

pointy pink pumps (that simply *could not* be purchased)

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The location of the acquisition was *Niche*, a Chicago retail favorite located within the real estate hot spot of Bucktown. The place, in which only a year earlier I had been propositioned to view an unknown man's nakedness for a twenty dollars, that now symbolized a kind of Mecca for all people hip and aspiring to be so. And, while I knew that I desired this insider label of hip Chicagoan, I accepted my status as outsider. Truthfully, I was a Chicago visitor, not a resident. I lacked the essential drive and financial resources to maintain an ongoing hip fashion façade, but these shortcomings were obvious and irrelevant. The need for these shoes went beyond the attainment of hip status and into a personal search for a new self.

As light as cotton candy and as nutritionally deficient, the pointy pink pumps would add nothing but empty calories to my wardrobe, yet I found myself craving their sickening sweetness. The Pepto-Bismol pink leather complemented by whitewashed wooden heels, silver buckle-like adornments and ridiculously pointed toes, conjured an intense hunger. Their severe points demanded my full and constant attention. They created an instant, intense desire for fashion-forward status and resembled other shoes I had seen and coveted. These similar, but hardly comparable pointy toes, had awakened my shopping senses. Was it possible that I would purchase these particular Bubbalicious™ pink pleasures? Subconsciously, they brought to mind my archetype of fashion: the elongated, highly stylized sketches of fashion designers. The long, lean figures and accompanying fashion persona were within my immediate grasp if I could only try them on. I almost instantly began and completed my search for an available sales associate to fulfill my request.

While I listened to the trendily clad shoe peddler explain the sugary Italian morsels while lifting them from the box, both eyes were hypnotized by their pinkness. I quickly consumed their seductive details: all leather uppers that would conform perfectly to my feet, delicately refined not-too-tall kitten heels, three perfectly polished buckles, silvery label of the maker, bleached white and suede leather interiors. My imagination began assembling impossible self-images while my shopping companion and best friend validated my rationalized thoughts. As I purchased the pink shoes, although there was the smallest hint of financial reticence, I forged

ahead due to their imagined impact on my wardrobe. My only thoughts focused on a soon-to-be-enhanced external image.

In a discussion of fashion and fetishism, specifically corsets, Kunzle (2004) contextualizes the use of corsets (called tight-lacing) in an assessment of how fashion can visually confirm our desire for and pursuit of social status.

“Feet, hands, neck and torso, when used for labouring tasks, grow thick and muscular. The physically idle upper classes can afford to keep them small and confined, preserving them as symbols of sexual refinement and social leisure. ... It was, as I show, principally lower-class or lower-middle-class women, certainly the tight-lacing majority, who sought to acquire the physical insignia of leisured status that they lacked in reality.” (Kunzle, 2004, p. 11)

High fashion, historically limited to upper social classes, has stood as a visual reminder of that superior status as well as other physical qualities. This desired visual statement of career success is partly what I hoped to portray as a result of obtaining these pink pleasures. I had other motives as well, many of which I was only minimally aware at the time I purchased them in 2004. In reality, the purchase of the pink pumps was the second incarnation of a remade self thanks to shoes.

The first, a pair of tall red boots, was purchased four years earlier in defiance of another's point-of-view. Because I knew that my boyfriend at the time would disapprove, because I knew they would draw attention. The circumstances under which I purchased the boots were quite distinct from that of the shoes, as I was purposely alone as compared to shopping with my friend and my intention to purchase was marginal. Particulars of the day were not extraordinary, as I spent many Saturdays running errands around Minneapolis, and during these outings I would frequently stop to browse clothes or shoe bargains. The day I came across the tall red boots, however, marked a turning point in my perceived ability to affect change in the direction of my life. While the notion that purchasing footwear could affect more than my ability to walk sounds implausible, the purchase of these boots did just that. Because of their redness, their tallness, and their visual assertiveness, they provided me with a tangible example that I could make a daring choice. A choice that would cause people to pay attention to me (literally) because I was

wearing tall red boots, and that indeed is what I wanted. The boots then, took on a symbolic status of my freed self because I ultimately left the disapproving boyfriend behind.

Not coincidentally, the motivation underlying purchase of these pink shoes had great similarity to that of tall red boots, although the pink pumps were purchased in defiance of myself, or rather my logical self, instead of another person. Notable is the period of time in which they were purchased, coinciding both with a feeling of career boredom and my first marriage, both of which posed new questions about the path of my life. Although I was unsure of the answers, these shoes would again allow me the opportunity to diverge from my established clothing norms. In fact, the mere possession of these shoes would begin to break me out of the fashionless black rut I had quietly and cooperatively endured for the past several years. Further, they helped to maintain my personal identity as a distinct individual within the boundaries of marriage. The fashion upgrade made me feel like more of a designer, one that could be revived and inspired, one that could coexist among the younger, more fashionable designers in my office. Although not exactly liberators as the tall red boots had been, they marked a reassessment of my life and reaffirmed my active participation in it. Both footwear purchases occurred amidst life transition. Both became a sign of that transition, a marker of that particular moment of time. Additionally, these two pairs of footwear became a means of psychological transportation. The transport took place in changing from one self-perception to another, providing a sense of power to affect or maintain my identity. Here begins the self-realization, as I reflect on the attraction to and desire for shoes that has characterized a majority of my conscious life.

A compelling sense of self identity signified by a person's shoes, or shoes as representation of transition is an unremarkable insight. The magical or transformative power, as well as the personal qualities that shoes possess is reinforced and forever documented within our popular culture. For example, *The Wizard of Oz's* Dorothy undergoes a geographic transplantation and psychological transformation when her Kansas house landed in Oz. The house itself lands on the Wicked Witch of the East, killing her. The viewer sees the witch's red, glittery shoes disappear from her feet and her stockings shrivel under the weight of the house. The next

moment, The Good Witch of the North endows Dorothy with those very shoes. The shoes that possess mystical powers. Shoes that were given to her without her request or permission of the original owner. The gift, as the viewer ultimately sees, becomes the solution to Dorothy's quest to return home. The journey home takes place in an unfamiliar environment and must be made by walking in the shoes that she was given. The shoes and the steps walked in them were therefore literally and figuratively the means by which her perception of happiness and home were transformed.

Transformation is also a common theme in the discussion of shoes, whether physical or psychological. Footwear can make us taller, change or cover the shape of our leg, and alter the way we walk. In the case of the pink shoes, the shape of the toe is exaggerated, giving the toes and heels a refined appearance. The centered placement of the pointed toe and tapered heel creates an unnatural, although more beautiful, symmetry because the foot itself is asymmetric. Together, these physical characteristics alter the appearance of the leg, making it longer and the foot, more shapely. The color is also light enough as to not contrast with my pale skin and thereby reinforces the shoe and foot as an extension of the leg rather than separate entities. The heels, although only two inches also physically increase my stature. Shoes, in addition to transforming our physical selves, may also represent our larger identity. Cultural knowledge tells us that some people's shoes are hard to fill, signifying the shoe as the holder of value rather than the person's cognitive or physical abilities. Shoes therefore carry the power to indicate a role or occupation and perhaps our level of skill attained (if our own shoes are hard to fill). Historical knowledge indicates shoes as signs of both occupation and status.

In my personal experiences, specifically early childhood through early teens, shoes not only helped form my identity, but also became indicators of my multiple roles as member of my school, family, and church. Recollections of yearly school shopping with my rank high among my early positive childhood experiences both because they were rare and the company in which shopping occurred. Most often, my mom, grandma, and sister would go together and make an event of the day. Shopping was not a regular experience because of the relatively low household income of my parents: a concrete plant manager and high school teacher.

Additionally, the lack of variety available in my hometown made frequency impractical. This void of shopping possibilities encouraged travel to a nearby city such as Fort Dodge or Mason City, Iowa, both of which were nearly an hour away by car and which therefore required much of a day. Daytrip shopping made it a special experience through the travel, the opportunity to eat out at a restaurant rather than home, and the change of environment that allowed for a more carefree and light attitude.

The specialness of the experience was enhanced by the act of getting new personal items, one of which was a pair of shoes. Although many purchases were driven by a price point, as I got older many were not. These higher-ticket items (specifically shoes) added other dimensions to the experience of shoe shopping: that of a deserved reward and unique physical identifier of my personality. The first recollection I have of shoes as reward and unique identifier were a pair of Bass™ tie shoes. They that were extremely comfortable, had intricate seaming details, and were very expensive. I had never seen shoes like this before, never heard of the color taupe, and was certain no one else at school would have them. Looking back, the shoes screamed nun, geek, and orthopedic and yet I also recall the strong desire to have them on my feet at school where everyone could see them. Shoes were one of the few items of clothing that were not strictly regimented in Catholic school. In combination with socks, sweaters, jewelry and hairstyle, these items visually characterized your personality to the student body. This characterization became especially critical to me, as I was to a large degree, hidden and speechless. My short stature as well as my aversion to any kind of public speaking left my articles of adornment to do most of the talking. The tie shoes became a kind of public identity for me because they embodied the qualities I thought I lacked, namely a distinctive appearance, personality, and point-of-view.

My mom purchased these indicators of my uniqueness at *Heart & Sole*, the only upscale shoe store in Algona. The taupe leather was smooth, pliable, and inviting to the foot. I can remember the sales associate explaining the benefits of wearing shoes that fit your foot, had arch support, and quality construction. I internalized what the sales associate said, and so began the “my feet deserve quality shoes” mentality. My mom reinforced this idea by fulfilling her own need to treat

me to those things she would not allow herself. I remember her saying things such as “they are too expensive, but we can splurge this one time.” These words connoted a privileged family status for me at the same time they struck a rebellious action against dad — both of which I readily and naively accepted. A similar recognition of my place within the family structure occurred when I received a pair of shoes from my brother, who had rejected my presence (I have been told) from the first day I arrived home from the hospital. Not because he was inherently evil or that I required effort from him, but that I usurped much of the attention he had grown accustomed to as the youngest child for the past five years. The gift of shoes then was more like a peace offering. The bright white canvass sneakers with the cornflower blue leather swoosh were both a reward for enduring the teasing and taunting and an acceptance of my presence in the family by my brother. I loved those shoes and still think about them when my brother asks me to do something onerous, and sometimes wish I still had them.

Shoes then have played more than their role as clothing accessory throughout the course of my life. It is clear that they have become symbolic of different points in my life where psychologically, I was embarking on a new role (whether public or private), thus validating shoes as exemplars of personal identity. In my case, what the shoe represented changed based on my life experience. Reflecting upon my encounters with the pink pumps, red boots, tie shoes, and sneakers, I now think their representation was a myth. This classification does not however make their presence insignificant and in many cases the representation helped me attain a different self-image, occupation, or life direction. In the case of my pink shoes, the heart and contradiction of my shoe myth was the shoes themselves, embodying *the* fashion trend, a playful sophistication, and contrived sex appeal. The shoes had the perfect combination of desirable qualities because of the provocative color (pink), metaphoric adornments (buckles), exaggerated features (pointy toes), and genre of shoes (pumps). Their intense and unique pinkness referenced culturally reinforced nostalgic ideals of girlishness and youth from Barbie™ to bubble gum to cotton candy. These mental associations when analyzed, however, reveal an intertwined and conflicting relationship between idealized, unattainable beauty and high calorie, non-nutritive consumables. Culturally, our society conditions children (both male and female) that good behavior is rewarded with these sugary treats and later covertly forbids them

(primarily female) by reinforcing the desirability of the Barbie's distorted body. The reinforcement occurs within fashion and popular culture, and is depicted through the images of ever-dwindling-sized models and actors in magazines, on the runway, television and in movies. Although I rationally and often vocally reject these cultural norms, the purchase of the pink pumps was both a contradiction of past rejections and acquiescence to the cultural norms they radiated.

Contradiction, however, also appears in the details of the shoes themselves. The color and its association to the nostalgic naiveté of youth, when juxtaposed with the undeniably pointed toes, scarcity of foot coverage, kitten heels (a shorter version of the stiletto), and multiple buckles communicate an uncomfortable sexual message. Steele (1999) and others affirm shoes, specifically those with heels, as “enhancing sex appeal” and “the prime sartorial symbol symbol of femininity” (p. 8, 16). The mainstream acknowledgement of the foot's relationship with sex is confirmed in Steele's account of *The Wall Street Journal's* article:

“High heels are not the only controversial design element in footwear. *The Wall Street Journal* once published an article on a shocking fashion in women's shoes: ‘The classic, closed-toe pump has developed a low-cut look in the so-called throat line, which means the shoe shows more of the cracks between the toes.’ The shoe industry calls this ‘cleavage,’ and many people find it ‘a sexy kind of look.’ Others, however, think the style screams sex and is thoroughly unprofessional.” (Steele, 1999, p. 60)

Further, Kunzle, citing Rossi (1976) summarizes the foot itself as the center of our sexuality:

Uniquely sensitive to touch, despite the fact that they have constantly to bear the full weight of the body, often played with and cosseted in infancy, and phallic in shape, the feet have naturally become a special erotic centre and sexual symbol ... ‘The voluptuous architecture of the body owes much of its sensuous character to the foot, which was responsible for the upright posture and gait that altered the entire anatomy ... [and this] also made possible frontal human copulation, a coital position unique in all nature.’” (Kunzle, 2004, p. 11)

The buckles themselves add to the shoes' deviant undertones as they metaphorically restrain the already mentioned sexual symbols (my feet) from spilling out of the shoes. Although shoe buckles have symbolized an enhancement of the wearer's status in terms of fashion history (Powerhouse Publishing, 1997), in this context they seem more appropriately related to the

sadomasochistic practices of bondage. The undeniably pointed toe and intensity of color exaggerate this sexual message through their straightforward presentation — there is literally no hint of a curve to the toe or attempt to soften the color. Together they work to reinforce rather than disguise or cloud the sexual content.

Mediation of the overt message comes solely through the shoes' category. Pumps, the type of shoes that describe the general features of my purchase, are also referred to as 'court shoes' in historical accounts of fashion. As described in the context of 18th century fashion, pumps were unadorned, may or may not have had heels, and were worn by both sexes as an everyday type of shoe at courts in Europe (Wilson, 1969). When the pump came to America, their audience was strictly female but their attributes were still largely unremarkable. Initial controversy soon became associated with wearing them because of their low-cut front however, but this too eventually faded. In contemporary society, pumps are basic work shoes for women in mainstream professional offices. Their utility and pervasiveness make them both practical and accepted. They come in an infinite number of colors, textures and styles. The pink pumps seemed to fit perfectly within this category of shoe (save their low-cut front), thus making them easy to rationalize as a practical shoe purchase. Subconsciously and consciously confronting these personal, cultural, and practical issues, I fixated upon the pointy pink pumps that summer day in Chicago.

Although I still have both the red boots, I hardly ever think of wearing them, as my sense of self feels unrelated to them. They signify me and my perceived life state in an earlier period of my psychological development. Even though their myth gave me the assurance needed to propel myself out of a bad relationship, the thought of wearing them is unseemly. Seeing other women wear similar boots in public cannot persuade me to wear them or even try them on. In contrast, the pink shoes do not carry negative transitional baggage, but I do wear them less than when I first got them. Their newness, both physical and psychological, has worn. Their pinkness is now less appealing, and although their purchase was the beginning of a more stylish and fashion-assertive new me, one not afraid of bold color or shape, I retain the choice to be bold or not, be

fashion-assertive or not. My mood and constantly shifting sense of identity continues to dictate my fashion choices.

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