

Paige Bremner

Shoes That Don't Fit

At sixteen years old, while I balanced delicately on the razor-thin edge between naivety and cynicism, I met Jaylin. It was the first time I was counseling summer camp and she was the first one to arrive at the dusty cabin where my co-counselor, Song, and I had been waiting. She walked in the door with a little pink duffle and a borrowed princess sleeping bag all rolled up, dirty blonde ponytail bouncing with each step.

My mind was reeling. What if my campers wouldn't listen to me? What if they didn't like me? What if I accidentally I told them my real name, which was supposed to be a secret? All of the counselors had bird names and the campers were only supposed to learn their real names at the end of the week, but I couldn't wrap my head around answering to a new name—I still felt like the same person.

I wiped my clammy palms on my shorts and walked across the cabin to greet her. "Hi, I'm Finch," I said, "and you're the first one here, so you can pick any bed you'd like."

The corners of her mouth pushed her rosy cheeks into a mischievous little grin as if she were getting away with something. "Any one I want?"

"Anyone you want." I repeated and the way her eyes filled with joy put me at ease.

The other girls came and claimed their beds—seven in all. Jaylin was smaller and skinnier than the rest. They were all twelve or thirteen years old. Most of them were starting to develop breasts and hips, but Jaylin still looked like a little girl. She wore bright colored graphic T-shirts from the girl's department and dingy white sneakers that made her body look too small for her feet.

On Monday morning, Song told me Jaylin had wet the bed. I took the rest of the girls to brush their teeth so Jaylin wouldn't be embarrassed when Song carried her sleeping bag to the washing machine at the nurse's station. Twelve is a little old to be wetting the bed, I thought. I thought I knew everything.

On Tuesday, when I took a group of campers to the bathroom after lunch, Jaylin took off one of her sneakers and showed me a blister on her arch— still filled with liquid. Her toes had raw, reddish patches on the front and sides where the shoe had been rubbing. She hopped around the bathroom on one foot, trying to keep the other from touching the sandy floor. "They hurt," she said.

I looked around for the seventh camper, I only counted six. They never stood still. "Just wear a different pair of shoes tomorrow," I said. "Those ones are rubbing because they don't fit right." Camper number seven emerged from the stall I hadn't seen her go into.

"These are the only ones I have," Jaylin said.

"Those are the only shoes you brought to camp?" I asked.

"No," she said, "These are the only pair I have."

On Wednesday, I had to carry Jaylin's princess sleeping bag to the nurse while Song stayed with the other girls. I wore a rubber glove and pinched just a tiny bit Cinderella's dress between my fingers. I could still feel the moisture. How long had she laid on this?

On Thursday, I was in charge for bible story time and we were talking about treating others with kindness. One of the girls asked what she should do if her parents weren't treating her with kindness. I didn't know how to answer at first—this wasn't where I had expected this conversation to go. I told her she should find another adult she trusted like a teacher or a church leader to talk to.

“But then they’ll take you to foster care,” said Jaylin, “and foster parents will treat you even worse.”

I started to figure it out. Her shoes didn’t fit right, she had to borrow my shampoo, she wet the bed every night, she never wanted to change in front of anyone else. What kind of home was this little girl going back to?

On Friday, Jaylin hit another camper—didn’t seem to think anything of it. We follow the examples set for us, I guess.

On Saturday, I helped her pack her things and I told her my real name, but I didn’t quite feel like the person that went with that name anymore. I told my supervisor that I thought Jaylin was being abused, but after that, I couldn’t do anything—I had to let her go. I cried until I felt empty.

Jaylin taught me that I don’t know everything. Not everyone has a mom and dad who love them and build them up every day like I do. Some people just have one pair of shoes and they don’t fit right.

