

Laces

by Gita M. Smith

Rosarious slouches into the lab, no book, shoelaces perilously undone, earbuds blasting Dr. Dre.

"ROSARIOUS," I signal, waving my hand to break through his wall of sound, "GADGETS OFF IN THE LAB!"

Inglorious student with glorious shoes, he is a prince among his peers. I see those shoes and the status they confer, and I know what they cost.

They cost him his books for the semester, is what they cost.

"You paid twelve hundred dollars for a pair of *shoes*?" I gasped when he first told me. But when I bent closer to look, I saw art and architecture. The shoes were *engineered*. They were built with materials that NASA astronauts dream of.

If they had been cars, they would have been 1959 Cadillac Eldorados or '57 Buick Electras.

Rosarious vacillated between pride and shame; he had not yet reached a comfort point with money, had not yet learned that, if you buy what you desire, then you have to harden yourself to its price tag.

You decide to be happy *or* guilty, so quick, what'll it be?

"Hey, hey, they's a lot worse 'n these," he protested. "Hey! Google it! They make summa them Jordans with diamonds sewn on 'em, cost fifty grand!"

You know what? I do not judge him. Long ago I decided not to invest in opinions about the students, saving my energy, instead, for the work itself.

My students are not used to such a minimalist approach. They are accustomed to the adults in their world martyring and

sacrificing for them, scolding or shaming them, sometimes idolizing them, sometimes breaking promises to them.

I offer them only the clear, cool water of grammar, the vigorous workout of my Great American Comma Clinic (a one-hour aerobic review of the comma and semicolon designed, my friends, to change your lives), and a dispassionate explanation of Chicago Manual of Style.

When Rosarious was offered his athletic scholarship (which does not cover books), a proud uncle in Nigeria sent him a jacket made from antelope skins. The family has hoop dreams for him, but then, thousands of parents have the same dreams for their tall sons with elbows calloused by jabbing other boys in their lifelong quest for possession of the ball.

In this lab, I walk along the line of computer stations, checking for facebookers and shoe shoppers whom I tap lightly on the shoulder as a reminder they are here to work.

I stop behind Rosarious and his sleek Kudu jacket, and he smiles at my reflection in the screen. His smile is sly and a little ugly. It asks, "How can I game you? What's the angle, here?"

I give him nothing, no crack in my neutrality.

"Tie your shoelaces," I say. "That way, your shoes cannot be stolen off your feet with one hard swipe. You must not be from the city, or you would have *known* that."

