Bargain Bereft Am I

An Ode to Loehmann's and the Lost Art of the Retail Safari

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BY ROLLIN McGRAIL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Loehmann's has filed for bankruptcy protection, and my heart stops. This is not simply a matter of a store's future threatened. It could mean the end of safari.

Shopping for a bargain is the female form of hunting. Baby boomers like me went through an important rite of passage as we grew into women's clothing: Our mothers took us to Loehmann's. My mother taught me how to stalk the nearly block-long racks of clothes at the Brooklyn, N.Y., store like a lioness, searching for a sweater on the sweater rack and finding the matching skirt, if I was skillful and patient, across the room on the skirt rack. And often not where they were supposed to be, stocked by size or color, but rather, hiding in the taller rushes of larger sizes or lurking near the dressing room where other hunters had dropped them to seek different prey. It sometimes took hours to find an outfit at Loehmann's. You were so flushed with the thrill of the hunt, or with fatigue, that what you finally bagged seemed like a trophy.

Yes, Loehmann's was about more than clothes. It was a test of your knowledge. They could tear out a designer label, but if you were a true shopper you could identify the brand without it the same way you could read the Torah without the pronunciation vowels under the letters. You'd done your homework. You'd pawed through Bloomingdale's, Lord & Taylor, Saks Fifth Avenue, so you could recognize the brand and season. If you were really good, you even knew the dye lot.

Loehmann's clothes were a half-season behind fashions offered at full-price stores, but that didn't matter. The point was to wear a dress every woman knew to be expensive. That you got it for a song was the equivalent of a huge pair of elk antlers above the mantel. If you felt guilty flaunting high-priced outfits before jealous neighbors you merely dropped your eyes and said "Loehmann's." Then people admired you as much for your gracious candor as for your hunting prowess. Win-win.

The store's communal dressing room reduced everyone to embarrassed near-nakedness. Rich, poor, fat, thin, old and young, married and virginal—we all stripped before the endless, unforgiving mirrors, under unforgiving fluorescent lights, and tried on garments. When you found one you liked you turned to the others, half-hopeful, half-triumphant, and asked: "What do you think?" If the dressing room sighed "Gorgeous!" you bought it. If the dressing room said, "I don't know. Does it feel a little tight across the *tochus*?" you relegated the dress to the return rack in the center of the room where the attendant fastened the buttons and sent it out into the forest again.

Friendships began in Loehmann's dressing rooms. "Where are you going to wear it?" led to sharing stories of our lives, and then to lunch with the kind of intimate talk that seems to go with having met in your underwear. More goodwill happened naturally among different ethnic groups in Loehmann's than in many activities between synagogues and churches aimed at building understanding. Women of all backgrounds competed to find the best bargains, but even in competition they helped each other: "Yoo-hoo, darling, you were looking for the beige top to those pants? Here it is."

Perhaps most important to me as a baby boomer, Loehmann's was one of the last links to my ethnicity. Until I was 20, I shopped with my grandmother on the Lower East Side of New York. We'd pass drug pushers and she'd roll her eyes and say that in her day when people rolled up their sleeves it wasn't for a needle but to fish for a pickle. Over the years, the pickle barrels and live chickens and the bargaining in Yiddish disappeared. When the bakeries that sold warm apple strudel sold out to bakeries that put signs in their windows advertising "authentic strudel," I knew the Lower East Side was no longer mine.

Nothing truly authentic needs explanation. Loehmann's was an American original—like wooden baseball bats and neighborhood soda fountains—in a country where little remains one-of-a-kind. In a serious burst of nostalgia three summers ago, I traveled the country in search of handcrafted items that reflected the character of each state. Not much luck. We've become a country of imitation and artificial flavors, of recognizable hamburgers and uniform coffee lattes; of Banana Republics and Gaps and Targets. Shopping may be convenient, but there are precious few surprises and little that is venerable.

Times change. At Loehmann's, we shopper-hunters knew in our bones when the store changed hands. Like the stock market, the quality went up and down. Then, about two years ago, we gave up hope: That was when good cotton shirts like the ones cut by our grandfathers, who were pattern makers on Seventh Avenue, could no longer be found among the badly sewn imported blouses. And that was when the elegant European silks in the Back Room gave way to cheesy rayon. For decades after Frieda Loehmann founded the store in 1921, you could buy clothing whose workmanship and classic lines would last years. That's why it was a bargain. Eventually, the new owners tried to substitute cheap chic for real value, and now they're in trouble.

I felt sad when Woolworth's went down, and regret the loss of Woodies. But I feel like saying kaddish, the mourner's prayer, for Loehmann's. The store had a soul. And it had law. Its old no-return policy made women hunt and keep—that is, live by their own wits. You had to be 100 percent sure at the cash register—something no other store forced you to do in an era when, if your husband didn't like it, the dress went back. The final-sale policy found women trying on potential purchases over their street clothes even as they stood in line to pay, and conferring with the woman in front of them right up until the moment of truth. Then the clerk behind the register had been trained to say, "Ah, what a bargain you found! I wish I'd seen it."

Boom. Sale closed.

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