

Filling Her Shoes

[Begin Section 1]

The Superman lunchbox hanging from James's knapsack was bouncing around, occasionally slapping him in the leg as he and Robbie walked away from school. James's mom hadn't shown up again. At this point, James knew what to do when that happened, but he still felt embarrassed for his mom every time he had to tell the teacher he'd actually be leaving with Robbie. When James saw the other adults--who smiled and asked "how was your day" even when *not* in the presence of another set of ears--he longed for such a relationship, and felt awful about longing.

The two had left school together that day. Robbie lived on my the second floor of their brownstone and James on the first, so even though they weren't in the same third grade class, they were *de facto* best friends. Robbie's fingers brushed along the chain-link fence separating the sidewalk from the playground as he babbled on about each resource-card in Settlers of Catan, and the effectiveness of the various moves one could make to begin a game of Quoridor. James counted the cars that drove by and avoided walking on the subway grates. Half of what Robbie was saying didn't even make sense, but James kept quiet and let his friend talk. Whenever Robbie rambled on about board games like this during their walk home, James knew how their afternoon would be spent: sitting on the floor by the pile of board games in Robbie's living room, Robbie quickly switching the current game with a new one every time he lost, and deciding they'd play another round of the same thing whenever he won.

"This way, it's fair," Robbie would explain to James, who knew not to question it. James considered abandoning Robbie and just going to his own apartment instead, but then he'd be alone. Alone, where even the sound of keys jingling beyond the door could set his heart into a panic. He once thought moms were supposed to be like this, but enough time around Robbie's mother had shown him they weren't. Robbie, for his part, had no clue what James was talking about when, before the school play last year, James said something about "not doing good enough for her."

They turned the corner onto Sixth Avenue. James froze. Something was wrong.

"Come on," Robbie said.

James pointed to the crosswalk. On one of the white lines on the asphalt lay a pair of black, high-heeled dress shoes; James couldn't help but recognize the slightly worn leather and the scuffed left toe. These were his mother's shoes.

James bolted into the street.

"Stop!" Robbie yelled. James snatched the shoes and ran back to the sidewalk, clutching them to his chest.

"These are my mom's." James's voice was quivering.

Right away, Robbie noticed what was going on. He had the power.

"I'll go ask my mom to call her," he said kindly. Before James could respond, Robbie was gone. James's legs twitched, as if he too was about to run the two blocks to their house, but he stopped himself. Something held him back. Holding these shoes to his chest, at this street corner, he felt his mom's presence. If he left this spot, he would be severing himself from her.

Meanwhile, Robbie had made it to the house. He was halfway up the stoop when he stopped himself and turned around.

James was still standing on the corner when Robbie returned.

“She didn’t pick up?” James asked.

“Nope,” Robbie said.

“Was she in our apartment?”

“Nope.”

“We need to find her.”

Adventure filled Robbie’s eyes. With James holding a shoe in each hand, they speedwalked to the grocery store, pushed open the door, and marched down all the aisles. No mom.

They speedwalked to the bank. They peered through the glass separating the front room with the ATMs from the back room with the tellers. No mom.

They speedwalked back to the school. The doors were shut, so they scanned the small crowd lingering outside. No mom.

James speedwalked to the restaurant his mom sometimes took him to. Robbie was lagging behind. James walked in, and entered a cloud of cigarettes and the smell of stale beer.

“Hey kid, get out of here!” Someone yelled from the bar. James disappeared through the door.

He was already hurrying away when Robbie called after him. “I’m tired! Can we stop?”

“But we need to know if she’s okay,” said James, walking back to his friend.

“We can’t find her,” Robbie told him.

“But we will.”

“Maybe not.”

“We gotta keep looking.”

“But come on!” Robbie complained. “We’ve already been doing your activity for so long! Can’t we do some of *my* activity? So it’s fair?”

James looked at Robbie in disbelief. “We’re not doing an activity!” he shouted. “We’re finding my mom!”

“Okay,” Robbie said. “But really. We’re not gonna find her.”

“How are you sure?”

“Well do *you* know where else she’d be?” Robbie asked.

“No.” James had to be honest.

The desperation that was in James’s eyes dissolved into sorrow. Robbie felt the power return. He gently took the shoes from James’s hands and tossed them to the curb. He put a hand on James’s shoulder.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s just go to my house.”

Robbie kept his hand on James’s shoulder for the entire walk. As they neared home, though, James couldn’t help but notice Robbie’s pace quicken, his grip tighten. When he looked to Robbie’s eyes, they were hard.

Robbie's mom greeted them in the apartment. "James," she said. "What's wrong?"

James was about to open his mouth when Robbie pushed him towards the living room. "We can't talk now, Mommy," Robbie said, and shut the door behind them.

Robbie sat on the floor and patted the spot next to him on the rug. James took it. "So which one first?" Robbie asked him.

The question caught James off guard. "What?"

"Which game?" Robbie said. "You can choose."

"Oh," said James. He chose Scrabble.

On his first turn, Robbie spelled the word *it*. On his second turn, he spelled *the*. James usually won scrabble, but normally it was without Robbie's help. He looked at Robbie, who was smiling at him.

Robbie usually rejected chess, and pulled out "Connect Four" instead whenever James would suggest it. But now, Robbie was setting up the board. This must be hard for him, James thought. Next time, he would let Robbie choose the games.

[End Section 1]

[Begin Section 2]

James and Robbie were sitting around the scrabble board again when James's mom walked into Robbie's living room. The heels of her shoes dug into the bristly rug, the scuffed right toe tapping rapidly.

James leaped up, threw his arms around her, and cried. She laughed and patted his back. "What's all this about?"

He didn't care if it was Robbie's presence making her do that. He felt like the kids getting picked up from school. He let go of her and looked down at Robbie, who was sitting, staring grimly at the corner of the scrabble board.

Soon after, James and his mom were back in their own apartment. His mom sat on the couch, and James snuggled next to her. He pressed the side of his face into his mom's arm.

"What the hell are you doing?" She said and flicked his forehead away. When James looked up, the eyes looking down at him were icy and cold and for a moment, he wished he was back in Robbie's living room.

[End Section 2]