



## If the Shoe Doesn't Fit...

It takes guts and determination to survive in the corporate world, discovered **LEIGH-ANNE HUNTER**. But it takes even more courage to be yourself.

**W**HEN I WAS A teenager, my mom bought me a pair of trainers with frilly laces and rainbow stripes along the heel. I loved those bright, happy shoes and wore them every chance I got.

On my wedding day I wore a pair of glittering, silver stilettos with seven-centimetre heels. I kept them in a box in pink tissue paper at the back of my cupboard, and would constantly admire them. On the day, I glided down the aisle to meet my groom, and later that night, he slipped off my shoes tenderly, and kissed my naked feet.

### *The Chrysalis*

When I started my first real job, in the cut-throat world of PR, I bought a pair of black leather ankle boots that said, "Don't mess with me." Click, click, click, they went, as I paced, cellphone pressed to my ear. As they sounded on the tiles, my mind echoed the refrain: Who am I, who am I, who am I?

I hated those shoes. But I became a great pretender. I convinced myself I was happy, swirling a glass of Champagne at functions. A part of me wanted to belong to this world. I laughed at our clients' jokes, but it was someone else's laugh I had imitated and made my own, one that didn't reach my eyes. ▶

If you slip into life's roles like shoes, be comfortable as you walk your path.

One day, after years of zipping and unzipping those boots, I did what every career woman who wants herself to be taken seriously should not do; I broke rule number one: Thou shalt not fall apart at work.

It was quite peaceful, actually, under the table. I could hear the hum of my computer, the ringing of phones and clacking of keyboards. I felt safe. No one could find me, although a part of me wanted to be rescued.

It must have been telepathy because my husband called. "Where are you?" he asked. "Under the table," I said. "What are you doing there?" "I like it here." Then it hit me just how unhappy I was, and I started to cry – big, heaving sobs that wracked my body like small earthquakes. "Come home," he said. And I did. I crawled out from under the table, smoothed my skirt, wiped away my mascara and, with a brilliant smile, walked out of the office.

For years, depression dogged the heels of my expensive boots, always in relentless pursuit, until the day I crawled under the table and said, OK, you got me. I give up.

If the shoe fits, wear it, they say. But sometimes it doesn't, and we force it on, hobbling along in a pair of shoes – or an identity – that clearly isn't made for us. "I'm fine," we say, a smile plastered to our face, even as the shoes pinch our feet, making every step unbearable.

### The Metamorphosis

I "wore" many different identities: Devoted daughter, loving wife, ambitious career woman, loyal friend, active member of the community. I watched what I ate, exercised and held my father's hand in intensive care.

In that momentary madness under the table, a little voice whispered inside me, like a big sister giving me a gentle, but stern, talking to. Judy Klipin, a Martha Beck certified Master Life Coach, calls it "the essential self," the true self that knows what's right for us. "As we get older, we develop a social self we project to the outside world, to feel accepted," she says. This domineering side of us, in its eagerness to please others, gags the essential self: "It can be quite a slave-driver."



“When we give ourselves permission to decide what is best for us, a transformation can occur.”

I scheduled an appointment with a therapist, and started hauling out boxes of my writing I had stashed away because, "who can make money from poetry?" Once I started writing, I just couldn't stop. Everything I had squashed and ignored, dreams I had denied air and light for so long, came pouring out. I scribbled on everything.

When we ignore our essential selves, we stifle our creative gifts and deepest desires, which can lead to feelings of frustration and depression, says psychologist Carol Eikleberry. I realised I didn't just want to write; I needed to. If I was marooned on a desert island, I would find a piece of bark to carve on. If I won the Lotto, I would write about how it felt to be an instant millionaire.

And when I didn't write, I spoke to God. And She spoke back. I looked at old photographs, and I liked the free-spirited girl whose laugh reached her eyes. I surrendered to the sadness, and found I was strong enough.

I gave away the shoes.


I walked through the neglected garden in my heart, covered in weeds. I opened the door of the abandoned house and walked through the dark, murky place, opening every door, letting in the light. I met myself in one of the rooms. She was filthy, dressed in rags, huddled in a corner, her hair knotted and her eyes glazed. I reached out my hand, and she took it. I pulled her out from under the table.

I don't think Cinderella lost her shoe the night she went to the ball. She left it behind on purpose, as she high-tailed it out of that ballroom, away from the judging eyes of aristocrats. She left the other shoe just outside the forest so she could run barefoot, and feel the earth beneath her feet.

### Taking Flight

It's not always realistic to quit our jobs, or stop being a mother, but, I believe, we can be better (and happier) employees, mothers, wives and daughters if we don't allow life's obligations to silence the poetry in our hearts; if we don't stifle the urge to write, sing, dance, act, or whatever it is that, as the Russian actor, Stanislavski said, "will grace you, now and then, with the greatest exhilaration it is possible to know."

It takes courage to be yourself, says psychologist Donald MacKinnon, "the strength to stand aside from the collective, and in conflict with it if necessary; to become and be oneself."

When we listen to our essential selves, giving ourselves permission to decide what is best for us, instead of what we "should" or "ought" to do, an incredible transformation can occur. "It's a wonderful thing to witness," says Klipin. "People go through a metamorphosis, like a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. They take flight." 

Leigh-Anne Hunter still works in PR, so she doesn't starve, but she feeds her soul by scribbling on paper as often as she can.