



Mall Together Now

A mother's reluctant journey to the white-hot center of the outlet center. By Firoozeh Dumas

For her 13th birthday, my daughter wanted to go to the mall with her friend Jacqueline. This was not the mall near our house, but a discount mall we had never visited. We don't have a TV (my husband and I choose not to), but my daughter heard about the place from the girls at school. She looked it up on the Internet, repeatedly went over all the stores, made a list of the ones she wanted to visit and decided that it was indeed worth the half-hour drive.

I hate malls, but I was not about to drop the girls off by themselves. I invited Jacqueline's mom to come with us. I didn't tell her that I was inviting her because I hate malls and needed someone to listen to me complain about malls. I just told her that lunch was on me. I like Jacqueline's mom, and I would have preferred taking her somewhere where I would not be in a prolonged bad mood, but daughters turn 13 only once, and it was hard to say no to her one birthday request.

My aversion to malls goes back to when I was 7. That was the year we moved to America from Iran. One of the first times we went to a mall, a man approached us, talking with urgency. We didn't speak English, but my brother Farid said this man was selling a religion. We let him know that we only spoke Persian, but then pulled out a sheet of paper, in Persian! He wanted to tell us about Jesus Christ. We told him we were Muslim, which felt like cheating since we never practiced Islam. My dad even ate ham, but this man was not deterred. He was pumped up! We finally got rid of him, but from then on I decided that malls were places to approach with caution, and maybe with a Koran, a Bible and Torah, for good measure.

Thirty years later, my dislike for malls has nothing to do with religion but with culture. Right around the time junior-high-school girls started wearing thongs, I decided that there was something very wrong with the choices being offered to young girls, and that malls epitomized this wrong something. At one point I sat my daughter down for a talk about it. I explained to her that my dream for her was that she would do whatever she wanted in life. I told her that my beloved Aunt Sedigeh had to get married when she was 14, even though she was the smartest person in the family. That was life in Iran back then, I said, but this is

Firoozeh Dumas is the author of "Funny in Farsi" and "Laughing Without an Accent."

America! Girls can do, in theory, anything they want. But there are so many bad choices to navigate, and as far as I'm concerned, I told her, certain clothing and the mindless desire for it is the beginning of the end. My daughter told me that she understood about my aunt since, Lord knows, this was not the first time she had heard that story, but that she still liked to go to the mall.

On the day of our big excursion, I packed two protein bars and timed our trip to get there right when it opened to avoid parking drama. When we arrived there were almost no other cars there. The girls could barely contain their excitement, so we decided to let them go off by themselves for an hour. This particular indoor mall not only had endless stores, but also rows of portable kiosks in front of and in between the stores. It reminded me of a science experiment in grade school: the teacher put big rocks in a jar, then when you thought it was full, she added some smaller rocks. Then when you thought it was full, she added water. This mall was just missing the water. The kiosks were in every nook and cranny, selling key chains shaped like the 50 states, costumes for pets, bamboo plants, personalized lollipops and nail decals. "Can't you just see the trajectory from dressing your pug in faux leopard, to wearing palm-tree nail decals to deciding that you don't want to go to college?" I asked Jacqueline's mom. She couldn't quite see it, but she could see the Neiman Marcus outlet.

We went in, and the next thing I knew I was on my third trip to the fitting room, arms loaded with clothes I cannot normally afford. That's when Jacqueline's mom told me that we had forgotten to meet the girls. "Let's come back," I said, parting with the clothes longingly, experiencing a feeling usually reserved for loved ones leaving on trips overseas.

The mall was crowded by this time, and we passed groups of teenage girls with too much makeup; sari-clad Indian women shopping with multiple generations of their families; Hispanic guys checking out the Hispanic girls who were all dolled up; and moms with toddlers, strollers, diaper bags and sippy cups. We found the girls at our designated meeting spot. "You're 15 minutes late," my daughter said. "We were worried." I apologized to the responsible members of our party, explaining how I'd gotten caught up in all the great Dana Buchman clothes.

In the end, my daughter gave me a lesson not only in punctuality but also in restraint, buying one pair of jeans and one blouse and no nail decals. Which is less than I can say. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY HOLLY WALES