

WHITE SHOES AFTER LABOR DAY

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In high school, a teacher told my boyfriend Mike, “Tell her to stay away from you because if you don’t then I will, and I don’t want to make her cry.” My academic advisor called me into her office and said, “So you like Mike huh? Just so you know, there are certain lines that once you cross them you can never go back.” In this moment I think I felt as confused as Dorothy did when she landed in Oz. I had just been attacked by the Wicked Witch, who had powers beyond my control. Too bad I couldn’t just click my little red heels and get away from it all. These things were being said because my boyfriend was black, and I was white. I felt like I could not get away from it: both my teachers *and* my peers were talking about me. I could not believe I had created such a mess, something this big, just by hanging out with someone! I mean people gave me those looks, like I was wearing white shoes after Labor Day or something. e.e. cummings was right when he said, “It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.” Turns out I grew up and became someone who would commit a social crime almost as serious as wearing white shoes after Labor Day. I mean how tacky is that?

I don’t remember my parents saying to me, “Now, you have to be nice to everyone,” but somehow they had an influence over my personality (as do all parents). They allowed me to be myself even at 3 years old; they let

me pick out my own clothes even if it looked ridiculous, instead of forcing me to wear what they wanted. Maybe they let me do it because they got a kick out of watching me run around in a diaper, snow boots, and a winter hat as an outfit. They taught me to question authority (which at times I'm sure they regretted). I didn't get in trouble for "talking back" in my house. I was encouraged to debate all issues, and both sides of the argument were talked about. Although my father's stubbornness led him to try and make it seem like he was right all the time, I learned that it was okay to stand up for myself. Sometimes it's hard to realize that people in authoritative positions aren't always right just because they are "supposed to be." When I started to notice the difference in skin colors between white people and black people and asked my father about it, he said, "There are only two kinds of people in this world: good and bad."

In my middle school, the greatest years of every kid's life, I had the privilege of being the dork that everyone made fun of. It was pretty much torture, from getting pushed in the snow, to getting paint poured on my pants, you name it. But hey, what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger, even if you do have to go to therapy as a result, right? By the time 8th grade rolled around, I looked and dressed a little different. Revolution. Now, the girls that had been making fun of me just all of a sudden decided they could be my friend. It was magical. Apparently the better you looked and the quality of your fashion sense had a direct correlation to how good a friend you were. Up until this point, I was completely blind to how fake these people actually were. They judged everyone and everything; superficiality ran their worlds. I realized that this was not who I was; I could never be like this, and I hated that I had wasted my time actually being their "friend."

Then came high school, yet another shining moment in life, where teenagers can truly be themselves. I wasn't confined to the middle school bubble, and I wasn't a dork anymore. I could have easily kept being friends with the girls from middle school, but I decided not to go that route. I just couldn't pretend that I was OK with how mean they had been. I no longer cared what they thought. I ended up making a whole new group of friends who accepted me for who I was, and it was like a completely new world. I met them while I was working out in the weight room. The thing about my new friends is that the majority of them were black. In a private school,

where the majority of the students were middle-class whites, the black kids all seemed to stay near each other, which makes sense. Then there I was—the proverbial center of the Oreo cookie. From an outsider’s point of view, I probably stood out as much as someone wearing red at a funeral. Finally I had real friends, something tangible, something I could hold on to. It felt like I was finally walking on solid ground. The rest of the school did not seem to like this too much. Everybody had something to say about my “hanging out with the black kids,” as if it was some kind of national event. To me, I was just hanging out with my friends.

Seeing my boyfriend and me together apparently made my classmates think of Spike Lee’s movie *Jungle Fever*. To some people, the psychology behind a white girl dating a black guy is to defy or to piss off her parents. My parents are very accepting people, and they did not care if my boyfriend looked like the Incredible Hulk, just as long as he was a good person. So I guess I liked the fact that I was with someone who I liked and cared about, and I got to defy society (not my parents) at the same time. Being with him, I felt like somewhat like my mother did one time when she left an acupuncture appointment, and the doctor had inadvertently left a needle sticking straight out of her head—why is everyone looking at me so weird? Even a look like that would not prevent me from walking around with someone I cared about. It is hard to be yourself when everyone else is trying to make you act like them.

Maybe it just hasn’t come into fashion yet—to just be with whom you like regardless of what they look like. Novelty can be scary to people. Generally, the unknown is overwhelming; everyone has felt this way at some point. It’s like going on the Superman ride at Six Flags for the first time; it’s really scary because you have no idea what it is going to be like. You’re nervous standing in line, while buckling your seatbelt, and while the cart climbs the steep hill, and the whole time you’re wondering if you really should have even gotten on this godforsaken ride. But once it starts and goes over the ups, downs, and arounds, you realize how much fun it is and you’re glad you took the plunge. This world is full of unknown things to learn about. You just have to be willing to accept differences. Once you have gone through with the roller coaster ride and learned about something that is different or “weird,” it is not so intimidating anymore.

