

In Search of Marge

By Bobby Hulme-Lippert

If only I hadn't bought the red one.

I'd arrived to buy blue jeans, but upon arriving to the American Eagle store the only thing I could see was the singularly most attractive shirt I'd ever laid eyes upon.

From a distance, it had an obvious measure of 'grunge' conveyed through its various hues of mud red and crimson. Admittedly, I liked the way it suggested Counting Crows earthiness and Nirvana-inspired rebellion even if my six-CD changer back at home had the following cued up at precisely that same moment: Chicago, Shania Twain, the Jackson 5, Boyz II Men, Jimmy Buffett, and the Greatest Hits of the 80s.

In fact, unless Mr. Jones came on the radio, I rarely listened to Counting Crows, and I honestly could not name a single song by Nirvana. But like I said, the hues of muted, mud red only suggested their music and their ways. It was just enough that you might assume familiarity but not so much that you might ask me a question about Adam Durst's latest interview on MTV.

Once closer to the shirt, I noted the plaid textures. Defining, intersecting lines that spoke of order and limits. Hewn with subtle grunge, but mostly structured, organized, and predictable. Yes, that was the one for me.

I walked toward it and took a sleeve between my fingers to note something new, something surprising. The material was unlike any other shirt I had owned. It was a seersucker material that gave the shirt a unique airiness – like it floated on the body. And the subtle seersucker bumps added another dimension to the earthiness. A dapperness. A refinement, even.

In 8th grade, I could provide you nothing more than the dictionary definition of “paradox,” but I readily intuited the way in which the shirt captured so much of the complexity of who I was. Or who I thought I should be. Or who I hoped to become. Plus, the shirt uniquely declared myself acceptable to a wide swath of social groups. There is nothing dearer to an 8th grader than knowing that they belong. And the more ways one can belong, the better.

Last decision: medium or large?

I went to the dressing room and tried on the medium. “Is it large enough?” In the mid-90s, baggy, oversized shirts was the look. Remember Will Smith on *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*? He pulled off some of the most classic polos and plaids of the oversized days. And who didn’t want to float into a room with that kind of swagger?

I tried on the large. “Is it too big?” When I raised my arms parallel to my shoulders, the sleeves of the shirt hung with enough room to slide a couple of baseball bats right in there alongside my arm. I was nearly wearing a large red sheet with just enough contour for one to observe that, “well yes, it is technically a shirt on that boy.”

No matter. I spent 20 minutes pacing the American Eagle store back and forth with a singular question pressing me into unending angst: “Medium or Large?”

Medium risks looking too much like a middle schooler properly dressed by a parent. Large risks an extreme bagginess my level of coolness may not be able to pull off. I may be shouting “Will Smith” so loudly that people will deride the lie outright.

Where was the Marge size that finally arrived circa 2015? Why had the fashion genius who married “large” and “medium” not been born 20 years earlier?

“Oh Marge!” - the Promise Land between a kid posing for the family photo and a rebel without a cause. The space of carefully crafted cool-but-not-too-cool, fun-but-not-too-wild. Marge possibilities could have given back to my teenage self hours upon hours of angst spent figuring out the right size.

I longed for Marge without knowing Marge by name or reality. The whole decision was about getting as close to Marge as possible.

I headed to the counter, and brought forth \$30 – as high a price as I had ever paid for a shirt, but can you really put a price on all that those threads would declare about me?

“Great shirt,” the clerk said as she folded my shirt and placed it in the American Eagle bag.

I hoped so. Medium it was. Medium it would be. *Was it enough?*

I was nervous about wearing the shirt to school because it remained unclear as to whether the medium size might overshadow the wonderful paradox I so loved about the rest of the shirt. Instead, I packed it for an upcoming 8th grade French class trip to Quebec. Best to experiment with the first glimpse of “new me,” or “fully me” in a city of strangers.

On our first night in Quebec, our French teacher, Ms. Chapman, had arranged for us all to have dinner at a nice restaurant. “It’s a casual-nice kind of place.”

The American Eagle shirt called from within my suitcase. That shirt was made for “casual-nice” – also for “grunge-refined,” “Portland-Charleston,” “garage band-golf,” and any other assorted combinations nearly unheard of. That’s how good the shirt was.

I finished buttoning it up in the hotel room, and noted both the lightness and the way the lightness somehow pulled my whole body up. It was a strong shirt! It drew my posture upright, it softened my shoulders into place. The only question was whether or not I was playing it too conservative with the Medium. Soon, the world let me know.

Then George Lewis happened.

George was a classmate and friend. He was gregarious, fun, kind, and he could also be wild. He loved watching WWF wrestling, and he equally enjoyed trying out the moves that he saw on the television on quieter, unsuspecting friends. I was often a prime candidate for an experimental move.

Pile Drivers, Body Slams, Arm Twists, Leg Twists – you name the body contortion, and George had a move to make that contortion happen. I was fairly helpless before him. Not only was he bigger and more energized by the prospect of wrestling, I was timid. I only ever put up enough resistance not to get hurt. Usually, my best resistance was to remove myself from whatever room we were in if I noted his energy level rising.

However, on this night, we were in a hotel room in Quebec, Canada, and I had nowhere to go. As we finished dressing for dinner, I could see the energy rising with him. Within moments that gleeful energy had a hold of me and prepared to pile-drive or body slam or whatever would happen this go-around. Except.

Except this time I was wearing the Greatest Shirt in the World. I could not risk harm to it.

“George, this is a new shirt. Get off!” I pulled away, and his hand lunged to grab me. I avoided his grasp, but the bottom of my shirt did not. Apparently even the Medium had a good amount of excess fabric because George caught a bunch of the back of my shirt in his fist, and he promptly pulled.

There are certain sounds in this world that cannot be forgotten.

The first cry of your newborn. The fire engine screeching around the corner to get to your next-door neighbor’s house ablaze. The deflated moan of the crowd when you are at the plate, bases loaded, and need just one run to win - and you strike out.

I shall never forget the zip-like sound of those complex, crimson threads being torn in half.

George managed to tear the shirt from the bottom left hand corner to halfway up the shirt.

“George!” I yelled, finding a voice of frustration and anger and clarity even I did not know I had.

It cried, it grieved, it demanded. It ached, it longed, and it stood. But one syllable, it nevertheless blanketed the room.

George obviously knew nothing about this voice of mine either. His hand released, he stepped back.

“Oh hey. I’m so sorry.” His voice soft. He meant it.

He even offered to pay for a new shirt when we got back home. I took him up on it. “Yeah.

Thanks. I mean...it’s new, and I like it.”

That night I put on a green polo shirt I had also worn in the 7th grade. It was fine, but dull.

Appropriate, but childish. And I was sad because I had paid so much to become so much of who I wanted to be, or could be, or would be. The sense of loss sunk deep within. *If only I had stuck to blue jeans; if only I hadn’t purchased the red perfection.*

Something, however, did change. George stopped pile-driving me. And body-slamming me. And arm-and-leg twisting me. We remained friends. Good friends, actually, throughout high school.

That visceral cry amid the tearing shook our relationship into a new spot. Closer to equals, and safer for me. Where had that voice come from? *What if I hadn't risked red?*

A week later I was back at that same American Eagle with \$30 that George gave me. I went to the same rack, felt the fabric again, and pulled another shirt off the rack. I gazed into the fabrics which promised to cover me afresh with earthy sophistication. I could already feel the strength that shirt would give.

“Great shirt,” the A clerk said as she folded my shirt and placed it in the American Eagle bag. I hoped so. Large it was. Large it would be. *Was it too much?*