

ONE

I'd rather have gone naked than shop for clothes with my mom, because she had a talent for finding shirts older than fossils. Like a palaeontologist digging up dinosaur bones, she discovered ancient pants in bargain caves. If I wore the outdated sweaters she picked, I'd become extinct faster than a woolly mammoth.

Being the only Chinese kid at school already made me stand out like a beach ball on a snow bank. My black hair and darker skin made me different from the rest of the kids, and my classmates teased me almost every day. They called me a math geek. They claimed I ate cats. They said Jackie Chan was my uncle. None of it was true, but that didn't stop them from making up nasty rumours about me. When I showed up at school in the clothes my mom bought, the teasing got worse. Much worse.

Since everyone at school wore blue jeans, I figured if I could get a pair of those I'd be able to blend in with the crowd. With nice clothes, I could fit in. I could become the cool guy, the popular boy, the kid no one teased. On the far wall of the boys' clothing section at Sears, a pair of jeans that would make me normal waited to be picked up, but Mom dragged me away before I could even touch the denim of my dreams.

"Cost too much," she said.

"Mom, I'm ten years old," I said. "Don't you think I'm old enough to pick my own pants?"

"I pay, I pick."

"But I'm the one who has to wear them," I argued. "I don't want to look stupid."

"You not have to worry. I not make you look dumb. Now hold my purse."

Mom tossed me her shiny red bag, but I let it drop to the floor. Her idea of dumb and mine were as different as chocolate bars and tofu patties. She dipped her bony hands into an aquamarine pond of bargain clothes and reeled in a purple T-shirt that had teddy bears dancing across the chest.

"Aiya. Too small," she muttered. She shook her head, her mass of curly black hair swinging back and forth on her head like a football helmet that was too big.

She tossed the shirt back and grabbed a pair of pink and blue overalls with sunflowers stitched into the bib.

“What about this one?” Mom asked.

“I think they’re for girls,” I said.

“Boy, girl. If it fit, what does it matter?”

It mattered. It *really* mattered. How could she not see the difference between girl and boy clothes? Either she was an alien from another planet where everyone looked exactly alike, or Mom’s job was to make my life miserable. Since I never found enough proof of her alien origins, I had to guess that Mom’s salary went up every time she humiliated me. She was going to get rich on this shopping trip.

“Aiya, they’re ripped,” she said.

Back the overalls went. Mom dug through the rest of the pile, the ugliest clothes ever made by humans or aliens. Nothing caught her eye. Maybe all the clothes were ripped. Maybe they were too small. Maybe my luck would hold out and I’d escape the fashion freaks on the bargain table.

“Ah,” she said. “These are the pants for you.” She fished out a pair of plaid slacks and checked the length against my legs.

I got dizzy just looking at the criss-crossing lines and multicoloured patches. They looked like a tic-tac-toe board that had spun out of control.

“I think I’m allergic to them,” I said.

She ignored me. “They look nice.”

“Mom, I think I saw some blue jeans on sale,” I said.

“The cheapest clothes are here,” she declared.

Only rejects ended up on the bargain table. They were like the last kid picked to play basketball. The team captains snapped up the good players first, but at the end there was always one kid left standing — the klutz who couldn’t dribble, the doofus who scored on his own net, the loser who had to be picked because the captain had no other choice. That leftover kid was usually me. Now *I* was the captain, and I had no choice but to pick the leftover plaid pants.

“What you waiting for?” Mom held up the pants. Her jade bracelet slipped up her wrist and disappeared under her sleeve. I wished I could disappear just as easily. “They look cute.”

“Mom, I don’t want to look cute. I want to look grown up.”

“They make you look grown up too.”

“They do not.”

She pointed to a grey-haired man slouched over a table, picking up a wool sweater with his wrinkled hands. He wore an identical pair of plaid pants.

I didn't want to look that old, I thought. Why didn't Mom shop for cool pants? Why did she always have to look for bargains? Why did we have such different tastes in everything?

Mom sighed. "Okay, okay. I picked one pair. You can pick a pair."

"Alright!" I yelled. A helicopter of hope took off for the clear blue denim skies. "Now you're talk — "

"From *this* table," Mom interrupted.

My helicopter crashed into the bright sea of corduroy and polyester.

"Mom, can I at least try on a pair of jeans?"

"Only bad boys wear blue jeans."

"Like who?" I asked.

"Never mind. You not get jeans."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because why?" A few more "whys" and she might let me try on blue jeans.

"Because I say so," she growled.

"Because you say so *why*?"

Mom's eyebrows arched up like bat wings. "Why do you keep saying that?" she asked.

“Because,” I answered.

“Because *why?*” she asked. Mom had turned my own trick against me.

I said nothing, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Try them on,” Mom insisted, holding out the pants. She might as well have been offering a spoonful of bitter cough medicine.

“I’m not wearing them,” I said.

“You will.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Put them on. Now.”

“You can’t make me,” I said. “I hate plaid pants.”

Standoff. Mom wouldn’t back down and neither would I. But then she resorted to a negotiation tactic that all mothers use to win arguments: “Marty, how you know you hate plaid pants if you never try them on?”

A few weeks ago she’d used the same question when I refused to eat kailan, a Chinese broccoli that smelled like the bottom of my feet. When I couldn’t answer her then, I had to eat the bitter vegetable. Today, I had to think of an answer to Mom’s tricky question or else I’d have to try on the pants.

“Because . . .” I said, stalling for time.

But before I could say another word Mom slunk over beside me, grabbed my pants by the belt loops and yanked them down to my ankles.

“Mom!” I yelped.

“Now will you try on the new pants?” she asked.

I couldn't argue with her, standing in the middle of the busy department store in my tighty whities. I covered myself with the plaid pants.

“Try these too.” She tossed me a pair of green corduroys.

I slapped the cords against my butt and shuffled across the carpet, my own pants still hanging around my ankles like leg irons. When I touched the metal door knob, electricity bit my hand.

“Ouch.” I pulled away. Shuffling across the carpet had built up a static charge in my body. How was I going to open the door without getting another shock?

“Do you need help?” Mom asked.

“No, I'm okay.” Using the pants as antistatic mittens, I opened the door.

The dressing room was tinier than a bathroom stall. Hanging on a beige wall, a tall narrow mirror reflected my skinny, half-naked body. I inched past the minefield of metal pins on the floor and kicked off my shoes and pants.

Outside the door, Mom ordered, “Try the plaid pants on first.”

Instead I slipped on the corduroys, zipped up the fly and fastened the button. Take that, Mom, I thought. But then I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror — the corduroys were even grosser than the plaid pants. They were the ugliest pants in the universe! First of all, they were five sizes too big. Second, they were super-bright neon green. And worst of all, incredibly thick fuzzy rows sprouted all the way down the legs. It looked like my pants needed to be mowed.

Forget it. I wouldn't wear the lawn for another minute. I started to undo the top button, but before I could unzip, Mom kicked open the dressing room door, grabbed my arm and dragged me into the middle of the busy store.

“These aren't the plaid pants,” she said.

“I know, Mom. I'll change right now.”

“No. Wait. These are perfect.” She beamed. “We should buy them.”

If the kids from school spotted me in these fuzzy pants, they'd get their fully-charged cattle prods to herd me into the geek corral where I'd end up on display for all to taunt and tease. I scanned the store for familiar faces. Around me, moms and sons

shopped for cool clothes. Across the aisle, the grey-haired man in the plaid pants examined a pair of black dress socks. So far so good. I saw no one I knew.

Then I noticed someone in the girls' clothing section. At first I didn't want to look, but like picking a scab, the itch to peek got the better of me, and once I did I wished I'd left well enough alone. There was Trina Brewster — the biggest gossip in grade four and my worst enemy. As Trina sifted through blouses and sipped a slushie through a bendy straw, I wondered how someone so pretty could act so mean. She constantly teased me for being Chinese. She picked on me for wiping my nose on my sleeve. She made fun of my thick glasses. Sometimes she didn't even need a reason; she just teased me because she felt like it. Why did Trina have to be at Sears, today of all days? I had to hide.

Before I could move, Mom let out an air-raid-siren screech. "Pull your pants up! I can see your underwear."

Every head in the store turned toward us. The boys snickered. The moms smiled. The grey-haired man hiked up his plaid pants. I jumped behind a rack of shirts. From between the hangers I watched Trina as she scanned the store. *Don't look this way*, I thought, sending telepathic signals for her to go back to

drinking her slushie. It worked. She resumed checking the blouses on the rack.

Something started to tug on my pant legs. The pants slipped down a couple of inches. I clutched the top of the pants, stopping them from dropping any further. What was going on? There was Mom kneeling on the carpet, rolling up the pant legs.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“They a little long, but you grow into them,” she said, far too loudly.

“Mom,” I said. “Quit it.”

I hitched the pants up.

“Maybe you need a belt,” she suggested.

“Shhhh,” I hissed.

“Why you want me to be quiet?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“Tell me now!”

“Please, Mom,” I begged.

Too late. Trina walked in front of me and smiled like a cat that’d caught a mouse. “Oh, hi, Marty. I thought I heard you. I see you’re shopping with your *mommy*.”

Mom stood up. “Marty, who is this?”

I just glared at Trina and said nothing.

“I’m Trina Brewster. Marty and I are in the same class.”

“Nice to meet you,” Mom said.

Trina noticed my legs. “Marty, are these your new pants?”

I was sure that a cruel comment teetered on the tip of Trina’s orange-stained tongue. As long as I didn’t admit the pants were mine, she couldn’t make fun of me. I said nothing.

Mom nudged me. “Talk to your friend.”

“She’s not my friend,” I growled.

Mom sighed. “Marty say he not like these pants. I don’t think we will get them.”

She didn’t think we’d get them? At last something went my way.

Trina’s freckled face lit up. “Don’t put them back, Mrs. Chan. I think you’ve picked out a great pair of pants.”

Mom looked at me. “See, Marty? You have nothing to worry about. Your friend likes them.”

Trina smiled wickedly. She didn’t like the pants; she just wanted my mom to buy them so that all the kids could make fun of me.

“Mrs. Chan, I’m sure Marty will be the talk of the town in these pants.”

“Thank you, Trina,” Mom said.

“See you at school on Monday, Marty. I hope you’ll wear your new pants.” Trina sucked her swamp water

slushie through her bendy straw. “Mmm, that’s good,” she said, grinning evilly as she turned and sauntered away.

Her blonde ponytail swished back and forth like the pendulum on the Grandfather Clock of Doom, ticking off my last seconds of being normal. I wished Trina’d take another sip of the slushie and get a brain freeze so powerful that it wiped out her memory. But good things like that only happened to people in blue jeans. Not to me.