

A WORLD OF SOLID COLORS

Plan of Correction

They had gumball golf in the lobby that year. For 25 cents you could watch a little red gumball roll onto a miniature green course, and you might get a hole-in-one and win a gumball for which you just paid 25 cents.

The machine was only 12 inches from a mounted red fire extinguisher, a clear OSHA violation if anyone at the county detention center cared. Black-uniformed officers, male and female, black and white, came in and out of the gray lobby. They looked and spoke to no one, except occasionally to each other.

There were 8 adults waiting for the 7:30 am visits. “Do you live in Woodruff? We lived there till our trailer burned.” “When did your son come in, last night?” Yes, he’s probably sober now.” “My daughter’s dad works at BMW. He’s raising bail for her.” “Daddy will be out before your birthday, Joey.” “Uh oh,” says little Joey.

Chico listened to the voices as he read the signs for the hundredth time: “No swimsuits, short shorts, halter tops, or revealing clothes.” You can’t wear a bikini to the jailhouse? Ask the boys on the inside what they think.

Charles Jameson (CJ) had been moved over to county after a few weeks in the old jail, a step up for him and his visitors as far as accommodations. In the old jail visitors (of which CJ had one) walked into a long, narrow, airless pea green room with black telephones on the wall separated by gray partitions. Once all visitors were in, a black iron door clanged shut with a noise and finality like the gate of Hell, making them prisoners also for 30 minutes. There was nowhere to sit, hang your coat, or pass out. You stood sweating for 30 solid minutes, speaking into a phone where the volume could

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not be turned up loud enough to hear well, to a facsimile of a human being in a Clemson orange jump suit who stood sweating on the other side of a dirty glass partition. Head sweat, mostly on the inside, blurred the glass. You couldn't rest on the floor because the phone cord was too short. You wouldn't want to sit on that floor anyway. To arrive at this oasis, you walked up a long, inclined corridor that could not have been stripped and waxed since the Reagan administration and begged admission from a snaggle-toothed 200-pound lady who you would swear had killed the real clerk and was enjoying impersonating her.

“My step-son hasn't written me in a month. I didn't realize they had to buy their own envelopes.” “And stamps.” “You can leave them some money in that machine over there.” “Yeh, \$2.50 fee each time.”

A young woman went up to the window and yelled through the thick glass, “Is Cal Mendoza in today?” like it was a hotel. Chico walked over and tapped on a small metal box. “Talk into this.” Ungrateful, she merely glared like he was flirting with her. Mendoza had moved on.

Last Friday a group of 3 men and 2 women came into the lobby laughing like they had broken the casino at Cherokee. A female officer opened a door for them and they passed through the metal detector. The officer looked at the unmoving Chico with a frown. “You a weekender?” She waved at him what looked like a spanking paddle but was a metal detector.

“No, I'm a day tripper,” Chico told her. The officer retreated unsmiling. All but one of the troop set off the metal detector and got the wand but there was no contraband.

“Can I bring my son a book to read?” asked a heavily tattooed woman. Chico

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tried to read the story on her left arm but she was shaking nervously. “We have books here,” an officer told her. “Or you can have a book mailed from the publisher.” “He’s got 500 books at home.” “Can’t bring one here.” “What about the Bible?” “What’s his religion?” “He says he’s an atheist.” “We got mysteries in our library.”

Chico stayed off to the side near the gumball machine and the sign that read “If you have any complaints ...it won’t do any good”, or something like that. As a veteran of many visits, Chico felt compelled to encourage other visitors and explain the set-up to them, but inevitably they would ask him for a ride, if he had money, or who he was visiting, all questions he did not want to answer. While waiting the obligatory 60 minutes he would go through reports from work and think about all the projects that were waiting for him.

“I like your tee shirt. When did you go to Myrtle Beach?” “I haven’t been there but this tee shirt has.”

He also thought about what he would say to CJ. All of the usual inquiries of conversation seemed ridiculous here. How are you doing? (I’m in jail) Whatcha been up to? (Waiting to get out) Having a good day? (Same as every day)

Chico and his wife had recently visited the beaches of Jacksonville, Florida, for 3 days. He would not mention that today. He didn’t want CJ to feel like he was living it up while the boy was behind bars, and most importantly CJ would want to know how Poppy could say he had little money to put on jailbird’s canteen when he was playing in the sunshine state.

Three days of squishing his toes in the sands of Florida had put him two weeks behind at work. Today he would visit for just 20 minutes, though he wore no watch.

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That would be contraband to an over vigilant officer, although how Chico could misuse a watch he did not know. Chico would be a terrible inmate. He didn't think like one. If he was in jail he'd be gripping the bars and begging, "Can we order out from a deli today?" Besides, when he wore a watch he couldn't resist looking at it every 3 minutes.

Twenty minutes today, that was it. Chico had an internal clock that was seldom more than 2 minutes off. That came from years of attendance at church services that began at 11 am and ended promptly at noon. The passage of time. How it must have slowed down for CJ.

Two very young boys chased each other around the metal chairs. CJ used to be like that, full of joy and inquisitive mischief. What happened? "Bennie, sit down now." Mom displayed her authority. Both boys sat down for 40 seconds then were up and running again while mom attended her busy cell phone. She had laid down the law and it might not get up again. Future felons, Chico thought, then realized he had spoken out loud. He looked around warily.

High overhead were TV monitors that listed the visitation rules for those who did not know how to behave in public, interspersed with slides of the interior which made the county detention center look like an attraction at Myrtle Beach, America's sand box. Long white curving corridors and clean shiny bars. A sign declared this to be a non-smoking facility. That's not what Chico had heard from CJ.

"6:30 visits," a thin black female officer in a light blue golf shirt called into the microphone. The heavy metal door buzzed and Chico got in line. A gentleman, he let the ladies in skirts go first. They passed one at a time through the metal detector, which was set off by three out of every four people. Everything is so sensitive these days. In

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fact, you would get a suspicious look if you did not set it off. What are you hiding? Out came the electronic frisk wand. “Probably your belt buckle.” “Guess I should have worn a rope,” Chico murmured. A female officer told each person “Hold out your arms,” while she scanned them briefly. “Wheee...” one of the kids yelled, like it tickled.

The lady with the 2 kids said to one of the officers, conversationally, “I heard Pete’s Restaurant down the street blew up after all that flooding.”

“Yeh,” answered the wand waver, “lot of cops used to eat there, it being just a block away.”

The tattooed lady asked gaily, “Any of them get injuries in the blast?”

29 Steps

Chico got a badge to wear to Area A. Deep buzzing sound, like an angry hornet, pull open the heavy pea green door, walk inside a large yellow open area with nothing but 4 stairways leading upward north, east, south and west. Another officer looked squarely at Chico. “You know how to get to Area A?”

Sure, Chico thought, smack your girlfriend around a few times. “Been there many times thanks,” he said quietly. The officer nodded soberly. He turned toward a steep stairway. There were 29 steps to the next floor, with a short landing at step 16. Must be so Grandpa can catch his breath. Chico kept climbing. That was his way of rebellion. Must be a good view from the top if you could see it: tall trees with beautiful fall colors, plain old houses remodeled into lawyer’s offices and bail bond joints (I’ll Fly Away, Open Doors), and a glimpse of tall buildings downtown. Downtown with its alcohol parlors and smoking dens, and homeless teens wandering the fabled streets.

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An African-American woman about 10 years younger than Chico climbed behind him energetically. When they reached the next level she moved from one partitioned area to the next looking for her man. First timer.

Chico went to the third partition on the left and leaned on a column. “Not out yet,” he said gently when the lady came around. “It takes a few minutes.”

The woman smiled nervously. “I’ve been waiting an hour. What they doing, primping?”

He smiled. “Sure. He wants to look good for you.” “Hot in here, and noisy,” she said. “Yep. Always.” Something was making an awful noise but it was not the a/c. The woman was all dressed up. Show that man what he’s missing.

Always when he first saw CJ he did not recognize him. Only because the kid walked up to the window and waved in that familiar manner did Chico know that this was CJ, little Boomba, his heir, adopted but raised from birth, in jail with the shameful signs of the felon: baggy pants and bushy hair which had not been cut in months. Haircuts cost \$8.00, which CJ would rather spend on Ramen noodles.

The gray door opened and staggering toward him was a tall brown boy who looked like so many others, approaching the glass like an animal at the zoo staring at the visitors who were waving dumbly. He was coming out of an ordered world of orange and gray, of fear and boredom, into a phone booth to connect to the lost world for a few minutes. CJ blinked, tried to focus. He studied his dad’s face for several seconds like, well, you are here. I guess you don’t hate me.

The woman in the adjoining area was quickly cooing into the glass, tapping on it. There were probably kisses on both sides of the partition. CJ picked up the phone and

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dialed, waited, then pointed to Chico's phone with a knowing smirk. He had all the procedures down perfectly and knew exactly how to negotiate life, when he was in jail. A recorded female (always) voice said "Your conversation is subject to being recorded." Wouldn't that be a fascinating job, jailhouse replay tech.

A look of relief mingled with exasperation came over CJ's face and Chico knew this was his son. The ill-fitting orange suit didn't help, so loose CJ held up the pants with one hand. Mainly it was the face, sad, sober, tense, no sign of joy.

CJ shook his head, then said "What's up, Poppy?" "Okay, how are you? Doin much?" "No. The usual. How's mom?" Mom didn't write unless CJ wrote first, so Mom didn't write. "She's ok." "Been doin anything?"

Chico thought about his 3 days in Florida, walking on the beach. He saw sailboats in the harbor. "Making a living."

A family of 3 struggled to the top of the stairs and paused to catch their breath. Behind Chico a young child leaned against a column and looked at his shoes while waiting for the head of the family to appear at the glass.

"So can you leave me twenty today?" It never took long for CJ to ask for money. "That's a lot of money," Chico told him. Between what CJ demanded and the jail required Chico's wallet was stretched thinner than taffy at the state fair. A sick inmate paid \$5.00 to see the doctor. He couldn't write a letter home without buying a stamp and envelope from the county.

"I need some food," CJ explained.

Chico pondered. "They don't feed you in there?"

"You can call it that. I don't get enough. I need snacks. Leave at least fifteen.

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See how I'm losing weight?" He held out his thin arms, almost losing the pants.

Always the same plea, leave me money. Well, it was no different than when he was on the outside.

"What did you have for dinner?" "Corn dogs." "Hey, you like corn dogs!" CJ shook his head, looked up to heaven. "Corn dogs and slaw, wow."

"I got a bologna sandwich for lunch, with potato chips," Chico offered, though he never got anywhere with CJ by sharing his own troubles. "I didn't get breakfast, except for a banana."

"Yeh, but you'll get coffee on the way to work." Sure, cause I work.

"Did you tell Cindy to visit me? She's on my list."

Chico nodded, thinking about how his daughter had cried after a jail visit. "She came one time." That was pretty weak.

"Yeh, one time. How about Mom, when is she coming?"

A fan came on somewhere and added to the noise but did not stir the heat.

"Well, it's hard for a woman to visit the jail," Chico said.

CJ rolled his eyes as the lady next to them went off in a shrill of laughter like she had just been pinched in a tender spot.

"It's not a pleasant place to be," was all Chico could think of.

"Tell me about it. A lot of moms come."

CJ ran a hand through the straggle of hair, got his hand caught momentarily then retrieved it.

"So," Chico said, "what keeps you busy?" He imagined CJ shooting basketball out in "the yard", or playing Spades with some guy called Razor.

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“I’m trying to get a Scrabble tournament going,” CJ growled with a smirk.

“You playing ball, watching TV, working...getting counseling?”

CJ shook his shaggy head. With his facial hair, youth, and palm tree hairdo he looked like a typical mixed race kid who is picked up for being in the right place in the wrong skin. Only this time when his girlfriend hit, he hit back. “Zero. This is not the Jubilee. I just sit and do nothing until I go to court. Could be months.”

Chico nodded. His brain went through the conversation catalog, stopping at “C”. “How’s the coffee?” CJ loved cream and sugar with a little coffee.

“I get some with breakfast. I could get my own coffee maker for \$16.00.”

Eyebrows danced hopefully. It always came back to how much cash CJ needed to thrive in the hoosgau. Well, who wouldn’t feel that way?

CJ fixed his eyes on Chico and got close to the glass. “What about my bail, what’s up with that? Any chance? I got to get out of here. I got to find a job and pay some bills.” CJ got scarily responsible when he was behind bars.

“\$1600 is a lot of money. My first car cost that much. My present car is worth about that much.” Chico smiled with satisfaction at a point well-made.

“You could sell it,” CJ suggested.

“Okay,” Chico said, rocking back in his thrift store Rockports, “now we are getting somewhere.”

CJ banged his head on the glass. Chico thought it was unintentional, but he pulled his head back and banged it again 2 more times.

Chico looked around anxiously. “Don’t do that.” There were no officers in the room but no doubt they were watching on cameras.

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CJ hitched up the orange pants and looked desperately at his dad. "I got to get out of this place before I die. Take up a collection at church. I'll pay them back. There's this guy who is getting me a job painting houses soon as I get out, but I got to get out by the end of the month or I lose the job."

"Who is this guy? What's his name?"

"Jacko. He's in the cell next to me."

"A guy in jail has a job for you. Sounds like a sure thing."

"It is," CJ said with grinding teeth. "But I got to get out end of the month."

"His name is Jacko?" "Yeh. So what's your bosses' name, Bing?" "Everette."
"Figures."

CJ's hair must be 5 inches straight up. The extra money Chico had sent him specifically for a haircut had been spent on pop-tarts.

The door behind CJ opened and a female officer peaked in, stared vacantly for several seconds, closed the door. Behind her, briefly, Chico saw a man who resembled CJ only about 10 years older, 35-40, wiry hair, looking down at his sandals. He opened an empty hand and looked at the palm, shook his head. It seemed he had not moved in a long time. Behind him the bars and curving corridors led around in a circle back to where he stood.

Chico continued his line of reasoning. "I know you want to get out, but you are probably going to court in about a month or two for sentencing. Then chances are you will go back to jail for a while, right? Why pay \$1600 to get out for a month? Would that be worth it?"

CJ just stared at the person on the other side of the glass, the man in the khaki

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pants and striped shirt who had a job and a home. “Yes it would be worth it! For a day it would be worth it.”

“What would you do for a month?” Chico wanted to know.

Chico’s mind went blank. That usually happened after about 12 minutes of talking to his son as they tried to reason together. The phone volume could go no louder, the machine noises continued, the lady on the other side of the panel got quiet. Chico usually broke such silences with questions of faint hope. He murmured, “Where would you stay?” The statement was filled with more meaning than he intended. In other words, you can’t stay with us, and who else will put up with you?

One thing about CJ that still surprised Chico is that he was never lacking for an answer to a bottomless question. His mind no doubt flipped through a gallery of street kids, yearbooks, mug shots and obituaries. “I’ll stay on the street. I’ll walk the streets all night. Anywhere. I just want out. Outside.”

Chico found himself looking down a lot when visiting CJ, searching for something to say, finding it hard to keep contact with the sad eyes of youth that had seen too much of the world. He noticed CJ’s pathetic sandals.

He looked up. “There’s a nice pair of your running shoes in the trunk of my car. Misty gave them to me with your clothes, right after you went in. Red gel soles, very comfortable.”

CJ shrugged. “I walked a lot of miles in those shoes, waiting for the sunrise. You wear them. Looks like I’m not going anywhere soon. Tell Misty to come and see me too. She’s on my list.”

Chico was thinking, she’s the reason you are here.

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“It was all a misunderstanding. What happened just got out of control. I wasn’t myself.”

Chico tapped the phone receiver to remind CJ that the conversation was “subject to being monitored”.

“You want to come out now and go on the street, in winter?” Chico began going through the logical list he always had filed away. “It’s 38 degrees tonight. Seems none of your friends have stayed in touch.”

CJ shook his head. “I’m in a small cell for 9 months with (he lowered his voice) a guy who steals from children. I’ll take my chances.”

“Some of the people you used to hang with were not looking out for you.”

Now CJ shrugged. “Well, you don’t meet sweet Christian people out on the street, Poppy. You meet crack heads, and kids looking for a friend, looking to get high to have some fun, people the world thinks of as losers and wackos...” he let it go. “So if you could text Misty and tell her to write me, and go on Facebook and leave my jail address so SOMEone will write me. Check with my public defender about a new court date. Tell Mom I love her, and leave me \$20 on your way out.”

That sounded like a dismissal to Chico. He marveled that when CJ was in jail he was Mr. Executive. He knew what needed to be done and he gave practical instructions to anyone who might assist him. When he was out of jail, Mr. Executive bolted and Mr. Party Boy moved in, and he was borrowing Chico’s phone to call friends and ask if they wanted to “chill”.

“Can’t put your address on Facebook.” “I know that.” “\$20 is a lot of money...” “Then \$15. Net.” “They got a game room back there?” “Nix.”

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“Tell Misty...”

“You love her, come visit you.”

“Yep.”

“And...”

“And do it soon.”

“And...that you are sorry.”

CJ stared blankly.

“You are sorry for what happened, right?”

“Tell her to write me, we’ll talk about it.”

On the other side a woman’s voice said, “Tell daddy what you did last night, Nate.” Nate looked sorrowful. “I pulled the cat’s tail, daddy.” “Not that. You helped me clean the house. We’ll have a clean house when daddy comes home.”

“Guess you got to get to work,” CJ said thoughtfully, “and I’ve got to get back to my novel,” he added, eyes rolling. He moved around restlessly.

The woman with a clean house was doing a belly dance for her husband, a “this is what you are missing” jig. He loved it, laughing and nodding, but later on he would be banging his head on the wall.

“Well”, CJ suddenly shrugged off the weight of the struggle, “even if I sit here till next May, at least then I will be out (Chico felt badly that the thought passed through his mind that he would have respite until May) and then I will be chillin.” He raised a pant leg with one hand and danced a little jig, tossing his head side to side and waving a finger in the air as the sandaled toes lifted off the floor. His movements were graceful, joyful, talented. It was just a brief thing, a premature celebration, but in that moment Chico

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saw his son of 10 years ago, smart and silly, a brilliant child of 12 with a world of possibilities ahead, dancing on the porch saying ‘Let’s go somewhere, Daddy’, his mind as eager to learn something new as to have fun. Chico felt sad, but mainly for himself now. He had one son, and him in jail. His mind wandering, he stared past the figure on the other side of the great divide, running a hand through his undisciplined hair. A sad, stunned look must have lingered on his face, remembering the fading hopes he used to have for his son. He could never hide his feelings. When he looked back CJ’s eyes were fastened on his dad’s face, reading the expression, and for the second time he said, quietly, “I guess you got to get back to work. See you soon. Be good.”

“Okay, see you.” He started to hang up.

“Tell Mom I love her and that I miss her chicken pot pie. Hey, are those gladiolas I planted still blooming?”

Chico nodded as they both hung up. CJ walked the few steps to the door, an officer opened it and he stepped through.

Red Shoes

Chico had to hold onto the railing with both hands as he went down the 29 steps. It was always harder going down in answer than climbing up in anticipation. He seemed to have no energy now. A little playful dance. “Hey, daddy home!” That was how CJ greeted him when he was 5. A little dance and song. When he was a walking encyclopedia at 12 and could repair anything and cook like a chef and lead the team in scoring, he did a victory jig. Every time they went camping or to the park Chico had thought, “I’m being a good dad. My son will grow up to be someone special for all the

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time I invest in him now.”

Chico waited for the woman in the office to notice him and buzz him out. She was tall and thin with hair pulled back and wire rim glasses. Out of uniform she would have looked like a sweet old grandma. She frowned at Chico as he came to the window to pick up his driver’s license. “You done already?” Chico frowned back. Yeh, I got the hack saw to him. “Some of us have to work,” he informed her. Next time he could leave his offending belt and buckle in the car, then he and CJ could both hold up their pants while they searched for something to say.

He walked outside into the still early morning sun, blinking at the light. Tall trees were swaying. It seemed like a Sunday morning when the light was so fragile, like the earth had just been born. Cars in the parking lot stood out in intricate detail and color. Chico hated cars but he noticed the make and design of each one he passed today. Sunshine patterned through the leaves turning red and yellow. It was very quiet.

Cars flashed along the freeway to his right. He was already late for work. He pulled from his pocket the constant list of tasks that must be finished today. Then he looked up. At the street corner a light turned green. A lady in a red coat and polka dot hat crossed the street. Somewhere a crying child broke the silence.

As CJ entered his cell far above he thought about his dad going out the front door into a breezy early fall day, the swaying trees sounding like a rain shower. He imagined him going briskly across the parking lot to his car, where he glanced at the tires to be sure the air pressure was okay. His dad would remove the heavy coat he had worn because the day began cool, and switch to the lighter jacket he had placed in the backseat that morning just in case. He would notice the colors in the pavement, still wet from the

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night's rain, and recite part of a poem he had learned 20 years ago that just ran through his mind. Then his dad would go to work, where he would stay late to make up for the time he missed while visiting the felon in jail. CJ thumbed through his mystery novel then put it down.

Far below Chico suddenly remembered that he was to leave money for CJ's canteen. Reluctantly he pushed back inside. He kept hearing CJ saying "Leave me 20, leave me 18, at least 15." He saw Grandma in the office behind the glass glance at him. You done already? If only he *was* done. He quickly put a \$10 bill in the machine, plus 3 ones to cover the fee, so \$10.50 net. He felt a twinge of compassion, then he added one more dollar. Snatching his receipt, he walked back out to his car.

He sat in his Ford thinking about how he had studied to be an artist, then put that aside so he could provide for his family and be a good dad. Chico Coles raising a son, the blind leading the deaf.

Pieces of Pete's exploded restaurant were stacked in the former parking lot. Two cops stood there observing like it was a crime scene. Chico headed down the crowded Motor Mile to work, a straight 4-mile shot, but halfway there he started to slow down. An angry horn blew at him and Chico waved politely. He pulled into a coffee shop he had passed for 8 years but never visited. He got a large coffee, cream and sugar, and a pastry. A very bored employee asked, almost hopefully Chico thought, "Take out?" Chico shook his head. "Take in." He took the food to a table by a window. Traffic rolled by, poor people in a hurry. Chico nibbled the pastry. He took a sip of rich coffee and felt it ooze between his teeth.

He thought about CJ going back to his cell, sitting there now reading a book,

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looking forward to lunch already. He had been in that jail for 9 months now. Suddenly Chico was surprised to feel something almost like pride. CJ had survived in that dark world for 9 months without going crazy. He had learned the rules and routines. He wanted out but he was not begging anymore. He knew that he could survive as long as he had to. CJ had done something that neither Chico or his dad had ever done, and didn't know if they could. Even his probation officer had told CJ that he was too soft to stay alive in prison. After his first week in jail he was crying and begging to get out. Now he would say "Leave me twenty and I'm good." CJ had done something that no happy-go-lucky kid should be able to do, something amazing, maybe his greatest accomplishment in his 22 years.

After taking another bite Chico remembered something and went out to his car, opening the trunk. Inside were CJ's snazzy running shoes, red-soled. He had gotten them from a friend, trading some shoes that Chico had bought him. Oh how CJ could run. Chico never passed the high school without thinking about CJ running around the track during his one year there, ninth grade, his head high, the cocky smile of the fastest runner.

Chico slipped on the red-soled running shoes and tied them quickly, then went back into the coffee shop. The cashier looked at him a little friendlier as he walked around testing the decorated, eye-catching shoes.

They hurt.

