



My life as a binge-purge shopper. (Or, how I learned to stop worrying and love the seven-day return policy.)

Buy, Buy, Birdie

MAMA'S GOT A BRAND NEW BAG: But she saved the receipt.

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Hello, my name is Sarah, and I'm a binge-purge shopper. Don't clap. I know that you, my fellow sufferers, are out there. I know because I'm behind you in line when you check out with that cart loaded as if you're fleeing the Cossacks. And I'm there behind you a week later when the clerk has to call a manager because you're returning most of the stuff and it's all been sacked, plundered, and pillaged. Oh, yeah, I'm watching while you try to convince them that the giant sweat stain in the armpit of that blouse was there when you bought it.

I understand. Believe me, I understand. I have made that round-trip more times than I care to recall and many more times than El Hubbo, the Hub of My Universe, can believe. Men don't return. Their feeling about the black-and-yellow windowpane-plaid suit the salesman at Men's Wearhouse talked them into buying is "Hey, dude, you skunked me. Good one. Couple more sixers and it won't fit anyway."

For women, it's another story. A story of hope and heartbreak. Of new beginnings and gaucho pants that make our butts look as if we need a couple of years on the pampas. It is a story that almost always involves the bane and something else that is the opposite of bane and starts with a *b* of our existence: clothes. Fortunately, within my own personal retail triangle—Ross ("Dress for Less"), Target ("Expect More, Pay Less"), T.J. Maxx ("One More X and You Could Buy Pasties Here!")—returns are easy, frequently bilingual ("*Regresar o cambiar?*"), and can sometimes even be Biggie Sized.

Thankfully, most stores no longer ask that most humiliating of all questions: "Reason for return?" I guess they got tired of hearing: "It didn't match the shoes I bought it to go with"; "My husband didn't like it"; "The mirrors in your dressing room exist in a parallel universe called Slimbovia"; "The cruel depravity of the merchandising monolith forces me to hate myself and my life and to believe that only a fifty-five-hundred-dollar Hermès Birkin bag will redeem my pathetic sham of an existence. Yet, even after purchase of said bag, I continue to wallow in a mire of self-loathing."

Ladies' fashion is nothing if not a fantasy inside an illusion wrapped in a thong. Every season, there is a new "look," a new "trend," a new "paranoid schizophrenic thought disorder." One of the longest-running delusions foisted upon a gullible public is this: | CONTINUED ON PAGE 219

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You, vulnerable shopper, are a member of the preppy elite. You must immediately purchase clothing appropriate for playing polo, attending a clambake on Cape Cod, yachting in the Hamptons, and having illicit assignations in someone's boathouse. Ralph Lauren built an empire and sold a lot of navy crewneck sweaters on this very premise.

Touch football at Hyannisport not doing it for you? Try this current fashion fantasy: You are a heroin-addicted New York supermodel. All your clothes have shrunk. Now, get into those tiny togs and hit the runway!

Then there were the dress-for-success years, when everyone thought it a swell idea to dress up in little man suits. I fell for this one during a particularly deluded and vulnerable period. Again and again I bought handsome three-piece business suits. This in spite of the fact that I worked at home, had a colicky baby, and the only "business meetings" I conducted were with a lactation consultant. Those three-piece numbers were my sad defense against the reality that all my life really required at that point was one urp-resistant sweat suit. So back they went. Buyer's remorse? It's my middle name.

Why do I, do any of us, give in to these ridiculous fantasies? Because something happens in

that dressing room. Something that causes my soul to cry out for a wee, tiny jacket that looks as if it came off an organ-grinder's monkey. Something that convinces me that sometime in my immediate future I will need a "neohippie" outfit with more gauzy, flowing bits than Stevie Nicks in concert. Something that makes me believe I will actually be able to sit down in a pair of low-rise jeans without outraging the plumbers' union. Then the gas wears off and I wake up back at home wondering what the hell I'm doing with a pair of harem pants. Why harem pants? The sultan is not going to be summoning me anytime soon. And this long khaki skirt? Do I think I'm going on safari?

Again, I have used fashion as a defense against reality, which is that I'm a suburban mom and 99 percent of my fashion needs can be filled by a couple of sturdy pairs of relaxed-fit (i.e., "capacious in the can") Dockers. That's why my mantra is "Don't take the tags off." There are those craven few who would exploit the returns line, bringing back bridal gowns in a shower of rice, prom dresses marinated in Bacardi Breezers and K-Y jelly. A friend who owns a store even told me about a returner so notorious she was banned from shops around town. After the ban, she forced her nanny (yes, nanny!) to attempt to take back flip-flops with dirt ground into them, skirts with the hems

ripped out, and Earth Shoes from the seventies. Me, I'm just looking to trade in a few dressing room delusions.

Because can anything compare to that moment when a pair of shoes Torquemada could have used in the Spanish Inquisition and a denim blouse that makes you look like a fugitive from a chain gang are transformed back into pure potential? You've hit the fashion reset button. It's one of life's few do overs. It feels as if Target just gave you a gift certificate, a pat on the back, and an encouraging "Nix on the Nicks, but try again." And so you do, until the pattern of "try on, take home, return" becomes a Möbius strip, an endless repeating loop. In fact, I'm still working through a credit voucher on an ill-considered culottes purchase back in junior high.

Is there any way to stop this insidious gorge-disgorge cycle? Yes. Women, henceforth we must vow to purchase only sensible clothing that fits well and is totally functional. We must stop wasting time and money being slaves to fashion fantasies that don't match the reality of our lives. Chairman Mao had the right idea. We'll each have two pajama-looking outfits. One for summer. One for winter. In black. With a little cap. And our hair in braids. Or maybe a bowl cut.

Who am I kidding? I'm taking this idea back. Reason for return? My husband likes it too much. ♣