

My Lost Kingdom

ON LUNCH BREAKS, escaping my gray government desk, I'd wander the aisles of a kingdom floating a few steps above street level in a 19th-century building. It was a domain of great calm and beauty filled not with gold and jewels, but shoes the colors of wildflowers. I can hear you groaning, but bear with me. Agreed, a shoe is not a shoe is not a shoe, and doctoral theses have been written on the subject from the perspective of sociology, history, anthropology and, above all, contemporary culture—especially after “Sex and the City” made Manolo Blahniks and Jimmy Choos fetish objects for a certain kind of aspiring urbanite. My awareness of all that came later and had no bearing on me. I was only twenty-two, not Cinderella trying on her missing glass slipper, and I wasn't prone to analyzing why I gravitated to the kingdom, a cavernous store called Anbar's Shoes. I just knew that it was a refuge for me.

My soul-deadening office job during New York's 1970s downturn was only temporary, I believed, and I was destined for a satisfying career elsewhere—a sure-footed executive editor (a democratic mentor-type, of course), wearing what I just might discover in the next hour. The floorboards dated to the Industrial Era of this former factory, windows filtered wan light from twelve feet above, dust motes moved lazily in the air, but no matter. Atop each neat stack of boxes, one sample was posed, toe turned outward, ready to be filled and then to flee the dreariness that awaited me after the magic hour had ended. Those shoes were made for dancing straight into my future.

I'd learned about this self-service store from a co-worker. Before I ever heard of Philippine First Lady Imelda Marcos and her 3,000 pairs of shoes, there was Sally, a hard-working civil servant who had been treating herself to a new pair with each biweekly paycheck. This had been going on for years before I arrived, desperate for a job after college, and so it was rare for me to see Sally wearing the same shoes twice. As her fleet fingers typed unending bureaucratic reports, underneath the grim metal desk her acid-green platform shoes tapped to a different beat. One visit to the store and I was hooked. Now, so many years and shoes later, I stop and ask myself why the store was not a store but a kingdom to me. The shoes' effect was transporting—a reaction that to my adult self at first might seem over the

top, even for a very young woman. That is, until I did some research and came across a 2015 BBC culture feature, “Ten Shoes That Changed the World.” Seeing those inflated words, which I half-expected to carry the subtitle “The Power and the Glory,” made me think that as a devoted subject in the Kingdom of Shoes, I was actually a paragon of maturity and modulation.

It turns out that footwear fascination—okay, obsession—has been around for millennia. The chattering classes have called shoes “cultural signifiers,” objects that speak volumes about their wearers and their society. Of course, they’re status symbols, too, beginning with sandals embellished with pure gold leaf and shaped nothing like the human foot—sound familiar?—worn by Roman fashionistas (30 BC-300 AD). The fact that they may also inflict torture on the wearer is beside the point.

Just about any shoe style we think is modern is not. Platform shoes worn by glam rockers, not to mention Vivienne Westwood’s eight-inchers that sent Naomi Campbell tumbling on the catwalk? An old concept recycled through the ages. High-class courtesans in feudal Japan wore a lacquered version called “getas” that were the same insane height—forcing them to walk very slowly for better viewing by males. In ancient Greece, actors who wanted the advantage of standing out on a crowded stage donned platform shoes. And in the 14th century Ottoman Empire, clogs elevated bathers’ feet over scummy, slippery floors. Last year, London’s Victoria and Albert Museum curated an exhibit, *Shoes: Pleasure and Pain*. Among the 200 pairs of shoes on view were mother-of-

pearl Turkish bath clogs towering nearly a foot high.

After viewing the exhibition, *Guardian* reporter Kathryn Hughes wrote, “Shoes matter... because they mark the place where our bodies contact the world and stories begin.” This strikes me as a brilliant observation.

My story was just beginning that year of my first full-time job. In the middle of what felt like a Depression in my beloved city, fashion was an explosion of saturated colors—hot pink, lemon yellow, turquoise, violet. Browsing the store, stocked with scores of European imports, I could have been strolling through an Italian garden or Spanish sunflower field. Despite their pedigrees, the shoes were deeply discounted, and in my cloak-and-dagger fantasy, kidnapped from plush-carpeted salons where elegant Old World salesmen knelt at the feet of rich women. Safely sequestered on a nondescript, even seedy side street downtown, they had found a better home where they would be appreciated by women with flat wallets but fine taste.

I would stroke the buttery leather, admire the creativity and craftsmanship of unique appliques or an enameled buckle, and practice a confident strut before a wavy mirror. Once when I returned the beyond-my-budget objects of desire to their stack, sighing audibly, the silver-haired owner propositioned me. I can’t recall the words, but I got the drift: for my favors, I could choose whatever shoes I wanted, whenever I wanted. He was whispering in my ear, spreading the riches of the Kingdom of Shoes before me. I stuttered “No, thank you” politely, before bolting.

My favorite purchase had a mythic, Proustian impact on me—proper navy blue pumps from Italy, but hand-painted with a dense, pink paisley pattern. They walked a fine line, the attempted balancing act of a person still in formation: admit into my life the classic influence of past times but subvert every inch with a quirky spirit. I wore those shoes more than a decade. Giving them up felt like losing part of myself.

I'm surprised I wrote that last sentence. But on reflection, not really, because shoes are so powerfully associated with personality. I think of my friend Christine. The first time I met her, she made an unforgettable impression in her knee-high gladiator sandals which, decades ago, were a rarity. I assumed she was an individualist, the kind of person who wasn't afraid to speak up for her beliefs. My first impression, based on those "warrior" sandals, proved over time to be right. And I think of my mother's sister, my Aunt Anna, who advanced to become forelady at a prestigious menswear company in the garment district and always dressed elegantly, head to toe. We lived in the same two-family house and every morning as she left, I heard the click-clack sound of her heels—they were always pumps—against the pavement, loud at first and then fading as she turned the corner. As the *Guardian* reporter might say, it was the sound of a woman literally striking out—hitting the ground, connecting with the world—in an era when few women were employed outside the home. In my mind, my aunt's shoes were part of her identity.

And I think of my mother, ten years younger than Anna, and her aura of glamour, of her pro-

nouncements to me even as a child about what well-dressed women should wear and avoid (red shoes were the mark of a fallen woman; my black patent-leather Mary Janes were just for summer wear). In my old files I find one of first post-adolescent poems:

MOTHER'S SHOES

Suede, patent, satin, kid and silk—
always at least 20 pairs
stacked neatly out of view
like piles of underwear.

I see her in matinal meditation
poised before the closet like Monet
before his palette, seeking the perfect shade.
She selects, wriggles into indigo
and clicks smartly up the sidewalk,
another Monroe.

Mother's shoes came and went.
In the 50s, spiked heels, lethal toes,
then it's chic to be sensible
and the swift, sure, reversal:
ballet flats, stacked heels, square toes.
Styles adopted, styles rejected:
vinyl boots, ankle straps,
earth shoes, rubber soles.

Lesson I: Wear a good pair of shoes
and you'll look like a million.

Lesson II: Tactful women, like leather shoes,
always give a little.

Mother's shoes came and went,
came and went, nesting each night,
foundlings in rows.

Going back even further into early childhood, I recall the happiness of playing dress up with my mother's hats, gloves, jewelry and scarves. But nothing connected me to her and to an adult future more strongly than slipping my little feet into her size 8 pumps. The loud clomping sound the shoes made as I paraded through the apartment was satisfying, as if to announce, "Here I am!" Although I was much too young to know that a deeper metaphor of filling another's shoes was at work, I seemed to sense the shoes' larger significance in a visceral way.

Today you can't think about shoes as "cultural signifiers" without focusing on stilettos—named appropriately for a super-thin, easily hidden dagger that can swiftly kill. Call them "needle heels" for the killer elite—those who can afford nearly a grand for a pair of Manolo Blahniks. I can't help picturing female assassins puncturing the ground as they stalk their prey, leaving behind tiny air holes for the damned below. I know I'm getting fanciful here, but ever since 1955 when Christian Dior's designer Roger Vivier made a prototype strong enough to withstand the wearer's weight, the stiletto shoe has been equated with sex and power.

Certainly the signature red-soled stiletto by French designer Christian Louboutin (the best-selling model, Pigalle, named after the Paris red-light district) is a contemporary fetish object for millions. The agony of actually trying to walk

in them any farther than from limo to restaurant takes its toll, though. And that has given rise in the past few years to an extreme procedure, Botox injections into the ball of the foot. This so-called "stiletto lift" is said to reduce pain, at least temporarily, by padding the foot with filler in the spot of greatest pressure. Some call it a "Loub job." According to Wednesday Martin's popular 2015 memoir, *Primates of Park Avenue*, the technique is in favor among privileged Upper East Side women who refuse to give up their killer heels. Their husbands are only too happy to provide financing.

One employee of a British surgery clinic told *The Sun*, "Loub job requests have now surpassed bookings for lip fillers. Women aged from 18 to 60 are asking for the procedure because all women want to wear beautiful shoes. If you think of the money they spend on shoes, having a Loub job is a sound investment."

And whenever there's a consumer need, someone will invent a new product to fill the gap. In 2013 Heel No Pain came on the market, giving stiletto addicts the less invasive option of trying a highly concentrated foot-numbing spray that contains an ingredient used by dentists. Whatever gets you through a night on the town.

But lately there have been some positive signs of rebellion against what, it seems to me, is the modern equivalent of whalebone corsets. I cheered Julia Roberts last May when I learned that she had suddenly cast off her stilettos on the Cannes Film Festival red carpet. The photo of her barefoot in an Armani gown went viral. Kristen Stewart did the same. The year before, a group

of women in their 50s had been turned away for wearing flats, and actress Emily Blount took the lead in protesting. She called a press conference and, referring to the high-heel dress requirement at Cannes, said, "That's very disappointing, just when you kind of think there are waves of equality."

Ah—there it is. A woman's right to refuse to wear the vamp/temptress uniform, to wear whatever she wants to feel sexy and powerful, whether it's athletic shoes, platforms, kitten heels, Mary Janes or loafers. Or the right to play the vamp if she chooses, but closer to the ground (easier to make a quick escape?). I can't help wondering if Audrey Hepburn would have been ejected from Cannes if she had shown up in her trademark ballet flats for opening night of "Funny Face." Curiosity compels me to go searching, and bingo, I find a Cannes Festival photo of Hepburn in a white evening gown accessorized not with flats but the tiniest heels. Holding the opposite arm of her tuxedoed escort, an unidentified actress thrusts one sharp-toed stiletto.

A week earlier than the Julia Roberts episode, a temp receptionist in England named Nicola Thorp, 27, was receiving her own media attention for refusing to conform to "foot dress code." The ruckus began when she appeared in flats her first day on the job at a major financial corporation and was sent home without pay for not wearing two-to-four-inch heels. Thorp objected to the requirement, described her experience on Facebook and quickly heard from many sympathetic women. That led to her posting a Parliamentary petition stating, "Make it illegal for

a company to require women to wear high heels at work." With 148,300 signatures at the time of this writing, she has catapulted over the 100,000 signature minimum that, in England, automatically guarantees a Parliamentary debate on the issue. Does the House of Commons have C-Span? That is one debate I'd like to hear.

Within my Lost Kingdom, I never thought about feminism and its relationship to shoes, although I was a budding feminist. I never sought any particular status brand. I didn't care if the shoes I might discover had flat, mid or high heels, only that they be exquisitely made. What I really craved and needed at that stressful time of my life were objects of beauty. I also felt a visceral hunter's thrill, never knowing what I would find. But none of this adequately explains why I was drawn there and why I still remember my visits so vividly.

I realize now that my deep pleasure was mostly about the experience—when I was inside the store, I felt that I existed, at least for a while, in a predictable, orderly environment that was becoming hard to find elsewhere. My frustration at work had been growing. Spending stultifying hours writing job descriptions for the Department of Social Services in a bleak office was not the career I had envisioned after the pleasures of Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot. Just riding to work every day inside ugly subway cars hastily covered with spray paint or black marker was to feel trapped in a netherworld's maze where anything could, and did, happen. On top of that, the unrelenting news of my city's bankruptcy, lay-offs, and increasing street crime was deeply unsettling.

By contrast, I felt peaceful and at ease in this beautiful kingdom. I had the feeling that it was run by people behind the scenes who cared for its happy subjects—people ruled by logic, aesthetics, even scientific principles. Is that another groan? Again, please hear me out. Thousands of shoes were color-coded and precisely arranged according to the spectrum: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Chartreuse could be found exactly where it belonged, in between yellow and green; teal shoes positioned between green and blue. I pictured a color chart on the stockroom walls being consulted like a chemist's Table of the Elements. The world might be coming apart outside, but here, all was carefully inspected, checked off and accounted for. Ultimately, I believe that's why it felt to me like a haven.

I've since learned the futility of expecting order and certainty in the world or my life. Ambiguity, doubt, confusion, even, at times, chaos—that's what I count on. Although the kingdom is lost—replaced by a bank surrounded by multimillion-dollar condos—I still recall the firm steps I took with such anticipation each time I crossed the threshold into that enchanted realm. I did not plod there, head down. I did not totter. For one hour, I soared.