Velcro Shoes, a Cardboard Computer, and Other Signs of Brilliance

by Casey McGrath

Shortly after my father remarried, we moved from our second-floor apartment on Hickory Street to the house my stepmother owned on Dearborn, which meant my sister and I would be enrolling in new schools. For Erin, the transition would be relatively painless; she was entering Hufford Junior High as a fresh sixth grader along with a fleet of others while I would assume the role of the weird kid no one recognized from the year before: a stranger's face amongst a crowd of old friends who had, until then, gone uninterrupted by outsiders. Unfortunately for me, I was a walking target for classmate contempt. For one, I was convinced I could grow up to be both a doctor and a bird, and when coupled with my boyish bowl haircut and a wardrobe of pastels and stirrup pants, my forecasted popularity status was anything but promising.

But perhaps the most certain predictor of my coming celebrity was the inheritance of my sister's outdated lunchbox. In middle school, most kids brought paper sacks you could throw away or ordered a meal through the cafeteria, so in an effort to embrace her coming of age, Erin had passed her New Kids on the Block lunchbox on to me. Their outdated hairstyles and mediocre voices had long been phased out in favor of fresher groups with comparable talent, and consequentially, proclaiming one's self as a fan now was nothing short of suicide. I was unaware of this, of course, convinced that if it had anything to do with all the birthday parties my sister was invited to and the thirty-one boyfriends she supposedly had, the lunchbox would equally be my magic feather. With the faded faces of Jordan, Joey, Danny, Donnie, and Jon closed tight around my bologna

sandwich, I rollerskated to school the morning of the first day, oblivious.

The third grade classroom I was assigned to was something straight out of my chapter books: cubed wooden cubbies for coats, desks with plenty of storage for my future art projects, and a glittered diagram of the solar system sticky-tacked against the back wall. A lady with blonde wiry curls introduced herself as Mrs. Drach and exclaimed with an enthusiasm that would progressively diminish over the coming months how thrilled she was to be our teacher. Every morning, she explained, would begin with math and science, and after lunch, we would focus on English, social studies, and art. I was good at drawing, and even better at English; I wrote and illustrated stories for hours every summer, authoring casts of friends to make up for the ones I lacked in real life. My favorite series was on the hamsters my dad had given my sister and me as gifts years ago but set free in our back alley because they had exponentially multiplied to the population of a small village. While my sister's hamster, Snappy, was in a constant state of giving birth, my hamster, Chewy, had only two babies, both of whom she had swallowed in cold blood. I had suffered the unique misfortune of lifting the sheet we'd put over her cage for maternity privacy at the very moment she downed her second child, headfirst and whole, like someone trying to ingest a pot roast without chewing. Two days and 6 litters later, the cages were vacant.

But despite their absence and questionable legacies, our hamsters lived on in student library Mrs. Drach kept at the back of our classroom, with each of my carefully printed stories stapled between two sheets of wall-paper and the title etched across the cover with a black Sharpie. She explained that it was like having our very own publishing company, as only the best, most creative and most thoughtful submissions would receive the honor of being showcased. Inspired, I set out to immortalize my rodent companions in a series of adventures that would lead them from the cavernous bathroom

plumbing to the awe-inducing wonders of the microwave oven. By Christmas, I was undoubtedly our class library's largest contributing author, with a staggering twenty-two hamster narratives and three random stories about my dog.

“I want everyone to take a look at the story Casey has written,” Mrs. Drach announced, fanning the book open to a sketch of Chewy and Snappy cruising down a water pipe on tiny, golf ball-sized rafts. “This is what a real story looks like! Do you see the detail in the pictures? Do you notice how neatly the words are printed, how much thought and creativity went into each page?”

My ears went hot with a mix of embarrassment and pleasure. Someone kicked my chair, but I pretended not to notice.

“I think everyone can learn a lot from Casey's example. Let's give her a round of applause!” Mrs. Drach grinned in my direction, clapping, and for some reason, I felt compelled to stand. My classmates' lukewarm response and disinterested stares made me instantly regretful I was made an example, and I quickly slumped back into my chair, vowing to leave the Chronicles of Chewy and Snappy eternally unresolved.

Deciding that my current school was stunting my academic progress, my dad enrolled me in a magnet academy the following year where I began the cycle of “weird-new-girl-who-looks-like-a-dude” all over again. Unsurprisingly, my new classmates did not like me. Aside from my enthusiastically raised hand at every opportunity, I was perpetually committing the annoying offenses of organizing canned food drives, school wide spelling bees, and playing catch by myself at recess. I still hadn't grasped the concept of fashion, either, as my babyish ensembles were often grounds for ridicule when compared to everyone's uniform of trendy sports team apparel. But the day I showed up in a pair of shoes with Velcro closures, it was safe to say that I was screwed.

“What, can't you tie your own shoes?” some girl asked. “Are you a retard or something?”

In truth, I'd only gotten the shoes because they came with a neat side pocket for your lunch money. And to make matters worse, I'd actually gotten two identical pairs for when the first set wore out. This ensured that I would be stuck wearing sneakers straight from the short bus for at least the remainder of my young adult life, and any desperate request for replacements would be answered with, “But we just bought you two pairs!" I was doomed.

Though most people in my position would have made attempted invisibility, I bemoaned my social status in the same night I constructed my latest art project: a replica of a computer with a Pampers diaper box for a monitor. Its inner workings consisted of two paper towel tubes and a roll of shelf paper on which potato shaped sketchings of my beloved hamsters paraded-- a modest replica of the video game that would be released as soon as my dad had time to make it. This was simply a pilot model, I explained, while my classmates gazed warily at the Pampers logos stamped across the cardboard.

“How come there's a baby on it?” someone asked.

“I didn't have time to paint it.” I explained, which was actually the truth. I had asked my dad for a box big enough for a CPU the previous night and this was all he had.

“Do you wear diapers?” someone else snickered, and the room erupted into giggles. My teacher rushed to my rescue, shooting the commentator a sour look and asking me to explain to the class how my “video game” worked.

“Well, you see,” I started, fumbling for the remote I'd crafted from a

McDonald's apple pie wrapper. “You press this button, and--”

“But that's not even a real controller!” the same kid interjected.

I pressed on. “In the real version, it will be,” I answered, tapping the pop bottle buttons with my thumb and cranking the end of the cardboard tubes to scroll the screen from two hamsters cruising along a tangle of piping to a shot of them racing across a kitchen floor. “See, you'll get points for all the crumbs you collect, and at the end, if you get enough, you go to the next level.”

There was a brief silence, and my teacher searched for the proper response, her eyes darting from the boy with all the quick remarks to me, an overweight fourth grader in a sweatsuit the color of Pepto Bismol, standing beside a leaning cardboard box she swore was a working machine, the faint outlines of her only friends waving their tiny paws in desperation from the unconvincing paper screen.

“This was a very creative project, Casey,” she announced, finally. “You really used your imagination to bring this computer to life.”

It wasn't until later that I realized that any time a teacher complimented you on your use of imagination, it was because they didn't know what else to make of whatever you'd created. My homemade narrative video in lieu of the assigned “getting to know you” essay, my diorama of posed Barbie dolls in a reenactment of the Boston Tea Party, my collection of simple lined stories that I'd written in spiral bound notebooks for tutoring stuffed animals at home-- all of these were grounds for teacher's lounge discussion and social exile as certain as crapping yourself on a playground slide. My laceless sneakers were as telling as the clown patterned “accident pants” worn by any unfortunate individual who would undoubtedly transfer schools from the embarrassment. I, however, would continue my oblivious tradition of dorky self-proclamations well into the junior high.

Now, I almost wished my teachers would have spared me the humiliation only someone that attempts to make computer chips out of paper products can know. Beneath the obvious drive to earn good marks and to impress my instructors was a perfectionism that would go on to manifest itself into everything I'd ever undertake-- if it wasn't a subject I was particularly good at, I would beat my brain into submission, the alternative too horrible an option to consider. A B on my report card meant I was not special, and a C suggested I should jump from a train. I could handle the fact that my hips made me invisible to my crushes and that I violated every law of popularity, but to be ordinary was a fate worse than the name calling my overachieving rendered. Being forgettable would make my stepmother, who had assumed a Hyde-like distaste for me as soon as the ink dried on her and my father's marriage license, right in her belief I was to blame for everything. I was the reason she could never find her scissors. I was the reason she and my father argued. I was the reason her fairy tale was not turning out as hoped: the unwanted inclusion, a step-daughter that served as a daily reminder of her husband's procreation with someone else. Even before I turned thirteen, I fantasized about my twenties, imagining myself breaking free from the confines of my seafoam green bedroom, my future accomplishments sure indicators that the hushed conversations where I was referred to as selfish, lazy, and ungrateful for forgetting to put away the dishes were completely unfounded.

Walking from the front of the classroom to the rhythm of halfhearted applause, my lopsided cardboard creation cradled in my arms and my classmates' disdain firm against my back, I already imagined the brightly colored A scribbled across my evaluation. Maybe there would even be a plus, I thought, accompanied by a handful of other praises that could be mentally replayed whenever my stepmother's stiff remarks over the latest forgotten chore, forsaken dish, or lunch money request compromised the feeble armor of my blankets.

So imaginative, they would say, standing back to admire the blinking lights and dancing hamster graphics across the pixelated screen. *I always knew she would amount to something extraordinary.*