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SHOES

A smart dresser needs smart shoes, right? But one does need to tread carefully...

MY SHOES WERE WORN OUT and I was passing a Goodwill store so I went in to see if they had anything that would fit me.

The assortment you find in places like this is not to the most exacting taste. And the sizes they get don't fit a normal foot like mine. But this time I lucked out. A pair of lovely heavy cordovans. Built to last. Looking brand new, except for the deep gouge on top of one toe, a mark that had undoubtedly resulted in the shoes' disposal. The outer leather had been scraped away -- maybe by some indigent like myself, outraged at so expensive a pair of shoes. You never know, it's the sort of thing I might have done myself in one of my darker moods.

But today I was feeling good. You don't find a pair of shoes like this every day, and the price tag read a ridiculous four dollars. I removed my ragged K-Mart sneakers and slipped into the cordovans, to see if they fit.

Immediately I heard a voice in my mind, clear as a bell, saying, "You're not Carlton Johnson. Who are you?"

"I'm Ed Phillips," I said aloud.

"Well, you have no right to be wearing Carlton Johnson's shoes."

"Hey, look," I said, "I'm in a Goodwill, these shoes are priced at four bucks, they're here for anyone to buy."

"Are you sure?" the voice said. "Carlton Johnson wouldn't have just given me away. He was so pleased when he purchased me, so happy when I was enabled to give him the maximum in shoe comfort."

"Who are you?" I said.

"Isn't it obvious? I am a prototype smart shoe, talking to you through micro-connections in my sole. I pick up your subvocalizations via your throat muscles, translate them, and broadcast my words back to you."

"You can do all that?"

"Yes, and more. Like I said, I'm a smart shoe."

By this time I noticed that a couple of ladies were looking at me funny and I realized they could hear only one side of the conversation, since the other side seemed to be taking place in my head. I paid for the shoes, which offered no further comment, and I got out of there.

Back to my own place, an efficiency one-room apartment in the Jack London Hotel on 4th near Pike. No comment from the shoes until I reached the top linoleum-covered step of the two-flight walk to my apartment, the elevator being a non-starter this evening.

The shoes said, "What a dump."

"How can you see my place?"

"My eyelets, where the laces go, are light-absorbing diodes."

"I realize you were used to better things with Carlton Johnson," I said.

"Everything was carpeted," the shoes said wistfully, "except for expanses of polished floor left bare on purpose." It paused and sighed. "The wear on me was minimal."

"And here you are in a flophouse," I said. "How have the mighty fallen!"

I must have raised my voice, because a door in the corridor opened and an old woman peered out. When she saw me apparently talking to myself, she shook her head sadly and closed the door.

"You do not have to shout," the shoes said. "Just directing your thoughts toward me is sufficient. I have no trouble picking up your subvocalizations."

"I guess I'm embarrassing you," I said aloud. "I am so terribly sorry."

The shoes did not answer until I had unlocked my door, stepped inside, turned on the light and closed the door again.

Then it said, "I am not embarrassed for myself, but for you, my new owner. I tried to watch out for Carlton Johnson, too."

"How?"

"For one thing, by stabilizing him. He had an unfortunate habit of taking a drink too many from time to time."

"So the guy was a lush?" I said. "Did he ever throw up on you?"

"Now you're being disgusting," the shoes said. "Carlton Johnson was a gentleman."

"It seems to me I've heard entirely enough about Carlton Johnson. Don't you have anything else to talk about?"

"He was my first," the shoes said. "But I'll stop talking about him if it distresses you."

"I couldn't care less," I said. "I'm now going to have a beer. If your majesty doesn't object."

"Why should I object? Just please try not to spill any on me."

"Whatsamatter, you got something against beer?"

"Neither for nor against. It's just that alcohol could fog my diodes." I got a bottle of beer out of the little fridge, uncapped it and settled back in the small sagging couch. I reached for the TV clicker. But a thought crossed my mind.

"How come you talk that way?" I asked.

"What way?"

"Sort of formal, but always getting into things I wouldn't expect of a shoe."

"I'm a shoe computer, not just a shoe."

"You know what I mean. How come? You talk pretty smart for a gadget that adjusts shoes to feet."

"I'm not really a standard model," the shoe told me. "I'm a prototype. For better or worse, my makers gave me excess capacity."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm too smart to just fit shoes to people. I also have empathy circuitry."

"I haven't noticed much empathy toward me."

"That's because I'm still programmed to Carlton Johnson."

"Am I ever going to hear the last of that guy?"

"Don't worry, my deconditioning circuitry has kicked in. But it takes time for the aura effect to wear off."

I WATCHED A LITTLE television and went to bed. Buying a pair of smart shoes had taken it out of me. I woke up some time in the small hours of the night. The shoes were up to something, I could tell even without wearing them.

"What are you up to?" I asked, then realized the shoes couldn't hear me and groped around on the floor for them.

"Don't bother," the shoes said. "I can pick up your subvocalizations on remote, without a hard hookup."

"So what are you doing?"

"Just extracting square roots in my head. I can't sleep."

"Since when does a computer have to sleep?"

"A fault in my standby mode I need something to do. I miss my peripherals."

"What are you talking about?"

"Carlton Phillips had eyeglasses. I was able to tweak them up to give him better vision. You wouldn't happen to have a pair, would you?"

"I've got a pair, but I don't use them much."

"May I see them? It'll give me something to do."

I got out of bed, found my reading glasses on top of the TV, and set them down beside the shoes. "Thank you," the shoe computer said.

"Mrggh," I said, and went back to sleep.

"So tell me something about yourself," the shoes said in the morning.

"What's to tell? I'm a free-lance writer. Things have been going so well that I can afford to live in the Jack London. End of story."

"Can I see some of your work?"

"Are you a critic, too?"

"Not at all! But I am a creative thinking machine, and I may have some ideas that could be of use to you."

"Forget about it," I told him. "I don't want to show you any of my stuff."

The shoe said, "I happened to glance over your story 'Killer Goddess of the Dark Moon Belt.'"

"How did you just happen to glance at it?" I asked. "I don't remember showing it to you."

"It was lying open on your table."

"So all you could see was the title page."

"As a matter of fact, I read the whole thing."

"How were you able to do that?"

"I made a few adjustments to your glasses," the shoe said. "X-ray vision isn't so difficult to set up. I was able to read each page through the one above it."

"That's quite an accomplishment," I said. "But I don't appreciate you poking into my private matters."

"Private? You were going to send it to a magazine."

"But I haven't yet What did you think of it?"

"Old-fashioned. That sort of thing doesn't sell anymore."

"It was a parody, dummy So now you're not only a shoe adjuster but an analyst of the literary marketplace also?"

"I did glance over the writing books in your bookcase."

By the sound of the thoughts in my head, I could tell he didn't approve of my books, either.

"You know," the shoe said later, "You really don't have to be a bum, Ed. You're bright. You could make something of yourself."

"What are you, a psychologist as well as a shoe computer?"

"Nothing of the sort. I have no illusions about myself. But I've gotten to know you a bit in the last few hours since my empathy circuitry kicked in. I can't help but notice-- to know -- that you're an intelligent man with a good general education. All you need is a little ambition. You know, Ed, that could be supplied by a good woman."

"The last good woman left me shuddering," I said. "I'm really not ready just yet for the next one."

"I know you feel that way. But I've been thinking about Marsha --"

"How in hell do you know about Marsha?"

"Her name is in your little red phone **book**, which I happened to glance through with my X-ray vision in my efforts to better serve you."

"Listen, even my writing down Marsha's name was a mistake. She's a professional do-gooder. I hate that type."

"But she could be good for you. I noticed you put a star after her name."

"Did you also notice I crossed out the star?"

"That was a second thought. Now, on third thought, she might start looking good again. I suspect you two could go well together."

"You may be good at shoes," I said, "but you know nothing about the sort of women I like. Have you seen her legs?"

"The photo in your wallet showed only her face."

"What? You looked in my wallet, too?"

"With the help of your glasses And not out of any prurient interest, Ed, I assure you. I just want to help."

"You're already helping too much."

"I hope you won't mind the one little step I took."

"Step? What step?"

My doorbell rang. I glared at my shoes.

"I took the liberty of calling Marsha and asking her over."

"YOU DID WHAT?"

"Ed, Ed, calm down! I know it was taking a liberty. It's not as if I called your former boss, Mr. Edgarson, at Super-Gloss Publications."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"I would, but I didn't. But you could do a lot worse than go back to work for Edgarson. The salary was very nice."

"Have you read any of Gloss's publications? I don't know what you think you're doing, but you aren't going to do it to me!"

"Ed, Ed, I haven't done anything yet! And if you insist, I won't. Not without your permission!"

There was a knock at the door.

"Ed, I'm only trying to look out for you. What's a machine with empathy circuits and excess computing ability to do?"

"I'll tell you in a moment," I said.

I opened the door. Marsha stood there, beaming.

"Oh, Ed, I'm so glad you called!"

So the son of a bitch had imitated my voice, too! I glanced down at my shoes, at the gash in the cap of the left one. A light went off in my head. Realization! Epiphany!

"Come in, Marcia," I said. "I'm glad to see you. I have something for you."

She entered. I sat down in the only decent chair and stripped off the shoes, ignoring the shoe computer's agonized cry in my head of "Ed! Don't do this to me "

Standing up again, I handed them to Marsha.

"What's this?" she said. "Shoes for one of your charity cases," I said. "Sorry I don't have a paper bag for you to carry them in."

"But what am I going to do with --"

"Marsha, these are special shoes, computerized shoes. Give them to one of your down-and-outers, get him to put them on. They'll make a new man of him. Pick one of the weak-willed ones you specialize in. It'll give him backbone!"

She looked at the shoes. "This gash in one of them --"

"A minor flaw. I'm pretty sure the former owner did that himself," I told her. "A guy named Carlton Johnson. He couldn't stand the computer's messing around with his head, so he disfigured them and gave them away. Marsha, believe me, these shoes are perfect for the right man. Carlton Johnson wasn't the right man, and I'm not either. But someone you know will bless the ground you walk on for these, believe me."

And with that, I began herding her toward the door.

"When will I hear from you?" she said.

"Don't worry, I'll call," I told her, reveling in the swinish lie that went along with my despicable life.