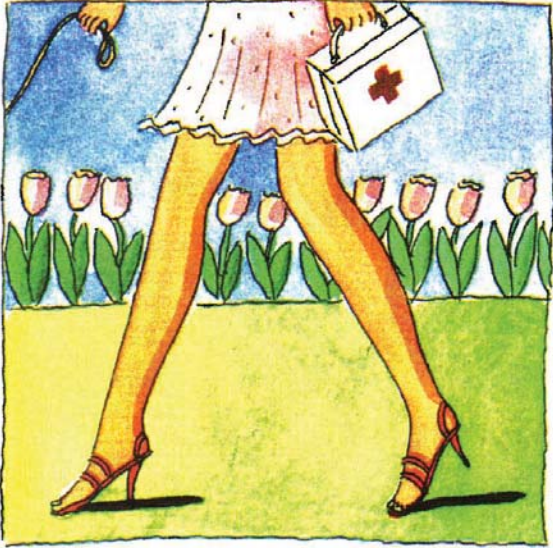


# The Cry of the Sandal Is Heard in Our Land



Merle Nacht

By RUTH LA FERLA

**S**TROLLING through SoHo last week wearing a pink dirndl skirt, Debbie Korb was the picture of spring, the only thing marring that vision being the flicker of pain on her face.

"These shoes are brand-new," explained Ms. Korb, a broker at Sotheby's auction house in New York, pointing toward dainty sandals embellished with mother-of-pearl. "It's the first time I've worn them, and already I have Band-Aids on my feet."

Around the corner on West Broadway, Amina Koeppinger, a model, found herself in similar straits. "Let me show you something," Ms. Koeppinger said with weary bravado as she lifted a foot streaked with welts. "When I wear my sandals this early in the season, I'm usually covered in plasters. But even that doesn't seem to be working today."

Ms. Korb and Ms. Koeppinger were among the army of New Yorkers taking advantage of last week's short burst of unseasonably summery weather to kick off their boots and slip into something airy. Eager to test-drive the new sandals, flip-flops, wedges and espadrilles bought in advance of the season, they were cheerfully submitting to what many accept as a rite of spring: pain.

The months of swaddling winter-tenderized feet in tights, thick socks and shock-absorbing boots are over. Now is when many women willingly squeeze their vulnerable toes into sandals that slice unforgiving into the skin.

Eva Gajzer, who sells shoes and clothing at Kirna Zabete, a SoHo boutique, has witnessed the casualties. "Band-Aids, I see them all the time," Ms. Gajzer said.

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Suddenly women are pulling out shoes with straps "like little knives," she said. "They walk into the store with their feet completely covered in blood."

Ms. Gajzer faults the shoemaker, not the wearer. "When you're paying between \$300 and \$600 for a pair of sandals, you expect them to be remotely comfortable," she said. "Otherwise the designer should be smacked."

Ms. Korb, for her part, is resigned to her fate. "It's crazy, I know," she said with a mixture of pride and chagrin. "I just bought these shoes for \$600. They're Valentino. They hurt, but I love them so much I even had a pedicure — another \$50 — just so I could wear them."

She was among the hobbled masses seeking relief at nail salons. "In the past four days we've been treating mobs of people, most of whom are exiting the winter without having done anything to get their feet ready for spring," said Anika Haynes, the spa coordinator for the Aqua Beauty Bar in downtown Manhattan.

"All the women who come here," Ms. Haynes said, "need emergency rescue. They're swollen, they're callused, and they're pleading, 'Can you buff, buff, buff?'"

Doctors, too, report a spike in business.

## Who cares about a slight limp or a blister or two? It's show time for toes.

"I saw 19 patients today," said Dr. Joanna Youner, a New York podiatrist. "All of a sudden everybody has something on their heels or on the sides of their toes, and it's all shoe related."

Dr. Youner, who insisted on wearing her new open-toe Ferragamos the other day, sore feet be damned, said sheepishly: "I'm a victim myself. In a stylish city like Manhattan, a certain amount of vanity is the female condition. If a little pain comes with it, I'll take it. But I draw the line at open wounds."

Tamara Morgan, an accountant, has evolved a preventative strategy. "My feet are fine," she said as she strolled in Times



**OUCH** The outbreak of spring sandals has coincided with the appearance of that time-honored sandal accessory, the bandage.

Square Tuesday wearing a pair of new Steve Madden sandals. "I made sure when I bought them that the part that goes across the toes is wide enough."

But for those who choose, say, toe cleavage or a sexy ankle strap over comfort and fit, some trauma is inevitable. "Corns and calluses are a response to the friction that comes from the way your feet slide around when they don't have enough support," Dr. Youner pointed out. She stressed that there is no way to speed healing. "You can soak your feet in Epsom salts to calm them down," she said. "But it is still going to take a couple of weeks." Suzanne Yalof Schwartz, executive fashion editor at large at Glamour magazine, did not have the requisite patience. Recently she bought a pair of Birkenstock look-alikes, "but they hurt so bad, I'm retiring them," she said.

Other women, Ms. Koeppinger among them, have opted to smile through the pain.

"You get used to it," she said.