

Leonie lay on her back and stretched her legs upwards, curving her ankles so that both feet were in profile. She pointed her Instamatic towards them and adjusted her position until her shoes filled the viewfinder. Click. The photo slid from the camera and she placed it carefully on the pillow beside her before letting her legs collapse and sitting up on the bed.

As she waited for the print to develop, Leonie examined her latest purchase. Wedges were in (again) and this was the summer of mix and match, clashing patterns. She'd chosen turquoise with a jungle design, although they went with nothing in her wardrobe. She put her feet on the floor and walked in a tight circle and then a figure eight, coming to a standstill in front of her full length mirror. The shoes made her taller, more slender, more sophisticated, even with her pyjama legs rolled up to the knee. As she turned side on to admire the heels, she thought of the shoes as delicate little hooves that gave her the elegance of a gazelle.

'Vertiginous' was one of Leonie's favourite words. Its extending length conjured the tautening of her calves, the clip clop of stilettos as she stalked across marble floors. Drinking cocktails on a bar stool, legs seductively entwined, heels spearing down. Striding along the street, platforms just about cushioning the throbbing balls of her feet. Browsing in the supermarket, ankles flexed, a trolley for support.

After testing the print with her finger to check the image was fixed, Leonie taped the photograph to the front of the shoe box. She unbuckled her wedges reluctantly, unable to resist stroking the leather sole and indulging in a quick sniff of the instep before she tucked them up in their box. Sliding her feet into her slippers (marabou trimmed mules, a modest eight centimetre heel, fuchsia satin) she unrolled the legs of her pyjama trousers and teetered carefully back through to the living room, where she put her feet up on the couch and sighed in relief.

'Hmm,' said Leonie's pedicurist the next lunchtime, in between buffing away dry and calloused skin. 'Looks like you might have the beginnings of an ingrown toenail.'

'Oh, just varnish over it,' Leonie said.

'Well, keep an eye on it and see a podiatrist if it doesn't clear up,' the pedicurist said, dipping her brush into bright coral nail polish.

That evening, Leonie had a work dinner. Which called for a pencil skirt, silky blouse, and heels high enough to elevate her over the boys. She opened her bulging wardrobe and scanned the Polaroids stuck to her shoe boxes. Black patent Manolos? Too kinky. Snakeskin Louboutins? She felt a bit ashamed of those, truth be told, and couldn't wear them without looking over her shoulder for

members of PETA. Slim platform courts in calfskin, pointy toe. Perfect. You could rely on Ferragamo. Leonie arched her left foot and slipped it into the left shoe. But something was wrong. Her foot wouldn't fit. She shoved a bit harder, feeling like one of the ugly sisters. No, it wouldn't go in. A hole opened in her tights and her toe burst through, starting a ladder that ran over the bridge of her foot and raced up her calf. Leonie rushed for the clippers but they were no use. She could not cut through the nail on her big toe.

Eventually Leonie shrouded her feet in heavy denier and squashed them into peep toes, but the knuckles of her toes ached all evening and she came home early. When she got undressed she saw that the big toenail on her right foot was suffering a similar affliction. In the morning, her feet were swollen. Her toenails seemed to have grown overnight. They'd even shrugged off their coral overcoats. Some kind of fungal infection, she decided, searching for the podiatrist's number and telephoning to make an appointment. Reduced to the pair of Birkenstocks she'd bought for a beach holiday and never worn, she called a taxi to take her into town. She needed to go shopping for interim footwear.

Breathing deeply as she walked through the perfumery and cosmetics department, Leonie began to relax. It would be fine. There would be a style that would fit, some marriage of toe and heel that would flatter her awkward feet. She accepted a sample card sprayed with a debut fragrance, paused to examine a new season eye shadow palette. To the right of the sparkling, mirrored hall, she could see the archway leading to the shoe salon.

The lighting was more subtle here, the atmosphere even more soothing. The shoes were displayed on glass shelves with spotlights above, each one quiescent in a glowing halo. With soft carpet underfoot, Leonie's toes felt almost at ease. The smell of leather enveloped her, so rich that it began to make her peckish. There were shoes with straps, shoes with ties, shoes with zips. Shoes with beads, shoes with grosgrain ribbon trim, shoes with diamante. Above all, there were shoes with heels. And women trying them on, struggling upright like newborn fauns, bending to check that buckles were secure, wobbling towards the mirrors for a first, tentative glance.

Leonie circled the room, watching them. One woman clutched the sales assistant's shoulder as a delicate pair of mules threatened to tip her. Another hesitated in the middle of the floor, hen-toed in exaggerated platforms. Another stood stock still in twelve centimetre stilettos, hands hovering by her side for balance. Leonie eased out of her Birkenstocks. The pads of her feet were soundless on the velvety carpet, and she felt her toes splay and the nails sink into the pile like claws. She yawned, stretching her tongue up to touch her sharp incisors, and licked her lips. The other ladies in the shoe department were beginning to look very much like prey.