

THE ESSAY » BY KIM BOSCH

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## Shoes unmake the woman

You would think I'd love getting new shoes, but at Bargain Harold's, I'd pray they didn't have my size

Every year, at the beginning of the bad-weather season, I was sent home with the same note printed on a half sheet of neon-pink paper. It read: "As of Nov. 1, your son/daughter is required to have one pair of indoor running shoes in addition to their regular outdoor footwear. These shoes will ensure the cleanliness of our school and gymnasium. Thank you."

I stashed it in my bag, hiding it as long as I could from my mom, but it was inevitable; Nov. 1 would soon be upon me and I couldn't show up without indoor shoes (in addition to issues of cleanliness, stockinged feet were considered unsafe for dodge ball, or so I was told). You would think a young girl would love getting a new pair of shoes, but indoor shoes were an additional expense, one my parents didn't see the need for, so it was off to the discount stores where glamour, individuality and taste ceased to exist.

Bargain Harold's - a beige box with a brown- and mustard-coloured sign - was my mom's favourite discount place and my most despised. Once we were inside, a smell of melted plastic and Windex would immediately fill my nostrils while the humming of fluorescent lights worked staccato counterpoint to the rattling of some far-off furnace.

It was these attributes (plus the sudden and total lack of moisture in the air, skin tightening as though all happiness remained outside, scratching at the door like a dog) that would instantly cause discomfort to even the blindfolded shopper.

What you did see was exactly what you'd expect: one bland room with steel shelves, floor littered with silica packets. The words Do No Eat would stare up at me from the packets' sides as I hung my head and moped to the back to where a sign on a bin with sharp corners advertised "Girls' Shoes: All Sizes" from amid a pile of gleaming white sneakers.

It was then that I would pray, please God, don't let her find



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my size. Please let me get by just this one time. But, of course, I was never that lucky. Out from the bottom of the pile my mom would pull a pair, severely crunched from sitting under the weight of its brothers and sisters, and right there, without a stool to sit on, I'd have to put them on, crouching on the floor while nearby dust bunnies peeked out from under the shelves.

The shoes were always remarkably stiff. The Velcro straps (they were always Velcro) were a chore to undo: fat, ugly bands that made me feel

like I was about to try on baby booties. The shoes required prying open at the heel by my mom, holding my foot in the air while she'd press her weight down and twist my thin ankle into position.

Once the shoes were on, she would tip her head from side to side and ask me to walk up and down the aisle. This was no easy feat either, considering left and right shoes were attached by a string of plastic, allowing only a two-inch stride. Up and down the aisle I'd waddle like a penguin, trying desperately not to cry, not to show

my mom just how much I hated these shoes, this place, my life at that moment.

And so it went, until one year my older brother, in all his blossoming prepubescent wisdom, took a stand. My mom had bought him shoes, a Bargain Harold's special I'm assuming, but these shoes were particularly bad. Not only was the same shoddy quality afoot, but the soles themselves, instead of consisting of a gummy rubber material, were a hard plastic, much like a hoof.

On the first day, during a

basketball game, my brother copped up and down the court, a distinct clacking sound echoing from his feet around the gymnasium and in the ears of courtside girls. Not only was there the embarrassing canter, but every time the play changed direction, there was my brother, without a single court-gripping tread on the soles of his feet, desperately trying to grasp the floor, legs circling the air like a scared Scooby-Doo.

That was the last straw for him. He told my mom he wanted Nike Air Jordans. High tops. Shoes that promised to make him fly for only \$125.

My mom said if he wanted sneakers like that he'd have to save for them himself out of his allowance; my poor brother, cutting the lawn, raking leaves, cleaning out the garage, all for a decent pair of sneakers.

But the day finally arrived and he bought his shoes: sleek black, white and red triangles that encased his feet like sacred pyramids. For a month he was on top of the world - until the shoes fell apart. Stitch by stitch all his hard work unravelled until all that was left were the crumbled remains of where his pyramids used to be.

Although I'm sure the indoor-shoe debate still exists in families today, when I think about it I realize how much my mom taught me by standing her ground on the issue. I learned that some things just weren't worth the money: I wore my \$3.99 indoor shoes when others wore more expensive ones, but, like everyone else, I outgrew mine by the end of the year. And I learned that, in the case of my brother, you don't always get what you pay for.

Instead, we were taught that value came from who we were in the world - with our friends, our teachers - rather than from a pair of indoor shoes.

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