

THONG AGAIN

by Cindy Matthews
Illustrations by Barbara Bryce

Killing time at the mall is not my idea of a leisurely, fun activity, a far cry from my two teenaged daughters, who believe my blatant lack of interest in shopping is abominable. How, they ask, can you not LOVE to shop? It's so much fun.

Mingling with girlfriends, clustered among mobs of shoppers, is a right-of-passage into female adulthood, right? I avoided that phase like the plague, so it seems strange that my fourteen year-old daughter loves to shop so much that she will do so with nary a peer in sight. Being alone doesn't mean beans to her. She clips along confidently, on her own, fondling the fabrics, scrutinizing the price tags, verifying deals, and splurging on any garment deemed tight enough to accent her finer qualities.

Ever noticed how everything inside a mall looks fake? The corridors are filled with gaudy, piped-in music, rows and rows of artificial lighting, and miniaturized trees that have been trained to grow low-what's to like?

Shoppers' faces take on a bogus look, too. You can spot the regular shoppers—they're the folk with the permanent, blue circles engraved under their eyes, skin the pallor of warm milk. They've been in the mall for days, strolling aimlessly up and down the pretend streets, in search of something they've managed to live without quite nicely up to this point. Conversation consists of grunts, nudges, and minimal gestures at shop windows.

I don't get it. What is so fascinating about walking around inside a mall while outside the sun radiates its wonderful heat? My job requires that I spend daylight hours facing inside walls of buildings all day long. Being a mom means the rest of my life is spent with my head closeted inside a washer/dryer or above the cooking elements on my stove.

Why, then, choose to be in, when I could be out? Ontario winters last forever. I am in hibernation mode eight months out of twelve. If I have to be indoors during winter, I prefer my cooping happen while I am nestled on my couch, situated by a comfy fire, a blanket snug against my chin, a cup of tea in one hand, a book in another, eyelids drooping. Instead, my daughters want me strapped in my car, trucking them to the nearest 40% off sign. No thanks.

This was highlighted by some recent 'quality mall-time' spent with my fourteen year-old, in a lingerie store that my girls frequent. I immediately noticed that the store clerks looked fake too. They all wore black and looked completely identical, like cloned mannequins. Their lipstick was the same and the perfume they wore was a direct replica of the Barbie's on either side of them. They spouted the same boring poppycock. Coupled with little generic grins, their clerk-to-patron conversation went something like, "May I help you?" Like they really cared.

My daughter made her selections and we arrived at the cash.

"Something else today?" one of the clones asked.

They always ask that. If I had wanted something else, I'd still be shopping, wouldn't I?

"No that's all, thank you."

"Will that be debit, credit card, store card, cheque, money order, or, *gasp*, cash.

I handed her my debit card.

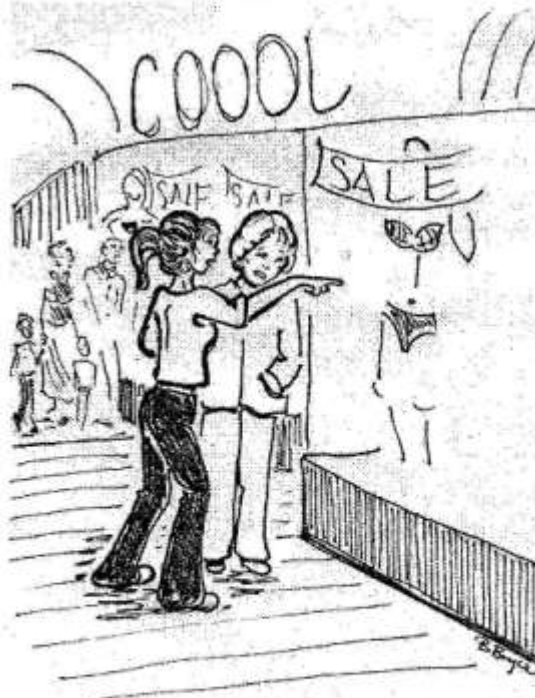
"Your discount card, please?" I stared blankly. "Your discount card. You have one, don't you?" The sarcasm dripped off her painted lips.

When I didn't answer, she gawked, like I'd left my head at the previous store.

"May I assume you are interested in purchasing a discount card for today's low, low, discount price of \$25.00?"

At this point, my lips rolled into themselves, forcing my words to stay in my mouth. I loathe shopping, remember? What would I do with a discount card, especially one for bras? My parents raised me in the 1960's—the braless era. Then doubt crept into my mind. Hmmmm, maybe I should get one of those cards. My daughters would have the thing paid for by, say, the weekend, the way they shop.

My daughter, who simply wanted to purchase what I was sure, was her hundredth bra, looked mortified. The line-up behind us consisted of twelve other female parents and their teen daughters, clutching their finds, looking bored to death, waiting for the nincompoop in front of them to vacate the store... forever.



"Yeah," I whispered.

"What's that?" The clerk squinted at me and asked the question with more volume than I thought was necessary.

Feeling satisfied that I had finally decided, I said, "I'll get that store card."

"Will that be the store charge card or a discount card? If you purchase the discount..."

I heard a 'humph' behind me. A very large-breasted teenager wearing a tummy shirt, belly-button ring, and a glare like none I'd seen before set her dozen bras on the counter beside me. Why was she buying so many? Intending to wear two at once?

"Never mind-I'll just take this stuff," I answered, pushing my purchase towards the clerk while trying to keep my eyes off the huge multi-coloured pile of bras.

"Lill, I need some help up here."

With that, mammary-woman took her pile of over-the-shoulder-boulder-holders to Lill's till. Good thing-I was starting to feel claustrophobic.

My clone was finally ready to position my daughter's thong and bra into a cream paper bag, donned with a lace handle. How quaint. Carefully folding the black thong and then the purple bra, the clerk placed them into the bag, lightly setting them in some tissue paper. Suddenly, she dumped the contents onto the store counter. While holding up the thong, she asked, incredulously, "You've tried this on, right?" A severe smirk graced her rosy, red lips.

Two can play this game, I thought. "Didn't need to," I replied, smirking back at her. "They're a gift-for my lover."

Mortified, my daughter slunk out of the lingerie store. I finished my transaction and joined her.

"Mom! Did you have to say that?" she asked. "I just wanted to have a nice quiet time shopping with you."

Was that a tear on her cheek? Stupidly, I asked, "Are you crying?"



Her brown eyes widened. She leaned towards me and whispered harshly, "No, I am not crying."

Then, laughing heartily, she left me behind, gaping, as she made her way to the next bargain. From afar, she confidently called, "You're thong again."

Editor's Note: Cindy assures us that her story is indeed a work of fiction.

Shopping in NOT for everyone. Cindy feels that there are many other fun ways to spend time with the family than shopping. She is the mother of two teenaged daughters and a thirteen year old son. When not working as an educator in southern Ontario, she loves to spend time outside hiking, riding her bike, hanging out at the beach or gardening.

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