

I

With a 38" ribcage and an AA cup, I probably should be buying my brassieres where transvestites buy theirs. But several girlfriends assured me that the House of The Perfect Fit is Margo's Lingerie, specializing in foundation garments for more than 50 years.

So even though what I need is a cover-up more than a foundation, I stepped into Margo's yesterday to find it staffed by two white-haired, nicely-dressed ladies of the type we used to call (when we were young, and not yet pickled ourselves) "well preserved." These ladies have the reputation of being the region's top shamanesses of Perfect Fit. It's said that they can hoist any chest.

The shop is tiny. On this spring day the door was open, and a neighboring storekeeper was standing by a rack of boa-trimmed silk teddies, shooting the breeze. She left when I walked in and announced I was looking for a 38AA bra.

It was a test. I have asked for this bra at Macy's and Mervyn's and Magnin's, at Victoria's Secret and Frederick's of Hollywood, and it has always been met with an incredulous stare at the zone below my neck. I suppose *that* big around, and *that* flat, is not a combination often seen. Clerks try to persuade me that I can fit into an A cup, even a bra designed for an A-B, or worst, "one size fits all." Ha! They assure me a padded bra "will make my clothes fit better." I try these on, look down, and don't recognize myself. I couldn't live with the fraud of going to work one day as myself, and the next day showing up with a bust like melons, or torpedoes, or whatever is the molded and stuffed breast-shape fashion of the moment.

The ladies of Margo's were undaunted by my request. Eleanor ran to the racks and started pulling things down while Grace dug into drawers, looked in the back room, and consulted catalogues. They found me a bra that worked, and ordered two more. As Grace rang up the sale she said, "We are so delighted you came in. Most of our customers are Ds, Es, Fs, or even Gs."

"Wow," I said.

"Is this the first time you've been in the store?" It told her it was. "You know," she went on, "We see everything here. A customer came in yesterday and said her husband's birthday wish was a breast enlargement."

"For him or her?"

"For her. The shocking thing is she already is a double-D —"

"No!"

"Yes, can you imagine? Most women don't want to be that big."

"It must be very inconvenient."

"Double D is plenty big enough, if you ask me. And he wanted bigger! Imagine that. And she was going to do it." Grace's pale blue eyes sparkled. "It made me mad!" She was beyond well-preserved. She was beautiful. *And she had delivered where others could not.*

She pushed the pink bag towards me. "Thanks so much for coming by. It is such a treat for us to see someone different."

II

The car was advertised in the local classifieds, but turned out to be in Southern California. Not a problem, assured the seller, Bruce. He and his wife would be driving up our way next weekend. They could swing by our place and we could look at it. We agreed to meet at Jack's. He's our Saab mechanic.

My husband likes to shop for guy stuff. He thinks nothing of letting people drive 800 miles to give us a chance to test drive. As we left to meet them I noticed my husband put a bottle of cabernet in our car. "Is that for the sellers?" I asked.

"No, it's for Jack," said Mish.

"Don't you think the sellers should also get some wine, since we may not buy the car?"

"You think? Okay." He added a second bottle.

I loved the glossy black car the instant I saw it. Sure, there were chips in the paint on the hood, but what do you expect of a six-year-old car with 95,000 miles on it? Otherwise it looked clean to me. We and the seller and his wife walked around the car, fiddling with the doors, checking out the trunk and the upholstery, admiring the engine, stroking the tires. Jack came out of his garage and Mish introduced him to Bruce and his wife. Jack glanced disdainfully at the car, shook hands all around without making eye contact, and said only "If you aren't ready for me I'll get back to work," and disappeared.

After he walked out of earshot, I whispered to the wife, "That's Jack's usual cool reception. Don't take it personally."

Mish said, "Yeah, it takes a while for him to warm up."

"Like two or three years," I added.

We took the car for a test drive. Threw it through some curves, revved it up to G-force acceleration, braked hard. It was as fun a car as I expected. Back at the shop, Jack did his own test drive: circling through the parking lot. Then he put it up on the lift. I made small talk with the sellers while Mish stood under the chassis with Jack, watching him. I learned the sellers were on their way to a funeral, and already running late. Maybe the wine wasn't necessary after all.

Mish waved Bruce and me into the shop. "Check this out," said Jack. "The original fuel filter." He pointed the flashlight. "That should have been replaced a long time ago. The pump'll go out the minute it clogs, and when the pump goes out . . ." Jack was talking to Bruce but not looking at him.

Bruce told him the car recently had a major service. "Well anyone who says they did a major service should at least change the fuel filter. That's bullshit," Jack said.

"D'you see this?" said Jack, shining his flashlight up toward the head gasket. "Here's where you've got an oil leak. When you had the major service you said you did, didn't your mechanic tell you about that?" He said over his shoulder. "You might be able to just tighten down the bolts, which his mechanic should have done. But that's twenty-two, twenty five right there if you have to pull the head." Bruce had already walked out of the garage.

Jack circled around under the car, shooting the flashlight in every crevice. "There's a little oil leak in the transmission, here. But that's normal." He spun all four wheels. "Look at these brakes, here. See how this disk is worn out?" He gave the wheel a whirl. "You can hear it. There's a warp in the disc, but you can't grind it out because it'll go below 22 centimeters, and you'll lose the air vent too. It's a goner, so you're talking about a new disk. This car doesn't take regular discs. So that'll be seven fifty for two."

I said, "Mish, are you adding up all these numbers?"

Jack was on a roll. "Here's a gouge in the undercarriage." He shone the light on the gouge. "But that's no big deal. But look here, at the ding in this rim. See how it's off balance? You can't buy these wheels used because any car in a junkyard crashed. So you have to buy one new — that's another five hundred or

so. And don't try moving this wheel to the left front, because that'll mean a new tranny."

Still not looking at us, he said, "By the way, did I warn you about the special tires on this thing?"

"Yeah, I saw Bruce's receipt for the tires," said Mish. "A thousand dollars a set."

Jack walked over to the bench, and picked up part of another car he was working on. "Here's how the head sits on the crankcase," he demonstrated, rolling the head over to show us where the oil passed through the head gasket. "See this opening here? This is the weak spot. You know, you don't get more horsepower out of the same-size engine without it costing you. So that's more compression in the oil system. The gasket'll seal when the engine's hot, but when it's cold oil'll just gush out." Without looking at us, Jack mimed a gushing gesture.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Bruce and his wife out in the driveway, shuffling their feet, their faces considerably more downcast than before.

"We'd better keep moving," I said, "They've got to get to a funeral."

Jack lowered the lift, and reached into the engine compartment. "If they had a major service like they said, the brake fluid would be cleaner," he muttered. "Some of these shops, they take the money, but they don't do a thing to the car." He gently lowered the hood. "I don't need to check the compression because everything sounds fine." He backed it out of the garage.

"We've got to get going," said the crestfallen wife, "we're going to be late as it is, and Bruce is the one who's doing the eulogy." Thanking us for the wine and for looking at the car, they got in, slammed the doors, and sped off.

While their moods had darkened, Jack's had brightened. "I'm not saying don't buy the car," he said, making eye contact for the first time that day. Even grinning. "I'm not saying a lot of these things aren't normal for a car with that mileage." He laughed. "Heck, I've replaced head gaskets in cars with only ten thousand miles on them. It's just that he's asking top dollar, and, well, let me put it this way: the car's *not* what it was advertised." Jack glanced at both of us to make sure we understood. Then he leaned back in his chair and laughed and laughed.

III

It was another day when I'd be eating lunch at my desk. So I walked around the corner to the deer-head-decorated convenience store, the one owned by the east Indians, with all the posters of semi-nudes promoting Mexican beer, to get a stale-bread sandwich and some cheap candy. I happened to be wearing, for the first time this spring, the punctiliously modest peach linen tunic-and-pants ensemble my sister and I each bought (coincidentally, but that's another story) in Berkeley, plus the delicate handmade slippers that happen to perfectly match the outfit's tiny lavender flowers.

The woman who owns this establishment looked at my outfit and asked, "You like piyama suit?"

"Huh?" I asked, "What's that?"

"Piyama suit" she said pointing to my clothes.

"How do you spell that?"

"P-a-j-a-m-a."

"Oh, yeah!"

"You want more? I have a lot, from India."

I must have imagined that in one of these outfits I could look as pricelessly desirable and inaccessible as the prize bride in a Bollywood movie: perfect skin, large green eyes with fluttering long lashes, chattel-for-barter fraught with inner metaphysical conflict. So a couple of days later I was standing by the Fritos display munching on another stale-bread sandwich while the proprietress showed me embroidered silk outfits, and her husband rang up fishing licenses and whiskey sales for other customers. No dressing room. No full-length mirror.

"How much do you want for this?" I asked, fingering a royal-purple silk frock, lavishly embroidered in beads and metallic thread, with embroidered-cuff pants and a matching chiffon scarf measuring 5x9 feet beaded all over, with a scalloped, embroidered edge. No dry cleaner would ever touch it, an inner voice warned. The bodice opened in front, reminding me of the lavish dishabille of Kama Sutra illustrations.

She noticed my eyes glaze over in deep inward revelation and knew she had a sale.

"Make me an offer," she suggested.

"I couldn't even guess what it's worth! This is fancier than a wedding dress!"

"What would you pay?"

"Don't make me guess. Are we talking a hundred dollars or a thousand dollars?"

"Oh, thousands," she said while my heart sank, "6,900 rupees, which would be . . . oh . . . a hundred and twenty five dollars."

"All right," I said, "I'll pay one twenty-five."

"Oh, that's okay, you take for a hundred," she said.

"Okay."

"How about this other one?" She held up a rust-and-ochre ensemble: tunic, top, pants, and scarf with embroidered neckline.

"Not sure it's my color," I said.

"One-twenty-five -- you take both."

"Are you sure the pants will fit?"

"Oh, yes."

I wrote her a check. "Now I need new shoes!" I laughed, as if I need a reason for new shoes.

"Oh yes, high-heeled sandals. Try Wal-mart," she suggested, helpfully. And I wondered if Wal-mart actually does carry Kama Sutra shoes.

When I got home, I inspected my new clothes. With a 28" inseam and 54" waist, yes, the pants are big enough, I realized, also realizing that underneath all that gilt embroidery a prize bride wears a giant silk diaper. Amid the beading on the bodice I found a spot; it's clear the purple outfit's been worn.

No matter; I don't have anywhere to wear it anyway, and my cleaner wouldn't touch it afterward. But I can admire it in my closet, and dream of being a prize-bride, and never have to buy the right shoes.