

STRANGER IN THE MANGER

When I was a child I was unable to pronounce the word “nativity,” and so, when I saw a tableau of a stable and lamb on the lawn of a church, I would ask if we could stop and see the “activity scene.” I remembered this the other day, standing in a living room with a wrapped present in my hand.

Shoes and I have been friends for 45 years. Shoes is not his real name. It’s the nickname he picked up from the 1970 Firesign Theatre comedy sketch “Shoes for Industry.” I met him in New Brunswick in the mid-seventies. I was attending Rutgers; he was hanging out at Rutgers. We both loved comedy, radio, music, film. I produced a weekly radio comedy show on WRSU called The Punsters, and Shoes became an unofficial member of the troupe. Among all sorts of eccentric voices he could do, he contributed a perfect Bob Dylan impersonation for our song “I Dreamt I Dreamt of Gefilte Fish.” He sang our fractured holiday songs: “Stranger in the Manger” and “Christmas on the Isthmus.”

Shoes became a part of my life: threaded through the decades. He kept the Punsters alive as a comedy rock band. He was a tireless cheerleader for my writing. My feelings for him were equal parts love and exasperation. He was unable to drive (and unwilling to learn); he was often unemployed and behind in his rent. Yet he was smart, funny, and loyal, and read *The New York Times* from cover to cover every day.

He led a solitary, Bohemian existence — often, it seemed, on a diet of Pepperidge Farm goldfish crackers (cheddar). When the Punsters eventually made the leap to NPR’s *Morning Edition*, Shoes was there, with bells on. He also, to my illimitable gratitude, discovered the actor who played Orson Welles in the movie of my novel *Me and Orson Welles*.

But the Bohemian life of one’s 20’s and 30’s becomes less viable as we age, and so it was with Shoes. Bad luck and judgment brought him low — and by last Christmas he’d been evicted from his apartment, and he was living partly on the street. He’d stay up all night in the Dunkin’ Donuts in Highland Park. He had exhausted my generosity and that of most others around him. I seriously worried he might kill himself.

And then the miracle. Through the intervention of Senator Frank Pallone’s office (hats off to you, Mr. Pallone), Shoes secured an apartment at what used to be Roosevelt Hospital. Apparently, three units had been reserved for the previously homeless, and Shoes was offered one.

I paid for his security deposit. We sat together in the rental office. The woman behind the desk, walking him through 40 pages of legal releases, explained that there was a Welcome Wagon, and all the new residents were invited to a barbecue on Friday. I told her my own Welcome Wagon story: how I’d worked at a jewelry store during high school, and that the Westfield Welcome Wagon sent each new resident a postcard reading: “Stop in for your beautiful free gift!” When the eager young couple appeared, I

handed them an ice cream scoop printed with “Compliments of Martin Jewelers.” They’d expected jewelry; they’d gotten a crappy ice cream scoop.

Shoes, the rental agent, and I took the elevator to the second floor. The hallways still were imprinted with the ghost of the hospital: phantom wooden doors from the 1930s with no knobs. But at the end of the hallway, Shoes fumbled with his keys and opened the door to his own apartment. Full of bright windows. Fresh paint. Wooden floors. A brand new kitchen. It was nothing short of beautiful. Shoes stood in the middle of it, largely speechless. He had a roof. A sink. A lamp.

One week later Shoes invited me over to show me how he’d set up the place. The few possessions he’d managed to save through his homelessness were lined up neatly: a collection of wind-up toys, a Bart Simpson doll, a framed photograph of Professor Irwin Corey. And in the middle of the tour he said, “I bought you a present.”

He handed me a small object wrapped in a page of newspaper. I opened it. It was an ice cream scoop.

I felt the camera pulling back from this moment: an overhead shot, the two of us, the ice cream scoop. And I knew the caption: *the activity scene*.