

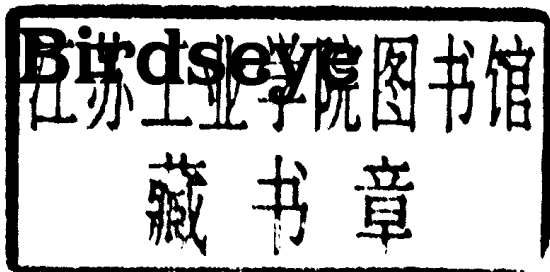
TARANTULA SHOES

Tom Birdseye



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Tom



Holiday House/New York

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Summary: After moving from Arizona to Kentucky with his parents, his five-year-old twin brother and sister, and his pet tarantula, Fang, an eleven-year-old works creatively to earn the money for a special pair of basketball shoes that will help him feel accepted.

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For the people of Kentucky—the Bluegrass State—
where basketball is king and conversation an art.

And for the Arizona desert rats I've come to know:
cactus fans, tarantula lovers.

Acknowledgments

Although writing is mostly a solitary task, turning a story into a book is not.

I especially want to acknowledge the expert guidance I have received on *Tarantula Shoes* (and on many other projects) from my editor, Margery Cuyler. Working behind the scenes, she rarely gets all the credit she deserves.

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TOM BIRDSEYE

Corvallis, Oregon, 1994

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CHAPTER 1

511 Sycamore Street

“Welcome to Macinburg, Kentucky!” Dad said as he climbed out of the big U-Haul moving van.

I opened the door of the family station wagon but stayed seated.

Dad smiled at me. “Isn’t it beautiful here, Ryan?”

I looked all around and tried to smile back at him. But right then lightning flashed and—KA-BLAMMO—a big clap of thunder boomed out of the clouds.

The twins, Justin and Ellie, ran over to where Mom stood on the sidewalk, looking up at our new house at 511 Sycamore Street. They grabbed hold of her legs and hid their faces. She reached down

and stroked their red curls. “It’s all right,” she said. “It’s only thunder.”

Mom. She’s always easy on those curtain climbers. I don’t know how she does it. Only a minute earlier I’d been so sick of them singing “On Top of Spaghetti,” I almost threw up. They must have sung it two hundred times!

“Yeah, it’s only thunder,” I said, more to myself than to the twins. I got out of the car and puffed out my chest, trying to act like someone who’s almost twelve should act—brave and grown-up.

But deep down inside, I wasn’t feeling very brave or grown-up. Not because of the thunder. I’d heard plenty of boomers during summer storms back in Arizona. I like them, the way the sound comes on with a sudden crack, then rolls around like it’s chuckling because it made the little kids jump.

No, it wasn’t the thunder. It was the upside-down way my life was feeling right then that had me scared. I’d been happy in my little town of Sierra, Arizona. I was born there and had lived in the same neighborhood all my life. I had friends I’d known since I was in preschool and one best friend ever: Patrick. He knew me as well as anybody. The Desert Rats, we called ourselves, when we went exploring up the canyon. But now Dad and Mom had done this awful thing—moved the whole family all the way across the country to this little town

called Macinburg, Kentucky—and it had me as jittery as a chicken at the coyote café.

I looked around. Not a saguaro or ocotillo cactus in sight. No mesquite trees or palo verde. No whip-tail lizards soaking in the sun. No gila woodpeckers. No rocks. Kentucky was covered up. The trees spread their limbs over the sidewalks like big green umbrellas. You could barely see the sky, which was all clouds anyway. And there was no dirt, just grass, mowed like it was supposed to be carpet. Bushes were everywhere. I was surrounded! Surrounded by green.

But the weirdest part was the air. It made my skin slick with sweat. My T-shirt was so wet it stuck to my back. I could hardly breathe! How could anybody want to live in a place where the air was too thick to get into your lungs? This place was downright scary.

I didn't let on, though. When you're the shortest kid your age—even shorter than the girls—you make a point to act big. "Yeah, it's just thunder," I said again. "Nothing to worry about."

Like it was trying to make a liar out of me, another flash of lightning and a big KA-BLAMMO went off nearby. I jumped, and Justin and Ellie let out nervous giggles.

But before I could get off a good warning glare in their direction, Dad said, "That was pretty close. I

guess we'd better get inside before it starts to—”

ZZZZZACK! A jagged, crackling bolt of lightning tore across the sky directly over us, and the rain came down like it was dumped out of a bucket on top of our heads.

Mom and Dad and the twins ran for the front porch. I started to run after them but then remembered Fang, my pet tarantula. He was still on the backseat of the station wagon in his little glass terrarium. No way was I going to leave my best souvenir of the Arizona desert out there alone in the rain. Or my official NBA basketball. I jerked the car door open, grabbed them both, and ran after my family, big drops of rain pelting my back. Then I walked into my new home for the very first time.

New? Did I say *new*?

“This place was built in 1919!” Dad said proudly, standing in the middle of the empty living room.

Mom and Justin and Ellie all smiled up at him like they agreed.

I looked at the cracked plaster, chipped paint, dented woodwork, scuffed-up floor. Talk about ugly!

Dad glanced my way as if he could read my thoughts. “They knew how to build houses back then. Real craftsmanship,” he said. “Sure it needs a little work . . .”

“A *little*?” I said under my breath.

Dad strode over to me, grinning like he'd won the lottery instead of bought a disaster with a roof on top. "But who can do a better job of fixing this place up than your mother and me?"

Mom walked our way, smiling. "Just give it a few days, Ryan," she said. "Once our things are unpacked and in place, you'll start to feel at home."

Dad leaned very close and his voice changed, dropping almost to a whisper. "This move is a great opportunity, Ryan."

Here it came again, what I'd heard too many times before. We had moved to Kentucky because an old high school friend had offered Dad a chance to be a partner in his construction business. Work was hard to get in Arizona, but there was plenty here in his old hometown.

For Mom, too. She had gotten a better job at the Bank of Macinburg than she'd had at Sierra Trust in Arizona. "Instead of a teller, I'll be a financial service representative!"

I didn't know what a financial service representative was, but from the tone of her voice and Dad's big grin, I figured that for them it all boiled down to "a great opportunity." To top it all off, we'd be a lot closer to relatives, they kept saying. Grandma O'Keefe lived just a couple of hours away, in Ohio. And Oma and Opa were only a little farther in the other direction, in some place called Corbin, where

Mom had grown up. We'd even get to visit with our cousins down in Atlanta on holidays!

Mom would talk of it all and smile. Dad would nod and say, "A great opportunity." Over and over and over he'd say it.

But right then I didn't feel like listening again, so I told them what they wanted to hear, even if I didn't mean it. (Sometimes you have to do that with adults—just say what they need you to say—so they'll get out of your face.) "I know," I said. "You guys loved it in Kentucky when you were kids."

The big grin crept back onto Dad's face. "And you will, too! *Especially* this house, once we get it fixed up." He winked. "There's a basketball hoop out back."

Mom put her arm around me. "And here you'll have your own room. No more sharing with Justin and Ellie."

I glanced over at the twins, who were trying to touch their tongues to their noses. The idea of having my own bedroom did sound good. They were always into my stuff in Arizona.

"Come see it!" Dad said. "It's got the same nice woodwork as the rest of the house and a big window with a view of the backyard. And it's private, too, off in its own corner."

I set Fang's terrarium down on the living room floor and leaned close to see if he was okay. I

watched him crawl across the sand and move under the rock I had propped up for him. Just like me, I thought. He's homesick for the desert, for Arizona.

"Come on, Ryan," Mom said. "You'll love it!"

I set my official NBA basketball next to the terrarium, then followed Mom and Dad and the twins down a short hallway. Dad opened a door. "Ta-da!" he said, and flipped on the lights.

It was my very own bedroom . . . painted pink.

CHAPTER 2

Where Y'all From?

I let out a groan as Justin and Ellie danced around singing, “Ryan has a pink room! Ryan has a pink room!”

Dad looked over the walls. “Oh, well, yeah,” he said, glancing at me. “I guess another color would be better, huh?”

I just stood and stared with my mouth hanging open. How could anyone have ever thought this was a good color to paint a room? The pink was so bright, it made my eyeballs vibrate.

“We’ll put paint at the top of the shopping list,” Mom said.

Dad grinned. “You bet! Just name the color,

Ryan. One . . . er, two coats and presto, a whole new feeling!”

I couldn't imagine even twenty coats doing the job.

“Is our room pink, too?” Ellie wanted to know. “I *love* pink.”

“Or orange?” Justin asked. “Orange would be great!”

“I'll bet it's orange *and* pink!” Ellie offered.

Justin wiggled with excitement. “Yeah!”

“Can we see it? Can we see it?” they both sang.

“Sure, let's take a look,” Dad said. He and Mom went upstairs with the twins, leaving me surrounded by all that pink. I closed my eyes and wished as hard as anyone has ever wished to be back where I belonged—Arizona.

Thunder rumbled not too far off, and rain plinked against my bedroom window glass. But through all that I heard another sound. Knock, knock, knock. It reminded me of *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy clicked her heels together three times and wished to go home. I thumped the heels of my old basketball shoes together. There's no place like Arizona. There's no place like Arizona. There's no place like Arizona.

Knock, knock, knock.

I opened my eyes very slowly to see . . . pink.

Knock, knock, knock.

The door. The knocking sound was at our front door. I walked from my bedroom into the hall. “Mom?” I called up the stairs, hoping she’d go answer. “Dad?”

But they were still showing the twins their room. The knocking became very loud: KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK. I stepped back into the living room. A boy was peering in through the front screen door. He lowered his knocking hand as soon as he saw me. “Hi,” he said. “Where y’all from?”

I took a few steps closer. “What did you say?”

The boy opened the screen door and stepped inside, letting a small brown dog in after him. Both had wiry hair and were wet from the rain. The boy, who looked about my age, was grinning, more out of one side of his mouth than the other, which made his eyebrows go lopsided. He spoke again. “I said, ‘Where y’all from?’ ”

His words sounded like they were covered with maple syrup, kind of gooey with sliding sounds all over them. Mom had told me people would talk differently in Kentucky, with a southern accent, like she and Dad used to years ago, but still . . . It took a few seconds for the boy’s words to sink in. He wanted to know where I’d moved from.

“Arizona,” I answered.