

SNEAKERS

By

Marc Laidlaw

It's easy to exploit the fears of the young. Easier still because those fears never entirely leave us. We think we've outgrown them; we believe that maturity has taught us better; we hope that all those fears weren't presentments of the future. And when someone like Marc Laidlaw comes along and gives us a piece like "Sneakers," we know—even though we don't want to know—that maturity and experience and sophistication count for nothing when the sun goes down and there are sounds out there we cannot identify. And they don't mean a thing when a shadow climbs the wall without a light to cast it.

~~o~O~o~~

WHAT ARE YOU dreaming, kid?

Oh, don't squeeze your eyes, you can't shut me out. Rolling over won't help—not that blanket either. It might protect you from monsters but not from me.

Let me show you something. Got it right here...

Well look at that. Is it your mom? Can't you see her plain as day? Yeah, well try moonlight. Cold and white, not like the sun, all washed out; a five-hundred-thousandth of daylight. It can't protect you.

She doesn't look healthy, kid. Her eyes are yellow, soft as cobwebs—touch them and they'll tear. Her skin is like that too, isn't it?

No, Mom's not doing so good. Hair all falling out. Her teeth are swollen, black, and charred.

Yeah, something's wrong.

You don't look so good yourself, kiddo—

"Mom... ?"

What if she doesn't answer?

Louder this time: "Mom!"

Brent sat up, wide-awake now, sensing the shadows on the walls taking off like owls in flight. And that voice. He could still hear it. Were those rubber footsteps running away down the alley, a nightmare in tennis shoes taking off before it was caught? He could still see his mother's face, peeling, rotten, dead.

Why wouldn't she answer?

He knew it was only a dream, she just hadn't heard him calling, tied up in her own dreams. A dream like any other. Like last night, when he had seen his father burning up in an auto wreck, broken bones coming through the ends of his chopped-off arms; and the night before that, an old memory of torturing a puppy, leaving it in the street where it got hit and squashed and spilled. And the night before? Something bad, he knew, though he couldn't quite capture it.

Every night he had come awake at the worst moments. Alone, frightened of the dream's reality, of the hold it had on the dark corners of his waking world. If that voice had whispered when he was awake, he knew the walls might melt and bulge, breathing, as the blankets crawled up his face and snaked down his throat, suffocating him. That voice knew all his secrets, it whispered from a mouth filled with maggots, fanged with steel pins, a slashed and twisting tongue.

How did it know him?

Brent lay back and watched the dark ceiling until it began to spin, and he felt himself drifting back to sleep. Everything would be safe now, the voice had run away, he would have okay dreams. At least until tomorrow

night.

~~oOo~~

It was not fear, the next night, that kept him from sleeping. Curiosity. He stuffed pillows beneath his covers to create an elongated shape, then he sat on the floor inside his closet with a flashlight. He had drunk a cup of instant coffee after dinner, to help him stay awake.

He heard the clock downstairs chiming eleven; sometime later the television went off and the shower splashed briefly in his parents' bathroom. Midnight passed. A car went through the alley, though its headlights could not reach him in the closet.

At one o'clock, a cat's meow.

The sneakers came at two. Footsteps in the alley.

Brent nudged the door ajar and looked out at the pane of his window. He could see windows in the opposite house, a drooping net of telephone wires, the eye of a distant streetlight.

Footsteps coming closer. It could be just anyone. He thought he heard the squeak of rubber; it was such a real sound. This couldn't be the whisperer.

Then they stopped outside, just below his window. Not a sound did they make, for five minutes, ten, until he knew that he had fallen asleep and dreamed their approach, was dreaming even now, listening to his heart beating and a dog barking far away, and then the voice said, You're awake.

Brent pressed back into the closet, holding his flashlight as if it were a crucifix or a stake in a vampire movie. He didn't have a hammer, though.

Why don't you come out of there?

He shook his head, wishing that he were sound asleep now, where these whispers could only touch his dreams, could only make him see things.

Not awake, like this, where if he took that talk too seriously, he knew the walls could melt.

I'm still here, kiddo. What did you wait up for?

Holding his flashlight clenched.

A walk, maybe?

He opened the closet door and crept out, first toward the bed, then toward the door of his room. Into the hall.

That's right.

Was he really doing this? No. It was a dream after all, because the hall was different, it wasn't the hall in his house: the paintings were of places that didn't exist, changing color, blobs of grey and blue shifting as if worms had been mashed on the canvases, were still alive. That wasn't his parents' door swinging wide, with something coming to look out. He mustn't look. There was a cage across the door so he was safe, but he mustn't look.

Downstairs, though, it was his living room. Dreams were like that. Completely real one minute, nonsense the next.

Like Alice in Wonderland. Like the Brothers Grimm or *Time Bandits*.

Who's real, kid? Not me. Not you. I promise.

Don't wake the White King.

Don't pinch yourself unless you want to know who's dreaming.

Don't open the back door and look into the alley, because here I am.

He turned on his flashlight.

Right behind you.

The black bag—if it was a bag—came down fast over Brent's eyes and whipped shut around his neck, smothering. He got lifted up and thrown across a bony shoulder. The sneakers started squeaking as he heard the alley gravel scatter.

Say bye-bye to Mommy and Daddy.

He was dreaming, this wasn't real.

There, that's what I meant, whispered the voice.