

Grounded

By Deborah Burghardt

We were 40-somethings, seated in Adirondack chairs by a snapping fire ready for a full-moon ritual. We'd set up at a friend's farm, a secluded spot of ground in the Pennsylvania Wilds. Not too wild, though, like those places where you drive off the blacktop onto gravel and then hit dirt filled with ancient ruts. But wild enough to stare past the stars in search of other galaxies.

"I burned all my high heels," Kathy said into the dusk.

"O-kay. You burned your shoes." I tried to hide my surprise, reluctant to judge her decisions since a mysterious pain in her knee catapulted her into unexpected surgeries and treatments. I remembered the Sunday she returned to our Woman Spirit group after bone cancer required doctors to amputate her leg. Kathy unstrapped her prosthetic and hopped into the center of our circle. "Ah, that's better," she'd said, her laughter a permission-slip to release our fears before Noon.

Kathy loved high heels, and she was tall to start, slender, and athletic. She dressed in chic outfits, set off by matching shoes and jewelry. My mother would have called her style "smart."

"When I couldn't stand looking at those shoes another minute," she continued, "I built a fire in the back yard. I reminisced about where I'd discovered each pair and why I bought them. I thought about the times I'd deliberately intimidated men-of-a-certain height, and the times I'd made an entrance, feeling beautiful and powerful in those heels." She paused and sighed. "And then I let them go."

The evening smelled of smoke and sage, perhaps with a hint of leather and suede. As silence settled over the participants, I reflected on Kathy's fire, how she allowed the flames to swallow the past and sanctify the departed. How many more losses would go up in smoke?

My love for high heels began in 1959 when I glimpsed a pair of red leather, pointed-toed, spool heels, gleaming beneath a spotlight in Royer's. A pearlesque button, attached to a single strap, beckoned me with a wink. I'd have those dreamy heels for Easter or die.

I pulled Mum over to the display. She sighed. "Red clashes with your pink dotted swiss. Try those patent leather Mary Janes."

"Clashes? Red and pink don't clash. Right, Dad?"

"I appreciate your excitement, but you're a little

girl.”

“A little girl? I’m practically in sixth grade,” I

reminded him, my arms crossed in defiance. “Mum wears high heels. Why can’t I?”

I lifted the shoes from their pedestal and clutched them to my chest. My parents relented. I strutted to the mirror and admired my first independent fashion statement. “Hey, Mum, watch.” I clicked my heels.

“Oh brother,” she said, with a nod to the clerk. “Charge them.”

Next, we stopped at the Women’s Shoe Department in Troutman’s. Mum strolled the high heel aisle, occasionally pausing to examine a pair. She turned them over in her hands as if she’d discovered a rare archeological specimen.

“What about these, Barbara?” Dad said, eyebrows arched with hope. He held black round-toed pumps with thick squatty heels.

“Alden, for the love of God. I’ve got my eye on those tan calfskins.”

Dad put his hand at the small of her back. “Darling, you need to be more practical.”

I knew he meant the balance problems caused by

her worsening multiple sclerosis (MS). But none of us wanted to utter those words.

“To hell with that. My suit will be incomplete without high heels.”

“At least try. Please, Boo Boo. For me?” Dad guided Mum to a chair and eased her foot into that ugly black pump, only little old ladies wore. I stared at the foot, attached to Mum’s leg, alright, but it didn’t match her. Those stupid shoes clashed with how she dressed.

Dad turned Mum’s face toward him. “High heels aren’t what make you beautiful.”

She pushed his hand away and stared at that ugly shoe, circled her ankle one way, and then the other. I kept waiting. *Say something, Mum. Say, to the hell with that.*

But she stayed silent even through her tears. I hung my head and pretended not to notice other shoppers noticing. Shoppers, who probably knew as little about MS as I did, out buying whatever shoes they adored.

Once an adult, I realized that Mum lost not just her mobility but her sense-of-self that Easter. But back then, I said, “I guess they’re not *too* bad,” to try and cheer her.

Dad nodded to the clerk, “Charge them.”

Kathy and I sat in silence, waiting for the storyteller to start. In *Woman Spirit*, we contemplated the pain of our lives through story. We believed that by sharing our sorrows and honoring Mother Earth, we accessed healing energies.

I pondered the irony in my starting to wear high heels *on the same day* Mum had stopped wearing hers. By my late twenties, I stopped wearing them myself—fearful of falling from those pretty platforms. I felt self-conscious, as if I walked funny, like when I played dress-up in Mum’s shoes. Besides, leading health experts assured us the angle ruined women’s feet.

Another two decades would pass before I pulled a thread that loosened my previous reasoning for wearing flats. I wondered if maybe I’d chosen my “practical” fashion preference to protect myself should MS loom in my future, in case my nervous system turned on itself—it would never force me to let my heels go—I’d avoid one less devastating loss.

Had I known about Kathy’s burning ritual back then, I’d have held one for Mum and her high heels on a full moon. I’d have listened to her stories about the olive-green heels with ivory Pilgrim buckles; the sapphire-blue strappy heels, dyed to match her evening gown; and her plans for the tan calfskins she never bought. I’d have asked her about outfits and entrances, about feeling powerful at the height of her femininity.

If we had held such a ritual, I would *not* have appeased my mother as I had all those years ago in the department store. I’d have sworn or sobbed or screamed right along with her. And we’d have made fun of those damn black pumps before we tossed them into the flames to rid the world of their ugliness. We’d have watched the smoke from them rise and disappear. We’d have sat in the moonlight to the last glowing ember.

Deborah Burghardt writes creative nonfiction after directing Women and Gender Studies at Clarion University. "Spared" was anthologized in *Bodies of Truth: Personal Narratives on Illness, Disability, and Medicine*. Her essays have appeared online at Globejotting.com and in literary journals, including *The Sun*, *The Watershed Journal* and *The Bridge Literary Arts Journal*. She lives in Fort Myers, Florida, and enjoys summers and autumns in Clarion, Pennsylvania. Her essay “Grounded” appears in the Fall 2020 *Intima*.

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