

Instructions for Walking Eddie

(and other items)

By

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The Great Chicago Fire burned from Sunday October 8 to Tuesday October 10, 1871, killing hundreds and destroying nearly three and a half square miles of the city. A tragedy, of course. But one that had several happy unintended consequences and I'm not just talking about a healthy regard for the dangers of a jittery cow and dry hay. Under the leadership of Arthur C. Ducat, Chicago implemented the country's most stringent building code in order to prevent future conflagrations. The city organized the world's most disciplined fire fighting forces. And Chicagoans also had the opportunity to reorganize its social structures and many of our finest clubs were organized.

The University Club was founded by alumni of Harvard University in order to maintain a library and reading room. The Union League Club was, according to its charter, organized to do nothing less than uphold the sacred obligations of citizenship. And the Chicago Literary Club was organized in order to share a love of literature and not just an excuse to have a lovely Monday evening. I have been blessed, really blessed, to be given the opportunity to be a member. Through the medium of Monday evening papers, I have learned everything I know about Schiller, about Julia Ward Howe, and even Chinese American trade relations.

We are brought together by a love of literature in all its forms—whether the biography, the essay, the poem, the letter or the esoteric question of whether God exists which caused such a brawl amongst our forebears that the club instituted a “no taking questions afterwards” policy.

The short story is, to my mind, the perfect literary form, a petit four that can be devoured in a half hour as opposed to War and Peace which, well, I've been working on since I was a sophomore in high school.

The short story is where I began as a writer. My first professional sale was to True Confessions magazine. My second to Modern Romance. In the past five years, I have published in Triquarterly, the New England Review and most recently in the Wild River Review. And although I have written novels, poetry, plays, regional histories, I keep coming back to the short story.

When I write a short story, I imagine myself as someone I'm not. It's like having a portal into another consciousness. And in the first of two short stories I am presenting this evening, I put myself into the shoes of a dapper, cultivated bon vivant who has found himself in the ladies' accessories department of a church rummage sale.

And so, I give you the following short story – Red Shoes

You just never know what you're going to find at the Christ's Church Rummage Sale and that's why I come every year. I always head for the basement of the rectory because I've found a lot of good prints. Electronics is usually in the nursery but they moved it this year to the conference room. I've never been in this room before.

I know those red shoes, and the matching bag. I know you're eyeing them, but they have some serious history. I have to keep it down because Winnetka is such a small town, but okay, it involves the Lesters. David and Helen. Not the older Lesters although fortyish doesn't qualify as young.

David is a big man. Six two and if you drained the liquor out of him he'd be just over a hundred pounds. He works downtown, gets off the 5:15 most afternoons, and walks directly across the street to Little Ricky's. He was there on a Thursday afternoon just two months ago when Igor took the bar stool beside him.

There's a feeling a man gets when another man sits right next to him in an otherwise empty bar. It's not a good feeling and so I assume David didn't feel good. Which is fine, that was Igor's intention. Little Ricky's was otherwise empty save for the bartender who was cutting limes and the hostess who was wrapping cutlery in napkins for the dinner crowd.

Igor was, is, a good three inches taller with all the necessary weight but not in the same proportion of fat, muscle and alcohol as David. Igor has a face like a potato that had suffered some genetic misfortunes. And he had a bulge in his jacket that David found discomforting. David shifted so that he wasn't quite on his bar stool but was on the other side of it.

"I am here to collect some shoes," Igor said without looking at him. He ordered a light beer.

David waited until Igor had been served and the bartender was back at the limes.

"Did she send you?"

"She did not send me. I don't even know who she is," Igor said, adding quickly. "I know nothing of the circumstances leading to her shoes being in your possession. It is only my task to get them back."

"She has a boyfriend?"

Igor is a man of action. David loves gossip.

"Okay, I guess you're not going to answer that."

David was drinking his usual—a vodka martini, straight up, two olives. But it wasn't his first. And though he is a Harvard man he isn't very smart in some ways that would have been essential to avoid what happened next.

"My car is in the station parking lot," he said. "Give me a minute."

"I'll be waiting," Igor said.

David left Little Ricky's and returned with a pair of black suede pumps. Igor put a twenty on the bar, and took the shoes.

"My only other instruction is that you are always to be most respectful in public when your paths cross and you are never to attempt to engage her in a private conversation."

Igor and the shoes left Little Ricky's.

The Lesters have the house on the corner of Chestnut and Governor Street. It was not the Saturday after the Thursday afternoon at Little Ricky's. It was the next Saturday, the first of the Spring when you finally think Winter might at long last be over. The Lesters were having an argument, although I don't know what it was about. They had their windows open and their strident voices could be heard in indistinct tones by passing dog walkers and joggers and families with their wide bodied strollers and their fresh lattes from Starbucks.

Igor sat in his car parked across the street. Igor had been to the house four times over the previous week—this was the first time either of the Lesters was at home. He drank his coffee over the course of a half hour, reassured himself with a pat to his chest holster, and got out of the car.

The Lester house, I'm not sure if you can visualize it, is the Victorian painted lady, the teal green with lilac and mauve trim. The doorknocker is shaped like an acorn, a reference to the three oaks on the property. Igor didn't use the knocker or the doorbell—opting instead to pound the door with his fist.

The argument between the Lesters came to an abrupt end.

Helen's size and fine breeding (she's a Seven Sisters girl) combine to give her every deceptive appearance of weakness. But she had been married to David for well on ten years so she wasn't the least intimidated by Igor and everybody is intimidated by Igor. It's his business to be intimidating. He carried that purse you are holding and the black suede pumps that looked somewhat familiar to Helen.

"I am here to speak to your husband," Igor said.

David Lester stood in the doorway between the dining room and the study. Helen and Igor were directly in his sightline. He stared at them. They stared at him. He didn't say anything and Helen turned on Igor.

"May I ask what this is regarding?"

"It is personal business."

"I've never seen this man before in my life," David said.

And the Lesters joined in staring down Igor who said, "I am here to retrieve a pair of shoes."

The brief moment of marital unity was shattered because David knew that given a choice of whom he would prefer to face in a boxing ring, a duel at dawn, or divorce court, he'd prefer Igor to Helen any day of the week.

"Well, I was just leaving," David said.

“David,” Helen said, stretching his name seven syllables wide.

“I believe these are yours,” Igor said and held the black suede pumps out to Helen. That is when she realized that what made those pumps seem familiar was that they were, in fact, normally found in her closet.

David shrugged past Helen to join Igor on the front steps. He closed the door behind himself and pulled Igor, or rather, attempted to pull Igor towards the sidewalk.

The two men regarded each other.

“Did she send you?” David asked. “Because if she did, you can just tell her that . . .”

“I have told you I was not sent by the woman. There are shoes. I am here to retrieve them.”

At that moment, the master bedroom window—directly over their heads—was opened. David’s next words were whispered.

“I lost them,” David said and then, under Igor’s gaze, he amended himself. “I threw them away.”

“I will have to get instructions.”

Igor left the premises. The Lesters perhaps continued their argument. Perhaps not. Maybe Helen questioned David about the stranger. Perhaps not. Well, of course, any wife would but that’s neither here nor there.

It is a truth well worth considering that most people don’t pay attention to what’s going on around them. On Monday, Helen followed her normal routine. Paddle tennis in the morning. Lunch at Jerry’s restaurant with three girlfriends. Planting cyclamens in the window boxes beneath the windows facing

the street. And then dressing for a girl's night out. She left the Lester home at six thirty that night and never noticed the black Lincoln Town Car parked across the street.

It had been there since ten a.m.

In the car, Igor read two Harlequin novels (his mother was part of a Harlequin book club that delivered four novels to the home each month and after her passing Igor continued the subscription). He ate leftovers from the previous night's dinner at Café Topolomba. On his phone, he updated his Facebook status and posted several items on craigslist rants n raves section. He watched Helen's movements. He waited for David.

David Lester arrived at the family home a half hour after Helen left. He had consumed one martini in a Styrofoam cup that he had brought onto the Metra Union Pacific train. He hadn't been to Little Ricky's in some time. When he jiggled open the front door of the Lester home and saw Igor seated on the living room couch, he was a bit too sober.

David bolted the last of the martini and put the Styrofoam cup on the coaster of the occasional table in front of the couch. As he slumped into the armchair set at a thirty degree angle to the couch, he noted the purse. The one you're holding now. That was placed on the occasional table.

"The Lucite handle is quite graceful but I hear that the heels of the shoes that match cannot be noticed without producing a smile," Igor said. "Heels in the shape of a heart. On its side. And the body of the shoe—black with the white hearts—so very versatile. A woman could accessorize any black dress with the shoes and the bag, and she would look effortlessly chic."

David looked at the purse. He figured his chances.

"I threw away the shoes."



“You indicated that was a possibility. But still. . . you invite a woman into your home and you throw away her shoes?”

“Helen was coming home. You know how it is. She would have asked questions.”

“I understand she took off her shoes in the foyer.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s right. She was half undressed by the time. . . “

David fell silent.

“But managed to hold onto the purse the entire time,” Igor said.

“Well. . . “

I know something about David that Igor doesn’t—David went to North Shore Country Day School and he had a lot of opportunity to hone his grace-under-extreme-pressure skills with the headmaster. But he didn’t take advantage of the learning opportunity. Instead, he was just as poorly prepared and awkward as he was when he was twelve. He squirmed on the particularly awkwardly upholstered chair.

“And she took off her shoes because Mrs. Lester asks that all her guests remove their shoes upon entering the house,” Igor said, nodding at the collection of shoes, coats, mittens, scarves, and umbrellas on the foyer’s armoire. “And when you two arrived at the house, the woman asked you where was Helen and you said she’ll be here in twenty minutes.”

“I might have.”

“This is not a deposition.”

“I understand.”

David finished off the ice cubes in his martini and I'm sure he wondered whether there was some sort of protocol for inviting Igor to have a drink. Because he needed one. David. Not Igor.

"She took off her shoes. She objected to your advances. You persisted. She managed to hold onto her purse the entire time."

"Nothing happened."

"What happened or didn't happen is of no moment. The shoes."

"I told you I threw them away."

Igor wiggled his lips in a manner most like Samantha in Bewitched casting a spell.

"And where is the garbage now?"

"I don't know. What do I know about garbage? There's the landfill out west of town. No. You can't be serious. Really? Can't I just. . . ?"

David pulled two Benjamins and a Washington from his wallet.

Igor took out his gun, aimed at the dog, and then shot the mirror above the fireplace.

"What the hell am I going to tell Helen?" David asked after he came out from under the occasional table.

Igor did not answer the question.

He left the Lester home and two days later those shoes you're holding were deposited—with the purse—on the porch of the house of a friend of mine. They smelled faintly of orange blossom Fabreze and see that part of the toe where it's frayed? I think there had been some vigorous scrubbing.

She had loved the playful vibe of red Lucite, white and black hearts. She had always felt glamorous, fun, witty whenever she slipped the shoes on her feet and transferred her cosmetic bag into the purse. They are now here at the Rummage Sale. Put them down.

And, yes, I would call Igor for you too.

Short stories were officially declared dead in the mid-seventies. There were a great many writers and not so many readers or, perhaps more accurately, publishers. The world of publishing was New York and if you didn't have the attention of a Manhattan based editor, you weren't going to be able to reach any sort of audience. I sent out so many stories in my youth, with stamped self-addressed envelopes and I waited for the invariable rejection letter. A form, almost always, although I got myself quite excited when I received a form rejection from the Paris Review that had a handwritten "I liked this but it just didn't work for our magazine!" note at the bottom.

But then something happened to publishing: it quite simply collapsed under its own weight. These days, the barriers to publication are, well, there aren't any. I can publish a novel, a short story, a poem, anything I want with nothing more than a laptop and an amazon.com account. If you were so inclined, you could find my short stories available for ninety nine cents and, shameless plug, I hope you do.

Short stories also have also changed in their structure but it conveys everything in the most compact way. It's the perfect form for our era of attention deficit readers. Ernest Hemingway's shortest and perhaps most tragic short story reads simply "baby shoes for sale, never used" This morning I read a short story composed entirely of text messages. And today, I would like to present to you a short story written in post it notes from a dog owner instructing a potential dog sitter.

## Instructions for Walking Eddie

1. The key is under the mat.
2. Dead bolt unlocks to the right, door knob to the left—remember it catches if you accidentally turn it to the right. When you walk in, you'll see—I have to prepare myself every time—the picture of you and me kissing on the Ferris wheel.
3. Eddie's box is to the left of the door. Yes, that's your bath robe wadded up into a bed for him. Unclasp the hinge and tell him he's a good boy. He was a mess when I first got him.
4. Just like me.
5. That (4) was a joke. This part is not a joke—he was twenty four hours away from being put down when I bid for him. I had to pick him up in Ohio. The drive felt like loss already. Because one day Eddie will die.
6. The radio. NPR. Haha! Your favorite. #sarcasm. Turn it off. On the weekends, I put on sports. P.S. the Cubs still haven't won. Can you talk to somebody about that?
7. Watch about touching his ears. He spooks.
8. I know when I write this that space and time are supposed to be fluid and you are here watching me dither with what to write next and you will also be here when I read what I have written. When I cry again you ~~will be~~ are here. At least that's what pop culture physics tells us.
9. You will see all my post it notes. And the journal on the kitchen counter where you would sit while I cooked dinner and you'd write our adventures of the day. Your drawings were always the best part.
10. Eddie gets a treat from the box next to the candy jar in the pantry. I haven't eaten even a single Snickers ~~since~~ because they're yours. And if I ate them, when the jar is empty it's going to be just

another way that you'll be gone. Even if space and time are fluid. Even if there's a heaven. Even if our lives are just the depot we loiter in before a great journey.

11. The photo from that night at the patron's party. It's ten minutes before I asked you and you said yes before I even said will you.
12. Eddie gets one treat. And then let him run around. He has four toys—pinkie, whitey, blue-ie, brownie. He's a papillon, also called a Continental Spaniel. He's bred for companionship. And I need that.
13. Sometimes I look at the text messages on your cell so I can see our conversation of that day. We were both anxious to see each other. You used the winking smile emoticon. I figured out your voicemail password and I listen to me (drunkenly) sing happy birthday.
14. She marks her territory with a lipstick (seemingly forgotten) on the bathroom vanity or a hairbrush on the nightstand. Forgive me, she is a distraction from grief. She wants to be my girlfriend.
15. I told you I was asexual and I was. And am now pretty much, to her frustration. Remember, you asked if you could come up to use the bathroom after I took you to birthday lunch at The Mighty Nice Grill? I was forty two years old. I had twice nearly stood at the altar—once with Francesca who was pregnant but later miscarried and the other time with Laurie and that would have been a mistake. I didn't think my life would include a wife or ever a child. And we talked about it—I wondered if I was gay but no. I was just uninterested. But the way you kissed the part of my ear midway between the lobe and the pinna fold after you came out of the bathroom, I was sprung. I got wood every morning when I woke up whether you were there or not. But now I don't. I am back to being me before you. At least, in that regard.
16. Plastic bags are in the drawer next to the dishwasher.
17. Check the water bowl outside his box. Ask him if he wants to go out. OUT is his signal word.

18. Open the door, take the leash from on top of the mat and raise your voice if he gets a landing ahead of you. At the bottom steps he'll wait for you. DON'T OPEN THE FRONT DOOR UNTIL HE'S ON HIS LEASH! Just last week, I yanked my cousin Rob back to the curb and he was like "get off me!" and then he said, "oh, God, I'm sorry" and then I told him I couldn't go to lunch.
19. Especially since it was going to be at the Thai place on Devon where you first said the three words. And then took them back because you said a gal should never say it first. So I said it four times as fast as I could just so you would give those words back to me. Which you did and I thought "this is what people live for." She made me wipe your words off the mirror. She said I need to learn to let go. I think I resent her.
20. I don't want there to be nothingness. I need to believe there's somethingness—Heaven, a great white light, Valhalla, Hell, Santa's Village. I'll take anything just to be able to know that what we ~~had~~ have was not just a collection of molecules arranged and then rearranged.
21. Walk him around the building. Let him sniff and tell him "good boy Eddie" when he does peeps and poops.
22. Let him back off the leash only when you are back inside the exterior door. It's okay for him to get up to the apartment before you. It has sometimes made me feel nearly happy when he wags his tail as I come up the last landing as if he were saying "what took you so long?"
23. He gets a treat but put it in his box. Make sure the latch is secure.
24. Turn the radio back on. If I ever came back home and heard Hannity or Limbaugh I would know you had been here. Make sure to lock the deadbolt and—my compulsion--remember to put the key under the mat.
25. I came up behind the car in the right hand lane, just fifty feet from the apartment. I was in such a hurry. I changed to the left lane. I didn't see you, didn't see the driver ahead of me waving you to

cross. I braked. But too late. Turquoise sweater. Blood on the windshield. A shoe dropping on the hood as you tumbled over the car.

26. You teased me in our texts that day that I had magic fingers because of how we did it that morning.

I was a man. I was the king of a country that extended from the headboard to the ends of the universe and I felt so happy knowing that I was surrounded by potentates of similar principalities, men and women both.

27. The woman who waved you onto the street fought the charge of reckless driving and there was a negotiated justice that satisfied nobody. I didn't get charged with anything but I wouldn't have fought it at all. Distraction is damnation. Just one instant, one decision, one proof that space and time are not fluid and unending because you ~~were~~ are gone.

28. There are no happy endings to stories because no matter what happens, the characters will die and everyone, everyone, has to say goodbye. Even if they don't get a chance to really gently sweetly have one last kiss goodbye.

29 I would be so happy to come home and not find the key under the mat. To think I would get a call later from you saying that my instructions were compulsive, confusing, dumb—that the extra key was in your purse. That all twenty nine post it notes flutter and swirl like dead leaves on the curb. If I did get that call, if these post-it notes were gone, I would sit on the couch with Eddie and I would scratch his ears and it would be so much better than every other night because this time I would know that you'd be coming home.