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The Shoe Shiners'

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Preface

Inspired by the point of view style of Arthur Rimbaud's *Drunken Boat*, I wanted to have a "the walls have eyes" approach to the businesses on 56 Washington Street in which not one but two different shoe shining businesses occupied in different years back-to-back. Looking further in the past I found that the space occupied a billiards house, a sudden disconnect from the businesses that succeeded it. The ever-changing landscape of business became an apparent detail I wanted to pursue even while focusing on the primary concept of the shoe shining business of 56 Washington.

The Shoe Shiners' by Denai Laster

2022

Every morning. The metallic clack sounds every morning.

The boxy red building beside the lot, Dog Rose, uses the space, cars pull in throughout the day.

There's the thud of a car door shutting, a click of the locks setting into place.

A young woman climbs out, brushing off the imaginary dirt from her jacket, smoothing out the skirt of her dress. She preens, the one thing escaping her fussing is her shoes.

Pleather loafers, black, and gold. The heel's chunky, solid bits of rubber and plastic that made satisfying thumps against the pavement.

She stopped abruptly, peering down at her shoes, just shy of turning the corner, just shy of reaching the front of the building.

"Oh, darn it." She bent forward, swiping a thumb over a slight scuff in the synthetic material. She stood up properly, turning her foot this way and that, another annoyed huff leaving her lips, "oh gross."

She dragged her heel against the pavement, scraping off the gum that had become stuck to the bottom of her shoe.

With a dissatisfied sigh, she went on her way inside, further away from the parking lot at 56 Washington Street.

1940

"Alfonso," it's him, "how's the business treating you?"

It was the same swing out, chime, swing shut, chime.

"Mr. Butler! It's going mighty fine, can't thank you enough for the opportunity."

Mr. Butler sat in that chair like every customer. "For three years, just before you settled in, this place was a shining place just like you, y'know."

He settled in nicely. The chair squeaked in response.

"Funny how things turn out so the folks used to Carey won't have to head too out of their way."

The wax was applied, the brush following soon after.

Brush, brush, brush.

The new shiner looked up tentatively, "what brings you over here, Mr. Butler?" His hands never slowed.

"Well," he started, tapping against the side of the chair, "you know the space next to Salena on 92? Just got it filled with a shoe repair shop, 'fraid you'll have some competition coming your way, though with the new shiner's over at 85."

The polishing went on in excited silence, more customers came in. Swinging out, chiming the bell. Swinging shut. Chiming the bell.

With a tip of his hat, Mr. Butler offered a smile getting out of his chair, "but you know business."

"I do, sir."

"Always coming and going, always growing or... well."

Mr. Butler shrugged that smile not lessening.

"Take care now."

Swing out, chime, swing shut, chime.

1937

Billiards to shoe shining. 56 Washington had turned from a billiards house...to shoe shining. No more balls clacking, instead, it was replaced by the noise of another.

It's in and out all day. Open— swinging out, a bell. Close— swing shut, a bell. A creak of a chair, and a conversation.

The popular choice these days are oxfords, maybe boots. For men at least, leather if they were old or could afford it, cloth if they couldn't. Women weren't nearly as rigid.

Her shoes are some kind of dark green animal skin: snake, gator, something scaley. Nothing synthetic. Shallow heels laced up. Pale stockings, darker skin.

The bristles brush against the material, wax, and polish. Brush, brush, brush.

Laugh-brush-laugh-brush

There's an exchange of payment, a passing word, swing out, swing shut.

Swing out, a bell, click-click-click, swing shut, a bell.

Leather. Genuine leather.

Boots this time, black leather boots riddled in scuffs, hanging on by chunks of skins and hide. The man drops readily into a chair, tugging the fabric of his trousers up away from them. He's from nearby. A barber. The door's nearby. It swings open, it chimes, it swings shut, it chimes. The entire area over here on Washington Street, it's a series of businesses, a collection of them even. In and out, and here he was in this chair.

The boots looked old, looked well worn, well used. Genuine, old boots.

The wax was slathered on, the brush nestled against the skin, stroked it.

Brush-chatter. The conversation was lively, passing words about business.

"Mr. Butler stopped by the other day," the barber would say.

"I haven't seen him for a hot minute," the shoe shiner would say.

Brush, brush. Brush.

"Yeah," the barber shuffled in the chair, forcing it to squeak, "he got to talking about a bike shop over at 63."

"A bike shop?" The shoe shiner's hands stopped for a moment, only a moment before he started again. "Ought to open another repair shop over here," he knocked the bristles of the brush against the leather tellingly, "you could use one."

The barber rolled his eyes, "Funny one, Carey," inspecting the job well done as the shoe shiner leaned away from him. "Could open another place like Palace over on 54."

"Could open another barbershop."

"For your sake, hope it isn't another shiner's."

The dry laughter in response was the end of the conversation, anything meaningful at least. They made their passing words, their goodbyes.

Swing open, chime, swing shut, chime.

Clack-clack-clack.

It's busier tonight than normal, a hall full of people all clustered around billiards tables, all shooting pockets and laughing. The smoke of matches and cigarettes billowed to the ceiling, chatter followed shortly after each puff.

There's a scratch, a flicker, a breath, breathing, and then—

Clack-clack-clack

Swing open, a firm swing shut.

"Aye, look who's here, looking all spiffy!"

"And look who's here already looking all spifflicated before the night's gotten good," He shot back, an arm getting thrown around his shoulder.

Another person jogged up to him, chuckling, "Well, if it isn't the Real McCoy himself, Mr. Butler!"

The chatter livened up, pool cues leaving their beds on the billiards tables and standing to attention just as anyone else had. A space was made for him, slotting him between a group of men, a pool cue was thrust in his hand before he could protest.

"Mind a round?"

"I just came by to see how the place was doing," he chuckled, earning a resounding round of 'boos'.

"Aw, come on Frank, one game, yeah?" Despite the urging, the cue was soon out of his hands and into another's.

"Maybe next time, George." He slipped away with a laugh, ducking through the rest of the building, slipping past groups all setting up or finishing a game of pool. Satisfied, he snuck

his way outside, avoiding the group from before, only slowing to watch the steady concentration of George lining up a shot only to miss the pocket completely.

Swing out—

Stepping outside, the warm Florida air hit him unencumbered, the only light reaching him now was the steady moonlight coming through the clouds. He took his first step fully out of the building before stopping, squinting down at a scuff on his shoe.

“Damn,” the businessman sighed, angling his foot every which way in the dim light, “maybe someone ought to open a shoe shining stop around here.”

—swing shut.