

Bloomingdale's brings out the best in me

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—"I need a new white shirt," my anonymous spousal other announced as we approached Bloomingdale's at Lexington and 59th in Manhattan on the morning before Thanksgiving. "To go with my black pants for the choir."

That seemed simple enough. A white shirt. I must have a dozen. They all look alike, except for the food stains. How hard could it be to buy one white shirt in a major New York department store?

It was never made clear to me why Ms. Anonymous and our daughter, Molly, insisted that I come on their expedition into the wilds of women's apparel. Perhaps they wanted me to bear their trophy home balanced on my head. Perhaps they planned to throw me to the lions I saw snarling over a fresh kill in handbags.

Perhaps it was another Family Unit Activity (F-U-A) in which we find value in each other's company. Past FUAs have included arguing and sharing a meal in sullen silence.

I've always enjoyed Holiday shopping with Ms. Anonymous. I'd amble into Cartier or Tiffany and say, "Bring out your biggest, greenest emerald ring." The black-clad, blonde women would roll out a watermelon-size stone on a fork lift, and I'd sniff, "Is that all you got? Not big enough. Do you have it in hot pink?" Then I'd walk out in a huff. Acting insulted is a survival skill when working in big-rock quarries.

I've always been very clear that shopping and buying are not related activities. I think I'd be less than totally honest if I did not add that the women in my life do not believe that buying is a mortal sin. I pray over their transgressions.

I've even heard one say that she would not throw a watermelon on the compost heap were it to appear on our doorstep in Blue Grass. An orange might do, or even a couple of carrots.

I didn't think my shop-and-skip tactic that always worked so brilliantly with Cartier would hold up in Bloomingdale's where shoppers finger merchandise as if it's a fish gone to stink and then buy it with a smile.

It appeared that we were shopping to buy, a thought that left me both shaken and stirred.

Whining and complaining had not rescued me. I needed a new defense, fast. Time had run out.

We charged into Bloomingdale's and found ourselves in the middle of a street fight between two middle-aged-lady roller-derby teams. Women wearing mink, \$2,000 blue jeans and six-inch heels ran me into the boards. (I knew the jeans cost that much because they came with factory-direct knee rips, not the after-market rips that look so tacky.)

Inside, we wound through the first-floor gunk-and-goo gantlets in hope that we would wash up near shirts.

Sales associates clawed at me, thinking correctly that I was the weak link in our three-link chain. Each one offered me something "for free," which turned out to be less than the whole story.

Some caked me with powders; others sprayed me like I was an invasive weed. I certainly could have used a rod and a staff as I walked through the valley of death by eye shadow. I got light-headed in the vapors section where each time I turned to escape, a different sales associate spritzed my wrist. I ended up smelling like a toxic-waste dump.

How hard would it be to buy a white shirt? Much harder than I had imagined.

I followed my leaders as we wandered through the wilderness of pots, pans and lingerie.

But a plan had emerged as I lay pinned to the floor by the fume lady and the vapor girls. It was simple: Buy the first white shirt and run for the exit.

On the second floor -- or maybe the 20th -- we found clothes for women, all of which were at least 100 percent off.

I stopped at the nearest 150-percent-off rack. "Here's a pretty one. Any more off and they'd be paying you to buy it."

Ms. Anonymous considered the fabric, judged the design, weighed the color, muttered that she liked it and then looked at the price tag: "Three-forty-eight!!!"

"Sold," I said. "It's a steal. The same shirt at Dollar General is \$3.49."

"I'm not buying that stupid white shirt for three-forty-eight."

"Of course, not. I'll buy that stupid white shirt for \$3.48."

"No."

"No?" I asked.

"No!"

We sounded like we were house-training each other.

Desperate, I upped the ante. "How about two stupid white shirts?"

(Hope had appeared that I could get out of Bloomingdale's in three hours and for less than 10 bucks.)

"No."

My escape plan lay in shreds. The battle had been joined with Bloomingdale's. I was a prisoner of war.

We spent the next four hours rejecting 300 other stupid white shirts.

Some were too white, or too off-white, or not the right color white, or a white that wouldn't go with black pants, or a white that was nice but wrong, or one that looked too old, or one that was too frouy-frouy, or one that would show the dirt, or the all-organic one that wouldn't show the dirt because it was woven from soil-eating microbes.

The ones with collars didn't have the right sleeves. The ones with the right sleeves didn't have the right buttons. The ones with buttons didn't have the right pleats. The ones with horns didn't have the right honk.

Some had goiters of ruffles growing out of their breastplates. Some had V-necks cut to the navel. Some had see-through fabrics; some had no fabric at all to see through. One had declared her candidacy for the U.S. Senate, running as The People's Shirt—Unbought and Unstuffed.

And each time, Ms. Anonymous was absolutely right. I saw why the shirt was not right.

With time on my hands, I noticed that most of Bloomingdale's mannequins had no heads. Those that did come with heads lacked faces. Several resembled husbands. I took this as a warning to button my lip.

Eventually, a white shirt was purchased. It was a nice white shirt, not a stupid one.

But as I lurched toward the entrance, the *coup de grace* landed.

"Now, I need some gold flats," Ms. Anonymous said.

"Too volatile. Stay in cash," I advised helpfully.

"Gold flats are not an investment," my daughter, the financial reporter, instructed me.

"Bars, plates, coins, flats—whatever," I said.

The women of my family looked at me funny.

We then marched into a scene that had been air-lifted from the street riots in Cairo—Bloomingdale's shoe department.

Rack upon rack of left-foot shoes were squeezed into an acre of floor space. Women worked the rows, picking specimens for harvest and throwing what they didn't want aside like wormy ears of corn. Husks littered the floor.

This was the mother of all mosh pits and no place for my gentle soul. One mother was threatening her 13-year-old daughter with a knee-length boot that was marked down to \$1,800. I couldn't tell whether the Mom was

upset with the girl for wanting to buy these boots or for not wanting to buy them. I saw another drag-along man crumpled in a corner—post-traumatic shoe disorder. I also saw several small-but-tasteful grave markers like the ones you see on highways.

I found an unpadded bench. There, I rocked my head back and forth, humming tunelessly. Ancient ladies patted me on the head. One slipped me a nickel, “Treat yourself to a Coke.” Another asked if I had seen her husband who looked a lot like me. He had been last seen at this very spot 20 years ago. I looked at the nearest mannequin.

It could not have been more than three hours later that a pair of shoes was found to complement the white shirt. The flats had tassels and shimmery gold scales. They would have been my first choice, too.

I will admit this: I had more fun in Bloomingdale’s than I had when I was shanghaied into a West Virginia square dance run by a caller whose only language was a semi-extinct dialect of Serbo-Croatian.

After a while, anarchy feels familiar.

From now on, I am sticking with Cartier and Tiffany. I’m in, out and done with my shopping in minutes. I’m never burdened with packages or wrapping decisions. No one sprays me. Everyone is glad to see me leave.

And here’s a stimulus tip for our economy. More women’s white shirts would be sold in America if women stayed home and let men do the shopping.

Returns would go up, too.

Increased sales and higher returns—a growth-stimulating twofer.

After reading this column, my numerous marital advisers have suggested that I better come up with a watermelon fast, or else.

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