



# to Suffer for *Fashion*

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**The scene is not unfamiliar in today's world. The first indication that they're coming is the sound.** In *The Devil Wears Prada*, the main character, Andy Sachs, calls the women the "clackers," and they are everywhere. The clacking echoes throughout the subway station, becoming more frantic as a train pulls up. Their sound intensifies and the time between each sound quickens. It can be heard downtown just before 9 a.m., amongst the taxi horns and screeching brakes on the SEPTA bus. In any academic building on campus, the sound fills the halls and stairwells.

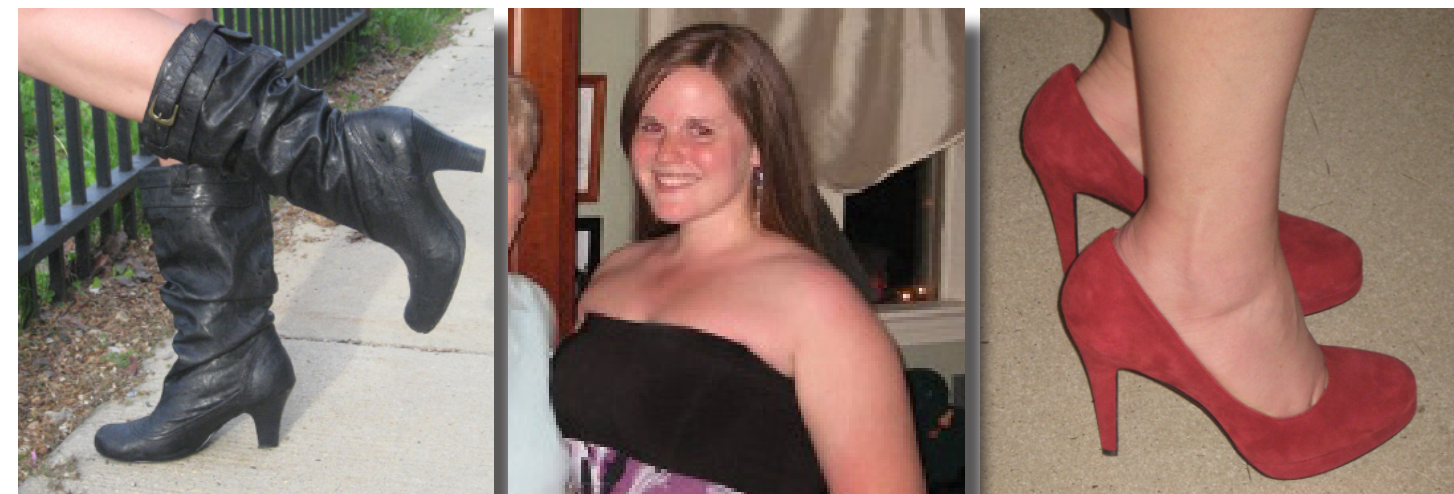
However, it doesn't end when the books are shoved aside and the office lights turned off. On any given Saturday night, the clacking resumes, accompanying giggles and the clinking of glasses. They come in every imaginable color, from plain black to magenta, and in every size. Some of them are cheap, while others cost hundreds of dollars. They are a girl's best friend, as they give her the body that nature robbed her of and allow her to stand eye-to-eye with her male counterparts. They are high heels, and they are slowly destroying the bodies of the young women who venture out in them every day.

It's not an easily ignorable trend. The glossy pages of every fashion magazine feature the shoes. Stilettos and pumps have formed a faithful following of females, appearing in every season complementing every new trend. When the weather turns cold, boots turn up with 3-inch heels allowing women to stay both warm and chic. However, women are not only influenced by fashion magazines. Carrie Brad-

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shaw, the main character of *Sex in the City*, made stilettoes as important to the modern woman as a career.

The shoes are more than an accessory. They are a sign of social status and style. But, while creating a perfect silhouette and completing an outfit, they are also destroying the body, literally from head to toe.



Abby McKweon puts one hand against her dresser, supporting her body as she slides her foot into a pair of black leather pumps. She stands straight, looking in the mirror and examining her outfit thoroughly. “I’m about three inches taller now. It’s awesome. It makes all the difference,” she says, backing up slightly to gain one last look before walking out the door. McKweon is not unlike other girls on a Saturday night as she gets ready to go out with her friends. She will spend the night walking around Philadelphia, dancing with her friends, and running to catch the last subway home. But McKweon should know better. Last semester, she

spent six weeks in a full cast. The night began with selecting the perfect heels for a night out. However, this particular night ended in the emergency room. “I really didn’t think about it,” she explains. “They were new shoes and I was excited to wear them out with my friends.” McKweon recalls that it had rained the entire day, but cleared up that night. She describes the wet leaves which covered the sidewalk. “I was walking home, not really paying attention. I started to slip on the leaves, and my ankle twisted around. The heel of my shoe got stuck and I fell over,” she recalls. McKweon went to the emergency room, where doctors originally diagnosed a sprain. However, when the condition did not improve, McKweon returned and discovered her sprain was actually a fracture. “I spent six weeks in a boot. My friends started calling me ‘Boot.’ It was awful,” she says. Now, over a year later, she has not changed her habits. Her passion for high-heeled shoes has not subsided. She has chalked the experience up to an accident and refuses to change.

Despite the pain of a sprained ankle and the humiliation of obtaining a new nickname, McKweon escaped relatively easily compared to the injuries of other women. Brandon Sams has worked as an X-ray technician at Einstein Medical Center for over three years. He has seen a myriad of different injuries, but recalls



one dramatic instance of a pair of high heels causing severe damage to a young woman’s foot. The patient came into the emergency room limping after hurting her foot at a party while wearing high heels. After being assessed thoroughly, it was determined that an orthopedist would need to examine her further. She had a fracture near her first and second metatarsal regions, which include bones in the toes. “When you have your foot in a vulnerable and unnatural position wearing heels, you’re susceptible to injury with a misstep,” Sams explains. Surgery that involves placing pins near the bone would correct the injury. Months later, the foot healed and she was able to regain full use of it. While no permanent damage was done, the injury kept the patient from work and forced her into months of painful recovery.

These stories are not uncommon. These and many other injuries occur while wearing high heels. Accord-

ing to a study from the International Journal of Humanities and Peace, tens of millions of Americans suffer from foot injuries every year, with women making up a great majority. Cited among these injuries are sprains, nerve irritations, and problems throughout other parts of the body, such as the neck and back. In the study, Jane Snyder, a physical therapist, describes the effects of wearing stilettos, explaining that “high heels cause the back and neck to hyperextend. The body compensates by flexing ... the hips and spine.”

Additionally, maintaining balance in these shoes causes the leg muscles to tense, which also eventually causes damage. While many women notice the blisters on their feet after a long day of commuting and look forward to soaking sore feet when they return home, the long-term effects are often overlooked.

Despite the bounty of clinical research pointing to high heels as the cause of many orthopedic problems



and the horror stories of many young women, it is nearly impossible to convince the fashion-conscious to put away her designer shoes for something more reasonable. For centuries, women have used these shoes to accent their best outfits and create a more desirable image. With this in mind, many researchers are now doing studies to determine which shoes cause less damage to the feet. The Lancet examined the effects of wide-heeled and narrow-heeled shoes on the knees of young women. In the end, it was determined that wide-heeled shoes put a greater strain on the knees and increase the chance that the wearer will develop osteoarthritis at a younger age. In addition to measuring the width of the heel, researchers have noted that the height also plays a significant role in the risk of long-term effects. While passing up the latest trend in fashion may not be an option, many women may take solace in knowing that simply making different choices in styles may protect their feet and backs, while maintaining their reputation and dignity.

Abby McKweon is not concerned about what she will feel like in the future or how the heels will ultimately affect her body. She is concerned about the near future, like this weekend, and not years ahead. However, a study in the Journal of Public Health Medicine focused on older women who, like many other young women today, did not yield to the warnings given to them years ago. In the study, researchers examined the age women started wearing high heels, the height of the shoes, and their occupational activities. All women had worn high heels throughout their lives and were currently dealing with health issues such as chronic foot pain and deformities. The study included woman 50 to 70 years of age. Most of the women began wearing high heels at about 15 years old and 26 percent had jobs which required them to wear high heels at work. While soaking tired feet in hot water seems to cure all foot ailments now, the study points

out what lies ahead for fashionable young women.

Today's blisters and bunions can easily become tomorrow's sprains and fractures. What is now treated with bandages could soon need surgery and pins. While the threat of these injuries is very real, the tendency of young women to follow the hottest trends is unavoidable. Most shoes are created to make a statement and not necessarily for function. However, there are options for young women seeking to save their bodies years of pain while remaining faithful to the latest trends.



Abby enjoys a night in heels with her friend Chino Hernandez.

Jane Snyder of the American Physical Therapy Association suggests limiting the amount of time wearing shoes, possibly keeping a spare to change into for times when more stress will be placed on the feet. While her advice is practical, other women are taking a more proactive approach. In The Globe and Mail, Anyi Lu, a chemical engineer turned shoe designer, describes her mission: "Manolo Blahnik has said that he designs shoes for women who sit. I design shoes for women who are on the go, with style," she says. It may provide young women with hope that fashion and function will soon merge allowing for the maintenance of a young healthy body and ego.

There is little chance that the clacking will cease anytime soon. As long as fashion designers, magazines, and celebrities endorse that style, women will buy into the trend. There is limited awareness about the problem and little done to remedy it. However, with shoe designers like Anyi Lu on the rise, perhaps hope is in sight. If stilettos and comfort find a way to unite, there is no question that women would immediately trade in their own heels for new ones with a better design.

"Sure, I'd love a shoe like that," McKweon says, sitting on her bed, continuing to prepare for her night out. "But until then..." she laughs and waves a red shoe in the air, holding it by its long, thin heel. ●