

Look Down

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2nd Place in the 18-25 Age Category

At school, everyone seemed to speak a language I didn't understand.

They talked about last night's Disney Channel episode, repeating jokes I pretended to recognise. They argued about restaurants, what they had done at the weekend, and whose new gadget everyone wanted.

I learnt how to join in without saying much.

"Yeah, I watched that one," I'd say.

I hadn't.

At home, we didn't have the channels they watched. Restaurants were places I saw through bus windows. On birthdays, sometimes we got KFC, and that felt special enough to think about all week.

Sometimes, when everyone was talking, I stayed quiet and studied their faces, waiting for a clue about when to laugh. I didn't want anyone to realise how many things I didn't know. It wasn't that I wanted everything they had. I just wanted, for once, not to feel different.

But none of that bothered me as much as the trainers.

Nike Air Max.

Everyone seemed to have them.

White ones. Black ones. Ones with colours around the bubble in the sole. In the playground, I could recognise people by their shoes before I looked at their faces.

I wanted a pair so badly that I knew exactly how much they cost.

I asked my parents if I could get them.

"Maybe for your birthday," they said.

So I waited.

As my birthday got closer, I imagined opening the box. I pictured wearing them to school and, for once, having something everyone else had.

Then my parents told me they couldn't afford them.

They looked almost as disappointed as I felt. That was the worst part. I knew they wanted to say yes, even when they couldn't.

"It's fine," I said.

But it wasn't.

So when someone at school asked, "Why don't you just get Air Max?"

I shrugged.

"Don't like them."

It was easier than saying, *I hoped I would. But the answer was no.*

My trainers were from Shoe Zone. There was nothing wrong with them, except everyone knew where they were from.

One afternoon, while we were changing for PE, a girl looked down at them.

"Are those even real?"

A few people laughed.

I laughed too.

If you laughed first, sometimes it hurt less.

Later, I sat on a bench tying the same lace again and again.

Bella sat beside me. She had a pair of black Air Max, the exact kind I had saved pictures of.

"My uncle gave me these," she said.

"They were my cousin's first."

I looked closer. There was a crease across the front and a scratch near the heel.

I had never noticed.

"I told everyone they were new," she said.

"Why?"

She shrugged. "Same reason you said you don't like them, probably."

For the first time, I looked at her properly.

Not her trainers.

Her.

The next day, someone started talking about the latest gadget their parents had bought them.

Normally, I would have invented something to add.

Instead, I said, "I haven't got one."

Bella looked across the table.

"Neither have I."

Nothing terrible happened.

Nobody stopped talking to us.

Nobody even really cared.

Under the table, my Shoe Zone trainers were still on my feet.

For once, I didn't try to hide them.