

They found her hanging in the shoe tree at the edge of town.

Gracie McBride had started the shoe tree some twenty years before, when she was sixteen years old and in love or at least lust with a boy from Sandy Cove, the next town over. His name was Ricky and all I remember about him is that he played football, not hockey, and that he went through one hell of a pregnancy scare with Gracie. No one told him that even if Gracie did have a baby in her belly, there was no way to be sure it was his.

When she finally let him know her period had come two days after it actually arrived—Gracie liked to have fun with boys that way—Ricky was so relieved that he drank half a quart of Jack Daniel's and went out in his father's enormous Chrysler something and backed it over every mailbox on Sunset Trail between Horvath Road and Walleye Lake. It actually wasn't that many mailboxes, but enough for Ricky to spend a weekend in jail.

Gracie was so impressed that when he got out, she told him to bring his football cleats and drove him out to an old oak towering over Main Street about a mile east of Starvation. There in the summer midnight dark she took off her clothes and then Ricky's and after they'd writhed in the tall grass at the base of the tree, she tied one lace of one of his cleats to one lace of one of her high-top sneakers—she had dyed it a bright pink so you could see it from afar—and threw the pair over her shoulder and clambered up into the tree. Ricky told her this was a stupid thing to do, especially naked, but Gracie giggled and kept climbing until she could find no more branches that would hold her ninety pounds. Then she reached over her head and looped the pink sneaker and black cleat over a bough.

Gracie wasn't as good at climbing down, or at least she pretended not to be. Ricky put his pants on and tried to help her, but he was too heavy to climb as high as Gracie, and she insisted, giggling again, that she was too afraid to descend. He finally drove into town while Gracie sat on a high branch in the dark, wearing nothing, until a fire truck came and plucked her from the tree like a pussycat. When one of the Pine County sheriff's deputies asked her what the hell she was thinking climbing fifty or sixty or seventy feet into a tree naked in the dark, she said, "I don't know, officer. Didn't you ever do anything for love?"

Soon more shoes began to appear in the tree. At the high school, hanging shoes became a spring ritual for graduating seniors, which naturally prompted a brief, futile attempt by the police to stop it, seeing as the kids' hangings usually involved beer and sometimes ladders. But adults hung shoes in the tree, too, especially after a night at Enright's Pub. Out-of-state tourists saw the tree and pulled over and hung their own shoes and flip-flops, their equivalent of writing in the guest book at a rental cottage. Sometimes when a romance soured, one of the two lovers would bother to shinny into the tree and slice a pair of shoes away.

But mostly the shoes multiplied, and over the years the oak took on the look of a matronly ghost dressed in a ragged nightgown. And somewhere in her highest branches dangled a single snow-covered football cleat tied to a high-top sneaker faded to a dirty gray, the pink but a memory.

And way below the sneaker now hung Gracie herself.