

NON-SKID

A sticky problem.

BY JOHN FRIZELL

Ellie stared aghast at the mirror. There was a bruise the size of a cantaloupe on her thigh and its colours seemed to be getting more livid as she watched. It hurt but the physical pain didn't come close to matching the mental anguish. There was a pool party tomorrow and she couldn't think of wearing a bikini. Even a bare-midriff look was out of the question. She could only wear about half of her party clothes, and she had a lot of parties to attend over the Christmas season. It wasn't fair. And Kathi had broken her wrist. Something had to be done.

She pulled her skirt back down, gingerly patted everything into a clean line and then phoned Jamie.

"Why don't you come down to the kitchen? I'm going to make some of Mom's eggnog."

"Great. You can tell me what you want when I get there."

Jamie was only a few metres away but of course he was in his room — where else? — and Ellie had decided never to go there again after having been trapped by one of his robots.

"There is ice all over everything outside," she said as she grated nutmeg and measured out chopped vanilla pod.

"Common this time of year."

"I'm falling over. Getting bruised."

"Don't go out. We have optical broadband. You can get everything you need."

"Jamie!"

"Walk carefully."

"I do. It's not enough."

"Wear crampons. You can order instep crampons off the Internet. Don't go out until they arrive."

He took two forks out of the drawer and showed her how the little metal claws could be attached to her shoes. Great. She would be walking around like some sort of predatory animal, ruining her shoes, with a big ugly strap running over the top of them to hold the device in place. Ugh. No way.

"That's a really good idea Jamie. But they might not be quite the right look."

Jamie's face went vacant, as it always did when she talked about any aspect of style.

"But I bet you could make something that would do the same job but be invisible. Of course no one else has managed to..."

She watched as his face became animated again. It was a bit unfair to manipulate him like this, but her brother loved technical

challenges and it would be fun for him.

"Eggnogs for a week," he said.

"You put it on like this," Jamie said, brushing a thin brown goo onto the soles of her oldest and worst shoes. "Don't get it on your hands."

He was wearing disposable gloves.

"What happens if I get it on my hands?"

"Just don't."

"But suppose I touch the soles of my shoes while I am putting them on?"

"No problem. Once this stuff has been in contact with the soles for 3 or 4 seconds it beds irreversibly into the material. It prefers polyurethane or PVC but it will adapt to whatever it finds. It works by..."

Ellie forced herself to listen, an intent expression on her face, nodding or saying 'Oh, really' when he paused, but as always it went right over her head. There were nano machines and long chains with ions on them or something, but the more Jamie explained the less she understood.

"Can I try them?"

She took a few steps towards the front door.

"They feel the same as ever."

"The nanos recognize flooring materials and inactivate. Go outside."

She put on a warm coat and gingerly stepped onto the icy front path. It felt fine. She took hold of the fence just to be safe and lifted a foot. She could balance. She let go of the fence. She could still balance. She walked up and down the slick gleaming ice of the path in perfect comfort.

"I got the specific adhesion perfect didn't I," said Jamie.

"You are a genius," said Ellie, kissing him on the cheek. She thought of her many friends and of Kathi, stuck inside with her arm in a cast. "Can you make a bit more of this?"

Ellie's social standing, already much better than average, had gone through the roof since she had started treating shoes. At first people brought old beat-up shoes and then came back a day or so later, but as her reputation spread people started showing up with their best. Girls who would not normally

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mix with anyone in her set were suddenly including her in their circle. She was careful. She never let anyone



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else touch Jamie's stuff and she always wore gloves — she had gone through two boxes of disposable latex gloves. She didn't really like the nickname 'Shoe Queen,' but the 'Queen' part was good.

The icy grip of winter wasn't as bad when you could get around easily, and she had lots of opportunity to use her upgraded footwear attending parties she never would have been invited to before. It wasn't until late February that the problems started.

"Jamie!"

"Sis."

"I was walking home just now and I stepped on a patch of grass."

She waved her second best boot in his face. The sole was carpeted with grass. Some of it had roots on it with bits of earth stuck in them. She plucked at it, bits of root came off but the grass stayed as if it were part of the boot.

"I could barely get it loose. If I'd stepped on the grass with both feet I'd probably still be there."

Jamie hesitated for a moment.

"Grass isn't a floor material. The nanos don't deactivate."

"But it's thawing. In a week or so the ice will all be gone. What's going to happen then?"

"Good point. I didn't think of that." ■

John Frizell was trained in biochemistry and works on ocean conservation for Greenpeace. In his spare time he walks, builds robots and writes short stories.