

Lingerie Ward

By Margaret Evans

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If a woman hadn't screamed at me for not devoting my time to her during that really big sale our department store was holding when there were long lines of people waiting to pay for their purchases, I may have considered a longer career in selling lingerie.

Or maybe it was the time another woman whistled at me and called me, "Girl! Girl!" from across the department.

On my first day in this place, they told me three things: Learn to measure and fit bras, sell the customers plenty of bras, and keep men out of the fitting rooms.

So, on the day the older man wanted to come into the dressing room with his twenty-year-old twinkie, I stood like a master sergeant, hands on hips, all 125 pounds of me facing him down.

"I have to approve," he explained, growing angry.

"I *have* to keep you out," I returned. "This is a *lady's* dressing room."

"You don't understand," he continued. "I *must* approve what she wears for me."

"*You* don't understand. It's store policy. I will call security."

He was so mad I thought he would grab his twinkie and go somewhere else, but he stayed and compromised. The girl stood nearly naked in the front dressing room so he could view her from the floor.

I hated Valentine's Day because that was when they all came out of the woodwork. Sensuous, threatening phone calls to the department, offering to walk me home from my job after dark. Or else. I assume they couldn't tell I was 46 years old from my voice. Lots of men came to shop on this day, some shy on their first trip through a woman's lingerie department, some not so shy and wanting to try on the garments themselves. We sent these guys up to the men's fitting rooms, and we routinely trashed the bras, panties and girdles they had worn.

I'll never forget the woman who had to be in her seventies yet who professed to have never adjusted a bra strap. Ever. It felt odd adjusting her bra straps for her. That is personal and something I wouldn't want anybody else to do for me. I didn't have the straps quite even when she declared everything fit fine and she would buy the bra.

I had regulars, too. Ladies who only wanted *me* to wait on them. If I was at lunch or on my break, they waited or returned later. One of them came in just to talk, rarely bought anything. She was not a widow, often spoke of her husband, but I think she was just lonely.

Another of my regular customers was not quite all there, a lady who broke my heart because I don't think anybody ever liked her and certainly not the other staff who ran from her less than perfect face, leaving me to wait on her. And she always wanted help picking out panties. She always bought the same style, but she always wanted help.

One exciting day, among all the others, a middle-aged man brought his elderly mother into the department to help her purchase bras. I measured her and selected several that she might try on, then got her settled in one of the fitting rooms. Her son waited by the cash register. Shortly thereafter, a wild young man, high on drugs, came flying down the escalator into our department. Right behind him was a young woman, similarly out of control, then three security guards. Racks and fixtures and bras and panties flew everywhere as the guards tried to tackle and capture the renegade pair.

I told the man waiting for his mother to stand at the entrance of the fitting room and tell her to stay inside. Then I advised everybody else in the department to run to another department. Then I called for more security. It was a scary time and the one young man got away after decimating our department. It took four guards to subdue the young woman who was still wildly kicking and screaming.

When things settled a bit, the rest of the sales associates and I picked up all the fixtures and merchandise and put everything back together again. The poor elderly lady in the fitting room said she was too upset to try on or buy anything and her son took her ruefully home.

I saw the world go by in the lingerie department. I was only there two and a half years, but I really think I saw it all. From the lady whose biggest problem in life was that the carpet she ordered (after verifying the sample color, mind you) didn't match her drapes, to the mother of two young boys who couldn't believe her husband had bought her a skimpy, lacy nightgown for Christmas. "What was he thinking?" she asked me, handing me a bag, in it the nightgown and a receipt. "I've got two little boys running around. They can't see me in this thing."

"How nice he still thinks of you like that," I commented as I began to process her refund. She looked thoughtful and a little guilty.

"You could always throw a robe over it," I suggested. "That's what I did."

She smiled and thanked me for her new perspective but purchased a more suitable nightgown for a mother of two.

The security room was back in the corner of our department. Once they took a young Asian girl in handcuffs into the room. Within the hour, her mother arrived to fetch her and, through the door, we could hear the screaming and slapping dished out to the girl in return for the mortification of shoplifting the girl had inflicted on her family's name.

I like to think that maybe I did some good for the world during my brief sojourn as a displaced worker in the Lingerie Ward. Maybe the 15-year-old believed me when I told her she really did need a more supportive bra than the strip of lace she picked out, so that by the time she's 30 her larger-than-life breasts wouldn't be racing to meet her knees. Maybe the

lady, to whom I refused to sell a girdle for her daughter who had just had a baby on the premise her daughter should do sit-ups instead, really did tell her daughter the natural way to flatten her tummy. Maybe all those women I showed how to measure themselves for the right bra size learned there's no real mystery to a proper fit, and maybe they're all buying the right size now. Maybe all those women I told not to buy a bra today because it's on sale tomorrow really did come back to buy it on sale and saved a few bucks.

Maybe I made a little difference during my time there.

If nothing else, my employee discount got me some really slick, hot underwear that nobody knows I'm wearing at my new job in health care.