



The  
POLKA  
DOT SHOP.

LAUREL REMINGTON

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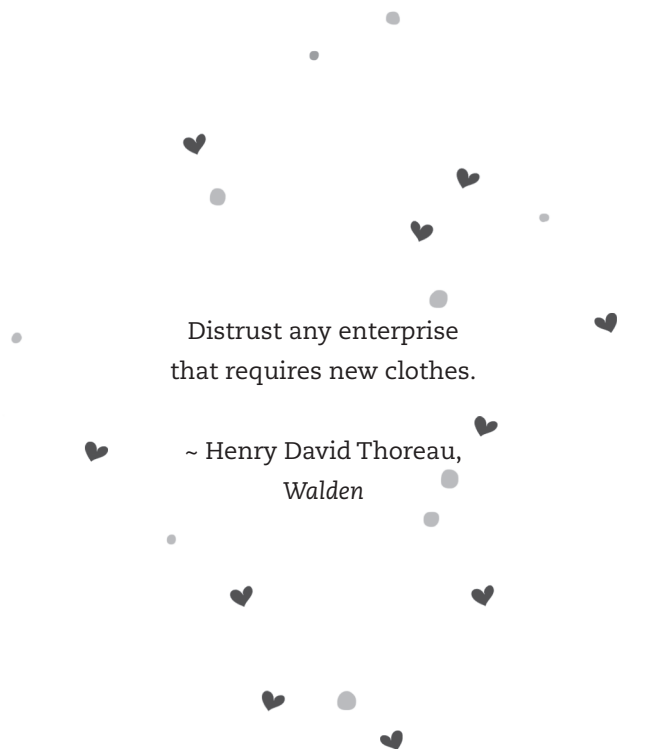
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Distrust any enterprise  
that requires new clothes.

~ Henry David Thoreau,  
*Walden*



## RICHES TO RAGS

**O**n the worst day of my life, the school announced a new policy – no more uniforms! You would think we'd won a war or something – everybody rushed out to the playing field at break time, yelling and cheering. Then kids started stripping off their brown blazers, striped ties and burgundy jumpers and making a big pile. Pretty soon everyone was jumping on the pile like a giant beanbag, and a couple of the boys started taking off more of their clothes – until a teacher came and put a stop to it.

I stood by the door to my classroom, pulling my blazer tightly around my chest. For me it was protection, and I didn't want to let it go. The idea

behind the policy was that ‘the children of Greenhill School should have the right to express themselves through their choices of clothing, hairstyle and accessories’. I guess it sounded good on paper, and it was great for most of the kids.

But not for me.

The school sent home a letter to the parents about the new policy. I threw it in a bin on my way home. For the next three weeks, I was the only kid who showed up in full uniform. I was only eleven at the time, so the kids weren’t as mean then as they are now. Still, there was whispering behind hands when I entered the classroom, and my best friend, Olivia, became the centre of a new crowd – the girls whose mums took them on shopping trips at the weekend.

At first, I joined in as they sat around a table at lunchtime, oohing and aahing over Chloe’s sequin top and appliqué denim jacket from River Island, Alexandra’s stripy jersey dress and navy wedges from Debenhams, and Sophie’s silver knit cardigan with the British flag buttons from Zara Kids. By the end of the first week, I was tired of pretending that Mum was ‘too busy’ to take me shopping, so I started going to the library at lunchtime to do my homework.

At the end of the third week, my English

teacher, Ms Tripp, drew me aside. ‘Are you OK, Andy?’ she’d asked, glancing down at my greyish-tinted white blouse that accidentally got washed with black socks.

‘Yeah, I’m fine – thanks,’ I’d said. It was safer that way.

Maybe it was Ms Tripp who decided that what I wore to ‘express myself’ was her business, and it shouldn’t include my old school uniform. Because someone called Mum and told her about the new policy. When I got home that night, she greeted me at the door with a huge bag and a: ‘You must be so excited – I’ve brought you some fun clothes from the shop that I just know will be perfect for you.’

Mum’s shop. *Eliza’s Emporium*. There’s a motto painted on the door: ‘Vintage and Pre-loved Clothing, New to U!’ When I saw that bag, my stomach plummeted, and I knew then that no blazer and burgundy jumper could protect me from what was to come.

And they didn’t.

Mum’s idea of ‘perfect for me’ was a pink Hello Kitty T-shirt with the rubbery white stuff on the face starting to peel off like the cat had really bad eczema. That and a pair of black leggings, which might have been OK if they hadn’t ended ten

centimetres short of my ankles and had crocheted lace at the bottom. She'd also brought a pair of pink Converse trainers that were two sizes too big. Even though they'd been through the washing machine, I swear I could still smell someone else's sweaty feet, and they made me feel like I was some kind of clown who'd escaped from a really scary circus. To top it all off there was a cropped pink jacket made of some kind of fake fur that felt like matted Barbie Doll hair.

I really didn't want to hurt Mum's feelings, but when I saw those clothes, I felt like crying. For one thing, I am not a *pink* kind of girl, but I guess Mum didn't know that because I always wore my school uniform during the week, and at the weekends I tended to be in my pyjamas a lot. (My pyjamas were red with white polka dots on them, and were a Christmas gift from my Aunt Linda who lives in the Lake District. They were really warm and lovely. I wish they still fit me.) But the main thing is, I really hate the idea of wearing someone else's cast-off old clothes all the time.

'Um, thanks, Mum,' I'd said, swallowing hard. She must have thought I was overcome with joy or something, because she pulled me into her arms, and told me that this was going to be 'such fun!'

Yeah.

When I went to school that first day, I went into the loos to check my reflection in the mirror, hoping that the outfit wasn't as bad as I thought. As I was standing there, Olivia and Sophie came in.

Olivia looked at my outfit, then at Sophie, then back at me. 'When did you get a dog, Andy?' she said.

'I don't . . . we don't have a dog.'

Olivia snickered and pointed at one of my matted pink cuffs. 'Then what tried to kill and eat that jacket?'

She and Sophie burst out laughing. I was kind of shocked. I mean, Olivia was my friend. So I'd thought, anyway.

For a while after that happened, I would get dressed in the mornings in whatever Mum had brought me (I did finally tell her *no more pink*), then when I got to school I changed in the loos into a pair of leggings, a T-shirt and a really long grey jumper (another gift from Aunt Linda) that I'd already worn so often that it had holes in the elbows and cuffs. But then I overheard Olivia whispering to Chloe that it looked like I was wearing something from her grandma's 'rag bag', whatever that is, and then Chloe started calling



me ‘Rags’ and the name stuck for the whole term. Eventually people got bored of it, but sometimes I still feel like it’s who I am.

Now fast forward two years – last week I had my thirteenth birthday. You’ve probably guessed that Olivia is no longer my friend – nor are Alexandra, Chloe, Sophie or any of the girls in that crowd. Their mums take them to the big Westfield shopping centre in town every weekend, and at lunchtime they’re constantly looking at fashion magazines and browsing shop websites on their phones. But while I’m still a little jealous (OK, a lot jealous) of their lovely brand-new clothes, I don’t really miss *them* that much. For one thing, they still act like they’re the fashion police – they lurk in the loos at break time, and everyone who walks in either gets the ‘oh, that top is cute’ thumbs up, or, more likely, a ‘did your granny die in that dress?’ or ‘did you borrow those jeans from a homeless person?’ thumbs down. It’s stupid, and it’s mean, and I’m glad I’m not part of it. The other reason I don’t mind not hanging out with them any more is because after the whole eating-lunch-by-myself-and-going-to-the-library thing, I made two new friends.

The first is Carrie. I met her in the canteen when we were both trying to sit by ourselves and

there weren't enough tables. I guess she wanted to be alone because a lot of the kids called her 'Fat Girl' (which is just *so* original, isn't it?). We ended up sitting together at opposite ends of the one empty table a few days in a row. It was kind of fascinating to watch her eat her lunch. She would always start with a big Tupperware of salad heaped with soggy lettuce, bleeding beetroot and sweet-corn, which she'd brought especially from home, and she'd always have a tiny plate of chips on the side from the canteen. I watched her push the vegetables around with her fork, trying to make herself eat a bite, and then rewarding herself with a chip. At the moment when that chip went in her mouth, her face looked like heaven.

One day, I couldn't stand it any more. I watched the struggle for a while and then went back to the queue and got a big plate of chips. I came back to the table and set them down between us. I took one, looking at her all the while I chewed and swallowed it.

'Thanks,' she said. She ate one of them, and I ate one, then one more, and together we finished all of them.

Now we're good friends. I try to protect her from people being mean – the next time someone called her 'Fat Girl' in the canteen, I told him

that ‘Carrie can lose weight but you’ll always be stupid.’ He’d laughed in my face but he’d turned the brightest shade of red.

My other friend is Alice, but only the teachers call her that. Everyone else calls her ‘Stevie’, after Stephen Hawking, because she uses a wheelchair. She used to walk, but then she was in a car accident when she was eight years old. The doctor says she might be able to walk again some day, but she’ll have to learn all over again like a toddler. She doesn’t like the chair – obviously – but she loves the nickname. I’m sure someone probably made it up to tease her, but instead of letting it bother her she decided to live up to it. She was already really into science anyway, and now her dream is to go to Oxford or Cambridge and study physics as a tribute to her hero, Stephen Hawking. She knows about all kinds of stuff like black holes, dark matter, wormholes and the heat death of the universe. She also has every episode of both *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Doctor Who* on DVD at her house, and watches all kinds of new sci-fi programmes on Netflix.

Carrie and I got to know her when she came to our school after we started sitting together in the canteen. Because there were only the two of us at the table, there was room for Stevie to roll up

in her wheelchair and join us. Sometimes I'm almost grateful that the school ruined my life, because I now have two friends who are a lot nicer and more interesting than the old crowd.

Almost.

Because the truth is, even two years later, I still have a major hang-up about the whole clothes thing. I know it sounds really shallow, but on the rare occasions when Mum and I go into town and I pass the shop windows, I feel like I could kill for a little stripy summer dress from Zara; sell a kidney for the sparkly sequin plimsolls at New Look. And I'd definitely trade Mum's shop for just about anything from Topshop.

Mum still loves bringing me home all kinds of clothes, none of which ever seem to fit me quite right – all baggy button-down shirts, faded T-shirts, calf-length dresses in ugly floral prints, bobbed cardigans and tatty jeans (don't even get me started on the jeans). It should be fine – I mean, not everyone in school is a fashion plate – far from it. I'm not the only one who regularly gets the thumbs down from the fashion police, and sometimes I've even worn something that got the thumbs up.

But no matter what my clothes look like, the problem is that I know they come from Mum's

shop. Nothing ever has that new-shop smell, a crisp cardboard tag; that stiff, starchy texture that means no one else has worn it. Ever. Anything that comes from Mum's shop is 'pre-owned', 'pre-loved', second-hand, *used*.

I wasn't going to mention this, but I really need to get it off my chest. It's a horrible secret that I haven't told anyone before – not even Carrie and Stevie. I like to think that maybe if I don't say it or think about it, it will turn out not to be true.

So here goes: Mum even brings me pre-owned *underwear* from the shop.

Can you think of anything grosser; more disgusting; more downright soul-destroying than wearing someone else's cast-off bras and knickers? Mum says that it's no big deal – that once something's washed, it doesn't matter that someone else has worn it. She says that lots of the bras and pants that come into the shop are practically new – someone's grandma bought her Minnie Mouse knickers when she wanted *Frozen*, or green when she wanted pink. I don't bother to point out that at age thirteen, I hardly want to be wearing Minnie Mouse knickers, or any knickers at all that someone else has worn.

So here's another secret. When I turned twelve, I took some money from the biscuit tin in the

kitchen. I told Mum I was going over to Stevie's but instead I took the bus into town. I went to M&Co and bought myself a new white bra and a six-pack of cotton knickers. I've been wearing them non-stop for the last year (washing them regularly, of course, in the sink). When Mum does laundry once a week, I throw the awful second-hand knickers into the laundry basket and Mum's none the wiser. I wouldn't want to hurt her feelings . . .

Because here's the thing: I love Mum. She's a really cool person. Everyone who meets her thinks so. She's the kind of mum who doesn't nag at me to do my homework or tidy my room. The kind who orders in a pizza once a week on Friday nights; and lets me keep the light on late when I'm reading a good book. She's been on her own ever since my dad died when I was four, and I'm really proud of the way she works hard with the shop to make ends meet and get by. So I really don't have any problems with her – except for my one BIG problem.

I know it's wrong to be vain about things like hair and clothes and how you look, and which boys fancy you and which girls want to be your friend. And it's a good thing I'm not vain, because I have nothing to be vain about. I'm tall and

skinny, without much of a chest or hips. If I had to name my one best feature it would be my hair, which is long and brown and goes almost down to my waist. My eyes are brown and I have long eyelashes. Stevie and Carrie say that I'm lucky – that I'll never have to wear mascara. They don't know how lucky I really am, because sometimes people donate old make-up to mum's shop and people do actually buy it. I'm sure I saw something in a magazine once that said that make-up can carry *E.coli*. Using someone else's mascara could probably make you go blind. So it's good that I don't need it. Buying used make-up is almost as bad as wearing someone else's knickers. But not quite.

Mum is one of those people who lives for the whole vintage thing. Before she met my dad, she went to fashion college in London, and for a while she wanted to be a teacher. My dad was a news photographer, and when they were first together they travelled the world to places like India and Thailand. When Mum got pregnant with me, they settled down in the village where Dad grew up and Mum opened the shop. Then Dad died. It wasn't a glamorous death like being killed in a war zone, or getting eaten by something in the jungle. He had a weak heart and

collapsed while he was taking out the rubbish. I don't really remember him except some snippets and images – strong hands; a man with blond hair lifting me on to his shoulders. Mum says I was too young to remember him at all, but I don't think I could have made those things up.

Like me, Mum's tall and thin; but unlike me, old clothes from the sixties and seventies and even the eighties look good on her. She knows how to accessorize – which plastic bracelets go with a sixties floral miniskirt; or which baggy 'layered look' jumper is going to look good over someone's 'lived-in' Levi 501 jeans.

Mum always says that vintage is a 'state of mind'. It's definitely got my mind in a state.

Anyway, so that's my story – riches to Rags. Did I mention that I just turned thirteen? I'm a teenager now, and I've seriously had enough.

But what can I do?