

# Boot-licked

BY SHIRLEY GRACE, MA

I have never wanted boots. Things western? Snore, except for maybe old Clint Eastwood movies. His grizzled scowl and rattlesnake voice suggesting you back off or be reeal sorry for the resta yer short life...now that's acting. Clint probably had boots on in his movies, but I never noticed. Nope, no boots of any sort for me.

Except once, back in 1979.

I was sixteen. Boots were in. Full-size leather ones, worn with long skirts or — please don't let these ever come back — gauchos. I thought I was a rebel, but What-Will-They-Think-Of-My-Clothes-Hair-Taste-In-Music-Whatever actually blotted out most of my individuality. *They*, that alpha-clique of cool kids who set the standards for the rest of us dorks, even if we said we didn't care. At that age, *They* trump all other opinion groups. *They* were wearing boots. I — a dork expatriate — wanted in.

The odds were against me. Our family had just moved. Again. Home was now history-reeking Bedford, Massachusetts, right outside of Boston. In winter, unrelenting cold, snow, and more cold. Year-round, a more subtle coldness from a closed Yankee society, at least for a transplanted high-schooler branded like Hester Prynne. Family not off the Mayflower?

Oh. Well.

So my father announces one evening that we all need to buy winter boots. He means functional, waterproof snow boots, but I sense an opportunity to shunt myself up the cool-o-meter. Maybe someone will actually speak to me at the bus stop if I look a little groovier. I shock my

box, but I grab it before he can help me put them on (remember when they used to do that?). *Ziiiiip*, and instantly I'm way cooler than just one minute before. I'm never taking these off.

Then Reality bites my brain. I must prepare to face The Man. The one with the wallet. I decide to

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parents by agreeing to go without complaint, and we all bradybunch over to Thom McAn.

We walk in, and I see them: Tawny brown. Sleek. Soft as a truffle. A slight sheen, but not too much. Zippers up the sides — a major point-scorer. Size seven, please. I'll just sit way over here. Dad debates lace-up or pull-on galoshes — decisions, decisions. The salesman returns with the

gamble that my father is too distracted to notice the details of exactly what his middle daughter is getting, what with three girls buying boots at once, and ten-year-old Carrie so picky about fit and color and design, and older sister Kathy so completely un-rebellious it's hard to coax an opinion from her, that maybe, just maybe, I'll get lost in the fray. It's happened before.

A daunting task, though. My father has made it a lifelong priority to stay as independently anti-trendy as humanly possible and wear clothes, so much so that he's unwittingly carved out his own fashion niche. His sensible suggestions — *wear a scarf in the car if you're worried about your hair. We don't need the A/C or Waterproof boots keep your feet dry* — regularly gall my sixteen-year-oldness. Captain Pragmatic scoffs at the tremendous pressure that can crush a teenager forced to choose between rats-nest hair or a scarf in public. *Fashion! Be an individual*, he preaches. *Who cares what the other kids think?*

But he doesn't have to shove his way to his locker every day, invisible to the student body. He doesn't have to face the daily humiliation of the cafeteria table hierarchy. He doesn't have to sit behind those three cheerleaders in book-keeping, as they out-brag each other in their fuzzy, pink, cowl-necked sweaters and perfectly feathered hair.

He doesn't have to be me.

Donning a defiant mask of resolved nonchalance, I stroll over to the Great Wall of Practicality.

"Hey Dad, I'm ready to go. I found some boots."

I lean into my own hip, the box slung down at my side. The boots and I wait, bored, staring at nothing. Doo-dee-doo, I'm just a girl doing what her dad told her to do, find some winter boots, nothing to see here, folks. My father stuffs his

new galoshes (pull-on) back into the box. He glances over, and asks if they fit.

"Oh. Yes. They fit," I answer. The truth will set me free indeed. I hoist the boots to the counter, casually blocking the box from public and parental view. Dad turns away to deal with my sisters'

my boots, and the battle he didn't know we were having is lost.

Twenty-five years later, I understand now that there was no changing him, only me, and I wasn't ready. Years would pass before the albatross of pubescence would rouse itself and fly off to bother someone else. Now in my forties, I

*Now in my forties, I can embrace common sense and comfortable clothes.*

choices so we can all leave. Hope raises its head, eyes darting. Whaddaya know, my plan is actually working. Then a sentient neuron fires deep in his brain. The I-smell-something-and-it-ain't-moldy-feet neuron. He turns, and asks The Question:

"Are. They. Waterproof?" The words congeal like Jell-o in my ears.

"I ... guess so."

Not enough. Like a hawk to a struggling rabbit, he zeros in on

can embrace common sense and comfortable clothes. Now I can admit that frozen feet are anything but cool. Now I'm at peace with my hyperactive hair (although I still won't wear a scarf). But that night, I barely looked at the snow boots I ended up buying, my defiance silent and self-punishing as they sat in my closet for that whole Massachusetts winter, and the next one.

I went to college in Florida.