

Thank you, M'am

(Langston Hughes)

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but a hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, dark, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with a sudden single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance. Instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk and his legs flew up. The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

After that the woman said, "Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here."

She still held him tightly. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes'm."

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?"

The boy said, "I didn't aim to."

She said, "You a lie!"

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman.

"Yes'm," said the boy.

"Then I won't turn you loose," said the woman. She did not release him.

"Lady, I'm sorry," whispered the boy.

"Um-hum! your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain't you got no body home to tell you to wash your face?"

"No'm," said the boy.

"Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman, starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, frail and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

The woman said, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"

"No'm," said the being dragged boy. "I just want you to turn me loose."

"Was I bothering you when I turned that corner?" asked the woman.

“No'm.”

“But you put yourself in contact with me,” said the woman. “If you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones.”

Sweat popped out on the boy's face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still held him by the neck in the middle of her room.

She said, “What is your name?”

“Roger,” answered the boy.

“Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face,” said the woman, whereupon she turned him loose – at last. Roger looked at the door – looked at the woman – looked at the door – and went to the sink.

“Let the water run until it gets warm,” she said. “Here's a clean towel.”

“You gonna take me to jail?” asked the boy, bending over the sink.

“Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere,” said the woman. “Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat, and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe you ain't been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?”

“There's nobody home at my house,” said the boy.

“Then we'll eat,” said the woman. “I believe you're hungry – or been hungry – to try to snatch my pocketbook!”

“I want a pair of blue suede shoes,” said the boy.

“Well, you didn't have to snatch my pocketbook to get some suede shoes,” said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. “You could have asked me.”

“M'am?”

The water was dripping from his face, the boy looked at her. There was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face, and not knowing what else to do, dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next. The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, run!

The woman was sitting on the daybed. After a while she said, “I were young once and I wanted things I could not get.”

There was another long pause. The boy's mouth opened. Then he frowned, not knowing he frowned.

The woman said, “Um-hum! You thought I was going to say but, didn't you? You thought I was going to say, but I didn't snatch people's pocketbooks. Well, I wasn't going to

say that." Pause. Silence. "I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son. Everybody's got something in common. So you sit down while I fix up something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable."

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an icebox. Mrs. Jones got up and went behind the screen. The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse, which she had left behind her on the daybed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room, away from the purse, where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner of her eye if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman not to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

"Do you need somebody to go to the store?" asked the boy, "may be to get some milk or something?"

"Don't believe I do," said the woman, "unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here."

"That will be fine," said the boy.

She heated some lima beans and beef she had in the icebox, made the cocoa, and set the table. The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him. Instead, as they ate, she told him about her job in a hotel beauty shop that stayed open late, what the work was like, and how all kinds of women came in and out, blondes, redheads, and Spanish. Then she cut him a half of her ten-cent cake.

'Eat some more, son," she said.

When they were finished eating, she got up and said, "Now here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto my pocketbook nor anybody else's – because shoes got by devilish ways will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But from here on in, son, I hope you will behave yourself."

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it. "Good night! Behave yourself, boy!" she said, looking out into the street as he went down the steps.

The boy wanted to say something other than, "Thank you, m'am," to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but although his lips moved, he couldn't even say that as he turned at the foot of the barren stoop and looked up at the large woman in the door. Then she shut the door.

Theme

A woman taught a wicked boy right from wrong when he tried to snatch her purse late at night. The boy lost his balance and fell on the sidewalk. She caught the boy by his neck and gave him some jerks, and dragged him to her house where she directed him to wash his dirty face. Then she offered him a cake to eat and ten dollars to buy a new pair of suede shoes. The boy became very much impressed by the good conduct of the lady and promised to be a good boy.

Reading Notes

slung	(past of sling) looped round
taking off full blast	running away at full speed
rattled	make short, sharp sounds quickly
stoop	bend the body forward and downward
frail	weak
willow-wild	thin that can easily be bent like willow-wild (a kind of shrub)
popped out	came out quickly
suede	a kind of soft leather made from the skin of goat
frowned	draw the eyebrow to show puzzlement
embarrass	make to feel ashamed
latching onto	cling to, getting possession of

EXERCISES

1. Choose the correct answer.

- i. What was the woman carrying?
 - a) a rod
 - b) a bag
 - c) a hammer
 - d) a large purse
- ii. From where was she coming?
 - a) factory
 - b) hotel beauty shop
 - c) office
 - d) college
- iii. What had happened to her?
 - a) a boy made a request for help
 - b) a boy tried to help her
 - c) a boy begged ten dollars
 - d) a boy tried to snatch her purse
- iv. The boy washed his face on the direction of
 - a) the police officer.
 - b) his father.
 - c) the woman.
 - d) his uncle.

- iv. What was the conduct of the people when they saw the incident?
- v. How did the boy look physically?
- vi. What was the condition of the boy when the woman gave him a few jerks?
- vii. Why did the woman ask the boy to wash his face?
- viii. Why didn't the boy run from the house of the woman?
- ix. Why didn't the woman watch the boy while preparing a dish?
- x. What was the nature of the woman's job?

4. Write the answers to the following questions in 100 - 150 words.

- i. Write the incident in your own words.
- ii. What was the effect of the behaviour of the woman on the boy?
- iii. Why did she treat the boy nicely in her home after punishing him in the street?

5. Use the correct form of the verb in each sentence.

- i. She (carry) the purse slung across her shoulder.
- ii. The boy (fall) on his back on the sidewalk.
- iii. Some people (turn) to look.
- iv. She (drag) the boy inside, down a hall.
- v. Mrs. Jones (get) up and went behind the screen.
- vi. The boy (take) care to sit on the far side of the room.
- vii. She (make) the cocoa, and set the table.
- viii. A hotel beauty shop (stay) open late.
- ix. She (lead) him down the hall to the front door.
- x. The boy (want) to say something.

6. Punctuate the following lines.

well you didnt have to snatch my pocketbook to get some suede shoes said mrs luella bates washington jones you could have asked me

7. Use the following prepositions in your own sentences.

in, across, off, up, around