SHOPPING

IF AT FIRST HE HATES IT, TRY TRY AGAIN.

It's the first sunny day after an endless winter and I've talked Jake, the 40-something guy I'm dating, into a shopping expedition in Manhattan. Actually, I bargained. "If you buy some new shirts and just one pair of shoes, I'll watch you shoot hoops in Central Park." Like many American men, Jake's anxiety level soars at the mere mention of shopping for clothes. For example, he never gets a hankering for new shoes; he just waits until the old ones fall apart. The shoes he's wearing today look like his dog played tug of war with the laces. When I mentioned he might need a new pair, he said, "yes I know." That was two months ago.

We start at a shop on Madison Avenue that carries both men's and women's fashion. I'm busy scrutinizing some fabulous retro lavender sandals that I plan to try on later. When I look around for Jake, I spot him through the window outside. He's been distracted by a street fair.

I run out to grab him back and he's holding up a set of vintage Batman trading cards. "Aren't these cool?" he asks me. "Yes. Cool. But what about the shoes, Jake?" It's a bit like taking my three-year old nephew shopping. Already frustrated, I agree to a coffee break. He puts down the cards.

I begin to think about the men I know and how they all approached shopping with the same sense of avoidance, boredom and apprehension. They can shop for sporting goods, they love electronic and hardware stores, but when it comes to entering a dressing room, they treat it like a proctologist's office.

Over coffee, I ask Jake why men hate to shop for clothes. (There has to be more to this than just wanting to get home to watch the game.) "It's the way we're brought up," he tries to explain. "We're conditioned from an early age. I remember my mother taking me to big department stores like Alexander's. The racks of hangers and seas of clothes made me dizzy. She'd have me try on tons of stuff and when the pants were too long or the coat too big, she'd say 'don't worry, you'll grow into them.' Then I'd have to wait for hours while she'd shop for herself or for my sister…"

Sure, blame it on the mother. But Jake had a point. I have two younger brothers and reflect back to when we were kids. To avoid shopping expeditions with our mother, one of my brothers wore only concert T-shirts to high school; the other dressed in Miami Dolphin jerseys and sweatpants every day. Whenever we'd go to the mall, they'd make a b-line to the food court. Both married now with high profile careers, their wives pick out their clothing.

"See what I mean?" says Jake. "But by the way, despite being traumatized by my mother, I don't mind waiting in a store while a woman tries on clothes. It's just that when men agree to this, they usually get sabotaged with questions like 'does this make me look fat?'"

It dawns on me that many American men have never experienced the concept of specialty stores with fabulous product and personalized service. So I decline a second espresso and drag Jake back into the store where he tries on everything the sales associate and I pick out for him. (He's quite taken by the fact that he doesn't have to struggle putting items he doesn't want back on the hangers.) "They really are helpful, not at all intimidating like I expected," he says in amazement. He buys three pairs of pants, a sportcoat, four shirts and two pairs of shoes. He says that he likes the lavender sandals and that I should try them on. "Sexy," he tells me.

"But do they make me look too trendy?" I want to ask, but bite my tongue. I can''t risk ruining the first pleasant shopping experience this guy's ever had. (And while he's paying, I sneak outside and buy him those Batman cards…)