

## Gifts

When I was six years old, I gave away my pencil case. Diane Wang said, "I like your pencil case. Can I have it?" and I just handed it over.

"Sure!" I pushed it across my desk and sat very still and tried not to cry.

Diane pivoted back to face the teacher, two gleaming black braids lying smoothly down her back.

If she thought she was going to be my friend after that – well...she sort of was.

I was in the first grade when I gave Diane my pencil case. I was the new kid in a nice Los Angeles private school. All the other parents were several tax brackets above mine, but somehow they still stretched to accommodate tuition, at least for one year. The other girls had violin teachers and friends from kindergarten.

And I was never poor. Not Dickens poor, no porridge dinners or fingerless gloves. Just middling-lower-middle. Store-brand juice boxes, fake Pumas from Payless Shoe Store: everything was just a little bit wrong. The worst I ever suffered was a poverty of approximations. But I suffered it just the same.

Pencil cases were big in 1985. The biggest of all was the shining red vinyl, fully automated, double-sided Hello Kitty pencil case from the newly opened Sanrio store in the posh Beverly Center shopping mall, a pencil case with a thermometer, push-button eraser compartments, and a split-level pen tray. A pencil case that cost a whopping \$20 – and that in 1985. I wanted that pencil case as much as I've ever wanted anything. And my parents bought it for me. And I gave it to Diane. Because she asked.

So Diane had real Pumas, a swing set and a swimming pool, and now she had a Hello Kitty pencil case with split-level pen tray.

Even now, I have to bite back offering up my possessions every time a coworker admires my shoes, my purse, or my car. I'm lucky to still have my wedding ring.

Why? The obvious answer is, I want people to like me. I think, if I can ease the path of lasting friendship with a few giveaways, why not? In the end, it didn't work with Diane, but this time it might.

But it's not just my desire to be liked. I don't want to see reflected on another face the looks I must have given Diane's authentic Vans. I want to be liked, loved, adored. But I don't want to be envied. It makes me feel guilty, and once the guilt is there, it ruins everything anyway. It takes all the fun out of the handbag. Diane had everything but she didn't have my pencil case, so I could never enjoy that case. Better to just throw it away. Or give it to Diane.

My father always says about some dubiously deserving person, “He’s confused being lucky with being smart.” My father hasn’t been that lucky. Me, I have a few nice handbags, high heels, and rings. I don’t confuse smart and lucky.

These days I don’t usually give things away when someone compliments me. Instead I just smile and demur, but the compulsion is the same. So when I blush and say, “Oh, thank you,” or “I got it on sale,” or “It’s not a real Tiffany,” I’m still fighting the same impulse. To say, “I’m sorry. I’m not smart, I’m just lucky, and I’d gladly give some of this luck to you.”