

## SWAMP SHOES

At the end of every summer my step mother would take my sisters and I back to school shopping. She was kind enough to remind me every time she bought me a brand new pair of shoes that they were supposed to last me the entire school year. I had to walk to and from school, play sports in my physical education class and when I wasn't in school, you could find me skateboarding, and running around with the energy of a road runner bird on jolt cola. I would watch my brand new shoes go from a thing of pride to shame and ridicule. Once in the third grade I chased down a fellow student and whacked him in the mouth a couple of times after he screamed at me "It looks like you're wearing trashcan shoes". The kids who heard him all laughed and pointed at me. A deep sense of shame became my friend that day and he stayed with me for many, many years. I can feel him looking over my shoulder as I sit here typing this story. I had a great idea when I was thirteen to wrap up my shoes with silver duct tape after I wore holes into the bottom of the soles.

Monday through Friday, rain or the beautiful southern California sun shining I had to walk through a stinky swampy nature reserve on my way to school that was about a mile and a half away. That swamp would always find a way to seep its murky water into the holes of my shoes, no matter how much tape I wrapped around them. one morning in the seventh grade I had to walk to school in the pouring rain. I was sitting at my desk next to a blonde haired, blue eyed beauty who looked over at me with revulsion upon her face and asked me "what is that disgusting smell?" shrugging my shoulders I watched in horror as her blue eyes traveled down the length of me and focused upon my sopping wet, duct taped and smelly shoes. She slowly turned her beautiful face away from me as she shook her head from side to side upset that she had to sit next to a kid that smelt like a bums wet dog. She never spoke more than a few terse words towards me for the rest of the school year.

In high school seeing a kid with duct taped shoes wasn't that big of a deal. I saw a few kids who also had to raid their dad's tool boxes for tape to keep their shoes from falling completely apart. I was fifteen when I first laid my eyes upon the bright red pair of high top basketball shoes lying in the weeds on my way to school. A gift from the swamp gods, I was a pimply faced boy Cinderella in reverse. I picked up those shoes with a beating heart full of hope that they would fit me. The swamp gods were cruel that day as I discovered that the shoes were a size and a half bigger than I wore. In anger I threw the shoes behind some bushes and walked to school in damp and stinking socks.

A few weeks later in my physical education class I was playing basketball and my shoes completely fell apart and no amount of tape would be able to resurrect them back to life. I tried to slink off the court in the middle of the game by walking towards the boys' locker room as kids yelled at me "hey where are you going? The games not over" I kept walking with a lowered head to my locker and changed out of my school uniform without showering. My god awful smelling shoes would cover up any body odor I might have.

I ditched my next class and snuck off campus. I was angry as hell as I slowly walked towards home, knowing deep in my heart that my future in high school was going to be altered by what I was about to do. With trepidation I crept into the bush that hid the bright red high top basketball shoes from the nomadic homeless that also used the nature reserve as a short cut to their destination.

Relief was the first emotion that I felt when I saw the shoes lying in the dirt and as I tied on my "new" shoes all I felt was anger. I was angry at the world for my crummy life, at my step mother for not loving me like she did her own children, at my father for allowing this to happen, and even at my younger sisters because they never had to be embarrassed by the shoes they were wearing to school. I tossed the smelly duct taped shoes into the muck and mire to repay the swamp gods for blessing me with shoes. The shoes were so big for me that they slapped the pavement with every step I took as I walked back to school. Those clown shoes mocked and shamed me with every dying echo of my footsteps.

In class a pretty girl named Emma whom I had a huge crush on asked me "why are you wearing those shoes? They're way too big for you". With low self-esteem I mumbled back to her the only lie I could come up with. "I was at a party and someone stole my shoes and these were the only shoes I could find to wear home". She shook her head slowly up and down somehow knowing that I was lying to her. At that moment I learned two valuable life lessons one, people are always going to judge me on my outward appearances and the second lesson was to never lie to a woman unless it's a well thought out and a rehearsed lie.

I remember crying tears of frustration as I methodically wrapped bright silver duct tape around the front of my now faded red high-top basketball shoes with holes in the soles.

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