



Talking Dog

By Lewis Shiner

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"If you can answer three questions," the dog said, "you can wear the magic shoes."

Tommy looked up and down the deserted street. "Did you ... say something?"

"That's right. Didn't you hear me?" It was a gruff voice, with just a trace of an English accent, and it was definitely coming out of the dog.

"You're a dog." In fact it was a huge, fat bulldog, with big flaps of skin hanging off the sides of its face. From where it sat, on the front steps of the abandoned motel, it looked Tommy straight in the eye.

"That's correct," the dog said.

Tommy stared hard at the dusty windows of the motel office. "This is a trick, right? There's a TV camera back there and you want to make me look stupid."

"No tricks, Tommy. Just three questions."

"C'mon," Tommy said. He deepened his voice. "Sit up." The dog stared at him. "Roll over. Play dead."

"Cut the crap, Tommy. Do you want the shoes or not?"

"Let me see 'em."

The dog shifted its weight to one side, revealing a battered pair of red Converse All-Stars. "Yuck," Tommy said. "Those are gross."

"Maybe," the dog said, "but they're magic."

"What are the questions?"

"Which of the following presidents died in office? Lincoln, McKinley, F.D.R.?"

"C'mon. They all did. That's the same dumb question they use when they're trying to sell you a free portrait on the telephone."

"Which weighs more, a pound of feathers or a pound of lead?"

"They both weigh a pound. This is stupid. Next you're going to ask me who's buried in Grant's Tomb."

The dog narrowed its eyes. "Have you done this before?"

"Ulysses S. Grant," Tommy said. "Lemme see the shoes."

They were just his size and felt pretty good, even though they were scuffed up and the metal things were gone out of the side vents. "I don't feel any different," Tommy said.

"You need the shoes to look for the treasure," the dog said.

"What treasure?"

"When you're wearing the shoes, you can open the doors of the motel rooms."

"Uh uh. No, sir. My parents told me not to go in there. Besides, they're all empty anyway."

The dog shrugged. Tommy had never seen a dog shrug before. "Suit yourself," the dog said.

"Hey, wait a minute. Tell me about this treasure."

"You have to find that for yourself." The dog started to walk away.

"Hey!" Tommy said. "Come back here!"

The dog kept on walking.

Tommy flexed his toes inside the shoes. Magic. He looked at the row of motel rooms, their dusty tan walls almost golden in the late May afternoon. He would already be in trouble if his folks knew he was hanging around the place.

He went to the first door and opened it.

Inside a woman sat in a chair, watching TV. Tommy felt a hot flush go up his face. "Jeez, I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't think there was anybody here."

"It's okay, Tommy," the woman said. "Come on in."

Tommy took another step into the room. "You know me?"

"Sure," the woman said. "You're wearing the shoes." She was a little older than his mother, and very fat. An open Whitman Sampler box sat by her thick right arm.

"Who are you?" Tommy asked.

"Nobody. Just a mother." The room was bigger inside than out and didn't look like a motel. There was a playpen in one dark corner with two kids in it. One of them hit the other with a plastic rattle. A third kid crawled around on the floor, dragging a blanket. The place smelled bad, like sour milk and old coffee and the bathroom at school.

A man's voice on the TV said, "Susan's going to have my baby."

"What are you watching?" Tommy asked politely.

"Nothing. Just a show."

The kid who was getting hit started to whimper. The woman put a chocolate into her mouth with a quick, almost guilty snap of the wrist.

"Well," Tommy said. He felt the way he did when he'd been looking forward to going swimming and it rained. "I have to go."

"Shhh," the woman said. "This is the good part." Tommy went out quietly and closed the door. He wondered what the dog had expected him to find. He went to the next room and knocked gently.

"Come on," said a big male voice.

Tommy opened the door and found himself in front of a long wooden desk. Behind the man at the desk was a window with narrow blinds, slanted to let the sun in. It made it hard to see the man's face.

"Tommy!" the man said. "Come right on in!" He stood up and held out his hand. Tommy shook it and backed away. "How in the world are you?"

"Fine," Tommy said. "How come you know who I am?"

"The shoes, son, the shoes! Now what can I do for you?"

Tommy hoisted himself up into a chair that was too big for him. He noticed a funny smell and sneaked a quick sniff at his hand. The man had left some kind of aftershave on it. It was so strong it made Tommy's eyes water. He rubbed the hand on his jeans.

"Do you know anything about a treasure?" he asked.

"A treasure," the man said, sitting back down. Tommy could now see his mustache and the way he'd combed his hair over the bald spot on top of his head. He wasn't that old, but he had circles under his eyes, and his smile wiggled like it wanted to come off. "Well, I may not know where to find a chest of gold doubloons, but I can tell you how to get rich." He leaned across the desk and whispered, "Superconductors."

Tommy pictured a man in red-and-blue tights taking tickets on a train. "What?"

"Superconductors," the man said. "They're like metal, you know, how it carries electricity? But they do it better and they're very, very cold ... well, hell. I don't know that much about how they work. But I'll tell you, there's a fortune there!" He slapped the desk. "A fortune!"

A little box on the desk buzzed. He punched a button and said, "Yes?"

A woman's voice said, "Mr. Connell for you on line seven, sir." She sounded like she was trying to whisper and sing at the same time.

"Stall the old fart, would you honey? And say, don't forget our business meeting tonight. I got us a room over at the motel." The man winked at Tommy, using his whole face, and punched another button on the box.

A picture frame on the desk showed a woman and two boys. The woman didn't look as though she belonged to the voice in the little box. "Not a word to my wife, now, Tommy," the man said. "You know how it is."

"No," Tommy said. "How is it?"

Before the man could answer, the box buzzed again.

"I'm sorry, sir, Mr. Connell says it's urgent."

The man grabbed the telephone and punched at a blinking light. "Goddammit, J.C., what the hell is eating your ass now? ... You what? ... You what? All of them?" The man put the phone back and fumbled at the drawer of his desk. His face was the color of cement. "Superconductors," he whispered, and started putting tiny white pills under his tongue.

"I -- I better go now," Tommy said. The man didn't answer and Tommy hurried outside.

The sun was setting. The world looked very tired and dusty. "Hey, dog?" Tommy called. There was no sign of it. Slowly Tommy went to the next door and opened it.

A woman lay on the bed. She was dressed kind of like the cheerleaders on the football games his father watched on Sunday afternoons. She had shorts made out of silver material and a thin red shirt tied above her stomach. When she sat up Tommy could see her breasts wobble under the thin cloth. They were very big, and drooped when she leaned forward.

"Hi, Tommy," she said. "Find the treasure yet?" She lit a cigarette from the butt of one that was in the ashtray.

"No," Tommy said. She had a dry, scratchy voice that was very sad. "Who are you?"

"Me? I'm a hooker, Tommy."

"A hooker? What's a hooker?"

The woman shook her head. Her hair was glued in place with too much hairspray, and she wore more makeup than Tommy had ever seen on one person before. "A hooker is a woman who ... well, she tries to cheer up men that aren't very happy at home."

"Could you cheer me up?"

"You're a little young, Tommy. It usually doesn't work anyway. See, grownups aren't very happy people a lot of the time. They look for power or money or sex, and when that doesn't work, they usually just sit around and watch TV."

"There isn't any treasure, is there?"

"I don't know, Tommy. I didn't find it."

"What's that?"

The woman had tied a belt around her arm, and was filling a hypodermic needle. "It's like medicine, Tommy. I think you'd better go now."

"Yeah," Tommy said.

It was almost dark outside. Tommy sat on the curb and took off the red All-Stars and put his own shoes back on. "Hey, dog!" he shouted. "Hey! You can have your stupid shoes back!" There was no answer. Tommy threw the shoes toward the motel as hard as he could. They broke the window of the first room, where the fat woman had been watching TV, and through the broken glass Tommy could see the room was empty.

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When he got home his parents asked him what was wrong. He told them he was just tired. He took a bath and went to bed and stared at the wall for a long time. Eventually he fell asleep.

School was almost out for the summer. With the windows open and the hot, dusty smell of the outdoors in all the rooms it was almost pointless to continue. Teachers struggled on anyway, to the accompaniment of shuffling feet and shifting bodies and stampedes at recess.

For Tommy it didn't matter anymore. He looked at Mrs. Aleio and thought about the fat woman in the motel room, and the woman whose picture had been on the businessman's desk. When he looked at Susie Bishop, the prettiest girl in class, he saw her in tight shorts and too much makeup. When Bobby Cubitto called out an answer in class, Tommy thought of him shouting into a phone.

He went by the old motel on the way home every day. There was never a sign of the dog. He even looked in the room with the broken window, but the shoes were gone. His parents knew something was bothering him, and his father tried to talk to him.

"Do you believe in magic, Dad?" Tommy asked. "Talking animals, stuff like that?"

"Well, Tommy," he said, and cleared his throat. Tommy noticed that his father had started parting his hair on the other side and combing it up to cover a thin place on top. "Things like that are called allegories. That means they aren't real themselves, but they stand for something real. Do you see? So if an animal in a story tells you something, it may just mean that you're getting a message from your conscience or something like that."

"But it's not real."

"Not really."

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On the last day of school they got out at noon. Tommy wandered the streets aimlessly, not wanting to go home. He found himself in a subdivision he didn't know very well. He walked with his head down, kicking a small black rock ahead of him as he went.

Something moved in the corner of his vision. It was a big bulldog.

Tommy ran after it. The dog saw him and cut through somebody's yard. Tommy didn't slow down. He ducked under a clothesline and chased the dog down an alley. It veered again and Tommy stayed right behind and suddenly it skidded into a flower bed, cornered by a chain link fence. Tommy jumped on it and forced it to the ground.

"Talk to me!" Tommy said. He remembered what the man had shouted into the phone. "Talk to me, goddammit!"

A screen door banged behind them. "Hey, you!" said a woman's voice. "Get out of those flowers! What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry," Tommy said, grabbing a fistful of the dog's fur. "My dog ran away. I'll pay you for the flowers. I'm sorry, I really am."

"That's okay," the woman said. "Just be more careful." She looked him up and down. "How are you going to get him home? He doesn't even have a collar."

Tommy shrugged.

"I'll get you a piece of rope," the woman said. She went into the house and came back with a piece of scratchy cord. "Here."

"Thank you," Tommy said. "I'm sorry about the flowers."

He dragged the dog out to the street. He hoped the woman hadn't seen him yelling at it. He would have looked really stupid, yelling at a dog to talk to him. He sat down on a curb. It was stupid. The dog was just a dog, and didn't deserve to be treated this way.

"Hey," the dog said. "This rope really itches."

"You can talk."

"Of course."

"Why did you give me those shoes? Why did you send me into those motel rooms with all those miserable people? What was the big idea?"

"No big idea. You're a special kid. Special things happen to special people. You don't ask for explanations."

"What about the treasure?"

The dog licked its chops noisily. "Take off the rope first, how about?"

"Tell me about the treasure."

"I don't feel much like talking with this rope around my neck."

The dog and the boy stared at each other, and then Tommy took off the rope.

"There isn't any treasure, is there?" Tommy asked.

"Not in that motel, no."

"Then you lied to me."

"Look, kid, I didn't say it was in there, I said you had to look for it there. See, sometimes you already have something and you don't know it. So you still have to look for it, even though you already have it."

"Have what?"

"A way of looking at things. Of finding people in empty motels or finding words in the mouth of a dog."

"Then I just made you up. You're not even real."

"Reality is whatever you decide it's going to be. You can have a reality where there are talking dogs and magic shoes, or you can be like the people in that motel. Like your parents. It's up to you."

"That's the treasure?"

"That's it." The dog got up and snuffled away down the street. It stopped in front of a big new car, lifted its leg, and peed on the tire. The drops spattered onto the dusty street like little gold coins.

"See you around, kid," the dog said over its shoulder.

"Will I?" Tommy said. "Will I see you again?"

"Sure," the dog said. "Life is full of surprises."

Tommy put the rope in somebody's trash can and started home. What do you know? he thought. After a while he started to whistle.

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