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36C

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36C

Cover Page Footnote

Art: untitled by Janet Loder

36C

*by Maggie Flynn**

There was a marquee downtown--a naked woman with a perfectly round butt and enormous circles of breast; each of her nipples a red lightbulb that flashed on and off in one-second intervals. It made her cleavage look like a runway for landing airplanes. Or at least a beacon for ships at sea, stationed as she was on top of a hill near the waterfront. Perhaps a ship or two saw her lights through thick night fog and steered off course into a tragic collision with the rock cliffs. But I doubt it. More likely, wayward seamen followed her lights to the club, drank up all their wages, and ended up on the street corner singing ballads to their lost loves.

The marquee is still there, but the club decided to pursue a wider range of clientele, so they had a black bra and panties painted over her round orbs. As I drove by I'd see two guys on scaffolding positioned around her waist like a belt. They taped up everything but her breasts and butt and painted with five-inch wide brushes. It took them two days. I thought they must be lingering, enjoying their task. Granted, she was big--her breasts could block the moon and several constellations from a view of the night sky--but I've painted the whole inside of a house in two days. She wasn't that big. They left the red blinking lights. Now she looks like an airport runway at night, but only if you squint.

As I pass the marquee in the exposing light of day, I have to feel sorry for this woman. The black bra and panties were painted in straight lines across, no deference to her roundness. Her red lights are just empty glass shells and, on the outside of her black bra, they don't seem to belong to her anyway. Lure though she may, she has no power to yield, nor the power to walk away.

Still, she is my patron saint of binding lingerie. Her red, blinking nipples will guide me on

my quest. I have come downtown to buy some bras. For my birthday, my mother has given me a gift certificate designated for intimate attire, even though I'd asked for CDs. She said that, one too many times, I have gasped and sat up perfectly straight, my face a rage of pain--the safety pin that holds my bra closed having popped open at an inopportune moment. I'm not fond of shopping for bras.

This time it might be endurable. The shop boasts a wide selection. The saleswoman seems competent; her breasts are lifted and separated. I show her my gift certificate. Bras, I say. You've come to the right place, she responds and gazes at my breasts with the experienced eye of a butcher appraising two candidates for Shake 'N' Bake. I cross my arms protectively. 36C?, she asks. On a good day, I answer. Any particular style? No, I say and begin to browse. I'm not sure what I'm in the mood for.

Choosing a bra is a deeply personal experience. You can learn quite a bit about yourself by examining the selection of cultural artifacts in your underwear drawer, but these may be things you do not want to know. Bras reveal the most because, like DNA, no bra can shape any two women in exactly the same way. The breast is what a woman is given, her nature, and the bra forms a manipulation of this nature into what she'd like it to be. The breast in the bra is a fusion of ideal and real, perception and reality, darkness and light--the whole cycle is completed every time two hooks are fastened into two eyes. (Or, not to

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exclude the convenient slide-in front fastening, when a metal prong is slid into a fabric loop.) This morning ritual connects the participant to the fabric of greater womankind. And if the participant isn't a woman, well, as far as I'm concerned, he can still connect to greater womankind but with due respect. This is a weighty matter, not just idle titillation.

I am opening boxes of Playtex Cross Your Heart bras for the full-figured woman to honor my grandmother, a small woman with disproportionately large breasts. She wore a medical corset every day, an amazing full-body affair with steel insets, two long lines of hooks, and white laces down the back. She had to wear it because years of binding herself into the flat-chested fashions of the 1920s and '30s had done irreparable damage. When

she visited, my mother would help her get into it every morning. It would take forever. My mother drove me to school, so I was late every day but I didn't bother to give an excuse. There's no explaining a grandmother's corset. I used to wonder who helped my grandmother into her corset when she wasn't visiting and feared it was my uncle. If it was, that explained a lot. At the time, he was 40 and still living at home. He drank himself crazy and thought everyone was out to get him. I think it must have been those long corset

strings. Before they were laced up each morning, they hung all the way to the floor and trailed behind my grandmother as she moved, like a miserly wedding veil.

My mother always wore pointy cone bras that flattened out exactly a quarter inch when you hugged her. Her breasts never seemed to move. I wore her bras sometimes when I was little. I didn't even have to stuff them. They weren't dependent

on the variability of the human form. I suspect my mother wasn't comfortable with her lot in life.

I am selecting bras without prejudice but I think I will pass on the rack of training bras -- the embodiment of a marketing scam, right up there with pet rocks and cubic zirconium crystals. I could accept the practicality of training breasts, though the logistics worry me, at least until Nike expands the Pump concept

from footwear to lingerie, but training bras are just as absurd as training orthopedic shoes, training hair pieces, and training adult diapers. Some things shouldn't require practice.

The saleswoman has appeared, to help me out of a sizing conundrum. The run-of-the-mill bras are sized about right, but the "high-fashion," expensive ones are sized small. If you want to feel stacked you have to pay for the thrill. Try several sizes of each style, she recommends, so I bring 32 bras into the fitting room: 8 styles, 4 sizes of



untitled by Janet Loder
photograph

each--34B, 36B, 34C, and 36C. No Ds though. I wouldn't buy a D no matter how well it fit me, not if it were the last bra on earth. I refuse to be a D. This is a pain, I say. Do men have this much trouble with shoe sizes? The saleswoman smiles. No dear, she says, that's just a myth.

Luckily, I don't need a minimizer. They're sized large so you feel small. They don't really minimize anyway. I had one once and it just squished my breasts painfully flat like raw pizza dough and distributed them wide around my torso. I felt like my breasts began somewhere in the middle of my back. In red, I looked like a can of Coke. And it made driving difficult.

I try on a bra. It's a business-suit bra. It couldn't be more of a business-suit bra if it had pin stripes. These are a special breed. They work late, they conceal coffee stains, they assert your femininity without threatening to expose it. They seal around your breast hermetically, providing a germ-free environment--fresh air must be pumped in. They'll support you all right, but don't expect them to push you over the glass ceiling. This bra makes me feel like opening an IRA account. I don't like it. It reminds me of my first job, at a bank. Management sent a memo around to all the women requesting that we wear bras in conformance with the dress code. We were all mystified. Each woman pulled out her bra strap in silent protest. Jane, in the next cubicle, yelled out that if they heated the building properly they wouldn't have this problem. The next day a flat-chested woman, who always wore bras anyway, brought in a box of Nipless pasties and put a pair in each of our in-boxes. She was on management track. Nipless are thimble-shaped pieces of foam, flesh-colored and sticky on one side, that are supposed to be worn under the bra for added discretion. I went to the ladies room right away to try them on. I strutted around in front of the three sink mirror hoping no one would barge in. Nipless were neat. Except for the proportions, my breasts looked as architecturally pure as a Barbie doll's. Two studies in curvilinear geometry. Jane wasn't interested in being unblemished. She adorned the pasties with a

canceled check stamp and wore them over her shirt. Jane wasn't on management track.

Now this one I can get behind! It's a little red "ultra" push-up bra, with one-inch wide sheer red straps. I am pushed up so far my breasts have achieved their own momentum and continue on their way after the rest of me has stopped moving--two masses of quivering flesh spilling out of their red containers, like a chemistry experiment gone awry. My breasts look like they are boiling over. Kind of neat, but what would you wear on top? A sweatshirt?

The saleswoman comes in to see how I'm doing. She says the red one is pure seduction, no man could resist it, but I sense that she's lying. Such an elaborate brassiere might give a man performance anxiety. Red bubbling breasts could get out of hand. I have surveyed my female friends on the underattire that men respond to best. The surprising conclusion was a striped undershirt with spaghetti straps. Although the results aren't statistically significant--I didn't use a control group--even my friend, Fatima, favored pink-and-white striped undershirts for seductive occasions, and she wears studded leather bras and black thongs for everyday wear. But never mind the man. I wouldn't be seen in this, not and risk being blackmailed. My own comfort level would deflate at the prospect. The shimmering red curtains set a definite mood, but once they're drawn, I'm afraid the set seems rather bare, the actors miscast, and the plot unoriginal.

The saleswoman returns with a black lace underwire with satiny straps. She says, This one gets attention. Yeah, like the man who rode towards me on his bicycle, arm outstretched, palm up. I wondered if he wanted money or salvation. I was kind of low on both. He slowed as he approached me and leaned over, almost fell on me. His hand grabbed my breast and his fingers pressed in. Then he was gone, pedaling down the street, but I could still feel his hand on my breast and I realized what had happened. I laughed; I had thought he was lost. I had thought he needed directions. Maybe he did. Maybe a breast pointing

North weighs slightly more than the same breast pointing South. A breast is a slave to the whims of gravity.

I try on the black lace one, strands of glittery gold thread woven through the lace. For all its glitz, it really is a somber little number. The black lace reminds me of the head covers worn by women going into the Spanish-language Catholic mass. I look down at two little immigrant heads bowed in prayer. No, not this one.

I confront a bra with fastenings so complicated it rivals Rubik's Cube. It must have been designed in Switzerland by a misogynist clockworks manufacturer. I wrestle with it. I calculate my position. I calculate the force I am exerting. I take into account Heisenberg's uncertainty principle for subatomic particles. I propose a null hypothesis. I cuss like a sailor. It's on! My engineer would have liked this one. He preferred removing bras when it required abstract conceptualization. He liked to figure things out--that's why we had trouble. He said I was an outlier, that I skewed the bell-shaped curve of normalcy, that I was at least two standard deviations away from the Mean. Still, he used to sleep behind me with his right hand cupped around my right breast, just holding it all night as I lay in his arms. But only if I slept on the right side of the bed. If I slept on the left side, he would still face towards the right and clasp the sheets or hold the air still in his rounded hand. After a while, I started going braless and sleeping on the left side of the bed every night. We drifted apart from there. He wasn't ambidextrous and he clustered around the Mean.

A flowered bra, knotted in the middle, suddenly transports me to a sunset-lit South Pacific island. I lie on the hot sand and watch the wild monkeys chase away the last traces of daylight. No--sand in my bra--I hate that. So, it's Brazil, a basket of succulent fruit balanced on my head. I am she--the woman who danced at our table the night my boss and I took a team of Japanese financiers out for drinks--stomping around clumsily in a tropical headdress, bra, and filmy dance skirt

cut on the bias. As we walked through the door, I noticed women dancing around the tables, swaying their hips in the direction of hands that proffered tips. My boss said, You don't mind do you?, and walked away before I could answer. He wasn't likable but he was a whiz at finance. He complained about the woman dancing for our table. He preferred the belly dancer with the silver metallic bra and a bejeweled belly button. Ours is just stomping around, he complained. You should give her a tip, I responded, so she can afford more dance lessons. He was a little drunk. He handed me his wallet. I pulled out a 10. He would have balked at a 20. I handed him back his wallet and the bill, folded with the edges inside. I worry about paper cuts. He slipped it under her strap and pushed it down until it disappeared beneath fruit-colored fabric. She smiled. She didn't recognize me even though we had an ex-boyfriend in common. He was unemployed, I couldn't park my car in his neighborhood, and he muttered too much, but I was happy with him. I liked to wear his undershirts, even the ripped ones, luckily. Most of them were ripped. She preceded me. He said she was a spaz, that they fought all the time. Still, in the beginning, I'd see her driving by his apartment slowly, not really driving, but not stopping either.

One of the Japanese financiers handed me his wallet. The others held their wallets in hand, ready to pass to me. They were eager to respect American customs. I pulled out a 5, 10, or 20, depending on the wallet owner's rank in his company. One by one they slipped the folded bills beneath her strap. When she left our table, she looked happier than the last time I saw her.

The flowered one, the saleswoman says, comes with matching panties. I sneer. I won't have anything more to do with it. I have squirmed uncomfortably in my movie seat every time a starlet disrobed passionately, confident in her coordination, revealing a matching underwear set. I have always wanted to stand up and scream, This is FALSE--a *Better Homes and Gardens* showcase seduction. It would never happen. She didn't even know she was going to meet him when she dressed

that morning. It's just not that easy to get your bras and underwear to match. It requires a small fortune supported by systematically planned laundry cycles. The starlet may have long ago discarded her underwear, but still I would growl in discontent and punch my popcorn. I know how you feel, a date once said. How many simulated orgasms can average American viewers bear before they lose their ability to appreciate the real thing? They go home. They make love. They think, What's wrong? We're not traveling from room to room. Our furniture is still intact. We're not screaming and sobbing, gasping and moaning, backed by the euphonious harmonies of a Bulgarian folk choir. We're not so sopping wet with sweat that we look like we've just battled a hurricane. We're not in soft focus. We're just not doing it right. My date is venting with remarkable intensity, not holding anything back. But he's missing the point. It's not the fake orgasms--they're just a symptom of the problem. It starts with the matching bra and panties.

I decide on a beige underwire with a racing back. Simple, but it makes a statement: No shoulder straps falling down on *this* torso! I feel validated. I have a New Bra. But the saleswoman is busy helping a 38DD. I give her some time. I am browsing again, through the darkest corners of the store. The sexiest bras, the ones that need explanation as to whether they're worn on the bottom or the top and, once that's determined, just how, the ones that no one ever buys though they seem to sell well, the ones that the saleswoman said are great to wear for a quick walk-through in front of the T.V. if you've lost your man to the World Series--these are almost always right next to the maternity bras. It seems to me like a bad marketing strategy. I prefer the maternity bras anyway. Their little white frontal pull-away pieces seem friendly, like white-curtained windows. Some of them even come equipped with several disposable drip guards that you insert in front before closing the window to save yourself from the humiliation of lactation stains down the front of your business shirt. My doctor once dampened my maternal instinct by

describing his residency in the African bush inoculating screaming babies. He'd felt warm liquid on his lower leg and had assumed another baby was peeing on him until he realized that the breast of the mother holding the baby was responsible. He said he hadn't realized that breasts could turn on so spontaneously, like faucets. Maybe we should export boatloads of maternity bras to the African bush--extend our sense of modesty to other peoples. White elastic straps could lead an army of white cotton triangles in hemming in the masses with a dominant cast. It would give National Geographic a whole new look.

They have specialty bras here too. Obviously, this is a full-service bra center. Bras with one slightly padded cup for lopsided breasts or post-lumpectomies. Bras with one or two fully-padded cups for post-mastectomies. Getting even is the best revenge, or the best refuge from a world with symmetrical expectations.

The saleswoman rings me up. She folds my racing back and says, This is a nice style, but I know she preferred the red push-up. The red push-up was \$90 and the racing back is only \$35. What a deal--I can still buy some striped undershirts.

As I leave, I pass by a mannequin that is wearing a strapless corselet. Fine for her, she doesn't have to move. I start to wonder if women are buried in their bras or if the undertaker just tapes the breasts together to provide the corpse with that pleasing, no-sag last appearance. They must do *something*. I've never seen a female corpse where the breasts laid flat against the body or sagged off slightly to the sides, not even at my grandmother's wake. And, I've never heard of breast rigor mortis. Maybe that's why they cross the arms over the chest, but then, what if there's an earthquake?

As for me, I don't care what bra I'm buried in, as long as I don't have to pick it out. But I might ask to be buried under an airport runway, directly between the two rows of flashing red runway lights that tell airplanes where to land. I wouldn't explain why. I'd just say, I'll fit in there.