

This story was first told at a campfire, during the summer of 2005, and then appeared in the Gazumba Gazette. Within the story lies a simple message: life is filled with *things* that can ‘divert’ us from what we should be doing, and tempt us to do what we should not. Once recognized for what it is, a ‘divertimento’ *should* lose its power to deceive us.

The New Pair of Shoes
by
Chick BeVier

Clothes were a much bigger thing for my mother than they were for me. The occasional trips to the Youth Centre, which (in 1956) was located in the center of West Hartford, were akin to trips to the dentist: something that had to be tolerated, but never relished.

The interminable periods of trying things on, standing in front of those three sided mirrors, being patted down by the sales clerks who were helping my mother decide if something fit or not, these things comprise, and stain, my memories of trips to the clothing store. Yet, there was one trip that was *quite* different.

One spring, circa 1956, I needed a pair of sneakers, and for the first time in my life I had an opinion of what kind I wanted. I wanted a pair of PF Flyers. I, like many of my fellow 8 year olds, had fallen prey to the advertisements that portrayed these sneakers as being capable of propelling their wearer to near supersonic speeds.

Not only did the marketing geniuses, who designed the sales campaign for these sneakers, know the mind of the pre-adolescent boy, so did the designers. The shoes were made of black canvass that rose well above the ankle. The support these “high tops” provided was needed to endure the high accelerations that the wearer was certainly going to experience, not to mention the side-loading that high speed ninety degree turns were going to produce.

Below the black canvass was white rubber from which the soles had been made. Flyers were equipped with white laces and embellished with a round, white, rubber disc, which bore the name: PF Flyers. That rubber disc was very important. There were look-alike sneakers, but everyone knew they were inferior. Only genuine PF Flyers were capable of *really* attaining such speeds and providing such maneuverability.

The Youth Centre, sensing that a great moment was at hand, had devoted a large space in the center of the shoe section to the sole purpose of displaying the Flyers. There were several shoes on display, along with pictures of kids, *just like me*, running, jumping, turning corners at high speed, and... well, doing about everything an eight year old mind, that was obsessed with foot speed, could imagine.

I really wanted a pair of these, near miraculous, shoes, and after several trial fittings, these things had to fit perfectly, I had a pair. During the trial fittings, my mother became impatient. I had never seen that before. When we had been buying pants or some other useless article, she had been unbearably patient as she insisted upon endless trial fittings!

Once the selection had been made, the clerk asked me to take them off so he could put them into the box. My mother must have seen my look of disappointment. She knowingly smiled at me, and told the clerk that I would wear them home.

The checkout register was located near the front door of the store, so when we reached it I asked if I could wait out front while my mother paid for the Flyers. The time to try them out was at hand. Mother said, "Yes," and cautioned me to stay in front of the store where she could see me through the window.

Once outside, with the open sidewalk before me and a new pair of PF Flyers on my feet, there was no promise that was going to confine me to the small patch of concrete in front of the store window. I remember looking down at the shoes and being amazed at how good they looked, how good they felt, how precisely they obeyed my every command, and then came the moment, I advanced the throttle and *they* began to accelerate. In seconds, I was traveling faster than ever before; they worked!

The shoes gobbled up the stretch of side walk that led to the corner of Farmington Avenue and South Main, they devoured the stretch between there and LaSalle Road, and from there the street signs became a blur; they also began to bear names that I no longer recognized. But I was oblivious. I was not looking at street signs; I was looking at my very own pair of PF Flyers sailing over the ground.

I soon discovered that, while the shoes allowed me to attain speeds I had never before reached, they did not prevent me from getting tired. My pace slowed to a trot and then a walk, and for some time I simply loped along watching those shoes carry me over the pavement. Eventually I stopped and almost instantly discovered — I was lost!

PF Flyers were not equipped with a navigation system. Today, of course, shoes come equipped with GPS systems and respond to voice commands, but not in 1956. It was expected that I would provide for my own navigation, and I had not.

I had been so occupied watching those shoes that I had traveled beyond the parts of West Hartford that I knew. I was not simply lost; I was lost for the first time in my life.

I remember standing on the corner and looking in all four directions. I didn't even know from which direction I had come. I don't remember being scared on account of being lost, but I do remember being scared on account of having disobeyed my mother. I didn't know what kind of things might happen to me on the street, but they had to be preferable to the kind of thing my mother was going to do to me.

My lost condition did not last long. Almost immediately, I saw a policeman. I also remembered my parents telling me that if I ever got lost, or needed help, I should find a policeman. They assured me he would help. So, with great confidence, I walked up to the officer who was walking his beat and confessed that I was lost.

He asked me where I had been when I last saw my mother. I told him the Youth Centre, and within a few minutes we were back in front of the store, and found my mother, who was searching for me.

The officer and my mother exchanged a few words, the officer cautioned me about wandering off, and then congratulated me on using such good judgment in asking him for help. I announced that I was only doing what my parents had told me to do.

My mother made a comment that suggested that if I had done that (stay in front of the store) this never would have happened, and the policeman left. I was sorry to see him go. I figured my mother was waiting for him to leave before she dealt with me, properly. Yet, as he walked off, she simply said, "Get in the car," and we rode home in silence.

Once we were home, she told me to take off the sneakers. I took them off and put on my old ones and she told me to go out and play "...in the yard."

Later that evening when Dad got home, he and Mom had one of those long conversations during which I was asked to leave the room. When it was over, I was summoned.

Upon arriving in the kitchen, I found my father holding the Flyers and my mother holding the box in which they had come. I figured I was about to lose the Flyers.

My mother said, "Chick, I want you to tell Dad what happened today." I recounted the whole affair, but left out the part about how I had been watching my shoes. Though I did not know why, I had an uneasy feeling about admitting that I had been *watching* my shoes: so, I emphasized how fast they were. Mom and Dad listened without interruption.

I figured my real sin had been to disobey my mother and was ready for the lecture and punishment that would come from that. What did happen, however, took me by surprise. My parents had seen something very different, and that had become more important than my disobedience, although that too had to be reckoned with.

After I had told my story, Dad asked me a question, "Chick, while you were running, what were you looking at?" I remember the amazement at discovering, "He knew. How could he know?"

Sheepishly, I answered, "My shoes." He and Mom both smiled and Dad asked me to elaborate. I began to explain how they looked, how they felt, and the wonder that they were on *my* feet. I reiterated how fast they were.

Then, instead of telling me how stupid it was to run about while looking at my feet (instead of where I had been going), or how naughty it had been to disobey Mom, Dad smiled and nodded as if he understood.

He then said, "You're going to own a lot of *shoes* like these." When Dad spoke the word shoes, he emphasized them in a way that indicated he was no longer talking about, just, shoes.

He looked quizzically at me and asked, "Chick, do you know what a *divertissement* is?" I did not.

"Well," he added, "it comes from an Italian word *divertimento*. Have you heard of that?" Of course, I had not.

Dad continued, "Then I think it's time you learned about *divertimentos*. Several hundred years ago, when operas were performed, the intermissions were sometimes lengthy. To prevent the audience from becoming impatient and walking out, the cast would present short performances in front of the curtain to amuse and entertain the audience. These short presentations were intended to distract the audience from the fact that they were *waiting*. In time, these short operatic performances, which were designed to divert the audience's attention, became known as *divertimentos*."

Now that I knew what a *divertimento* was, Dad continued, "By taking your mind off what was right and making you think about what you desired these shoes caused you to disobey your mother. Then, by distracting you from watching where you were going, they caused you to get lost, and in both cases you did what was wrong without even realizing it."

The shoes were like one of those *divertimentos*.

Dad lowered his voice and pointed his finger in my direction and said, “Now listen to me, once you know what the real function of a divertimento is, it can never fool you again. Chick, now you know.”

Dad continued, “We had considered throwing these shoes away, but I have a better idea.” He handed the shoes to me and said, “We want you to have them, and see if you can put them to better use, some use that won’t make you disobedient and thoughtless.” I was then dismissed.

Ever since that day, when I obtain, or find myself wanting, some new thing, I still hear my father asking, “...*and to what use are you going to put this.*” I haven’t always answered his question as well as he would have liked, but at least I continue to ask it. After that day, it was more difficult to ‘divert’ me.

Thank you Mom and Dad,

Love,
Chick

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