Sole

Tabitha Jensen
Concordia University - Portland

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SOLE

Tabitha Jensen

The Nordstrom shoe department is nirvana on any given day. The variety of sumptuous footwear (or functional, if you’re into that kind of trash), the men in tailored suits on their knees before you, the pretty boxes emblazoned with our favorite names in signature script—but during the Nordstrom Anniversary Sale, you can actually feel the divine presence of a merciful God. Steve Madden, Kate Spade, Roberto Cavalli, Michael Kors... go ahead, touch it. Pluck it from its perch on yonder unworthy clear plastic pedestal without trepidation. The Comcast bill and student loan payment equivalent cost is slashed—MASSACRED! by red ink, revealing the special price that is an undeniable steal, a reward for pre-planning the fall. Still expensive, yes. But now you’re in the Macy’s Price Zone, a place where justification can live and breathe as carefree as a card swipe.

Of course, during this two-week midsummer solstice, the shoes aren't the only things on sale. Sure, you could go upstairs and buy a coat. A Victorian-style lace blouse and a pencil skirt for work, maybe. Yoga pants. But unlike that bulky coat that makes you look like a tent, or the blouse that gaps in the buttons where you dare sprout more than a B cup, or the spandex Yoga pants you’ll end up skipping the gym and eating ice cream in, there is not a single shoe on that entire floor that will make you feel bad about yourself. Nobody has to complain, “I’m so fat, I’m a nine,” or, “that anorexic size five bitch! Eat a sandwich!” Feet don’t have breasts, or hips, or thighs, or freakishly knobby elbows. They’re feel, and no matter what your style is in your heart, you can express it without being afraid with shoes. Whether you’re a loud lipstick-red platform, a classic Coach kitten heel, or even just want to tool around your garden in your Crocs, we’re absolutely free to be you and me.

In my wardrobe, my shoes make the outfit. I don’t worry about what I’m going to wear with a lime-green pair of faux alligator skin stilettos, or brown pinstriped low heels with contrasting silk detail. After I pick out my footwear, I go out and buy a couple coordinating pieces, more subdued so that the shoes soak up the spotlight. I relish nothing more than the random coworker, waitress, guy on the Max train or snotty Pretty Woman-esque boutique girl bursting out with, “Oh my god, I love your shoes!” I love your shoes! You’re so sophisticated, so stylish, so beautiful, so unique! I covet you, oh goddess of soleful couture!

It goes without saying that the Nordstrom Anniversary Sale is a special time for me. Ever since I was a little kid, when my mom packed me and my little sister and brother up for Back to School Shopping, where I would pick out pink and purple loudly-laced tennis shoes. When we got home, exhausted, full from the especially-chic-for-an-eleven-year-old Nordstrom Café lunch, we would ravenously separate our wares and retreat to our rooms, where the shoes would remain preserved in thick tissue and graphic-heavy cardboard. There they would patiently wait until early September, when, on our triumphant return to school, they would be unleashed in all their newness and blister-producing prowess. Nowadays I’ve grown impatient—I can’t save leather boots for fall! I will wear them out of the store and into the muggy July heat! However, tradition endures. Just as it did yesterday, Sunday of the first weekend of this year’s sale. Sure, I couldn’t actually afford even the most mercilessly marked-down shoes. My fiancé Matt and I were in the throes of putting together a wedding, and the ambitious money-saving plan I was kicking off was getting off to a rocky start—covering all non-essential expenses on $80 a week doesn’t make it far past happy hour. But as soon as we stepped through the gaping entrance, into the hive of permascowling middle-aged housewives, Dolce and Gabanna cell phone toting high school girls teetering on trend overdose and sales girls with microphones quite unafraid to talk shit about the lot of us in between runs to the mysterious backroom, I couldn’t resist. Especially when I wrapped my trembling hand around a luscious Linea Paolo blood-red patent leather pump with black ruffles and bow around the toes, skyscraping at five inches lofted by a pencil-thin black heel.

“Ooooooh,” I breathed, twirling it between my fingers, around my palms, careful not to smudge its pristine glossy veneer. I must have looked like a pristine catch, because one of the guys caught me right away.
"Can I bring that out for you?" he asked, his tone hinting at pleasures unseen. His eyes, sincere.

"Yes, in a nine and a half, and a ten, please... and those, those on the end? The brown heels? And these knee-high boots!"

As he obligingly ran off to do my bidding, I scanned the department for a seat. It wasn't looking good until my eyes caught the void of a set of chairs not far from the register. No coat, no purse, no convenient little kid marking the spot as Taken, just a few cluttered shoeboxes amidst the chaos. Assuming the former occupant had moved on, I sat down and awaited the sales guy's return, and the wonderful gifts he would bring along.

A few moments later, a woman talking in a million directions returned. "Okay, I think I'm done. How much did these cost? Oh, no, I'm getting ready to go, you don't need to leave. Do you like working here?"

"Oh I'm sorry," I said, gathering my purse up in my arms to leave.

"No, it's fine, don't worry! I worked at Fred Meyer for seventeen years, never had a formal education."

The girl repacking the shoes, evidently not bound for purchase, looked just as confused as I was. "Yeah, I like working here," she finally shrugged.

Along the walkway between the showcase floor and the cash register, I spotted Matt rounding about, searching for my fake red hair and thick-rimmed glasses as he happily pressed a bright pink smoothie against his lips. He towered above most everyone around him, his neatly-shaven shining bald head a beacon in the bedlam. I stretched and waved my arms several times trying to catch his attention without looking too spastic, until he finally saw me and headed over.

"What're you waiting for?" he asked, offering me a sip of the sweet strawberry banana smoothie.

"They're bringing me shoes," I breathed. He nodded and stood, refraining from any of that don't you have enough shoes bullshit or the dreaded you know you can't afford those. Good, good man.

"I can't believe we were crazy to come out on a day like this," he did offer up in a resigned sort of way.

"My husband told me I had to get out of the house today before he threw me out," the funny lady in the seat next door cut in with a deranged smile. How do you quite answer that? Relate? "Oh yeah, I get kicked out of my home all the time, too." Refer her to a domestic abuse hotline? I opted for my favorite, the old Smile 'n Nod, which required the least amount of verbal exchange and wouldn't encourage further random thoughts meandering away from her odd mind.

"So," she said, clasping her hands in her lap and smiling serenely at me, "are you expecting?"

Matt's eyeballs almost exploded out of his skull. I could scarcely even comprehend the audacity, it was so brazen and... there. "What?"

"Oh," she said quietly, her face falling down, down, down aslivid insanity and strangling hurt burned behind my stunned gaze. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked if I wasn't sure..."

"WHAT?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'll leave now." I saw the shoe guy slowly walking out of the backroom toward us, four boxes teetering in his arms.

"I'm sorry, I have to go. I'm sorry," I said sincerely to the poor guy who was now on the floor, about ready to unwrap my first delicious morsel as Matt jumped to my side to half-carry me out of the store as pleas of "I'm sorry" followed me out of the department, across the gridlocked Clinique and MAC counters to the warm solace of the parking lot sidewalk, where I immediately burst into tears on his cotton-covered shoulder.

"It's just your shirt," he insisted, referring to my empire waist, flowing top that had jumped from maternity stores everywhere into this spring and summer's pop fashion rotation. It may have been true—I hope to God it was to this very moment—but nothing could save me from this pit of a feeling that I was a dead ringer for Queen Latifah. "Stupid meth-head bitch. She was crazy, you know that. Fucking crazy. You're beautiful."

"I'm...nnnot fat?" I sniffled.

"No!" Yeah right. As if that meant anything true.

That night, after trudging through the rest of the day in a foul-ass mood and passing off several self-deprecating cracks.
(“wow we sure have been walking a lot today... it’ll definitely help me work off the baby fat”), we were back at home and I was in my closet, hanging up my freshly washed work clothes on hangers. I noticed two big piles on top of the shelves above, outfits taken out of rotation. The first pile was the nice things that I’d worn a few times that needed to go to the dry cleaners, but I was way too cheap to shell out the money so there they rotted. The other pile was full of the cute tops and bottoms I’d picked out ten pounds ago that now brought out too much of that Pillsbury dough boy look in me. On Hold Until Thinner.

I almost fell over trying to pick through the hill of fabric, my feet stumbling over my first pair of leather boots, Nordstrom Anniversary Sale Circa 2004. Shoes spilled everywhere, unabashedly, from middle school and high school and college and an entire range of moods and styles and sizes I’d gone through since. Only the most beloved, beragged soldiers that couldn’t possibly be worn at all had been discarded. There were no piles designating the ones that made my calves look killer from those that gave me cankles. I loved them all, I loved them on me... my shoes are unconditional.

“Are you doing okay, honey?” Matt’s shadow stood over me, rare notes of concern in his usually carefree voice.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“I just don’t want what that lady said to bother you. You know she’s a fucking crackhead.”

Unconditional. After two and a quarter years, it was then that I finally saw past all my insecurity, my past-boy-baggage and neurotic bullshit that I had found a living, breathing person who would never put me in an On Hold Until Thinner pile. In the most trivial of terms, just like a beloved pair of Blahniks, I was not going to get tossed away because I was in a bad mood, or got in a fight over something stupid, or cried when I should have just been a grown-up, or ate a cupcake after dinner. Someone who will really be there forever, like Saltwater Sandals.

“Thanks,” I smiled, grabbing my Nike running shoes out of the corner. “What’s for dinner tonight? Remember, I’m eating for two now.”