



CAVERNS
below
MILWAUKEE

ANDY TYRA

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Caverns Below Milwaukee

Written and illustrated by Andy Tyra

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For all the believers
in Milwaukee.



1

SACRED ARTIFACTS

His birth name was Walter but everyone knew Grandpa as Papa Chuck. His huge personality left an equally large void in our family when he died. I was seven when he had his stroke but the few memories I have of him are vivid. He made pizzas while singing along to oldies on the radio. He peeled and ate an orange during his nightly game shows. He joked with his brothers and fishing buddies on a phone that was also a table lamp. The white ceramic contraption sat on a side table next to Papa Chuck's recliner. Installed in the base was a rotary phone with a coiled cord and a handset as big as a dumbbell. My older brother Kevin and I used to make prank calls on it, asking people if they knew where we could buy "potato boots" which were not a thing.

Shortly after his funeral, my brother and I each received a box that contained some of Papa Chuck's effects. My box held three black-and-white photos in an envelope: a shiny-haired high school portrait, a snapshot of young Walter looking tough in dirty coveralls while leaning on a station wagon, and one with him and my Grandma Myrna on a picnic blanket. There were also a half dozen pristine cowboy-themed comic books in plastic and a pair of old brown shoes.

I was too young to appreciate the value. It may as well have been a



A wooden sign with a light blue background and a brown border hangs from a dark wooden post. The sign is held up by two silver chains. The text on the sign is "Aral's" in a large, stylized, brown font with a white outline, and "Shoe Repair" in a smaller, brown font with a white outline below it. The background is dark and textured, with a brick wall visible on the right side.

Aral's

Shoe Repair

box of wet sandwiches. But when I rediscovered my shoe box among the artifacts in my Mom's basement, it was like finding lost treasure.

The brown shoes popped into my mind when I was trying to figure out what to wear to Kevin's wedding in June. I was so broke in my early twenties that buying a decent pair of new shoes was not in the budget. The wedding was a couple of months away and there was no way I could wear sneakers or my work uglies — the comfortable black blocks that were part of my restaurant uniform since high school. The wingtips would be a good match for my new suit and provide a way for Papa Chuck to attend the wedding, if only through the spirit of his surviving footwear.

The problem was that the shoes were stiff and crusty to the extent that wearing them would likely result in their total destruction. I decided to visit the shoe repair place on Howell Avenue to see if they could work some magic.

Back then I was a server at a breakfast-and-lunch spot in Bay View called The Tiptop and I also cleaned up after hours at a restaurant in St. Francis called Fancy Dan's. So I had trouble getting to the cobbler's shop during their operating hours which were Tuesday through Thursday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. as dictated on their cassette-driven answering machine. It was a narrow window by my service industry standards, so it took me a while to get there.

It was a mystery how businesses like Aral's Shoe Repair could exist at all. They had no website or social media presence. While the world around them had picked up speed, they were just cobbling along, continuing to practice a lost art despite the challenges to their business model.

Online, most reviewers gave them 2 or 3 stars and suggested that the cobblers weren't great at customer service. One critical consumer, FarisonHorde, commented, "The guy is rude. Said my \$200 shoes are cheap plastic." Two outliers gave 4 stars and provided more positive feedback. KingJakeDaffy wrote "Great service by strange people" while PB&J227 stated "My cowboy boots are better than new. Definitely recommend these guys."

I've always assumed that a city with sufficient population could support some number of old-timey artisans — cobblers, clockmakers, upholsters and the like — if they had a decent amount of traffic going past their shops. The peeling sign hanging in front of Aral's Shoe Repair made me think this hypothesis wasn't true in this case. It didn't appear to be

EMPLOYEES
ONLY



a functioning business at all. The sign was small and hard to see in the context of its brick background. Like many former bars in Milwaukee, the building had a corner entrance. Theirs was void of any additional signage and flanked by large windows with blinds closed.

Inside I found an ongoing conversation between the shopkeeper and a woman wearing a cheetah print jacket over a black suit. The cobbler, a very pale man of around fifty-years-old with long, sterling hair, told her in a calm voice that reattaching a strap on her heels would be a waste of time because they were made from “just plastic and glue.”

The woman bottled her outrage and collected her shoes. She left behind a perfumed scent that was soon replaced by ambient chemical odors comprised of two parts laundromat and one part auto body shop.

“Just one moment,” the man said and entered an adjacent room where tinny music and television applause blared.

The counter was old-school Formica worn from years of gentle abrasion. There was a coat tree with a few jackets and a baseball hat on top. I owned the same hat.

After a moment, a sinewy woman with a stern face emerged from the back room and shouted behind her. Her skin and hair were as pale as her male counterpart.

“If you can’t take it, ask Wick. It needs to be in Chortle tomorrow.”

While I was trying to process what the female shopkeeper was talking about, she lifted a hefty brown ledger from underneath the counter and slapped it down. In a series of tidy movements, she opened the book and wrote something, then clapped it shut.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Hi. I was hoping you could do something with these.”

The shopkeeper examined the wingtips thoroughly, lifting the tongue of each shoe and looking inside. She scratched the leather with a fingernail.

“We can fix these,” she concluded. The origin of her accent was unclear. Maybe Pennsylvania Dutch.

“Pick up on Tuesday.”

She wrote on a slip of paper and handed it to me.



Shoes.
Pick up on 5/17

You have
bad breath.



2

MAGICAL THINKING

My alarm went off on the following Tuesday and I snoozed it for two hours before getting a coffee and going to the cobbler shop. The female shopkeeper closed the big brown book as I opened the door.

“Hi, I’m—”

“Nine dollars.”

I pulled cash from my wallet and she fetched Papa Chuck’s wingtips, which gave me a moment to revisit their business model. A few days per week, a handful of customers came in and paid between nine and twenty dollars. Even if they got a spike in profits for repairing equestrian gear or leather furniture, it still didn’t add up. Maybe they were committed to keeping the family business alive or they owned the building and didn’t need much money to live. Or maybe they produced fake versions of designer handbags in the back room.

I checked out the various footwear on the front shelf: a pair of purple clogs, some chukkas with metal studs around the collar, sharp-toed slingbacks and weathered baby shoes with buckles. No baby would wear shoes like that. I took out my phone and tapped two quick photos, then stuck it back in my pocket.

She clopped Papa’s wingtips on the counter. They had been restored to

gleaming perfection.

“Wow. They look so good!”

The creases were smoothed as was the moonscape of the toe cap. Every surface was made new while retaining the original character. The spot on the toe where the cherry of a cigarette sizzled a black divot was now just a bump.

I dug out three dollars to offer as a tip.

“We don’t accept tips,” she said, taking the money anyway, and passed me my receipt.

I couldn’t get over the miraculous restoration. The wingtips were placed in the most visible location in my apartment: on a dish towel in the middle of my kitchen table. The disbelief and resulting joy were renewed each time I passed.

At the wedding, the shoes outpaced all expectations. My girlfriend Jess and my Aunt Lauryl both commented on them. Jess said that I could have been a suit model “for an outlet store,” which was more than adequate praise for my needs. It gave me enough confidence to get beyond my anxiety and enjoy myself. I hugged my new sister-in-law and apologized for being so sour at a baseball game months before. In my speech at the reception, I told my brother what a good choice he made. Jess and I danced to a slow song and kissed in a dim hallway afterward. When I ordered my last brandy old fashioned, I said to myself “thanks, Papa Chuck” and drank it in four swallows.

Jess had already left for work when I woke up with my trousers still on. I cleaned the shoes with a sock and returned them to the kitchen table, still impressed by the degree to which they had been repaired. In my hangover fuzz, it felt like a mystery to be solved.

Who were these cobblers? I studied the photos on my phone. The weathered baby shoes were too tiny for a toddler yet their aggressive treads were worn down from thousands of steps. I’d always wondered why they made hiking boots for babies at all but seeing such footwear in need of repair took the absurdity to the next level.

It was too peculiar for me to leave it be. It formed a loop in my mind that, in retrospect, I should have broken with some physical activity. When the female cobbler said something about “Chortle,” she was implying that it was a location and not just a kind of snorty laughter. A search revealed nothing. It wasn’t the name of any place on earth as far as I could tell. I



surrendered to my hangover and slept through the afternoon.

The following night, Jess and I went out for chicken mole at Amuletos and I showed her the photos. She looked distracted as I held my phone across the table. It could have been a lot of different things on her mind. She didn't vocalize everything on her mind the way I did but I was surprised she didn't have anything to say about the wingtips or the tiny buckle shoes.

"These are the baby shoes I told you about. Zoom in."

She was staring at the small painting mounted above the bar mirror: a portrait of a forlorn toddler with a pageboy hairdo.

"Unbelievable."

It was clear that she wasn't talking about the portrait but I was unsure about whether her comment conveyed veiled amusement or hidden judgment regarding my topic of choice. I assumed it was the former.

"I know! The baby who wore those shoes must have hiked the Appalachian Trail."

"I bet they are leprechaun shoes."

It was hidden judgment. Whenever Jess mentioned leprechauns, they were a placeholder for those things that she considered foolish. I deflected her comment with laughter, knowing the joke was on her. Leprechauns were known to be cobblers themselves and could fix their own shoes.

We returned to her house and watched a show about unlikely animal friends. We laughed a few times before she fell asleep on the sofa. I covered her with an afghan and researched the origin of the word "Aral." It had Turkish and Indian origins. It was a surname and a somewhat common first name. Different sources defined the word as a stream between two mountains, a descriptor for curled objects, the resin of a shala tree or an elephant in rut.

Jess would say I was taking it too far. She would remind me of my ghost hunting expedition in West Allis or the Sasquatch trap at the Kettle Moraine that almost got me arrested.

The world was full of bizarre undercurrents that moved unseen and Milwaukee was full of them. Those kinds of mysteries and supernatural phenomena looked so much more exotic against the bohemian backdrop of my hometown. Every bar, hotel and bowling alley had multiple ghost stories. Frozen alligators were found in alleys. Unexpected sinkholes swallowed automobiles whole. Raccoons traveled in the sewer like goblins



in an underworld labyrinth.

My pal Delvin and I were seniors in high school when we stopped for ice cream at a place on the East Side. It had been raining for days and we were bored of it, thus the senseless need for candy bar bits suspended in soft serve. We stopped at a stoplight when we felt a quake that shook the car. There was a metallic clunk like knuckles colliding at a rail yard and a black SUV a few cars ahead dropped through a sinkhole. It crunched into the deep dark rubble twelve or fifteen feet below, severing a sewer pipe on its way down. Delvin panicked and almost hit the car in front of us with his sudden U-turn. It seemed plausible that the sinkhole might spread and we'd all fall through the street.

Incredibly, local news would later report that the sinkhole driver was okay. But motorists would forever know that potential danger lurked beneath the street.

Later that night, Delvin stopped on Russell Avenue and pointed at the roof of a house where three raccoons were perched on the ridge, silhouetted like gargoyles with wiggly little hands.

"They usually move around in the storm drains but they don't know where to go when the system gets full like this. They climb trees and telephone poles and stuff. One time I saw them hiding out in the playground at the Trowbridge school."

Delvin's claim was verified the following summer when I saw a raccoon waddling down the margin of Clement Avenue just after dusk. It poked its head into the curb drain and oozed through the slot like a glop of magma.

It made me think about how strange things are happening everywhere, all the time. While we slept, unknown deep sea creatures were feeding and being fed upon. Dragonfly nymphs were breathing through gills in their anuses. So was it so far-fetched to think something extraordinary was behind the rebirth of Papa Chuck's wingtips? I resolved to find more shoes in need of repair.