

Editor's Note

In her essay “My Mr. 50s,” author Jaclyn Burt uses vivid descriptions to explore how a favorite accessory helped shape her identity. Do any of these descriptions stand out to you? If so, why? How does Burt’s use of language bring the relationship between objects and the construction of the self to life for the reader?

Although the author is writing about her glasses, do more universal themes emerge? She discusses the way the glasses helped create an identity for her, but says, “ultimately you’re the one that changes you.” What do you think she means by this? As you read, pay attention to how the role of Burt’s glasses evolves as the essay progresses. What claim is she making about identity and objects? Who is she addressing? As a reader, how does the author’s use of second person perspective influence the purpose of the piece? Try to identify Burt’s audience: Her peers? Teachers? Others? How does the writer’s perspective change the way the audience receives a message?

My Mr. 50s

Jaclyn Burt

According to my doctor, I have perfect eyesight. But I wear glasses. They have thick, rectangular black brows and gold lining on the frame and they are passé. They’re called Mr. 50s glasses. I didn’t grow up in the 50s or even inherit them from a dead relative; in fact, I’ve only had them for a year. I got them because I liked the way I looked in them, and ever since I started wearing these old relics, I’ve been wondering if belongings can make us belong.

The summers in my hometown can get too hot to go to the beach or even sit outside, so my friends and I have discovered a cool alternative—bargain hunting! About a year ago on one such pursuit, we ended up in a grimy second-hand store on Poway Road. You could feel the years in the balled-up cotton on the clothes from far too many trips to a rusty washing machine. Now, I’m no priss, but I could never wear those clothes because I always envisioned fat men peeling garments off dead bodies on the side of the road and transporting them in the back of a baby blue pickup truck to these musty shops. So instead, I went for the accessories bin, which is far less intimidating. After several minutes of unearthing, I came up for breath with a pair of thick-rimmed glasses like the ones you might see your Grandpa wearing in those old family photos. I had a strange feeling while holding them—like the kind I used to get when I would imagine myself as a spy or someone mysterious. I polished them off and tried them on. The winds didn’t blow the door open and the earth didn’t crack

at my feet and pull me under, but I did feel a little surge of curious confidence on my ears and nose.

I didn't take them off all day. When I wore them I looked goofy, clever, boyish, and mischievous, but I felt sassy and smart, and I'd smile like I had a secret. I experimented with different accents, voices, and personas trying to uncover the personality and power they held. A personality, however, cannot be unraveled in a day. So that summer, being the social butterfly that I am, I would meet people, go places, see and be seen and I'd wear the Mr. 50s until they grew on me. Pretty soon people identified me with them and would treat me differently as a result. I wore them to a picnic once and started talking to Joven, an exceedingly opinionated character who had scared me in the past with his vocally bitter criticism for those who opposed his radical ways. Although my friends and I had been around him often, I don't think I'd ever spoken to him, too afraid he'd decide to denounce his vegan values and bite my head off. That day was different, though, and I had my good luck charms on to prove it. I carried myself in a collected manner when I spoke and was surprised at the unusual reverence Joven displayed and the respect he gave me for my opinions. It was as if he saw me as an equally experienced and knowledgeable individual before we started talking so he didn't try to force his views on me. These glasses not only gave me a collected demeanor but oddly enough, they seemed to give people a pre-conceived notion of what I was all about. People began to see me like I'd seen people like Joven; I was an admired trailblazer.

The paradox of people in all generations is that everyone strives to be different, and when others see that one unique being, they'll follow along too, thinking, "I want to be my own person just like they are." Pretty soon, it's popular to be unpopular and it's trendy to go against the grain. The more I wore these out of date glasses, the more people would evaluate me as something I wasn't. I didn't have it all together, and I wasn't trying to be different. A "popular unpopular" movement these past few years has been the "indie" or individual persuasion. From an object I bought for 10 dollars, people suspected I might be an anarchist who didn't care what people thought about me. They suspected I might be a vegan who didn't shower much and rode my bike everywhere. None of that was true, but the glasses did come to define the things I was interested in. I found myself more enthralled with eclectic music, nature, and delicious vegan ice creams, but I still wasn't the character that these glasses defined me as. Nonetheless, I like to act a part that was written for me. This disguise allowed me to behave with less self-consciousness; it made me feel I was a completely unique individual who didn't have to answer to anyone. Strangely, as time went on, these character traits became more a part of my personality and I felt more confident even without the glasses.

In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the character Rosalind is only able to realize her undying love for Orlando when she is in costume. Disguises can be liberating and ironically revealing. What my disguise revealed about me was the fact that I was insecure about the way I was perceived by others. I didn't need to rely on a mask to protect myself. I am what I am (not Popeye, but Jaclyn) and I think the only way to see things clearly is to see things myopically for a while. Looking back, I would like to think that a pair of magical glasses changed my life and my personality, but realistically, I changed over time because of my experiences with friends, family, and growing up. Possessions can make you act differently, and can make others perceive you differently, but ultimately you're the one that changes you. Maybe the glasses helped me discover something about myself, but in the future I don't think I'll need them to define my personality. I'll give my Mr. 50s away to a second-hand store, and some lost person in the same loop of life and time will give them a try because it's fun letting some disguise define you for a while. It may just help you to see yourself a little more clearly.

Jaclyn Burt is a biological sciences major.