

Absence of Presence

I found a black parka abandoned in the tall file cabinet while looking for an old syllabus. The jacket, perhaps stored here on purpose over the summer, had a ripe odor, like my son's laundry bag in his college dormitory.

At first, I thought it belonged to a particular young man, one of the three other adjunct professors, who shares my small basement office at the university. We teach on different days, and our paths had never crossed. I posted a note on the bulletin board, but nobody seemed to know whose jacket it was.

I thought about throwing it in the trash, but first I decided it would be a good idea to inspect the item of clothing more carefully. After all, we endure cold winters here in New England. It was a men's size small and the inside label read "Prada." Wow, I thought, like in "The Devil Wears Prada." This item was expensive and someone was surely missing it. I called Lost and Found at the university police department, but nobody had reported it.

The outside pocket contained a two-year-old ticket stub from Lufthansa, the German airline. A dry cleaning tag with Chinese letters was attached to the inside loop near the collar. Could the owner be a wealthy international student, perhaps Asian? Perhaps he didn't bother tracking it down and simply purchased another on his next trip to Newbury Street, Boston's center for boutiques and upscale shopping.

The next time I held office hours, one of my male students, a self-described fashionista, stopped in for some advice on his essay assignment, and I mentioned the jacket. He inspected it carefully and decided it would fit.

"I'll take it if nobody claims it," he offered.

The black vinyl Prada jacket, size small, has spent more time in my office than I or any of my suitemates have over the past year. One of my fellow adjuncts thinks she might now remember whom the parka belongs to. She sent an email, but nobody responded. Meanwhile, I've taken the liberty to air the jacket out on the coat rack. It seems puffier now, perked up from the attention after all those months in suspended animation, like a bear over a long winter. And what a brutal winter it's been so far.

The other day I carefully folded it up like in a boutique and placed it on the empty shelf by the wall. The

Prada parka is the first thing you see when entering the office. It occurs to me that none of the adjuncts could afford it, yet we are bound by some ethical standard, perhaps far above that of the jacket's owner, to keep it safe.

Two weeks later: the jacket has disappeared. No note, no thank you, no explanation. A literature professor of mine once coined a phrase, "the absence of presence," which seems apt.