Material Girl

Is plastic a positive girl's best friend? River Huston discovers the wonders (and woes) of retail therapy.

August 1, 2001 By River Huston

I wasn't always a shopping goddess. But my mother was, and she dragged me on retail jaunts—on sale, of course—even before I left the womb. (Photos of her garbed in chic maternity wear suggest that I was browsing in utero.) But when I hit toddlerhood, Mom would often deposit me in the toy aisles of whatever department store she was terrorizing, leaving me stuck with Hasbro and Mattel for hours. To this day I hate toys, and I had an aversion to shopping till I moved to New York City in 1981. As I cruised Eighth Avenue, I remember wondering for the first time, "What could be in all those stores?" And I spent the '80s striving to find out.

Like Mom, I'm of the breed of solo shoppers. While I work my way through the mall or the local TJ Maxx, I see mothers and daughters going at it—arguing over skimpiness, say, and price. That wouldn't work for me at all: I can't really enjoy the shopping experience if I have to think of anyone but myself. I would especially dislike having a morose offspring or cranky husband trailing behind; in my finer moments, even a girlfriend is too distracting. Deep in concentration, lost to time and oblivious to other people, I peruse the racks for that elusive, magic garment that will transform me forever.

Still, I have perfected the art of "tantric shopping"—the ability to eyeball and handle but refrain from buying. Recently this highly evolved art has became a survival skill. You see, over the last decade some 80 Visa cards somehow came into my possession. It was the only personalized financial planning I could envision. Every money manager I consulted shrugged his shoulders and said there was not much a terminal girl could do: Given my brief life expectancy, traditional long-term 401Ks and other investments were out of the question. And because I've always worked, I felt that going on federal disability would be unlivable. So I kept filling out the pre-approved applications that Visa kept sending.

I planned to save the credit cards for my last years. Once given notice of my imminent bodily departure, I would take myself on the ultimate of shopping adventures. Can you say Prada and Manolo Blahnik? Now, I'm not so shallow that on my deathbed I'll be longing for that pair of perfect-shade-of-camel sling-back mules I never threw down the plastic for. Still, if I knew I was going to get a reprieve from that final curtain call, you can bet that one of the first things I would do once I could walk again is buy those leather lovelies.

Of course, my checkout time took a raincheck. But even before I realized that, I started to dip into the cards casually. Because I'm going to die is always the perfect excuse for needing to treat yourself to something: Of course I deserve that velvet blazer. And debt be damned! Once I started using them there was no going back. My credit-card liabilities have ballooned. These days, with my HIV "a manageable disease," I see my debt-consolidation manager more frequently than my doctor. I still have 52 active cards with $400,000 of credit available. How much do I owe? No comment.

For me, shopping—tantric or otherwise—is steeped in the addictive, including shame. If anyone asked how I spent my day, I would never admit to shopping. Sometimes when I've been at it for over eight hours, I'll call someone I trust to talk me out of the store.

I was brought out of a memorable retail reverie last spring when I watched a woman in her 80s holding a bright yellow sweater up close to her wrinkled face. As she gazed into a mirror, her eyes glowed and her lips spread into a smile of beaming approval. I wondered what she was thinking, what she saw in that mirror. Did she find herself transformed by the same magical fantasy that sprinkles fairy dust on me as I tread the aisles?

Shopping gives me the sense that time has stopped. Like a Zen daydream, I return for a moment to my long-flown 20-year-old body, with the luxury of not being pinched and pummeled on an hourly basis by the awareness of my imminent mortality. I look in the mirror and see the bliss of youth, not falling T cells and platelets. I have calmed my nerves as I was having a large needle inserted into the base of my spine by contemplating the storewide clearance at Neiman Marcus that I was going to get to before rush hour. When I'm scanning the aisles and my eye lands on a luscious color or a bold Pucci pattern—and it's 70 percent off—there is no such thing as AIDS! (The best markdown I ever experienced was when I bought my dog a coat—white-and-brown-striped wool with leather trim—that retailed for $349 and was reduced to $4.99. I framed that price tag.) Shopping is one of the few activities I have left that is devoid of disease. It flings me joyously into the fantasy that all is well.

Will that be cash or charge?

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