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Can't Buy Me Love: Teaching About Clothes, Class, and Consumption

Anne challenged a group of girls during my senior year at Eureka High School to see who could go the longest without wearing the same outfit twice. Anne and her friends had attended Zane Junior High School. Most of their parents were doctors and lawyers; they either lived in the old lumber baron homes or the fancy new houses that hugged the sides of gullies filled with redwood trees and small streams. My friends and I attended Jacobs Junior High School. Our parents were mostly working-class folks, who toiled as elec-

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tricians, butchers, or pulled green chain at the lumber mills. We lived in modest ranch-style homes or rented on the side of town where the stink of the pulp mill became a perfume we wore on windy days.

Anne's challenge wasn't realistic from the get-go. The Zane girls bought clothes at Daly's and Bistrin's, or their mothers took them on shopping trips to Santa Rosa or San Francisco. Janet's mother made most of her clothes, and Janice sewed her own dresses and skirts. I took jobs washing dishes or babysitting to buy a few outfits from Daly's. My mom sewed as well, but not with the finesse of Janet's mother. I learned to make long skirts that required only two seams and to wear a shirt long enough to cover my problematic zipper installation. I ran out of clothes after the first week. Anne won. Did she go four weeks? Seven weeks?

Clothes are class markers. And coming from my class background, I wanted desperately to fit into Anne's world, a world where people bought clothes at department stores and went to beauty shops for haircuts and permanents.

I've watched this same drama play out daily in my classrooms at Jefferson and Grant High Schools in Portland, Ore., a cruel world where one-liner jokes fly across hallways and locker rooms. "Where did you buy those shoes? Volume?" Teenagers spend nights and weekends deep-frying French fries, scooping ice cream, and selling clothing dreams to other teens so they can buy shoes or a pair of jeans that might pay a good chunk of their parents' rent. Some risk stealing from Macy's or Nike Town so that they can look like they have money. School becomes a preparation for a lifelong job of consumption, buying the next television, the next phone, the next house—ever bigger and ever better, to compete, to be successful, to be OK.

Equating success with wealth starts early—think of Cinderella's magical transformation. Through clothes we can move from scullery maid to princess. With the right clothes we will be accepted and loved. The prince will fall in love with us, we'll dance all night, and we'll live happily ever after. The story is told again and again in cartoons, literature, television shows, movies, lotto games, and advertisements. Remember how Julia Roberts moves from prostitute to socialite with a change of clothes and a bit of advice about fork etiquette in the movie *Pretty Woman*? In Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Professor Henry Higgins instructs his maid, Mrs. Pearce, to burn Eliza's clothes and buy her some new ones. "Take all her clothes off and burn them. Ring up Whiteley or somebody for new ones. Wrap her up in brown paper till they come."

Students play out this story on a daily basis. Children begin ranking and sorting each other based on those material possessions: clothes, toys, electronic gear, cars. Whose is best? Who has the most? They make jokes about each other's clothes, shoes, hair. They brag about how much they paid for their shoes or hats. For a while, my students even wore the sales tags on their hats and coats. Students purchase social cachet by wearing the right clothes, the right styles, as if they are imbued with magical power. If they have the thing, they have the status. But even if they don't gain acceptance in the inner circle, wearing the right clothes guards them from peers' humiliating judgments.

I realized when I first stumbled on this writing assignment that I had touched a place of pain and shame that needed to be explored more fully. Students knew they hurt, but they didn't have a social critique to help them understand their humiliation. They internalized the shame of poverty and blamed themselves or their families instead of criticizing a society that places more value on what we own than on our capacity for compassion or good work. In every lesson I construct, I want to puncture holes in the myths that make my students feel shame and doubt about themselves and their families.

Working in a high-poverty high school like Jefferson or a high school like Grant, where rich and poor rub elbows, I needed to help students shape a critique of that insistent voice that says, "Buy more," so students could understand the origins of both the shame and the need to equate success with money.

I feel that I can get to more honest discussions if I initiate the conversation "a little to one side," by extracting the lesson from student stories.

William Stafford, Oregon's poet laureate, wrote: "Poetry is the kind of thing you have to see from the corner of your eye. ... It's like a very faint star. If you look straight at it you can't see it, but if you look a little to one side it is there." Stafford's image holds true for prying open tough conversations in the classroom. Sometimes I feel that I can get to more honest discussions if I initiate the conversation "a little to one side," by extracting the lesson from student stories. When I come in with pronouncements instead of engaging students in discovering, students resist. They fight back against the idea that the web of advertising and consumption has snared them, even though they sport name brand shoes, shirts, pants, and bags. By using literature and their lives, I set the scene for them to make their own discoveries, to learn their own lessons without teacher lectures about how they are pawns in a society so consumed with consumption that after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush encouraged citizens to show their patriotism by going shopping.

Despite having serious themes that I want students to confront, this lesson leads to lots of laughter as students recall their own stories about their brushes with clothes or class. Of course, the lesson also teaches students how to read and write more effectively.

Reading Langston Hughes

We begin by reading Langston Hughes' story, "Thank You, Ma'm." Hughes' story tells about Roger, a young man who attempted to snatch a woman's purse so he could buy a pair of blue suede shoes. Mrs. Louella Bates Washington Jones caught Roger, "put a half nelson about his neck," and took him home to her apartment where he learned a valuable lesson about compassion and forgiveness. The story prompts our discussion about why we buy—or steal—things we can't afford.

Hughes constructs his story through a series of small scenes. As we read, I ask students to note how Hughes shows the toughness and compassion of Mrs. Jones. Mrs. Jones surprised Roger with her actions, maternal banter, and generosity. Through short dialogue sequences, Mrs. Jones also uncovers Roger's living situation:

"Are you going to take me to jail?" asked the boy, bending over the sink.

"Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere," said the woman. "Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe you ain't been to your supper either, late as it is. Have you?"

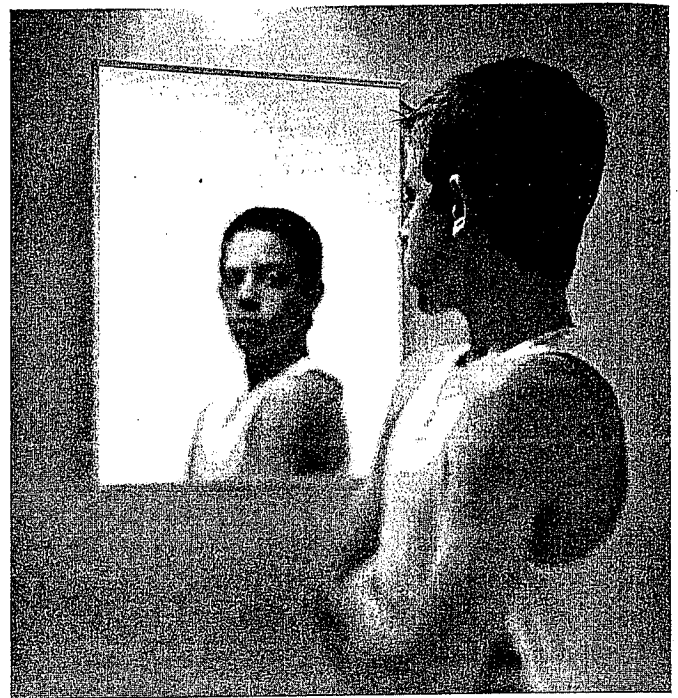
"There's nobody home at my house," said the boy.

"Then we'll eat," said the woman. "I believe you're hungry—or been hungry—to try to snatch my pocketbook."

When Roger confesses that he wanted a pair of blue suede shoes, Mrs. Jones surprises him by saying, "Well, you didn't have to snatch my pocketbook to get some suede shoes.... You could have asked me.... I was young once and wanted things I could not get."

In this exchange, Hughes shows Mrs. Jones' understanding that Roger's poverty, not a character defect, played a role in his aborted attempt at purse snatching. This admission opens the door for student discussion about why someone would risk stealing for a pair of shoes. But the dialogue and actions also show students the art of developing characters through small scenes.

After reading this story, a student I'll call Randy talked about stealing jewelry at Meier & Frank, a local department store, because he couldn't afford to buy the gold chains he wanted. To move the story beyond clothes and accessories to the bigger issue of social class, I told the story about how I tried to make Judd, a family friend who took me to school on rainy days, drop me off on the other side of school so no one would see me arrive in his beat-up car. Judd, being stubborn and proud, refused. He



Brad Wilson/Getty Images

always stopped right in front of the double doors leading to the main hall of Eureka High School. This story opened up Jessica to talk about her mother's old car, and how she asked her mother to drop her off two blocks from her school so no one would see the car and make fun of her. Felicia told the story of being stuck without a ride after school. A wealthy student from the other side of town offered her a ride home. Felicia took it, but had the student drop her off in front of a big house down the street from her small, sagging house, then waited until they drove off to walk the rest of the way home.

Reading Gary Soto

We also read Gary Soto's short story, "The Jacket," which offers another example of a young man who believes that clothes will help him gain acceptance with his peers. In this story, a boy tells his mother that he wants a jacket "something like bikers wear: black leather and silver studs, with enough belts to hold down a small town." Instead his mother gets him a jacket "the color of day-old guacamole." Soto's story prompts discussion about those clothes we've been forced to wear that make us feel like outcasts.

Soto's is the anti-Cinderella story. Instead of love and acceptance, his ugly coat brings him shame and humiliation:

The next day I wore it to sixth grade and got a D on a math quiz. During the morning recess Frankie T., the playground terrorist, pushed me to the ground and told me to stay there until recess was over. My best friend,

Steve Negrete, ate an apple while looking at me, and the girls turned away to whisper on the monkey bars. The teachers were no help: they looked my way and talked about how foolish I looked in my new jacket. I saw their heads bob with laughter, their hands half covering their mouths.

Soto endows the coat with a miraculous ability to harm him. "So embarrassed, so hurt, I couldn't even do my homework. I received C's on quizzes and forgot the state capitals and the rivers of South America.... Even the girls who had been friendly blew away like loose flowers to follow the boys in neat jackets." Soto's use of hyperbole loosens up the students to talk about their own fashion disasters.

Each of these stories prompt clothing memories—not all bad. Because the students are the same age, they share some common memories. While I remember days-of-the-week panties, they remember Underoos. I talk about Buster Brown shoes that Mom bought to last—and they did. They laugh about "jellies," a common plastic shoe that girls wore for a period of time. I loved my Annie Oakley skirt and vest, and they loved their superhero capes or pajamas.

But we also talk about the clothes that failed us. Frank talked about the day he was forced to wear grey leather pants. "I had to go to school looking like a moving couch." He described how one boy mocked him, "Hey, Frank, your legs look like two old bananas." Andrew wrote about the bellbottoms that made him the target of student laughter: "'I hate these clothes,' I said to myself as I looked in the mirror. The thought of the day ahead was the most dreaded thing of all: classroom ridicule was my worst enemy."

After reading the stories by Hughes and Soto, I tell students I want them to write narratives from their lives about clothing, shoes, or haircuts. The story might reveal something about the significance of the clothes: Did we believe they would give us magical power, like the Cinderella story? Did they shame us like the Soto story? Did the clothes show something about class, like my story about the competition with the senior girls or Hughes' story? Because a prompt sometimes elicits blank stares rather than furious writing, I use student as well as Hughes' and Soto's published models to show how different writers addressed the topic.

Examining the Craft of Writing

As we continue our discussion of clothes, class, and fitting in, as well as writing styles, we return to Hughes' and Soto's stories to examine the narrative characteristics each writer uses. Students highlight the dialogue in one color, and the blocking in another. I reminded students that in theater, blocking tells actors where to stand or how to deliver their lines. In literature, it serves a similar function. In the section of "Thank You, Ma'm" I quoted earlier, when Roger bends over the sink as he asks a question, his action is blocking. We also look at the ways both authors develop character through physical description, but also through dialogue and actions.

We read "Pro Wings," by my student Sarah LePage, to examine how she details the humiliation she suffered when her mother bought her shoes from a discount store through a series of short scenes. As we color-highlight narrative criteria in the story, we learn about both Sarah and her mother through their dialogue and blocking. I ask students to notice what the blocking tells us about both characters, how Sarah's mother snaps and grabs her arm, how Sarah crosses her arms, and shakes her head:

"I'm not getting any shoes from here," I announced, as my mother led the way down the aisle crammed with my size shoes.

"You'll do what you're told or else!" she snapped back.

I crossed my arms, planted my feet, narrowed my eyes, and shook my head in defiance. "I said I want Jellies!"

She stopped cold, whirled around and grabbed me by the arm. She dragged me within inches of her beet red face and spoke in a hard, terrifying voice, "I said you'll do what you are told! Now go sit down and take off your shoes, 'cause these are the ones that you are getting." She forced a pair of gray Pro Wings with matching Velcro into my clenched fists.



Dorothy Seymour

The first few times I introduce blocking to students, I have them act the scene out. I tell them, "These are stage directions. Through blocking, the writer tells us how the character needs to deliver the line or what they are doing while they speak." For this scene, I bring two students to the front of the class. "What does Sarah sound like when she says, 'I'm not getting any shoes from here'? Is she whining? Is she shouting? What is her mother doing while Sarah says this? Put the scene in motion." The physical movement demonstrates the power of blocking to "show, not tell."

Sarah uses an extended metaphor in her story that I point out. She places her Jellies on the bed "as if burying a wounded soldier." Later, she offers her mother "the corpses" of her shoes. Soto also models the use of metaphorical language in narratives that I want my students to attempt in their writing. In the first line Soto writes, "My clothes had failed me. I remember the green coat that I wore in fifth and sixth grade when you either danced like a champ or pressed yourself against a greasy wall, bitter as a penny toward the happy couples." Bringing these literary tools to my students' attention increases the use figurative language in their writing.

I also want my students to consider their classmates as teachers and to learn from each other's stories and storytelling techniques.

After color-highlighting the pieces for literary devices, I ask students to make a list of stories that have surfaced for them, including how they got the clothes, the significance of the clothing, and a story connected to the item. When most students have generated a few stories, I ask a few students to share. This time for talk is important. Our conversations not only stir up stories for those who are stuck, our talk helps create community in the classroom. Prior to moving into writing, I lead students in a guided visualization.

Sharing Stories—Read-Arounds and Collective Text

These stories aren't written simply for me to read, grade, mark off, and return. The stories comprise part of the literature we read in class. It's worth repeating that students need real audiences for their writing. Reading the narratives out loud brings those private moments of shame or humiliation, of humanity, into the open, so we can soften the pain and examine why we believed we needed to have the latest jeans to be accepted. It is the

public airing of these stories that helps us excavate those private feelings of doubt, that helps develop the ability to question why our society pushes us to look a certain way, to question why we believe that the right clothes or shoes or address will make us a better person.

But I also want my students to consider their classmates as teachers and to learn from each other's stories and storytelling techniques. So while each student reads, I tell the class to listen and take notes about how the story illuminates injustice, the need to buy acceptance, as well as the use of language, dialogue, blocking, metaphor, or characterization.

For example, Deshawn Holden's story, "Shoes," provides an example of redemption, of an ally who steps forward, offering refuge from the onslaught of criticism, as well as a great model for the use of humorous interior monologue also found in Gary Soto's piece. When DeShawn's sister leaves a pair of cheap, white shoes from Volume on his desk instead of the Nikes he hoped for, he is saved from humiliation by another student:

The most popular boy in the school, the boy who had the three f's—fashions, friends, and fans—came up to me. Everybody looked up to him, including me.

"Those shoes are fresh, man. Here, let me lace them up for you." He said this with such sincerity that no one else could laugh. I took him for his word as he laced those shoes up.

Chetan Patel's story, "Baby Oil," pushes the story beyond consumption to look at how students abandon cultural ties to assimilate into school culture. (See p. 80.) Throughout his childhood, Chetan's mother put baby oil in his black hair as a daily ritual.

In 3rd grade, a fellow student, Anh, asked the teacher, "Why do Nimesh and Chetan have shiny heads?"

"I put baby oil in my hair," Nimesh announced without hesitation.

"What about you, Chetan?" Anh asked, her eyes taunting me. What she really wanted was for me to say that I used baby oil. She wanted me to be humiliated in front of the class. I wasn't going to let her have that pleasure.

"I used water," I lied.

"And it gets that shiny?" Mrs. Todd asked, frowning.

"Yup." Mrs. Todd stared at me, trying to pry the truth out of me.

When Chetan reaches 6th grade, he abandons his morning baby oil ritual and instead, "squirited out my brother's LA Looks gel and ran it through my hair.... I

marched to school and held my head up high in Ockley Green's crowded hallways."

Kanaan's story about the Chuck Taylor high tops his mother kept buying him demonstrates children's fear of being taunted for their clothes: "I hated to put them on. I was already little. They looked like they covered up my whole calf. They were too flexible. High tops were supposed to support my ankle, but these didn't. I was embarrassed to go out in those old Chuck Taylors.... Nobody ever talked about them, but I still didn't feel comfortable. If I'd a been them kids, and I seen someone wear those same red Chuck Taylors everyday, I would have talked about them. They probably did talk behind my back because little kids don't let anything go past without speaking on it."

Jessica's piece directly confronts the class aspect of clothes. She is a poor student at a wealthy middle school, desperate to fit in. She wants a pair of jeans like the other girls at school, but after her mother sees the price of the jeans, she tells Jessica, "I'm sorry, honey, but I really can't afford these." Her mother takes her to Value Village, a used clothing store, to find a pair. Jessica's interior monologue shows her fear of ridicule:

Value Village? I was appalled. Obviously, she understood nothing and did not care about me or how I felt. Value Village was the place the popular kids ridiculed. They yelled at kids in the halls with insults, "You buy your clothes at Value Village!" They said it was a place for homeless people and welfare recipients.

These stories open students to talk about similar issues: going to the welfare office with their mothers, using food stamps to buy food at grocery stores, the humiliation of being the kid who receives the Thanksgiving basket of food. When I open my class to talk about real issues that affect students' lives, we can get to real learning. This gathering of "collective text" during the read-around is where the class moves beyond sharing writing as a "strut-



Barbara Miner

your-stuff" exercise and into collecting evidence about our lives. As one student said years after she graduated, the read-around and collective text helped her look beyond the cardboard stereotypes of "basketball player" and "Jefferson Dancer" to see our common humanity.

This lesson is part of my yearlong campaign to get students to examine what is taken for granted and normalized. Writing stories about clothes, hair, or fitting in becomes part of our study of literature, advertising, cartoons, and history where we ask questions about race, class, and power. As a language arts teacher, I want to shine a light on the places in my students' lives that make them feel small and vulnerable.

Too often, school allows students to stay isolated in their private feelings and observations. Their emotions and interpretations of those emotions are at the mercy of advertisers and a culture industry that rarely have young people's best interests at heart. Writing about and discussing personal issues that have social ramifications can help overcome this isolation. As they listen to one another's stories, students begin to recognize how they often chase dreams and compete in ways that may make some people lots of money, but leave them feeling empty. ■

Pro Wings

by Sarah LePage

I grasped my seashell blue Jellies and walked over to my bed. I placed them down on my bedspread as if burying a wounded soldier. Their sides had long ago come undone, their heels were ground down and filled with rocks, and their pearly blue appearance was dulled by many hours of being scuffed on pavement. In vain I tried to save them; tape wouldn't seem to hold the sides together long enough for me to take three steps and glue was far more trouble than it was worth. It formed a pasty river down my arm and cascaded over to splat against the floor. I knew what I had to do.

Tucking my exhausted Jellies under my arm, I set out to find my mom. I found her minutes later sitting in front of the TV.

"Mommy, can I have some new Jellies?" I asked, offering her the corpses of the ones I owned.

"Didn't I just buy those damn things?"

"Uh, I think it was almost two months ago," I sighed.

"I'm not going to spend any more of my hard-earned money on those cheap things. Tomorrow we'll go to Volume and get some shoes that will last."

What?? Volume? Shoes that would last? What was she saying? All I wanted was a shiny new \$2.99 pair of pearly blue Jellies. "Momma, can't we just get some Jellies?" I cried.

"Girl, I ain't wastin' no more of my money on those cheap plastic things, and I think it's past your bedtime anyway!"

I sulked back to my room, a tear slipping down my cheek as I buried my beloved Jellies underneath the paper in my wastebasket.

That night, visions of Volume haunted my dreams. I heard the other children laughing. I saw the ugliest pair of shoes that resembled twin boats more than they did shoes, and I saw my mom buying those very same shoes saying, "Now, these will last ya."

The next morning Mom dragged my sleep-deprived body out of bed and said that we were going to buy my new shoes.

"Mom, do I have to go to Volume? Wouldn't it be cheaper if we just went and bought me some new Jellies?" I whined.

"Stop pestering me about those worthless things," she snapped.

Worthless? That single word stung worse than the slap of a hand. My prized shoes weren't worthless. How could she talk about them like that, and in front of me?

"I'm not getting any shoes from here," I announced, as my mother led the way down the aisle crammed with my size shoes.

"You'll do what you're told or else!" she snapped back.

I crossed my arms, planted my feet, narrowed my eyes, and shook my head in defiance. "I said I want Jellies!"

She stopped cold, whirled around and grabbed me by the arm. She dragged me within inches of her beet red face and spoke in a hard, terrifying voice, "I said you'll do what you are told! Now go sit down and take off your shoes, 'cause these are the ones that you are getting." She forced a pair of gray Pro Wings with matching Velcro into my clenched fists.

The next week at school, it was torture, as I knew it would be.

"Hey, Sarah, are those new shoes?" Jennifer asked. "I got new shoes too, but mine don't fly."

Everyone in the class started laughing, even Michael, the class dork, the boy everyone made fun of.

"Yeah, I bet you'd have no problems making the track team," he smirked. It wasn't even funny, yet everyone laughed. I walked home humiliated, with kids flapping their arms in my direction like birds, but Mom was right, those shoes lasted a long time. Too long.

Goodwill Jay

by Chrysanthius Lathan

I did it. I had finally punked Jay. I spoke up for every Goodwill-going, ghetto child and parent at Sabin Elementary. The chuckles, elbows, and snicker-sneers from my friends in line in the freshly waxed hallway told me so. So did the facial expression somewhere between pity and indigestion on Mr. Rodriguez' face when he turned to him and said, "That's karma, Jay, that's karma."

If there was a syndrome called "Teasing Tourette's," Jay Johansen had it. He was, by far, the most diabolical, merciless 4th grader known to don Air Jordans—albeit scuffed and as white as snow being left to die in an NYC street, they were Jordans nonetheless. So I already knew what 5th grade had in store well before this sunny September day.

It all began August 23. That was supposed to be my birthday. But NOOOOOOOO. It was "school shopping" day at the "mall." The local Goodwill got the updated name from my brother Emanuel and me, 'specially to piss off Mom, who did not find it piss-off-worthy at all. We grew up pretty poor, although we would never know by the mountains of barbecued and fried chicken paired with the yams, potato salad, greens, minty-fresh sweet tea, and hunks of buttery cornbread that constituted our weekly Sunday meals. Laughter was how Emanuel and I coped with the frequent adult realities we faced as young kids. Mama held it together by whatever means necessary, even when it meant buying school clothes at the Goodwill—a serious mid-'80s infraction, not just a, but THE, fashion faux pas of the decade. The only thing I ever wondered was—how did we have a 1988 brand-spankin'-new, candy apple red, never-violated Olds Cutlass, and not enough to get clothes that still had virginity? "You got a job? Well, get one or shut up," was her final reply for anything involving cash. And she never forgot to read us our rights about six blocks from the store. "If y'all act right, you can pick out one thing you want. Otherwise, don't touch nothin', and Emanuel, leave folks alone!"

Anyway, we walked into the cave of a Goodwill in pursuit of that balm called laughter, and caught a whiff of the air. It smelled familiar—a wet dog inside of my Grandaddy's motor home that he's had since the '60s. "PEEEEEYOOOOOOUUU!" he yelled, seconds before Mama nearly snatched his arm out of its socket. "Do it again, I'll knock those lips down your throat," she said between clenched teeth. And with the threat of life, off we went. Emanuel and I had a dark, secret, fetish-like desire of going to the Goodwill with Mama. Heck, it was just plain fun! Where else could you go and try on too-big men's sportscoats with the patches on the elbows, play with toys that nobody cared if they got broken, find a Walkman, and wolf down

a double-bacon cheeseburger, fries, and Coke—all in one cahoot? We had to face it—Goodwill was a kid's mecca. As long as you didn't buy your clothes from there. See, this had been a ritual on or near my birthday, year after year. But this one was the Grand Poobah of all wake-up calls.

"What'choo gon' look for this time?" Emanuel asked me while wearing a pot on his head.

"I don't know. Keds," I replied. "Not white, though. Mama will wash 'em and they'll get that yellow bleach ring around the rubber. Everybody'll know they're not new," I explained as an expert on disguising no-name clothes. "I'll get red. Or blue. No white, no yellow ring."

"Well," he added, "why do you care about yellow rings? Your teeth are yellow."

"Skip you, punk!"

"I really want some Jordans."

"Ooh, they have them one shoes that look just like Jordans at Volume's," I further advised. "They're kinda fresh, they just have two Velcro straps and the shoelaces are skinny." Just then, a golden light shone from the heavens, so blinding I took a pair of old blue-blockers from the shelf and put them on, turning toward the shoe racks. A pair of Jordans.

I don't know who got there first out of Emanuel and me, or what method of transportation we used to get there (he thought it was teleportation), but we were at the shoe racks in a matter of a millisecond. Revolving clothing racks and old mannequins did not stop us from getting there, either. We simply knocked them over. Emanuel tried them on. Too big. "Get 'em anyway," I said.

"Dummy!" he called me so fluently. "By the time I grow into 'em, a new kind will come out. Plus, Mama said nothing over \$5.00."

I scoffed. "Whatever. They scuffed anyway." It was about then that I saw Jay at the burger counter with a very pretty woman. She wiped mustard from his white polo, fussing uncontrollably, so it seemed. "I told you not to wear this shirt anyway. Now I gotta come back here next month and get you some more clothes. Boys are so messy. Dang."

I ducked behind a hanging-off fitting room door and snuck off to the electronics, thinking blankly about seeing Jay. There was no way I was saying "Hi." We ended the trip on a pretty good note. I got some overalls out of it. Sure, they were too small. "That's what scissors are for," said Mama. "Make 'em into shorts." And though they may not have known it, I had those same overall shorts to thank—for they would lead me to victory weeks later.

As Mr. Rodriguez led the class back inside from the first gym class of the school year, the funk of fallen Gingko nuts was like noxious poison. Keela pushed Jay, and Jay pushed me, making me push Adriane. “Dang, Jay, MOVE!” Keela yelled.

"If Chrissy would use her Pro-Wings to fly out of the way, I could move," he jabbed, illegally popping his bubblegum. "Go fly with your family, the seagulls, Chris."

"L-I-leave me alone." I was the youngest of four siblings, unused to defending myself. This just made him jab quicker and harder. "L-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-shut up!" he teased. "L-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l..." Folks' giggles rose from the rear of the line like Thriller zombies, and I began to shrink, shrivel, look for a storm drain for me to dissolve, melt, and slip away into eternity. See, generally, as a career tease-ee, I make it a point to stand in line nearest the front, where I had teacher immunity and protection from the tease-er. I had to tie my shoe at the whistle and ran out of luck. Jay kept it up. "That's why you got those overalls from the Goodwill—"

It was then that I began to fill up and charge with a fluid that felt like a combination of pride, Kryptonite, jet fuel, and mustard. I looked at the ground. And there, with the same scuff on the same left shoe—was the same pair of ashy-butt-looking Jordans Emanuel put back on the rack. I magnified in on the white polo collar with a faint yellow stain that showed under his sweater. And when I opened my mouth, this is what fell out:

“Oh, I KNOW you ain’t talkin’, Jay. You didn’t see ME at the Goodwill. I saw YOU and hid behind the mannequins from yo’ ugly scary mama, who licked the mustard off yo’ shirt you have on now, from that dirty old-people cheeseburger you ate! Y’all think I’m lyin’? Turn your left Jordan, Jay. A scuff. That’s cause those are the Jordans MY big bro threw away, and he’s gon use ‘em to kick yo’ butt for tryin’ to sting on ME! NOW WHAT?”

And that was the day I punked Jay Johansen. As he painfully looked up the line, one face at a time, the faces staring back rendered no love. Just laughter. And the undigested pity of Mr. Rod. This was a day picked-on kids around the world would envy for life. So why did I feel so small when I saw the tear stream down the right side of his face and land on that mustard-stained collar? It reminded me of the times I had been at the burger counter with MY mother.

The moral of this story is: Everybody shops at the Goodwill. Everybody.

The author is a teacher in Portland Public Schools.