

FIRST PERSON

by Beth Bernstein

I'm Worth It

MOST WEEKENDS, in between errands, I can be found ogling expensive baubles in fine jewelry shops. Although I have a penchant for period pieces, I am an equal opportunity jewelry fan. I can as easily be seduced by contemporary designer styles, and fancy colored diamonds have been known to make my heart flutter. One Saturday, while leaning in to take a closer look at a diamond watch I'd spotted in the window of a Madison Avenue shop, I sensed a presence beside me. Within seconds, a deep voice inquired, "Could you try this on for me?" A steady hand held out an elegant antique engagement ring. I glanced at the ring and then looked up into the most intense green eyes I'd ever seen. The guy was gorgeous; how could I say no?

I tried on 10 rings, from intricate turn-of-the-century styles to clean modern settings. He placed a deposit on my favorite and thanked me. I congratulated him and resisted the urge to say "Here's my card in case it doesn't work out."

Since then I've modeled jewelry for male friends and strangers, from diamond drop earrings to pearl necklaces. Female friends send their husbands to me for advice, pleading, "You've got to help me; he has such awful taste when it comes to choosing jewelry."

"But does he kill spiders?" I want to ask.

After all of the trying on I've done for other women, I decided it was time to take the plunge from perusing to purchasing. It became clear that I needed to retire my trendy sterling silver, my cute white gold pave pendants and my small diamond studs, and treat myself to a more important and dazzling piece of jewelry. I deserved it; I could afford it. I had arrived at being 40 and was still single, with no prospective husband to shower me with lavish gifts.

My first self-purchase investment was a platinum eternity band with round diamonds set in a pattern of marquise and square shapes. Before long, I acquired a family of five geometric motifs, which I stack on my right index finger. I wear them everyday.

During the past year, I also became the proud owner of a wide platinum, ruby and diamond Art Deco bracelet, long contemporary briolette cut diamond drop earrings, and a sexy 18k gold mesh choker with dangling multi-colored sapphires.

Yet every time I buy another piece of jewelry, I feel a twinge of decadence and doubt that I should be spending so elaborately on

myself. I never have any trouble buying a Gucci handbag or Prada shoes. The little Armani in the window seems to ring up my credit card before I even enter the store. I own my Manhattan apartment and have IRAs and mutual funds. Not only am I clad in designer clothes, but I'm also responsibly (or neurotically) planning ahead for my retirement. So why am I feeling so guilty?

Thinking back, I remember my Sweet Sixteen. I had my eye on a sapphire pendant with tiny diamond accents. I brought my father to see it. "This is the type of jewelry that your husband will buy for you," he said. He presented me with a sterling silver Elsa Peretti cuff from Tiffany & Co. instead. I loved it and still have it, but the message that I heard was "You're sterling until some man deems you gold or platinum."

Like many of my peers, both single and married, I have grown out of the belief that jewelry, especially precious stones, must be purchased for a woman by a man. In much the same way, I've learned to build my own shelves and kill my own spiders. I'm self-reliant and independent. I've joined the growing ranks of self-purchasing woman who are in touch with their tastes, more confident about their personal styles and know that they've worked hard and are worth it.

When my 41st birthday rolled around this year, I decided it was time for a more substantial necklace to replace my lone solitaire. (I've learned that it's a lot easier for me to commit to jewelry than commit to a man...) I choose my jewelry stores carefully: ones that offer welcoming and knowledgeable sales help, allow me to try on and to ask questions, and never leave me waiting when they spot a woman with husband in tow, assuming a bigger purchase.

The necklace I chose was a delicate lacy garland style of varying size diamonds with intricate millegrain work around each stone. Everywhere I go, women compliment me on it and ask for the name and address of the shop where I purchased it. "I've been looking for a new pair of longer earrings; I'm thinking about pink diamonds," a co-worker told me after seeing my necklace. "Why wait around for my husband to buy them?"

Every time I put on my necklace, which has become my favorite piece, I still get a lift. And if I ever do get married, (with the exception of the wedding ring) I know I'll continue to buy my own jewelry. But it would be so nice to hear someone say, "Honey, let me help you with the clasp." ♦

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YOURSELF.