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# HECK ON HEELS

Still Balancing on Shoes, Love,  
and Chocolate!

*Mary T. Wagner*

iUniverse, Inc.  
New York Bloomington

## HECK ON HEELS

*Still Balancing on Shoes, Love, and Chocolate!*

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This book is dedicated to...

my children—Deborah, Sarah, Michael and Robert—

whose every breath gives lift to my wings...

and to the wonderful women in my life...

because from cradle to grave, it's our girlfriends we *really* grow old with!

g u t t e r

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## Forward

*I've still got sand in my shoes.*

No, not the kind that Dido sings liltily about in “Sand in my Shoes,” with a music video of sun-drenched tropical vacation romance and a rueful return to reality while images of a tall, dark, and handsome stranger with great abs float lustfully through her memory.

This would be more the Midwestern beach variety, in fact, from a photo shoot in the dead of winter on the shore of Lake Michigan. Two days before New Years Day, 2007. While it would be incredibly exciting and adventurous to report that someone was using a camera to pose and take glamorous pictures of *me* for some reason, the gritty reality is that I was sunny-side down on the wet sand, stretched out full-length shooting pictures at eye-level of my favorite high heels with the waves breaking in the background. I was starting a blog, and I was calling it “Running with Stilettos,” and I wanted a cute shoe picture to kick it off with.

I just hoped that nobody was watching! So much for launching a project with confidence and energy and a blaze of glory. I felt so ridiculous in this quest that I first left the shoes and the camera back in the car while I scoped out the beach for other signs of humanity. Once at the water’s edge, I looked up and down the shoreline. The nearest people were at least two blocks away in each direction. Whew! I went back to the car, grabbed the gear, and got busy. Cold, and wet, and sandy, and busy.

But let me back up the truck here for a minute. I didn’t know the first thing about blogging. I hadn’t published a line that didn’t involve

a legal issue of some sort since I'd started law school ten years before. When I'd switched career horses from journalism to law at that point after a life-changing accident, I never thought I'd be missing it. And oh boy, was I wrong! While my life operated on entirely too much "chaos theory" to marshal focus and concentration for, say, writing a novel, friends finally convinced me that I needed an outlet for creative writing again, and steered me into setting up my own website.

I was a babe in the woods. I carbon date from the time that my journalism college had a room full of selectric typewriters for students to use for their assignments. In my first newspaper job, I had to be *ordered* to start composing a feature story on a computer keyboard instead of writing it out by hand on a legal pad first. Okay, enough of a trip down memory lane, I'm not as old as Santa Claus.

But this was a whole new world. I needed an endless supply of help navigating every step of the set-up process, and all I really knew was that I had one essay I wanted to write and hoped that more would follow. And I needed, in my mind's eye, a cute shoe picture. Fast.

The pre-launch day for the blog was gloomy and overcast for the most part, and I wondered how I was ever going to get this accomplished. Nobody was holding a gun to my head and saying "publish *now*." But I felt a devil-may-care new-beginnings quality to the timing of pushing the "print" button on New Year's Eve, and then heading out to ring in the new year with friends and champagne. The essay was already written, the structure of the website set up. I kept slogging morosely through the day with household tasks. Then suddenly the clouds broke up and I saw sunlight in my front yard, and I kicked into gear, throwing three pairs of my favorite spike heels and a camera into an Ann Taylor bag and heading to one of my favorite beaches thirty miles away.

Life is full of those serendipitous moments, as I keep finding out. I posed and snapped away, first the pink faux-alligator slingbacks, then the black leather numbers with the cream piping and perky bows, then finally the caramel colored faux-alligator stilettos. I worked really fast, not just because I didn't want anybody to walk by and alert the mental

health authorities, but because my fingers were freezing. Convinced that there had to be a usable shot in one of the dozen I'd snapped, I stood up, packed my meager supplies away, and turned to walk back to the car. As I turned, I noticed that from this angle, the afternoon sunlight caught the waves in an entirely different way. A spasm of curiosity fired up.

Hmmm. . . . On the downside, I was cold, I was wet, and the bystanders (*gasp!*) were getting closer. On the upside, I was already covered with wet sand from my chest to the tips of my toes. And I was here. Out came just the caramel colored stilettos and the digital camera and I wiggled my fingers to get the blood circulating for just a little while longer. I flopped down on the sand one more time, and snapped all of two pictures before saying "enough already!"

You can guess how this story ends, of course. The last picture I snapped—of the two I had never set out to take—turned out to be the best of the bunch. Not only did it launch the blog, I used it for the cover of my first book, "Running with Stilettos." **And** my business cards. **And** the promotional postcards I still hand out shamelessly at every opportunity.

I don't think I'll ever entirely get every grain of sand out of the sneakers I wore to the beach that day. But I don't mind. I still look back in wonder at the workings of chance in our lives, and the fun to be had by following the sudden question "why?" with the reply "oh, **why the hell not???**"

I've found it to be a darn good theory for daily living.

And an even **better** theory when it comes to shopping for shoes. . .

g u t t e r

# Author! Author!



Of all the accessories to bring along to my first ever book-signing, the rocks proved to be the most practical. I'd packed books, of course, and a couple of pens, sunblock and lipstick, even bought a package of emergency M&Ms when I stopped for gas on the way to Chicago. But in the final analysis, it was the rocks.

Yesterday was my maiden voyage into the realm of in-person book promotion. I was hanging out my shingle at the Printer's Row Book Fair, billed by the Chicago Tribune as "the Midwest's largest literary event." I'm lucky enough to belong to two press organizations, the Chicago Writers Association and the Illinois Woman's Press Association, that had tables or tents set up at the fair for members to display at. So off I merrily drove for my book fair adventure, with a forty-pound suitcase, a full tote bag, a purse, and a stand-up display.

But first, a word about the preceding frenzy of disorganization. As in every step of the way in this journey into print, opportunity has been

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racing far ahead of preparation, and I've been dog paddling as fast as I can to keep up.

The wardrobe malfunction was first on the list. For weeks I'd known what I was going to wear. I was wedded to the idea of my show-stopping pink spike-heeled sling-backs, and had the perfect summer dress to go with. Sleeveless, tropical, a little flirty with side slits at the hem, and with pink hibiscus flowers on a black background, above all, slimming. The afternoon before the fair, as I finally started to pack, I put on the shoes and then tried on the dress for the first time since last summer. Oops...big time. Somehow over the winter, my hips had re-sized themselves, and the dress was suddenly strategically inoperable. So that's where all those cozy mugs of Kahlua-spiked hot chocolate topped with whipped cream and nutmeg in front of a toasty fire went last winter. Darn!

Since the pink stilettos were non-negotiable, I tore into the nearby town, searching frantically for a comfortable figure-flattering summer dress with enough pink in the design to match the shoes. With the primary choices being Kohl's and a place called Dress Barn, I soon found out it was going to be harder than I hoped. I looked at the clock on the dashboard, calculated how many hours remained—three—before the man in my life showed up for dinner, gritted my teeth at the thought of getting snared in rush-hour traffic, then gunned it to an upscale mall in Milwaukee thirty miles away.

After searching pretty much every dress section in the mall at warp speed, there were two things I knew, as Oprah likes to say, "for sure." One was that I'm really picky about dresses. The other is that when clothing sizes get into the double digits—anything above, say, a size eight—vertical stripes do **not** make you look thinner. In the last store at the far end of the mall from where I'd parked, I settled on a sale-priced tropical print tunic with plenty of pink in it, to go over black

*Author! Author!*

slacks. Less expensive than the dangly earrings I then bought as a chaser...but both still cheaper than a dress.

I got home, tidied up the kitchen, started a load of wash, began stacking books in a suitcase, then checked on the Chicago weather for the next day. High winds, possibly the occasional thunderstorm. The man of my dreams took a long-enough break from shooting arrows in the back yard to fashion a couple of makeshift braces for the display from a pair of wire coat hangers. Nothing fancy for this gal at this precise moment, just something that worked. And didn't require another trip to town.

The display itself had come into being just a few days before, after I'd met Paul Salsini, a Marquette University journalism professor and fellow author for coffee. After giving me an insider's perspective on marketing tips and personal appearances, he'd counseled me on the need to have some kind of a promotional poster on display near the books. There was no time, of course, to remotely think about getting something professionally printed. But it's amazing what you can accomplish with a sheet of industrial strength cardboard, a can of "hammered copper" Rust-oleum, some frantic and experimental eight-by-tens at one-hour photo pricing, and a roll of camouflage duct tape.

The coat hanger braces raised another yet wind-related problem. What to do about the piles of promotional postcards I'd had printed up to casually hand out to passers-by? Set down without something weighing them down, they could end up in Kansas. The answer was a few feet away in the garage. I started rummaging through dusty cubbyholes for rocks the kids had brought back from fifteen years worth of family vacations at rocky shorelines, and came up with four. One looked like a flower with very thick petals, one was covered by tiny chains of fossils, one was a pretty chunk of quartz, and one just look like...a

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rock. The suitcase started to feel heavy enough to tie a body to and hide it in Lake Michigan.

I showed up at the fair, gear trundling behind me on wheels, feeling like Dorothy just arrived in Oz. Okay, okay, we know that Dorothy had a few rough days in Oz. Flying monkeys, the Wicked Witch, those weird talking trees that threw apples. I'm thinking more like the early happy scene where everything is strange and new and she gets greeted as the heroine of Munchkin Land while the Lollipop Guild and the Lullaby League sing for her. The book fair was enormous, with the treasure-seeking vibe of a bustling, bohemian flea market...but with an army of identical upscale tents stretching for blocks in a regimented row down Dearborn Street and around into Polk, accented by live music, table-top vendors, and reserved-seating venues for talks by big-name authors here and there. A vibrant, quirky little island of its own, in the midst of a vibrant big city. And my home town.

I found the IWPA tent, squeezed into my corner spot of the table I shared with two other gals, and started to unpack. The predicted "high winds" in the Windy City channeled down the high-walled corridor of Dearborn Street with the turbulent speed of rapids through a slot canyon, and it was instantly clear that despite the makeshift braces and duct tape, the poster was going to go flying if left unattended. I gamely stood for the next four hours with my arm draped casually across the top to hold it down. I didn't know I could do without a bathroom break for that long. I smiled, signed, chatted, passed out innumerable promo postcards, and wrestled with the wind to keep the poster on the table. I thanked heaven for the fact I'd eaten breakfast before I left, since the wind only let up for about twenty seconds, enough time for me to dash to the center of the tent and scarf down three donut holes before returning to my post.

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Four hours later, it was time to move shop to the CWA table. This time I took down the poster for good and left it and the duct tape behind. This gig was a little more relaxed—without the poster, I could finally sit down. I still shamelessly and reflexively handed out postcards to anyone who made eye contact. A teenager looking too young to find the book interesting? “Here, bring one home to your mom!” A single guy of any age? “Here, take one for the woman you love!” One guy smiled and shook his head, remarking “well, that would be the man that I love.” No problem. “Oh heck, I’m sure you’ve got a niece or a sister!” He took the postcard with and started to read as he walked.

Two hours passed in the blink of an eye, accented by the growling of my empty stomach. At nearly four, I remembered the “emergency M&Ms” in the bottom of the tote bag and tore into them gratefully, still working the crowd, one hand passing out cards, the other shoveling candy into my face, momentarily unable to make polite conversation with a mouthful of candy-covered chocolate.

At four, I made my way back to the big tent and started to pack up. Two hours were officially left for the fair that day, but the crowds had started to thin, and the folks that remained had that weary “I’ve been here too long and just want to go home” look in their eyes. The clouds got darker, and the wind picked up, and just as I closed the last remaining book into the suitcase, I saw umbrellas start to open in the crowd. I had picked as good a time as any to make a graceful exit. The gals sharing the table with me said that the paperweight rocks had worked like a charm, holding down the stacks of postcards I’d left behind which folks still stopped by and snapped up.

Other authors had plenty to tell me about what typically made a “good” day or a “bad” day for them at a book fair, but with nothing of my own to compare it to, I’d have to say I had a pretty fabulous day. I sold some books, signed some autographs, shook some hands,

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met some interesting people, tried something new. Talked about shoe shopping at length with a lively, ebullient couple visiting from New York, talked about law with a man whose son just finished his first year of law school and wanted a career in public policy, talked about writing with a young woman just starting out as an essayist, talked about large families with a young woman who was the fourth and youngest child in hers. Pointed out the exact page in the book where the word “sex” appeared—just once!—to a man who was thinking about buying it for his thirteen year old daughter. Met a neonatal intensive care nurse writing a series of suspense novels. Yeah, it had been a very, **very** good day.

I found the parking lot where I’d left the car, loaded the bag of books that were left into the back, and cautiously navigated a labyrinth of steep, narrow ramps back down to street level. As I pulled forward into the street, the rain started to come down in buckets. Then, still feeling a lot like Dorothy, I left the Land of Oz behind, and made my way through the storm to get back home.