

David M. Fortier
163 Goodwin St.
Bristol, CT 06010
(860)584-8043
dfort001@yahoo.com

School's Out

by

David M. Fortier

Chapter I

The club-footed man worked the river side of the old factory, which rose over the river and desolate landscape like a great cathedral. Robin combed the grounds for anything he or his long-haired partner could hock, eat, or trade.

He passed from room to room deep in the ancient belly of the building, around old square iron objects like altars and through low narrow passages solemn quiet of the abandoned building.

An earthy smell, damp with the heated wetness of the raw January thaw, attacked him. He avoided contact with the sweaty walls and stamped his feet to frighten rats and scatter wild dogs and warn intruders. His imagination was as much the summoner of phantoms as of real creatures.

People still tramped through and left food scraps and clothing. Once he'd come across a couple making love. Unsettled, perhaps by an unconscious knowledge of the voyeur in their midst, they rose from their naked embrace and left looking uneasily behind them. Like Lot leaving Gomorrah, he thought to himself in the eerie silence. He chuckled. He would have to remember to tell Julio. Julio was a priestly man and his protector. Julio was always thinking of the Bible and God's holy hell fire.

Phantoms were all around him now. Robin remembered another time when he broke up a picnic on the upper floor, in the corner overlooking the Deer River. That day he ate like a king -- potato salad and beans and relish and chicken and wine. Julio didn't approve of the wine, though, because it loosed demons in the blood and you never knew what they would do.

But here now was something that confused him. He'd seen many things, but he'd never seen anything like this, candles in a circle around the indistinguishable mass in the center of the circle.

He brought the beam from his flashlight down into the gloomy dank darkness of the basement floor onto the heap for a closer look. The yellow beam ran over legs and arms. A body. Some strange substance that he could not quite comprehend seeped from the body onto the floor. Oh, yes, he said. It came to him all at once. Blood.

He moved closer, all at once fearful that the body might rise up and grab for him, hoping that the worst was over. Among the things he had seen were dead bodies. The thing that interested him now was where the light shone, on a pair of black shoes. He could use new shoes. He moved in. But before he could get any closer the heap shifted and he jumped back slipping in some of the blood secreted from the body and almost injuring himself against one of the iron altars.

A rat slid out from underneath the corpse. Robin caught a glimpse of the thin tail as the creature ran out the door to the river.

Robin thought it best to find Julio before exploring any further.

They worked quickly.

Robin held the flashlight as Julio maneuvered nimbly around the old piece of machinery and the rubble from the crumbling walls. He circled the body making sure not to disturb it.

“I told you they were nice shoes,” Robin whispered.

“You want the shoes, you get the damn shoes,” Julio yelled back.

His moods could be volatile.

“There's some sick mothers out there,” Robin said.

Julio picked up a plank and prodded the body. He pushed the end of the plank underneath it. His first effort to turn the body face up failed. But the body was stiff enough so that on his second effort, he succeeded in propping the body on its side.

“There, there, there,” Julio said, arms flailing, to indicate to Robin that he wanted the light on the face.

After Julio vomited, he kicked out the plank and staggered outside.

Robin tended to avoid contact with anything unpleasant unless there was something in it for him. What interested him were the shoes. If Julio wasn't going to help him with the shoes, there was no sense in staying. He followed Julio outside and thought about the right time to mention the shoes again.

He knew that he'd have to bide his time. Julio had a temper. But he was a friend. In fact, he was Robin's only friend. The long-haired man had saved him twice, once from a group of hoods and another time from wild dogs. If it weren't for Julio, Robin might have ended up like this corpse.

Outside in the morning sun, Robin waited for Julio to say something. Maybe then he could bring up the subject of the shoes.

“God,” Robin heard him say, “you wonder what's happening to this world.”

“No,” he corrected himself. “It's the end time. Murder rampant, corpses split in half like pigs. Each and every one a sign signifying the end.”

He turned to Robin.

“Did you see? The face was gone, completely gone.”

Robin shook his head up and down.

“Of course, I saw it,” he said. He lied. It was a little white lie. He didn’t want to hear a sermon. He wanted to hear about the shoes.

“This is the work of Satan,” Julio said. He crossed himself for the second time and pulled a crucifix out from under his shirt and kissed it.

“Bless the soul of this person and commit it to heaven. Nobody deserves to die like this,” he said.

Once more, he turned to Robin.

“It is the work of Satan worshipers. Where I come from, they do this thing. I wouldn't be surprised if they ripped the heart from the body, before the rats got to it, roasted it on a spit and ate it. They washed it down with the blood.”

He began to gather a few of their belongings, the ones they took with them as they traveled up and down Deer River, migrating like the birds depending on the season, except the season was always the same.

“Nothing for us to do here,” he said.

Somewhat relieved, except of course for the shoes, Robin started down the path that would take them along the river. It meant that they would be spending the night in the church shelter downtown. After that they would start south.

“Two days,” Julio said. “Rats will pick that body clean. There won't be anything left.”

Robin conjured a bleached skeleton lying belly down, eerily white like the ones in laboratories, but this one had on a new pair of shoes.

“Damn, those shoes looked good,” he said. He rarely used curse words. In fact, he worked hard on his vocabulary. It was Robin who taught Julio his English, at least what he hadn’t learned in the service. Cursing was something his mother told him never to do, so he reserved curses for times when he really wanted attention. He thought he might be making his point to Julio.

“You want to walk in the shoes of the devil,” the long-haired man said. “Go right ahead. The world is in uproar. It’s good versus evil. You walk in those shoes, you are wearing the uniform of the damned.”

“Really, Julio,” he said, “I don’t want those shoes. They aren’t that important. No, really.”

But he was thinking that the shoes would still be there on the next trip. Maybe Julio wouldn’t be so suspicious then.

“When my old man was dying,” Julio began, “he was in bed for a long time.”

Robin had heard this story time and time again but he enjoyed listening anyway.

“It was my mother’s job to give him his shots of morphine. She taught me how to do it. I gave him shots sometimes to help ease the pain from the cancer. He had suffered for a long time. No one knew it was cancer until they opened him up and saw what it was and that it was too late. We gave him his shots at home until the day he died.

“On the day he died, just before death came, he screamed. I can still remember that scream.

“Grandma was horrified. She told me he screamed because he saw the devil coming to get him. She said, ‘My son went to hell.’ She was horrified then, but she learned to laugh about it afterwards. She would laugh and say he deserved to die that way, said he was a son of a bitch. Sweet Jesus, my grandma hardly ever cursed.

“She locked that room up. Never let anyone in there every again. But when she wasn’t around, I would sneak in. I would sneak and call to him. ‘Grandpa, grandpa. Come talk to me.’ There were days he did.”

dfort001@yahoo.com