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The Charge of the White Brigade

Glenna M. Andrade

Roger Williams University, gandrade@rwu.edu

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The ambivalence about the case crosses ra-

The charge of the White Brigade

By GLENNA ANDRADE

As most shoppers know, the most publicized sports event of the winter season is the annual January White Sale. The only reason it is not televised is because it has more participants than observers.

White Sales can snap even the most lethargic shopper out of his or her winter drearies. The mere mention of "White Sale" sends chills up and down consumers' pocketbooks. It offers them a chance to unsaddle their guilt about holiday overspending because they now purchase necessities instead of luxuries and will save money rather than spend it.

On the morning of the sale, shoppers — eyeing high-flying flags and pacing ever so nervously — await the opening of the store. When the doors are unlatched, they scramble like fillies through starting gates, swinging their rumps to maintain their positions. A cry of uncurbed enthusiasm echoes through the crowd, "C-H-A-R-G-E!"

After they halt at the sale bins and install themselves at one side, they snort at anyone who dares encroach upon their territory and paw through the necessities they came to purchase — things like guest towels that only come monogrammed with Q or Z, satin Snoopy sheets (dry clean only), crystal soap dishes shaped like penguins wearing snowshoes, irregular sheets designed for heart-shaped waterbeds, soap carved into the shape of an elephant, Care Bear comforters that are reversible to Cabbage Patch preemie patterns (king size only), ashtrays shaped like toilet seats and toilet seats shaped like ashtrays.

Shopping White Sales can be a gripping experience: People wrestle, wrangle and then

rewrestle for the rejects.

One day, after having survived the initial crush, I became determined to take advantage of the bargain in sheets. Ordinarily they come in pairs, flat and fitted, but during a White Sale, the only available sheets are either one kind or the other. As I decided between the tops of one pattern and the bottoms of another (thinking it easier to sew corners than rip them out) a salesclerk proposed a solution. She said another store in the mall had some bottom sheets in the same pattern.

By the time I galloped down the mall, bought the fitted sheets and returned, a fine selection of bottom sheets had replaced the top ones. The friendly salesclerk had disappeared just as quickly. Resigned to making flat sheets out of the fitted ones, I began to look for matching pillowcases, finding the only pair cradled in another shopper's arms.

"Look," I said, "If you don't really need them, I do."

"I do," she replied. "I'm going to make throw pillows for my bedroom."

Craftily I suggested she could buy a matching towel instead. "That would be more practical because you could wash it. I saw a whole table of them at 50 percent off down at the other end of the mall." Desperation, as they say, is the mother of invention.

A "white" sale must be an invention too, as there is never anything white. Towels may be cream, ice blue, pearl or ecru, but never the snowy color I need for my black-and-white bathroom. I recall, while sorting through the towels that day (ready to use one to weep on), a woman sniggering, "Black towels! Did you ever see anything so hideous?"

"May I see them?" I asked, shivering with delight.

"I suppose they'd be appropriate if one was married to a garage mechanic," she sniffed.

"Or, if one had three children," I sniffed likewise. "Thanks."

That evening, after I'd installed the new towels on their racks and shelved some of the sheets on top of the unopened packages purchased a year ago, I began stuffing my king-size pillows into the standard-size cases I'd bought my mistake. No matter how hard I pummelled them, each pillow looked as if it were sticking its tongue out at me. Just then, my son appeared at the bedroom door.

"I can't sleep," he said. "The sheets are too bright. I see eyeballs staring at me."

"Turn out the lights," I scolded. "Then you won't even notice the peacocks."

"But the peacocks claw me when I turn out the lights."

"Nonsense," I said, "Those sheets can't be scratchy because I washed them three times just to get the labels' glue off."

Another child arrived a moment later. "My sheets feel like sandpaper," he complained. This was when I learned I'd been raising two princes on percale all these years, and that muslin was not a religious person but a type of fabric.

And the towels, you are asking, how did the black towels work out? Well, to be honest, I never know if they are greasy or not, but I can always tell when my children have brushed their teeth.

I did eventually find out why January sales are called "White Sales," though. When I opened my bill later that month, my face blanched with horror at all the money I'd saved.

Glenna Andrade is an Iowa City free-lance writer.