

When my feet are comfortable, I am happy. Clean, dry, feet, untrammelled by tights, socks, slippers, shoes, or boots. Toes curling into a clean carpet, cool grass, grainy sand – those are happy feet and they make me very happy indeed.

I have always preferred walking around in bare feet, but didn't know why until a few years ago.

Shoes have always presented me with difficulties. As a small child, summers meant red t-bar sandals from Marks and Spencer, worn with white socks. These quickly became white socks with red bloodstains where my toes rubbed raw on the new, hard leather. Winters meant clumsy zip-fronted fake-fur lined ankle-high boots, which I hated with a passion and which became heavy when wet. Spring Bank Holiday in May meant a pair of flat-heeled satin and silver 'walking shoes' to wear during the annual church procession – pretty as fairies' shoes and very, very painful.

Women's high heeled shoes have always been a total mystery to me. I have tried ever so hard to literally fit in. Like all little girls I was fascinated by my mother's, aunties' and cousins' high heeled shoes and longed for this elegance. Along the way of growing up and growing older I have acquired various pairs of these shoes but never worn them for long. They hurt. If I work through the pain, my toes and foot joints go numb and come up in huge blisters, bleed where the skin has rubbed off them and throb like the devil for hours after the shoes are kicked off. I wobble and trip like a failed drag-artist, unable to find any balance on the teetering heels.

My problem with footwear, as my mother had impressed on me, was that my feet were very narrow. Court shoes would never stay on my feet. I needed a shoe that had an ankle strap or some kind of bar across the foot, or was high up on the foot, say like a brogue or a sensible lace-up. We had the usual rows about fashionable shoes when I was in my teens and these were always made more painful in a very real sense by my feet growing in rapid spurts.

Fortunately for a large proportion of my growing up, high heels were not fashionable. The boxy square toes and clunky heels of the mid-to-late 1960s alternated with completely flat chisel-toed sling-backs or summer sandals made of leather strips. I remember fondly the Mondrian-design flat slingbacks I wore for a whole summer, the brown leather Roman sandal that went to Italy with me, and the silver and dark blue chunky sling-backs I was wearing the first time I ever got wolf-whistled.

Even when the glam-rock era arrived in the early 1970s, shoes remained proportionately chunky and low-rise. They might have a two-inch platform sole but the actual net height of the heels weren't huge. Of course you could find the towering stack heels if you wanted to but not many girls I knew went for them – we had to run for buses and walk to lots of places.

When I was 18 and at university, living away from home, I bought my first pair of shoes without mother's supervision. They were good-girl, dark brown leather with a moderate heel and a t-bar strap. They were, as per mother's instructions, real leather, a quality brand, and a narrow fit. They were pure agony.

Since then, every shoe purchase has taken me at least a year, plus boxes of plasters, to render wearable. My feet spent thirty-odd years swathed in Elastoplast, Compeed,

corn-plasters and every pain easing remedy ever known. I have tried shoe-stretchers, wetting shoes to stretch the leather, thicker socks, thinner socks, no socks and gel pads, all to no avail. I have smiled through the pain with gritted teeth and winced as I peeled off socks that have stuck to the bloody scabs on my raw-rubbed toes.

When I was forty-five, and shoe-shopping, a shop assistant was looking for a style I'd asked to try on when she commented that they weren't available in a wide fitting but that she'd fetch me a similar, but wide, style. I didn't have the nerve to tell her that she was mistaken and that I have a very narrow foot. I meekly tried on the style she fetched to me expecting nothing good, and underwent a paradigm shift of self-perception.

It was the first time I have ever put on and worn a shoe without pain. I wore those shoes to shreds and went back for more. My triple-E feet became happy in shoes. For the first time the blisters and corns disappeared from my toes. I can smile, genuinely, even when not in bare feet. I can even sometimes forget I have anything on my feet at all.

I am a wide-footed woman. I may get wider, but unless I chop off some toes I will never have a narrow foot. Nor did I ever have.

Looking back, I suppose my mother dearly wanted a dainty violin-playing daughter with narrow feet and bows in her curly hair. Sadly, she got me, but she did her best with the material to hand.