

A HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO LINGERIE SHOPPING

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When I was a young man, long before I was married or even had a permanent girlfriend, I thought shopping for lingerie with my eventual loved one would be a peak life experience. I imagined an intimate, dimly lit dressing room and romantic sensuality as my lady showed off her selections. I imagined a Victoria's Secret moment, where perfection is immediate and effortless, and the result is stunning. If I let my mind wander even further, I imagined a fashion show at home and a candlelit afternoon.

In my youthfulness, I never gave any thought to how a woman chooses the lingerie that is so flattering once it's been chosen. I hardly noticed the thousands of brightly colored bras and panties adorning the walls and rounders in Macy's lingerie department as I strode to Menswear to buy socks or a tie. It never occurred to me then that those tiny, pretty little frillies actually represented an obstacle course of confusion and frustration.

My eyes were opened early one spring morning when my lovely bride-to-be announced she needed some new lingerie and Macy's was having a sale.

"I'd like to help," I said immediately.

She hesitated and said, "Sure," and that should've been my first clue. I was eager to fulfill my fantasy, however, so off to Macy's we went, arriving shortly after the doors opened.

The first thing a man feels when he walks into a lingerie department is that he is entirely out of place. I hadn't expected that, as a mere passerby. I thought there would be subtle tones of sensuality and sexuality. Instead, I felt anxious and insecure, and imagined waves of hostility from the women shoppers. I was overwhelmed by the variety of styles, colors, fabrics, functions, and designers, and the realization that the closest male was on the far side of the store trying on running shoes.

Fortunately, my bride-to-be favored one bra designer and one style, although I'd never paid attention to those specifics before. As I stood frozen and intimidated, she pulled my arm and said, "There they are." We wove through racks and rounders and stopped before a wall-rack containing merely hundreds of bras in every imaginable style and color.

There were push-up bras, sports bras, flirty sports bras, jogging bras, underwires, minimizers, maximizers, little cheaters, big cheaters, strapless, backless, convertible backless, crisscross, front-close, back-close, two-hookers, three-hookers, four-hookers, lacey, satiny, satiny with lace, floral, paisley, leopard spots and tiger stripes, to name just a few.

With a practiced eye, my intended chose a handful of bras in her size and style and pulled me toward the fitting room area. "Now we're getting somewhere," I thought, and my fantasy began to revive itself.

“You’ll have to wait outside,” my love said at the entrance to the fitting area. “There are other women in there.” She pecked me on the cheek beneath buzzing and flickering fluorescent lights and disappeared through the protective curtain.

Crushed, I found a nearby wall to lean against. It goes without saying there was no chair. And that’s a curious thing. I’ve waited in Macy’s lingerie departments up and down California, and there is rarely a chair for the awkward male to retreat to while the female undertakes the fitting ritual in private.

There is a chair by the cash register at the Macy’s in Corte Madera, but there’s a security camera right above it. If you sit too long, a guard strolls over and asks if you need help. To be fair, the Macy’s in Palm Desert has a hard plastic couch in an alcove next to the fitting area’s entrance. There’s even a little flat-screen TV on the wall where you can watch infomercials for the garden weasel and upside-down tomatoes while your lady fair seeks the perfect combination of fit, lift, separation, support, and comfort.

But back to my first lingerie shopping experience. I continued to lean against the wall and eventually several women emerged from the fitting area. “*Psst*. Are you there?” my beloved called in a stage whisper.

“Can I come in now?” I asked with a surge of hope.

“NO!” she said loudly enough for the shoppers outside to hear.

“How’s it going in there?” I whispered back.

“One’s too large, another’s too small. I don’t like the straps on the white one, and the cups are wrong on the beige one,” she said with a hint of frustration. “Go get me a bra in a ... in my size, in candlelight.” She was back to her stage whisper.

“What’s candlelight?” I asked in my normal voice.

“It’s between white and beige,” she replied in her whisper.

“OK. Just hang on a minute.”

If you think it’s embarrassing to set foot in a lingerie department for the first time, then to be dragged through it by your partner, then to loiter while strange women give you dirty looks, it’s nothing compared to pawing through a wall of bras without a female companion nearby for cover, looking for something called candlelight in the right size. I finally found the one and walked back to the protective curtain. Pulling it aside, I whispered triumphantly, “I found it!”

“Bring it here. Room 3,” she whispered. “Hand it over the door and then go back outside.”

“Here you go,” I said, my feeling of self-worth somewhat restored.

“Oh shit,” she said out loud. “This is ecru. And it has three hooks.”

“What’s ecru?” I whispered, bewildered.

“Go get the woman!”

And that’s another funny thing about lingerie departments. There are posters of pretty young women all over in various states of immodesty. The posters are on the walls, the merchandise racks, the columns, and by the cash register. And in every one, the model is smiling or twinkling or pretending to be shy. But the saleswomen don’t look anything like that. They’re all shades of grim and bored. And not a one is smiling or twinkling. The ones with tape measures and “Perfect Fit Consultant” buttons are just plain frightening. I wouldn’t let one of them measure my feet for shoes.

You’d think Macy’s would’ve figured out they need at least one attractive young woman in the lingerie department. That way, young men would be enticed into the forbidden realm to buy their girlfriends tee-shirts or sports bras, or at least gift cards. It’s just good marketing to broaden your customer base to include men. I obviously don’t know anything about lingerie, however.

Anyway, I finally found the saleswoman, who was on her knees restocking the sale rack. “What’s your problem?” she demanded. I explained that my lady in Room 3 wanted to try on a particular bra in a particular size in candlelight. “It’s over there,” she said, waving toward the wall rack. I said I’d looked there but couldn’t find the correct one. “Then we don’t have it,” she snapped. “Everything we have is on the rack.”

“But my girlfriend said she saw it,” I countered.

The woman grunted to her feet. “They don’t pay me enough,” she muttered. She huffed toward the wall rack, grabbed a bra at eye level, and marched toward the fitting area.

“Room 3,” I called to her back and returned to my loitering.

By two in the afternoon, my love had finished making her selections. In addition to several new bras, she had a rainbow palette of panties. Choosing the panties had been another educational experience for me. All had to have the correct rise and leg cut, and the right amounts of lace and cotton in the correct places. The unpleasant saleswoman rang up our purchases, and I was aghast at the prices. One panty cost as much as a three-pack of my underwear. And each bra cost more than my first suit.

I mused about why bras are so expensive as the saleswoman bagged our purchases. I tried to imagine what goes into designing and producing a bra, thinking you’d need an entire team of experts to design it: structural engineers, mechanical engineers, materials scientists, CAD/CAM designers, physical anthropologists, cultural anthropologists, fashion designers, psychologists, physiologists, sociologists, aestheticians, marketing specialists, consultants from men’s and women’s magazines, focus groups, and photographers all came to mind. Then you’d need the raw materials and production facilities to manufacture it. And of course, Macy’s has to make a profit. No wonder a bra is so expensive, I decided.

As we finally headed back to the car, I said, “Boy, that was a hassle! I never imagined!”

My true love looked at me and asked, “But you like the result?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“I love the result!” I murmured in her ear. We walked with our arms around each other and kissed over the crinkle of her shopping bags.

So, here’s the lesson I learned from my first experience shopping for lingerie. There’s an expression from my youth that goes, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” But when it comes to a male shopping for lingerie, I’ve decided the lesson is, “If you’re trying to be part of the solution, you are the problem.”