

Mr. Mud E. Shoe

By A.J. Schaar

Inspired By Nikolai Gogol's short story, *The Overcoat* (1842)

Short Logline: *The story of a fellow at the bottom of society who's turned against at every turn by people who should help him.*

Long Description: *In a rapidly spinning series of pathological vignettes, "Mr. Mud E. Shoe" tells the story of a hard worker at the bottom of society who's turned against at every turn by the people who should help him: his employer, his colleagues, his banker, his tailor, his beat cop, his landlady, his doctor. The cat. The condition of his life reaches into the past as far back as human records have been kept, and his haunting death reminds us here and now that but for the grace of God (and nice new clothes), his condition might be our condition, too. Underneath the façade of all well-to-do lives, we are all naked to the cold winter wind, and to death. "Mr. Mud E. Shoe" is inspired by Nikolai Gogol's short story, "The Overcoat," which made a profound impact on Russian literature; it is lesser known now, but no less true.*

The Parts with a Suggested Doubling for Five:

1. Mr. Mud E. Shoe
2. Good Manager, Bad Manager, Tailor
3. Colleague 1, Banker, Thug 1, Doctor
4. Colleague 2, Loan Shark, Thug 2, Police Officer
5. Secretary, Landlady (and the Cat)

Mr. Mud E. Shoe

*(Blackout. Sound of winter wind. Sound of a door closing the wind out.
At lights up, a chair is center in a spotlight. A handwritten sign downstage reads "Office."
Mr. Mud E. Shoe is dressed like a tramp. The Good Manager is dressed well)*

Good Manager: Mr. Mud E. Shoe. It's good to meet you. Please sit down.

(Shoe sits, nervously)

That's right. I'm the new middle manager here in this certain department. I like to meet the people under me.

Shoe: Under...

Good Manager: Under me, yes. I'm sorry for not conducting this employee review yesterday. My secretary thought your file was a joke. "Mud E. Shoe." Sounds like a joke name. But I like it, sir. The name been in your family for long?

Shoe: *(nods)* For...

Good Manager: For your father's name was Mud, your name is Mud, too. *(consulting papers)* I can see that you've been *here* for a long, long while. As far back as these records have been kept! And never a mark against you. Never sick, late; never make a mistake. You're a copy clerk, yes?

(Shoe nods)

Good Manager: Yes. Literally minding your p's and q's. And you've always been a copy clerk? An entry level job? Never been promoted? Given a raise?

(Shoe shrugs, shakes his head no)

Good Manager: You'll forgive me if I say so, but it shows. I've seen this before. You know, an employer's job should be investing in people's lives like yours, but they think it's more intelligent, for them, to keep you down. And they'll keep keeping you down, and keep asking you for more, 'til you can't stand it anymore, and then: they'll *fire* you. It could happen any day.

Shoe: *(flustered)* In... On... By!...

Good Manager: ...It says here you only speak in prepositions. We thought that was bad office humor, too... Remarkable man. Well, Mr. Shoe, I'm going to make a *project* out of you. I'm going to see you *promoted*. And see you given a *raise*. But I'll have to work fast. You see, confidentially, between you and me, I am a *good* middle manager. We never last long. Executives don't really want someone like me, paying real attention to their lowest employees! Most executives aren't interested in what their business *does* but in what it's *going to do*. So, they'd rather have someone talk *vision* to them than talk about someone like you. Who has worked hard. For their benefit. A sucker on the bottom of society, who clears away one fearsome patch at a time, all the overwhelming, slimy morass of minutiae that bogs down society's life. ...Some executives just make more *dollars* than *sense*. ...*I'm* always hired and then always fired for being a *good* middle-manager... Well. Never you mind about that. The next time we meet, I'll have good news for *you*, Mr. Shoe. You've *earned* it.

(They shake hands. Middle Manager goes off one way, discretely wiping his hand. Shoe circles the chair center, glowing. Sits again. Colleagues enter)

Colleague 1: If it isn't Mr. Shoe, all dressed in his Sunday best. Har har har.

Colleague 2: Har har har. Sunday best! Har har har.

Colleague 1: You look so well-dressed, you must be on your way to your wedding. Hahar.

Colleague 2: A wedding? I wasn't invited! Hahar.

Colleague 1: Shoe's going to marry his landlady. A woman who's 90 years young, with a cat.

Colleague 2: Must be after her money.

Colleague 1: Let's celebrate now. Here's confetti in here. *(empties a wastebasket over Shoe's head)* Har har har.

Colleague 2: Har har har.

(Shoe hasn't minded this heckling; besides being used to it, the idea of being valued at work has given him a sense of peace. Secretary enters)

Secretary: Mr. Shoe? Please *step* this way. The *newest* middle manager would like to see you now. ...Shoe. Step. Ha ha.

(Shoe steps off with the Secretary)

Colleague 1: Shoe. Step. Har har har.

Colleague 2: Har har har.

(Colleagues exit. Shoe comes back to the chair center with the Secretary to be presented to the newest middle manager)

Bad Manager: Mr. Shoe, I'm the newest middle manager of this certain department. The last new middle manager had outdated ideas. He has just been fired and I have just been hired for my *vision* of this place. And it starts with you. What year did you start as a copy clerk here?

Shoe: *(baffled, crestfallen)* ...In...

Bad Manager: You can't even remember. Exactly my point. Copy clerks are a thing of the past, Mr. Shoe. There are typewriters now! A technology that's able to do your job faster, better, and cheaper than you. Sure, the new typewriters cost more than a year of your wages, but as I told the executives at the top, these machines are an *investment*. Send a copied piece of paper that's been typed and not written by hand, and we project the kind of company we are. The kind of company that looks to the future. Which brings me back to you. A thing of the past. Your job no longer exists and so you're going to be *fired*. Or, maybe promoted! But you'll never be promoted looking like *that*. Ridiculous. I'll give you one chance. You come in here tomorrow in a nice new suit. Show me that you would invest in yourself, or, it's *the end of you* in this certain department.

Shoe: *(pleads)* In... About.... Through!...

Bad Manager: Don't touch me, Shoe.

(Bad Manager stalks off. Shoe staggers round and returns to grasp his office chair. He turns his pockets out. There is no money. Seeing a mess, he uncomplainingly puts the 'confetti' wastepaper back in the wastebasket, and still reeling, takes the basket off.

The handwritten sign downstage is changed for one that says "Bank." Shoe enters, hat in hand)

Banker: Mr. Mud E. Shoe?

(Shoe is nervous, desperate; nods)

No kidding. You know, I thought someone put your name down as a joke?... Well, Mr. Shoe, it says here that you'd like to take out a loan for 50 dollars to buy "a nice new suit." Is that correct? I took the liberty of checking your bank statements and see you only make about 200 dollars a year. Now, I'm going to preface what I need to say to you like this. First, I see you've been a customer of this bank for as long as our records date back. So thank you. And I see you've always paid your bills on time, there's never been a single mark against you. You're to be congratulated. That's my preface. What I have to say is that I'm afraid you don't *look* like the kind of person this bank would give a loan to. Loans are an *investment* for the bank, you see. I can't *invest* in *you*, Mr. Shoe. Sorry. A word to the wise: Come to the bank when you have more money than you need, and we'll be happy to loan you all the money you want, at very competitive rates. But come to the bank when you really need money, and really, no bank will help you, Mr. Shoe. That said, I can refer you to a... someone who can give loans to people like you. It will be more expensive, but I'm sure they'll be able to help you right away. Be sure to give them my card. They're just that way.

(Banker goes off one way. Shoe, dismayed, goes the other way and is met by the Loan Shark)

Loan Shark: Ah, Mr. Shoe. I was told you'd stop by. Those bankers send people like you to me... for a small referral fee. You're better off here; those bankers are crooks. Whereas I'm happy to loan you 50 dollars on trust, without even checking your records. You look like just the kind of person who'll pay me back on time—at *my interest rates*. Now. An unsecured loan with me has *no* interest attached if you can pay me back *tomorrow*. Otherwise, it costs twice the original sum plus 10 percent more each month—so just 110 dollars will be due on the first of next month, and if you can't pay it all back at once that's no trouble! We'll just keep adding 10 percent more to the interest for the life of the loan 'til it's paid. Straightforward enough?

(Shoe nods deeply uncertain)

Good. Here's your money. 50 dollars cash in hand. Lot of money for you, Mr. Shoe. Well done.

*(Shoe offers his hand to shake; the Loan Shark pretends not to see it and exits. Shoe looks at the money in his hand, and sets out again. The sign downstage is changed to read "Nice New Suits."
A tailor comes on and sees the money in Shoe's hand just before Shoe pockets it)*

Tailor: Here for a nice new suit? Looks like it's high time... Do you know how lucky you are to have such a fine frame? Look at these shoulders. Look at these legs. I've got just the thing for you. I'll be right back. Take off those rags.

(Tailor goes off to fetch a suit. Shoe strips to threadbare underwear, carefully folding his old clothes. The Tailor enters with a simple suit and a coat with a real cat collar)

The clothes make the man as they say. When people see you in this, you'll be the toast of the town. The man that everybody wants to be with. There we are.

(The Tailor steps back to take in the full effect and is gob smacked)

You look so much better! You do! You... Why, just look at yourself!

(Shoe, almost afraid to look, glimpses at a 'mirror...' He is impressed. He almost doesn't recognize himself. He takes on a more confident posture. Shoe indicates that he'd like to see the coat on with his arms through the sleeves—not just thrown over his shoulders—he's a man of the world and knows about these things)

Of course you want to see your arms in the sleeves. You're a man of the world who knows about these things... Perfect.

(The Tailor helps Shoe. The clothes fit perfectly. Shoe is transfixed with his own image)

I'll dispose of these old clothes for you. You won't want to wear them anymore. And that'll be... 60 dollars?... for the full ensemble.

(Shoe looks for the money in his new trousers— of course the money isn't in his new pants, but he begins to panic. The Tailor helps himself to the money in Shoe's old pockets and counts it)

I mean 50 dollars. The coat is on sale. A real bargain sir, that's a genuine cat collar! And you'll want it this terrible winter. It will keep the biting chill of the wind from you for years to come.

(Shoe feels the cat collar, deeply touched by the high quality and luxurious warmth)

Wait 'til everybody sees you now!

(The Tailor goes off. Shoe carefully removes his new coat to admire it. Dances with it. Dances off. The Tailor peeks on again to admire him. He really does look much, much better. The sign downstage is changed to read "Street." Shoe returns wearing his coat flung over his shoulders. Colleagues meet him on the street)

Colleague 1: Say, Mr. Shoe, you look swell!

Colleague 2: Swell!

Colleague 1: You ought to throw us a party! Show off!

Colleague 2: Yes, throw us a party! Let's go out tonight!

(Shoe remembers himself and is embarrassed. He has no more money)

Colleague 1: Alright, I'll throw a party. It's my birthday today. And everyone's invited! Meet at my place tonight after dinner. Alright?

(Elated again, Shoe dances off and the sign now reads, "Home." The landlady enters with a cat and radiantly greets Mr. Shoe)

Landlady: Mr. Mud E. Shoe! As I live and breathe! Look how fine you look! I've never seen the like! Have you been promoted?

(Shoe shakes his head no, remembering)

Shoe: With... in... about...

Landlady: *(darkening)* If you haven't been promoted, then where did you get all the money for this? You've hardly any money after you pay me your rent and board. And haven't I been kind to you, always saving you the extra scraps from all the other lodger's plates. I know you, Mr. Shoe, you'll eat the flies with your soup you're so hungry sometimes. And here you are in a nice new suit, and no extra money for me, I suppose? Well, well. Then I've no dinner at all for you. You can go to bed hungry for all I care. And tomorrow, I will be raising your rent. You look like you can afford it wearing a fur collar like that. You've upset the cat. I can tell. *(the cat hisses)*

(The Landlady exits in a huff. Shoe thinks of the money. And he is hungry. But then catches a glimpse of himself in a 'mirror.' Dancing again, the lights change to dusk, to dark. The sign downstage reads "Street" again. Shoe looks cautiously around. A laugh echoes off from one side, deep and sinister. A laugh echoes from the other side, high and lewd. The lights flicker like a streetlight on the fritz. Shoe puts his arms through the sleeves of his coat and pulls the cat collar about him. The wind blows. Shoe walks ahead.

As he walks, colors begin to brighten. Jangling happy music plays off. Happy laughter. Brighter lights. He's walking to a better part of town. We hear high heels run by and closer laughter. He's overwhelmed by so much beauty and warmth... His head is quite turned. He sees that sign downstage now reads "Colleague's Apartment in a Good Part of Town"

The Colleagues and Secretary greet Shoe with cheers! They admire him in his new suit)

Secretary: Gee, Mr. Shoe. Let me help you with your coat. Real cat? What a swell!

Colleague 1: Sure, he's swell. Have a cigar, Mr. Shoe!

(Shoe puffs on a cigar, they all cheer, but he coughs)

Colleague 2: Har har har! Here now, have a drink, that'll help!

(Shoe takes a shot, they all cheer, but he starts to cough anew on the stuff)

Secretary: Oh well, just give him air. Dance with me later, Mr. Shoe? *(Shoe is still coughing; to the colleagues)* Let's play cards.

(Cheers. They leave Shoe. His coat has been dropped on the floor. He picks it up hastily and carefully makes sure it's clean and whole. He looks off after them. Looks at his watch. Feels bleary, hungry, and woozy but mostly happy and decides to leave without a word. He changes the sign to read "Street" and then knocks it over accidentally. He looks up at the brightly colored lights, and the jangly happy music, wistfully and joyfully.

He walks, and as he walks the lights get dimmer, then begin to flicker again. And then the wind begins to blow. It blows from the left and then from the right, and then from in front of him, then from behind. It is so cold, and the spotlight becomes so small that Shoe becomes afraid. He hears footsteps that echo his own. He covers his eyes in fear, and the lights go out)

Thug 1: *(in the dark)* Nice clothes you've got there. Bet you must be a swell.

Thug 2: *(in the dark)* Whaddyou mean. Them clothes is mine. Bet he musta stole em!

Thug 1: *(in the dark)* Another thief, huh? I should punch the *world's* lights out for it's thieving.

(The sound of a punch, and their footsteps running away.

In a spotlight again, we see Shoe is stripped. He feels his jaw. He feels the cold. He looks around in desperation for his clothes! They are gone!

A Police Officer strolls on. Shoe stops him)

Shoe: Out of!... Into!... Off!...

Police Officer: Easy, buster. Looks like you had a few too many. I *suspect* you were up to no good tonight, weren't ya. I *suspect* you were out with some whores, and some cash, and then you lost your head and then you got got. Well. You wanna stay out of the lockup tonight, you'll leave me alone, you creep. Pervert. Clear off and be thankful I don't arrest you. I thought at first you were a swell, that's why I walked this way to help. But you look like a bum and that's all that you are. Clear off, you heard me, or I'll book you for assaulting a police officer!

(The Police Officer raises a club. Terrified now of the officer and by everything that's going on, Shoe, freezing, runs off. The sign now reads "Home." The Landlady has had enough of this)

Landlady: *(meeting Shoe)* Waking me up at this hour of the night! And just look at the state of you now! What's got into you, running around with no clothes? It's freezing outside! You'll have caught your *death* tonight! Well here, have a blanket and I'll call the doctor. It's more than you deserve treating a lady like this, and her cat. *(the cat hisses)* You stay there. I'll be back.

(Landlady exits and returns with a doctor who has had enough of this)

Doctor: Bringing me here at this time of the night! This will cost you a fortune. Just wait for my bill.

Landlady: Doctor, this is Mr. Mud E. Shoe. And you'll have to wait for him to pay me before he can pay you.

Doctor: Are you telling me that this man has no money?

Landlady: Yes, that's right. Went off and spent his money on a nice new suit. And just look at the state of him now.

Doctor: I don't care. If this man cannot pay me, I cannot ethically treat him. Tell him to save his money for a coffin. A cheap one. And I'll say goodnight.

Landlady: Good night, Doctor.

Doctor: Good night. *(exits)*

Landlady: Good night, Mr. Shoe. A dinner's still too good for you. Treating a lady like this, and her cat. *(cat hisses; exits)*

(Wrapped in a blanket, shivering in a chair, Shoe hallucinates. His coat and suit dance around him now, tormenting him, and dance off. They are gone now, never to return)

Shoe: *(cries out generally to the world)* WHY DO YOU DO THIS? ...I AM YOUR BROTHER!

(Shoe coughs and cries, and coughs and cries, and coughs and coughs and dies. Lights out.

Lights up. The sign reads "Office." A panzer assault of interest now; sends it up right to the end)

Bad Manager: *(enters furious without a coat or pants)* Where the HELL is Mud E. Shoe? Which way did he go? He just stole my suit! MY SUIT! I told him to get one, but this is ridiculous! I'm FREEZING now! The bastard's FIRED!

Colleague 2: *(entering, looking forward to seeing Shoe now)* Shoe stole your suit? What a sport!

Colleague 1: *(enters)* What a swell!

Bad Manager: *(indignant!)* What a scandal—*scandalous* behavior! This is serious!

Colleague 1 & 2: *(laughing at Bad Manager)* Har har har!

Bad Manager: Look at the state of me! Show some respect! Take me seriously!!

Colleague 1 & 2: *(laughing at Bad Manager & then ignoring him)* Har har har har har har har!

Colleague 1: *(to Colleague 2)* Shoe's always the first at his desk. This is strange.

Colleague 2: *(to Colleague 1)* Where did Shoe get away to last night?

Colleague 1: Disappeared!

Colleague 2: *(suddenly)* He was always almost just invisible.

Colleague 1: Yes, wasn't he!

Bad Manager: Just wait 'til I catch sight of him again, the filthy bastard!...

Secretary: (*enters urgently, holding a note*) Mr. Mud E. Shoe is dead!

All: (*shocked!*) Mr. Mud E. Shoe is dead?

Secretary: His landlady just sent a note! Asked that his final check be made out to her!

Colleague 1: But Shoe can't be dead! When did she say he died?

Secretary: In the middle of the night last night!

Colleague 2: But we just saw him!

Bad Manager: I just saw him! *He just this moment stole my clothes!*

Secretary: Then it must have been his *ghost*, sir!

Colleague 1: What?

Colleague 2: A ghost?

Bad Manager: What? A ghost? I took a pinch of snuff—and he sneezed! He's real enough alright! And he *shall not* rip the coverings from *my reality!*...

Secretary: Oh, poor Mr. Mud E. Shoe!

Colleague 1: His father's name was Mud.

Colleague 2: So his name was Mud, too.

Bad Manager (*apoplectic!*) He didn't even wear shoes, he wore boots! You're all being ridiculous! He isn't a ghost; he's just the specter of a parasitic man! (*the victim here*) He stole from me and now I'm freezing and nobody seems to care!!...

(Lights flicker and dim, the sound of a door creaking open, and footsteps)

Secretary: (*afraid*) Did you hear that? Is somebody there? Hello? Do you hear those footsteps, too? ...Can this certain department *help* you? Hello? How can we help you...Mr. Mud E. Shoe?

(A winter wind suddenly blows them all backwards. Blackout in a chaos.

A door creaks closed and slams. End.)

*Note: A detail in the short story used in the conceit here: Gogol suggests that "Mr. Shoe" has spent so much time copying papers that he sees his own neat handwriting over everything he sees; so, for example, he might see a lamppost as well as the written word "lamppost" before him. Mentioning this because, due to the rapid changes, it may be useful to have signs on the different characters as well as the settings (as opposed to fully *dressing* either).*

Also, for those interested, the original name of our fellow in Russian is "Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin." Gogol makes a point of saying that his surname means "shoe" (although he wears boots). The patronymic (middle) name tells us that his father was also named "Akaky." And his (and his father's) first name sounds a great deal like a word that means "covered in excrement," and also a word meaning "harmless" or "blameless." So taken together, the name means (essentially) "being unjustly under a heel" or as we literally interpret here, it means "Muddy (Mud E.) Shoe." Gogol makes it quite clear that while the name might seem outlandish, there could surely be no other name for this (literally) poor fellow.

Finally, the sudden turn into a ghost story at the end raises several questions... Here's a point that's implied, but not explicit in the story that may help: the thugs who stole Shoe's clothes may also have been ghosts. Or, if they were alive when they stole Shoe's clothes, they may have subsequently become ghosts. The reason this is implied is because, in a somewhat bewildering last moment, after Shoe's ghost has been seen all over town stealing coats and abusing police officers, the last ghost sighted in the story is described as having a moustache. The only other figure described with a moustache in the story is, of course, the thugs who knock Shoe unconscious and rob him. Either way, the idea of multiple ghosts wanting to literally haunt the consciences of authority figures, and bring the rich down to their level by stealing their clothes, (along with many other details), suggest that we are not simply observing Mr. Shoe's condition, but a pervasive condition in "civilized" society.

"The longer and more carefully we look at a funny story, the sadder it becomes."-Gogol