

AT THE MALL!

By John S. Halbert

In my novel, *ARBAT SQUARE*, the "Kip Leeds" character goes shopping for a young woman, "Sloane Ferry," whose clothes were taken by police as evidence in a case while she recuperated in a hospital. The episode, with touches of humor, points out a truth that males (the astute ones) have figured out: that females from childhood onward have a totally different viewpoint concerning buying things and on shopping in general, compared to us guys.

For the background, here is the story piece verbatim:

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A half-hour later, Kip stepped out of a taxicab in front of a shopping mall. Inside, he looked up and down the broad concourse and spotted a familiar-looking department store at the far end.

Even though Sloane sometimes drove him to distraction, he admired her good looks. And she was right about one thing: as a typical male he didn't know much about women's clothes—but he knew what he liked, so he would make this little shopping trip a creative exercise to decorate her "his" way. This could get interesting, he thought.

At a cosmetics counter just inside the store, a matronly middle-aged saleswoman caught his searching look. "May I help you?"

"Ah, yes . . . I'm here to buy some women's underwear."

The employee raised her eyebrows. "Okay—" She rolled her eyes toward the other side of the store, pointing. "Over there . . ."

He sauntered past displays of handbags and rows of women's blouses to what was obviously the lingerie section.

A teenaged salesgirl saw him coming. "Looking for someone?"

"Actually, I'm here to buy some women's underwear."

The young woman's eyebrows arched upward; her hand went to cover her mouth. "Oh, well, you certainly came to the right place," she blinked, with a discreet cough, "what kind of underwear would you like?"

"Something lacy, or with strings. I'm sort of new at this."

"We try to be helpful . . . what size do you want?" Kip did not notice she was trying hard to keep a straight face.

He pulled out Sloane's list and handed it to her. "I'm buying these for a friend. She's a girl."

Oh—this is a gift!" The salesgirl looked relieved. "I'll show you what's popular, right now." She led him to a display of thongs. "Your friend would probably go for some of these."

Kip's eyes got big. "Yes, I would . . . I mean—'she' would." He scanned the packages. All had provocative pictures on them. "They sure look tiny."

"It's because they 'are' tiny; that's the whole idea."

Kip could feel his blood pressure rising; ‘Sensory Overload’ was overtaking him. He lifted two packages of string underwear and a couple of lacy thongs from the rack and handed them to her. “I’ll take these.”

The girl looked at Sloane’s list. “Bras are this way.” She led him to a display of all kinds and shapes of brassieres.

Kip shook his head. “I’ll let you be the judge.”

The clerk grinned and lifted some of the cupped, sheer undergarments from the rack. Based on some color advertisements and pictures above the display, when fitted, Kip decided, they wouldn’t leave much to anyone’s imagination. “All the girls are wearing these,” she said.

Kip thought “wearing” was not the right word—he had seen more cotton in the top of an aspirin bottle. But with nothing else to influence him, he shrugged, and the girl carried the lacy things to the counter. He hoped no one at the credit card company would notice he had bought women’s underwear.

The next stop was the shoe department. Since he was doing the buying, he would get Sloane some shoes that would flatter her feet. That, of course, would automatically eliminate the chunky, squared-off, combat-boot-like clunkers that he saw young women wearing nowadays. Didn’t they realize how un-lady-like those “clod-hoppers” looked? Somewhere he had heard the phrase, “women are slaves to fashion,” and most of the shoes he saw on display confirmed it. Some people somewhere were getting rich foisting off these ugly things onto females, he decided. Kip was starting to believe he was a better judge of what looked good on women than the women themselves. In short order, he picked out a pair of flats and some strappy sandals in the size Sloane had written down.

In the summer clothes section, he told a young salesgirl he was buying a replacement wardrobe for a friend in the hospital. “I’ll take whatever that girl’s wearing,” he said, pointing to a full-size display picture of a model. He knew Sloane would look great in it, and she deserved it, after all she had been through.

The last thing she had written on her list was a “make-up kit,” so he went back across the store to the cosmetics counter. The same lady he had talked with earlier watched him coming toward her. “Oh, yes . . . I remember you—did you find your ‘ladies’ underwear?”

“It’s for a friend who lost all her things in a . . . ‘burglary,’” he thought fast, “do you sell anything like—” he scanned down Sloane’s list, “. . . a ‘make-up’ kit?”

“Right this way.” She motioned Kip around the glass counter to a display of shiny, feminine-looking oval metal objects. According to a printed advertisement above the little brass boxes, they were called, “compacts”. The woman pulled out one and set it atop the counter. “This is probably what you’re looking for.”

Kip picked it up and turned it over, frowning. “Do women really use these things?”

“Yes, and she’ll need these too.” The saleswoman opened a slightly larger box that contained a little atomizer, tiny bottles of liquids, something that resembled a miniature artist’s palette; other things that made no sense to him—for all he knew, it could have been a surgical kit. Kip threw up his hands in bewilderment. “All right . . . I’ll take all of these!” No wonder it took women so long to get dressed, he thought.

Even though female clothes and cosmetics were baffling to him, Kip was actually having a good time of it, and was also feeling rather pleased with himself, as he had been in the store less than hour and was already finished. There were the standing jokes among his male friends that women took all day to buy even the most ordinary things. Guys of all ages considered it an undisputed truth that girls and women went to the mall for the emotional experience of just being

there—not necessarily to buy anything in particular, but rather to fill great chunks of time. This usually meant hours of aimless poking around doing what they called “shopping”. And heaven help a fellow of any age she dragged along with her; his day soon evaporated into thin air. It had even happened to him, once or twice.

Kip and his buddies, on the other hand, considered themselves much more sensible about such matters and always went to a store to buy something specific, whether it be clothes or merchandise. When they found it—which usually didn’t take very long—they paid for it and took it home. Kip laughed to himself at the very idea that men could do better than women when it came to buying things—even women’s things.

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Okay, you can be the judge, but I believe the above piece demonstrates the basic differences in the strategies men and women use when going to the store. “Kip Leeds” was in-and-out of the place with all his merchandise (of which he was basically unfamiliar) in an hour. A female---any female---would have taken at minimum a half-day to do that same purchasing. You see it all the time, even in the supermarket. Watch as the guys step up to a display, scrutinize in a hurry the various items and make a quick selection. Then they repeat the process all over the store as they push their carts from one aisle to the next; stopping only long enough to pick off the shelf that for which they came to the store. For, you see, the fellow already knows what he wants. He may even have (*--gasp--*) a list! By contrast, women---that is, to say, females in general---when at the store operate off a philosophy that could best be described as “disorganized”.

It all starts from earliest childhood when her mother takes the little girl to the store, or more importantly, to “The Mall” to “Shop”. For females, “Shopping” is the most important function of going to The Mall. It is a basic aspect of their lives. Most of them are there to consume vast chunks of time, aimlessly going from one store to another; not with any particular idea in mind as to what they really want, in fact, they probably don’t *want* to buy anything. *Just being there is what really matters.* Particularly on the weekends---on Saturday afternoons, in particular---you see the little knots of giggling teenaged girls who, when they are not ogling the boys who pass by, are stepping into first one store then another, then another . . .

But they are not there to *buy* anything---of course not! The girls are in the midst of *The Emotional Experience of Being ‘At The Mall’*. Seeing and being seen is the most important thing. Likely as not, the parents, seeking a few hours of peace and quiet, had gladly dropped off their little darlings and their friends at the mall entrance, knowing full-well that, except for the obligatory visit to the food court, they won’t actually buy anything. The girls (and you see knots of them everywhere up and down the concourses) are just there to take up time and space and to give them something to talk about at school the following week. By the way, it doesn’t get much better when they have grown up; by that time, only the circumstances will have changed---not the basic principles.

This process as applied to females starts in childhood. From the time the girl baby can hold up her head and be aware of things, mom plops her into the stroller and *Off They Go To The Mall!* The child, ever absorbing the nuances of this new, exciting environment, right off learns that it is *FUN* to ride up-and-down the concourses, into one store and out; then on to the next one, then out, again; always with mom acting like she's really interested in what she's doing as she lifts and drops countless items. All this may go on for hours, during which time mother spends not a penny. Because "buying" is not the objective, here---the real reason mom is At The Mall is to just *Be There*. Sometime along the way, they will stop at the food court where the little one gets food (a bottle, usually, and maybe a diaper change), and more reinforcement that there are lots of things to do in this big, bustling place called, "The Mall." The process gets ingrained in the little girl's mind to the degree that she is forever "hooked." For the rest of her life, "Going To The Mall" is a ritual in which to indulge as often as possible.

As stated, buying is not the real objective. One can observe this principle in action by the fact that most of them aren't carrying any shopping bags. Take a seat on one of the concourse benches and watch as a female with a youngster (or youngsters) enters a store. The broad principle applies to females of *all* ages; with babies or no. But, for now, let's consider that they have a little girl in tow. Inside, the agog mom will go to a display, lift items off the counter or the rack, one-after-the-other look them over, sometimes with a fake agonized expression, like all this was serious, which it is not, then set down the merchandise. With a final look-around at the establishment to see if there are any other departments they should visit, the mother pushes the stroller, if the kid is in one, or drags the toddler back out into the concourse to the next store where the procedure is repeated. If you stay there long enough, you'll see this going on all day long. And that's just from one vantage point. It's happening all over the place.

The principle is so ingrained that it has become almost an institution. Some department stores even have seats (not always comfortable seats) at the store entrance for harried husbands and other males accompanying female "shoppers" to sit in reasonable comfort while the "significant other" goes about her "business" in the store. Once, while sitting in one of these chairs, I talked with an elderly, very well-spoken African-American gentleman who was likewise occupying one of the by-the-front-door seats, trying without success to not be bored. He told me he had been waiting for his wife for over two hours. Such occurrences are typical.

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My most memorable experience of having to endure that endless process was on a Saturday some years ago, on a day that I had already planned to do various and important chores around the house. At ten-o'clock that morning, my mother-in-law asked if I could take her to the drug store to pick up some medicine. *The drug store was in a mall.*

I, along with the older lady, my wife and our little boy, who was in a stroller, piled into the car and by ten-thirty we were stepping out of the drug store, the elderly lady's pills in her hand,

into the mall concourse. My wife chirped up, "Since we're already here, let's go look at some clothes for the baby."

Without realizing that I had unwittingly stepped into a trap, I nodded, "Okay," and away we went up the concourse.

During the rest of the day and *into the late-evening* I had to follow the two mesmerized women into first one store and then another---a score or more of them, it must have been---while they lifted . . . and examined . . . and put down . . . and picked-up again . . . and set aside countless items of clothing, bed sheets, throw-rugs; everything that the department stores and emporiums had for women. After the first stop, the baby clothes were forgotten and it was off and away for them in their quest for the women's stuff. They even bought some things that they later took back when they found comparable merchandise in later stores that were supposedly of better quality or better-priced. It went on all day long while my day slowly but steadily evaporated. We ate lunch and dinner at the mall. At closing-time, at ten o'clock in the evening, we finally shuffled back out to the car. After all that poking and "shopping", the women were empty-handed---all their efforts (and my day) were nullified at the end. The only thing we had bought *and kept* were the pills at ten o'clock that morning, *nearly twelve hours earlier*. It was then that I understood that there is a big difference by which men and women go to the store. The difference is: "Gals "Shop"---Guys "Buy."

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Here's how it works for me and for almost every other fellow I know: If I want something---say a tool, a particular wrench; whatever---I know from the start which stores carry the item. Not only that, but I have a pretty good idea which of those outlets likely has the best price, consistent with the quality for which I'm looking. I will drive to that store, locate the tool on the rack, pay for it and take it home. Simple and effective. Not only have I saved countless hours of looking, poking, prodding, changing my mind (like females do), buying and taking back---even on the same "shopping" trip---I have what I want at the price I'm willing to pay, at a vast savings in time and effort.

The same principle applies at the supermarket. I dash into the place, get a cart, step smartly up and down the aisles grabbing what I want (*remember the 'list'*), pay for it and leave. If a female had gone into the store at the same time to buy the identical things as I had, even as I drove home she would likely only be a third or halfway through her buying experience---picking and probing; lifting everything in sight and setting it down; a process that was instilled into her by her mother in her impressionable childhood.

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Throughout it all, a fellow should endeavor to keep a level head. On one hand, we certainly want to be with our significant other---and there are plenty of times for that---but if the guy

wants to keep his sanity and his plans intact, when it comes to going to the store with a female he must use knowledge and strategy. He can either go with her and lose all that valuable time while she mostly ignores his presence, as I and countless fellows of every age have experienced---or arrange things where the lady can have the enjoyment of “shopping”, which is what she will do in any case.

Invite her to take a friend and the two will be very happy together for many hours.

And he will be happy doing what he had planned to do in the first place.