped the flaps back together. Then he picked up the pen, and with rapid back and forth movements he crossed off his name and address. Above the mailing label on the wrapping, he wrote simply, "Fred." Jack sat looking at the package for a moment, thinking. Abruptly, he stood and reached for his car keys.

In a few minutes, Jack was slowly driving on the old road that ran out past the Methodist Church at the edge of town. After a mile, he turned into a wide driveway and proceeded under a canopy of trees arching over the pavement like the nave of a church. The far end of the driveway opened out into a grassy field with headstones arranged in neat rows.

When he found Fred's grave, Jack got out of his car and laid the box in front of the stone. "Sorry I'm late, Fred," he said softly. After a few moments, his eyes were wet, but he didn't cry. Instead, he sat down in front of the stone and began to talk.

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The Windswept Press
Saugerties, NY
www.windsweptpress.com