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Christy L. Lorio
University of New Orleans

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Blue Laser Beams

Christy L. Lorio

“Those shoes aren’t the least bit feminine, not to mention they are hideous,” my mother snipped at me.

“But moooom,” I lamented. “That’s the point.”

While my mother was off combing the sale racks at good ol’ JC Penney, I was given sixty glorious minutes to roam Belle Promenade Mall by myself. Technically, I wasn’t supposed to go past the food court, but I dodged wafts of pizza grease and chicken nuggets anyway and snuck into Baker’s Shoes. How could a place like this exist in the mall, let alone in my decidedly unhip hometown?

Baker’s neon sign was a laser beam cutting through my fog of teenage angst. I was a product of the 1990s grunge era: a crushed velvet dress, worn with a flannel shirt tied around the waist and clunky shoes was the look I lusted after. I blended in at school about as well as a duck hunter sporting a safety orange vest on Wall Street. *Sassy Magazine* was my fashion bible, but the clothes featured in the editorial spreads were either too expensive or unavailable to me. Shipping costs were deemed a waste of money in our household, so catalog orders were off limits as well. Little did I know that my shoe fantasies would be fulfilled at Baker’s. Sure enough, tucked away in a forgotten corner of the store were the flashiest shoes I could find, and they were seventy-five percent off! Of course, they were deeply discounted; no one in my town would be caught dead wearing platform lace-ups with the veneer of a booth seat in a diner. The powder blue vinyl, embedded with a million holographic sparkles, reflected the joy I felt in being one sales transaction away from being just as cool as my rock star idols. The white rubber platform soles with the wrap-around faux blonde wood would proclaim my status as someone more worldly than my suburban roots. Everyone I encountered would think, “That girl! She listens to Mazzy Star and Nirvana and would pierce her nose if her mother would let her!”

I didn’t reveal my glittering purchase to my mom until we were safely in the driveway at home. I knew she wouldn’t waste the time or the gas to return the offending footwear to the mall, and after much hemming and hawing, she let me keep them. “I bought them on sale; look how much money I saved! Aren’t you proud of me?” I reasoned, waving the crumpled receipt in the air while trying to appeal to her frugal sensibilities.

“Fine,” she sighed, the voice of defeat softening her words. “You’re the one that has to wear those ugly things, but only on the weekends, around the house.”

My all-girl high school, like most Catholic schools, required uniforms: a starched, white-collared button down, an itchy, navy polyester vest, a Shepherd’s check knee-length skirt, and sensible black penny loafers. There wasn’t much room for interpretation, except for the occasional emerald green nail polish that would slide under the radar. However, we were allowed to wear whatever we wanted the last Friday of each month as part of the school’s monthly charity food drive. For the cost of a can of black beans, girls could wear whatever they pleased. Students fell into one of two camps: you either wore pajama bottoms and a ratty sweatshirt to class, or you painstakingly pieced together an outfit the entire week leading up to those glorious eight hours of self-expression.

That Friday, there was absolutely no way I wasn’t going to wear my new shoes to class. The rest of the outfit was inconsequential; my freak flag was flying high and proud, courtesy of my feet. My dad, who was infinitely more forgiving of my fashion faux pas than my mom, dropped me off at school as usual. My homeroom was upstairs from the library, where students would huddle outside before class. This was the perfect catwalk: not only would the girls sitting on the curb see me getting dropped off, but the entrance to the library was built like an aquarium, ensuring optimum exposure of my prized possessions.

Even out of uniform, these girls managed to dress the same: pastel cable knit sweaters, neatly pressed khaki pants, and grosgrain ribbons perched atop their pony tails. I was about to single-handedly expose the herd to a world of fashion they were too narrow-minded to understand. This wasn’t just a fashion statement: my shoes were practically a Public Service Announcement.

I reveled in the ten seconds it took for me to walk through the library to the stairwell, hitting the pause button so I could absorb every moment of it for posterity’s sake. Eyeballs drilled holes into the backs of my platform heels as the light bouncing off my footwear illuminated my second best accessory: a shit-eating grin. I played it cool, pretending like I was oblivious to the ruckus I was creating. Delayed reactions ranged from hushed whispers and muffled giggles, to unabashed laughter. “Can you believe what she is wearing?” Daniele, my arch-nemesis, burst out. She was the worst of the bunch; she knew how to give a girl a visual beat down with her beady little eyes. Even the librarian let out a chuckle, and I loved it. The few friends that I had, most outsiders themselves, were enamored by my fashion choice.

“Where did you get those?” Courtney cooed, the envy rolling off her tongue like mercury. She was the ring leader of our clique, mostly because her mom let her cross the river to shop at The Riverwalk Mall.

“Oh, just some store in the mall,” I replied, not wanting to give away my private source.

I didn't cause a fashion revolution that dress-down day. Instead, I further alienated myself from the pack, but deep down I secretly harbored a sense of loneliness. Sometimes, I wished that I could conform. However, to dress like the herd would have been a denial of my core being. In religion class, we were told lying is a sin, and I was no sinner when it came to being my true self. Plus, I enjoyed the attention. I was never cut out to be Little Miss Popular, so if I couldn't beat them at their own game, I had to create my own set of rules. Of course, I was being superficial, too, judging others on what they were wearing, mentally corralling them like sheep, not unlike how I was parroting rock n' roll idols and waifish models in designer clothes. My attitude transcended fashion choices.

That same year, we were given an assignment to write a biography about any female role model of our choosing. While other students penned requisite adorations about their aunt, an older sister, or conventional heroes such as Oprah, I chose local vampire author Anne Rice. Her purple prose spoke to my faux tortured soul. Plus, she lived in an ancient New Orleans mansion, which was more lush and gothic than the 1980s ranch-style home that I grew up in. As predicted, the paper wasn't well-received. The Salesian nun who taught the class returned my masterpiece with a big fat D on it, scribbled in red ink, with little explanation for the subpar grade. Surprisingly, it was the one time that my mom didn't rip me a new one for a bad grade. (I expected a tongue lashing for anything less than a “B”.) My rule-abiding mother was willing to admit that it was a well-written paper and that my work merited an A. Take that, Sister.

Now that I'm moonlighting as an adult, it's interesting to reflect back on how those formative teenage years informed the person that I've become today. Whenever I flip through old photo albums, I can't help but cringe at most of my wardrobe choices, which were just as embarrassing as the morbid woe-is-me poetry that I churned out after receiving the unabridged works of Edgar Allan Poe for Christmas one year. There's the black lipstick and combat boots I wore to my sophomore Winter Formal that offset my pretty burgundy lace dress. And there's my favorite thrift store find: a white faux leather jacket embroidered with daisies that was so musty my mom made me keep it in the garage. The pungent blend of mildew and the previous owner's cigarette smoke still permeates my memory. As for my beloved blue sparklers, the dingy, white soles fought a long, hard battle with crazy glue, and eventually, I took them off their sticky life support and gave them the proper burial they deserved in the trash can. Still, I haven't lost the spirit that went behind their purchase in the first place: don't compromise who you are for anyone.