

“Dad’s Boots”

By Ray Dillon

I still heard his boots when I woke up. No smell of pancakes. No morning news. Just squeaking and creaking, old leather boots.

I wished I could just go back to sleep, to keep dreaming, but I knew that wouldn’t happen now. I sat up in the bottom bunk and scratched my feet on the thick burgundy carpet. The comforting leather creak was pushed out of my head as a truck boomed down the street. I tried to recall my dream, but couldn’t.

Bobby’s bunk was at my eye level. Only his hair was poking out of the covers. I shivered hard, grabbed a t-shirt and orange, hooded sweater off the floor, and hurriedly pulled them over my head. I threw on thermals, sweat pants, and two pairs of socks, but couldn’t find my sneakers. I searched my closet, under the beds, even some of the dumb places they might end up: the tub or the kitchen cupboards, for instance. They were nowhere. I marched down the hall to my mother’s room, but she was still sleeping, at least as far as I could tell; she had barely left their bedroom in nearly a month and hadn’t said a word unless it was in her sleep, which was usually just saying Dad’s name. I watched the bundle of blankets for the rise of breath, and released my own when it finally came. I let her sleep.

I headed down the length of our rickety trailer, through the kitchen to the front door to find my other, cruddy shoes, but they weren’t there, either.

That was the last straw. I had a weird feeling about my shoes being gone. I felt like I knew exactly where they were, even if it didn’t make any sense, and I was going to get them.

“What are you doing, Seth?” A small, sleepy voice called from behind me as I put on my snow boots.

“Hey, Bobby. You aren’t coming,” I said, sounding like the man of the house already. I didn’t feel like it yet, but I couldn’t let him come along. He’d just get in the way and probably get hurt. He was only eight, after all. And mom always said, *You’re a mature ten*. Bobby sparked awake after he saw my reaction.

“I am too.” Then, “Where are we going?”

I sighed. I guess it’s his dad, too. I guess he has a right to go.

“Alright, you can come. But, you gotta bundle up good. Mom’ll kill us both if ...” But mom probably wouldn’t even notice we were gone. I missed her.

I grabbed the sack lunch I’d made the night before. I hadn’t finished Bobby’s, though. As I was making it (with a little extra pepper, just the way he hates it), the radio said we’d be having a snow day. No school. I was relieved, but it made me nervous. I think it made Bobby feel the same way. If there was no school, what would we do all day? Sit around this icebox, listening to Mom moan in her sleep, and thinking about dad? We didn’t have cable and the Nintendo stopped working (it usually does that when a younger brother spills juice on it). That was enough to drive a person nuts.

I made Bobby’s lunch, stuck them both in my book bag along with a flashlight and extra batteries. I thought about getting my Beebe gun out of dad’s gun cabinet – I knew where he kept the keys – but decided that would draw too much attention to us. But, I did make sure my pocketknife was in my front pocket.

I left mom a note, though I doubted she would read it, and we were on our way. We decided to take Thor, our German Shepard, with us, though. Just in case, she (we thought she was a boy when we named her) could protect us. That was, if she didn’t rip my arm off trying to catch a squirrel.

We cut through the trailer park and into the field behind the school. It was odd seeing it so empty and still; dark windows, streets and schoolyard clean of tracks. It felt like we were the only two kids left on the planet. We snuck along the far side of the soccer fields—another reminder of how dead everything seemed—until we got past the grain elevators, then crossed the old road to the railroad tracks. Bobby did exactly what I’d expected. He tripped, banged his knees on a rock, and started wailing—great way to break the silence. Thor quickly went to his side with her ears back and her tail down in concern, and licked his face like he was covered in honey.

“Dangit. You’re okay, Bobby. Stop bein’ a baby. You got so many layers; you probably didn’t even feel it. Don’t make me sorry for bringin’ you.” That was mean, but got him to quiet down and come along.

“I did so feel it, Seth.” Bobby said looking down and rubbing his knee.

I felt bad for saying it the way I did, but I was already worried enough about this whole thing and I just couldn’t take him being a baby.

Seems like ever since Dad disappeared, he'd been even worse than before.

We walked along the railroad tracks quietly for a while, hard snow crunching under our feet. I wondered how long ago the last train had come down these tracks. I'd never seen one, and there always seemed to be tall grass around (at least in the summer). I didn't balance myself on the rails like usual, but Bobby got the notion anyway. I wanted to yell at him because it was slowing us down, but I bit my tongue. *I'll just ignore him and he'll stop*, I decided.

The farther we walked and the farther away from home we got, the less sure I felt about this whole trip. What did I really expect to find out there?

The snow and wind picked up really bad then. Suddenly, I wished I'd taken my own advice and brought a bigger coat. I pulled a turtle with my jacket, sticking my head deep inside so only my eyes shown over the collar, and shoved my hands into my pockets. I heard Thor whine and felt bad for her. All she had was a bit of fur to keep her warm. That couldn't help that much. And her paws had to be freezing.

But, then her chain pulled tight and I realized that she wasn't whining about the weather. She was turned around, facing the opposite direction where Bobby should have been, but he was nowhere in sight.

"Bobby? Bobby?! Where are you?" I yelled and charged back down the tracks. I could barely see through the cold wind and giant snowflakes. Thor barked and pulled on the chain.

She directed me forever so long. *Oh, man! How long had I been ignorin' him?* She finally stopped and barked frantically towards a group of trees. He wouldn't have gone wandering off, would he? I realized she wasn't barking at the trees, but at a small, caved in hole in the drift of snow along the tracks, just about the size of hole Bobby would make! My heart pounded. I heard his muffled yell and let go of Thor's leash to start digging. She helped. After uncovering a few feet of snow, I could feel Bobby's hand, grabbed it and pulled hard. He came out and we tumbled back on to the tracks. He was covered in snow and his face was bright red. At least it wasn't blue. I knew that would be a bad sign and I was sure that's what I would see.

"Oh, Bobby. Are you okay?" I was even more scared than I'd realized. I hugged him. He was crying, but tried to fight the tears back.

"Yeah. I'm fine. I wasn't that cold. Just couldn't see or hear anything."

"Let's just go back. I'm sorry I wasn't payin' attention to you. We'll go back and get you warmed up," I said.

Bobby looked sharply at me, "No. I said I'm okay. Let's go."

I'm sure I looked surprised, but didn't say anything. We helped each other up and continued down the tracks.

Bobby walked close beside me. The wind seemed to blow harder and harder by the minute. I started to think I'd forgotten the way. I *was* just a kid last time I was out here. But, finally, we made it to the stone bridge and I knew we were close. After the bridge we cut right into the woods along the river and the trees helped cut down a lot on the wind. I stayed in between Bobby and the edge of the river, and Thor did the same for me. But, after a short distance, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye; a snow-white rabbit hopped out from behind a tree and into the field. I hoped Thor hadn't seen it, but she had and she bolted, ripping the chain out of my hand, knocking me off balance and I slid down the side bank of the river. I grabbed for anything, but only found snow.

"Thor! Seth! No!" Bobby yelled.

I prepared to plunge deep into the icy water, and try to fight my way out from under the ice, when I hit something hard and glided on it. The ice was strong enough to hold me and the next thing I knew, I was curled up in the middle of the river looking up at Seth who let out a relieved giggle.

I stood up slowly, gauging the sturdiness of the ice and seeing if my luck would hold up. It didn't, the ice began to crack. Panicked, I took two quick leaps, hearing the crack stalking after me. I made it to another sturdy spot near the opposite bank and stopped. I scooted across the ice to find a place to climb back up, but that definitely wasn't going to work, at least not here. I had to get somewhere with a shorter bank.

So, Bobby and I walked beside each other, me down below on the ice, him up above on the ground. Thor was gone.

Finally, we made it to a short embankment with roots that served as stairs for me to climb up. Bobby helped me as best he could. I looked around for Thor and didn't see a thing. I thought about going back and following her footprints, but we'd already come too far.

"Is that it?" Bobby wanted to know.

I sucked in a breath as I looked where he pointed. Without realizing it, we'd already made it to the shack.

"Yes! That *is* it." I told him. I started to run for it, but something felt wrong.

We crept toward the snow-covered shack cautiously. The snow had drifted up past the windows. I suddenly wanted to run back home and forget this whole thing. I think Bobby did to, because he took my gloved hand in his and squeezed. I wish I hadn't brought him, but at the same

time I was glad to have him. We stood still for a moment, too frightened to do anything. Then, I realized what was wrong with the place. Circling the shack were new footprints! That's when the door creaked open.

"Well, lookee what we have here," a voice sneered and I recognized it. Scottie Lambert stomped around the corner carrying a big, jagged stick. "Hey, guys. Check it out."

I moved in front of Bobby and squinted at Scottie against the wind. The stick was more like a branch. Four other boys poured out of the old shack. I knew them, too. They were all six graders, a year older than me, but they were big enough to be in high school. I saw then that they were all clumsily smoking cigarettes. *How stupid*. It irritated me, but also made them scarier in a way. I found the pocketknife in my sweats.

They didn't waste any time or words; they just attacked. They pushed me back into Bobby and I landed on him pretty hard. The knife went flying. But in our fall, my leg struck out and caught one of them in the ankle. He spun on the ice and landed with a yelp. One went after Bobby and held him down in the snow. He was not crying. He was fighting back. The other two kicked me in the sides as I tried to block. I saw Scottie bring the branch high above his head, eyes trained on me.

"No!" I screamed. It was all I could get out. I shut my eyes tight and lifted my hands above my head.

Thor's growl shattered the air, and the wind and snow seemed to subside instantly. Scottie stopped still. So did the other boys. Thor had her lips high and teeth grinding. The bullies backed away.

"Call the dog off, Seth," Scottie said. "Call him off!" This time with more fear in his throat. He held the stick out between him and Thor.

"Leave us alone, Scottie!" I said.

"We weren't gonna hurt you. We were just messin' around. Call him off."

"It's a her!" Bobby said and pushed the boy off of him.

"Whatever. Just call it off!" Scottie was getting desperate and I didn't want him to hit our dog.

"Thor. It's okay," I said. Then to Scottie, "Put the stick down."

He started to protest, but Thor got closer and growled deeper. He put it down.

"Now, leave us alone. We're just checking on something in the shack, then we'll be gone, okay?" I reasoned.

"What, you seein' if your dad's body is still in there, huh?" one of the boys spat. Then, seeing my jaw drop, "Yeah, we know all about how your dad off-ed himself." He started to laugh until I turned and looked at him.

It seemed like I was somewhere else for what happened next.

I jumped on the boy and grabbed him around the neck. He collapsed to the snow and I continued to choke him. I think he hit his head on something, too. The other boys tried to stop me, but Thor jumped in front of them. All I could think of was what the boy had just said. It was the first time someone had put words to what I had suspected. Dad left one morning and didn't come back. Mom got a phone call, screamed, and ran into her room. Bobby and I didn't talk about it.

I thought about the shack, my father's favorite place to hunt before he got down sick. I thought maybe my dad would still be in there. My imagination kicked in and envisioned him coming out to stop this. Then it went into overdrive: Maybe he was a zombie now. Maybe he'd come out to eat us!

I was gripping his neck so tight in a headlock with this image in my head that my arm began to hurt. He was making horrible choking noises.

That's when Bobby said, "Stop! Seth, stop it! You're gonna kill him!"

Slowly, I let go of him. I had begun to cry. The boy lay there gasping for air. I sat next to him sobbing and looking around.

"Take him and get out of here!" Bobby said without a waiver in his voice.

They did. The older, bigger boys gathered each other and headed into the woods.

Thor came to my side and licked my face. I hugged her. Bobby came over and wrapped his arms around us too. We sat there for the longest time.

When I finally calmed down, I got up and headed towards the shed defensively, still seeing the image of my dad as a zombie. Bobby stood behind me and waited. I hoped he wasn't thinking the same thing. The tilted wooden shack smelled of death – animal and, I supposed, human – alcohol, and cigarettes also littered the air. It was enough to make me want to gag and I almost did.

I peered in through the cracked door and saw that the inside was pretty well filled with drifts of snow, except for a few areas where the boys had been stomping. There were three small sections to the shack, partial walls separating them. Animal skins left by hunters lie around with piles of empty beer cases and bottles. In the far corner, the darkest corner, I could see a snow covered chair and something underneath. I couldn't make out what, but it made my heart race.

"Seth?" Bobby asked quietly.

"Just a sec," I returned.

I pulled off the book bag, and retrieved the flashlight, pointing the beam at the chair. I inched nearer until I saw what it was: my dad's old,

leather boots sitting there, untouched by the snow, or drunks, or bullies. I rushed over, scooped them up, and held them close. I checked them over to make sure, but I knew they were his. There was something stuck inside one of them. I pulled it out and lost my breath again. It was a picture of Bobby and me. I flipped it over and saw:

*"I'm sorry.
I love you, boys.
Take care of your momma."*

My eyes welled up and big tears rolled out. I headed back towards the front door hugging the boots. When Bobby saw me, and what I was carrying, he finally started to cry too. We took one final look inside the last place our father had been alive in this world, and shut the door.

The walk home went fast. In fact, we ran most of the way home with Thor trotting alongside us, ignoring the movement in the bushes and trees. The wind and snow had stopped and the sun ducked out every once in a while. We stopped once to devour our smashed sandwiches.

We bounded in the front door of our trailer and called for mom, but didn't get an answer. We sat down on the living room couch and just stared at dad's boots for a while with big smiles on our faces. We couldn't keep from smiling now, which was so strange and wonderful since we hadn't felt anything but sadness since dad disappeared. Then, I thought about Mom and how she had sounded that day. She's gone too.

I started taking off my boots and got the best idea. I quickly stripped them off and grabbed dad's boots, pulling them on my feet. I laced them up and stood. Instantly, the old familiar creak entered the room. Bobby's eyes lit up. I walked around the room and let out a little laugh. I plodded up the two steps into the kitchen and squeaked some more.

"Me next!" Bobby said, giggling.

"Sure thing," I said and took the boots off without unlacing them. Bobby slipped them on and creaked around some more. We laughed and passed them back and forth, trying to see who could creak the boots the loudest. It had been so long since we'd done that and it felt so good. It felt like Dad was here with us again and was all better.

"Michael?" Mom's voice was weak. She saw us. "Oh, I ... I thought I heard ..." Then she saw the boots on my feet. "Oh, my ..." She covered her mouth and her face went from a ghost to alive with every kind of emotion. Tears streaked her face as she ran to us. She put a hand on the boots. "Where ... did you get these?"

“We found them in dad’s shack, where he went hunting,” I said. She remained silent a moment and I didn’t know what else to say. She looked from me to the boots and back.

“So, you know ...” She choked back the words.

“Yeah ...” I said and handed her the photo. She looked at it and a painful sob leapt from her.

Finally, she wrapped her arms around me, grabbed for Bobby and hugged him tight. “I’m so sorry, boys. I didn’t know how ...”

“It’s okay, mama,” said Bobby.

Under her weight, I leaned back and the shoes squeaked again.

“Oh, it’s ... it’s so good to hear that again,” she said.

My mom took a shower, got dressed, and made us French toast for dinner. It was dad’s favorite. That day was Dad’s day. We told funny stories about him and talked about how he was better off wherever he was. He’d gotten down so sick with the cancer, but he stuck it out as long as he could for us. We all knew it was his time to go and that was the best thing for him.

That night, before bed, I tucked the photo of us, along with a photo of Dad into the boots and headed for my closet. When I opened the door, I was shocked to find my new sneakers next to my cruddy old ones, sitting right in the open, and in the first place I had looked that morning. There was no way I could have just missed them.

Things got better for us after that. Dad’s life insurance from his stint in the air force kicked in and it was actually enough for us to move into a real house with real heat. I never fought again. Scottie and his cronies steered clear of me and Bobby; especially Bobby, who ended up taller and stronger than all of them.

And, twenty some years later, I still have those old boots. They’ve become my muse in a way. They help me remember why I am who I am. In fact, I’m wearing them and squeaking back and forth as I write this.

Bobby and I still trade off an on. And wherever we are, we always bring them home for Dad’s Day.

THE END.

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