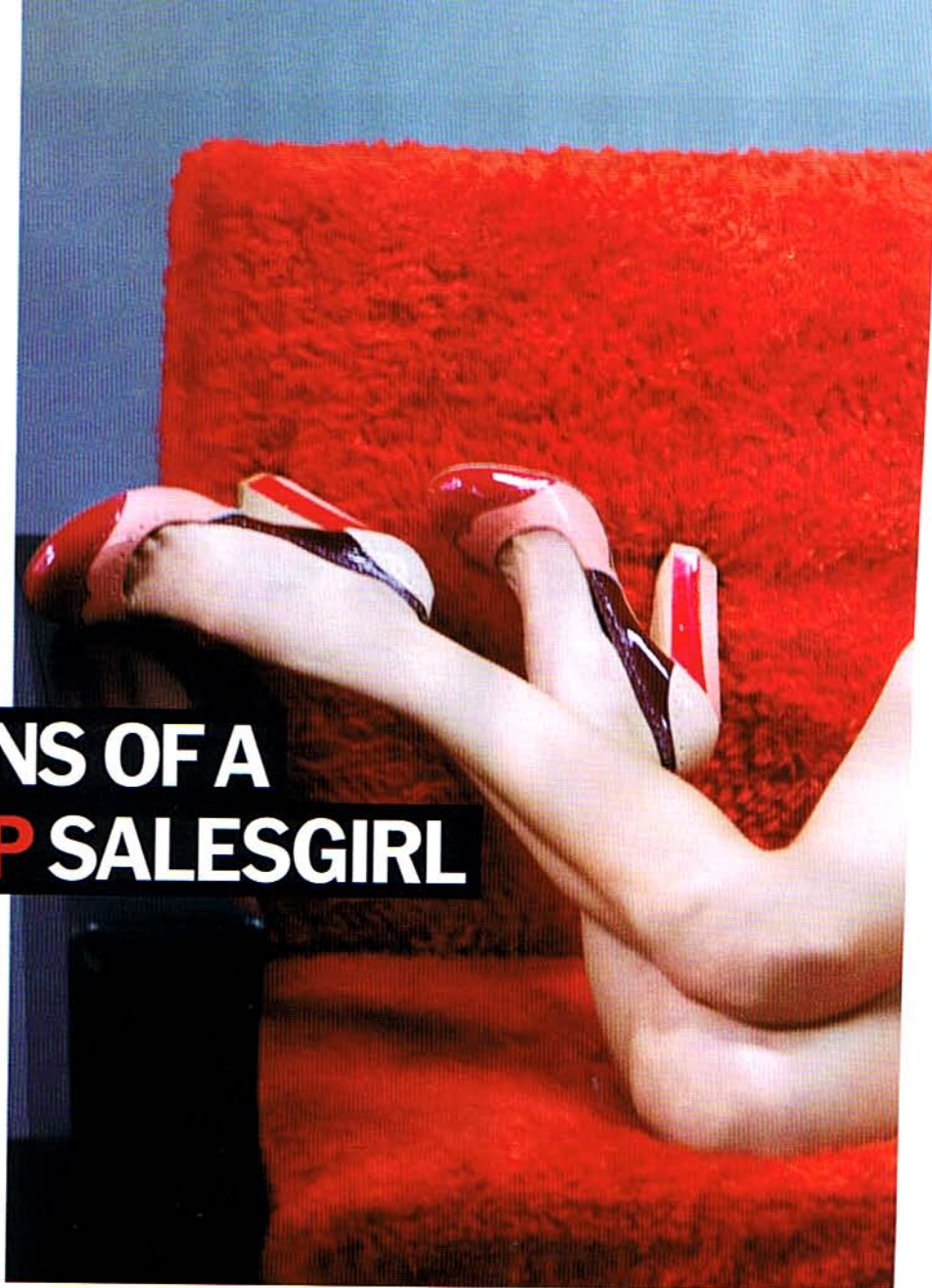


CONFESSIONS OF A SEX-SHOP SALESGIRL

Who knew that selling sex toys would provide such a window to the soul?

By Arianne Cohen



MY FAVORITE customer, Marlene, first appeared at 10 a.m. on a Saturday. A youthful, 50-something firecracker in mom jeans, she marched in and scanned the shelves. "I have three sons and a husband. I need a vibrator that is completely silent. Do you hear me? Com-plete-ly si-lent." She looked at me expectantly.

We buzzed around the store, switching 20 vibrators on and off until we found an ugly but quiet plug-in model. She raised her eyebrows. I assured her that aesthetics are not essential to pay-off. I revved the motor from behind the storage-closet door. She didn't hear a peep. When I emerged, she hugged me. "Your mother must be so proud of you," she enthused.

Actually, my mother, whose house my paychecks were mailed to, still believes that Grand Opening is a bookstore, not a female-friendly sex-toy shop. I wasn't ashamed; I simply couldn't justify adding the word "dildo" to our pile of mother-daughter detritus.

My stint began when my friend Laure double-dog-dared me to take the job with her. We quickly learned that sex-shop work is the least sexy gig out there. My half-decade as a lifeguard was flirtier, full of sex jokes and wedgies. This was like working in a preschool, providing construction paper and paste.

Here's the way it went down: I'd linger behind the

counter while customers shyly wandered in. First they'd pretend to look at books, then lubes, before finally landing near their *objets du désir*. Inevitably, they'd glance my way, and I'd approach in whatever persona (funny, subdued, earnest) fit the customer. They'd promptly whisper their most personal problems in my ear, then look up at me for a solution. My sole training for this interaction was

"Once you've cracked someone's desires, you understand them in full."

an incoherent 10-minute speech by the intoxicated owner of the store. I learned the rest under fire. Sex, I quickly gathered—or a lack thereof—is at the center of everyone's identity, and once you've cracked someone's



desires, you understand them in full.

Mothers and grandmothers tended to breeze in, announcing exactly what they wanted: Quicker sex. Longer sex. An easy orgasm. It was the younger ones who tended to be uncertain, proof that the confident women of the world haven't quite figured out how to pass that confidence on to their children.

I grew skilled in helping the usual suspects: the woman with a newborn strapped to her chest seeking to avoid giving her husband blow jobs, the dowdy middle-ager who nonchalantly purchased lube by the quart, the graceful 60-year-old with long silver hair who bought the largest dildo I've ever seen ("I do think this will fit the bill").

My role stretched far beyond that of

salesgirl. Primarily, I was a therapist. I listened earnestly as customers informed me of their fantasies involving feathers and safety pins, things they'd never told anyone before. Most began with, "Don't laugh, but . . ." My nodding approval had a soothing effect, and they'd tell me more.

Often, I was an anatomy instructor. Men regularly appeared solo, asking for specific toys. Their plans, which I'd gently tease out, were often very bad ideas involving exotic, porn-inspired positions. I would grab a diagram highlighting the clitoris, remind them of the natural range of motion of most women's hip flexors, nudge them toward a more arousing plan for her, and throw in a discounted book on erotic massage.

Ultimately, I became an ad hoc protector of women. Like the time a bearded book editor appeared. After gabbing about the erotic-lit industry, he explained a particularly ludicrous double-penetration scenario he imagined for his wife. He seemed to treat sex as an event strictly for his pleasure, which I found particularly egregious. I was sleep-deprived and blurted out, "Sir, what do your wife's feet look like?" He paused. Then stuttered. He had no idea. I suggested that for the next month, he spend a weekly hour in bed with his wife without using his penis. Two months later, a thank-you note appeared to "the tall saleswoman who taught my husband how to make love."

Understand, we were not just selling motorized sticks. We were also teaching women how to never be submissive. A woman with a well-stocked toy drawer isn't dependent on anyone and is unlikely to hurl herself at a lowlife just for nooky. Though I began my job on a lark, it became clear that being a sex-shop salesgirl is, in some way, a curiously feminist calling.

A FAMOUS HARVARD professor appeared one day, with fedora, seeking videos from our female-friendly collection. (No matter how primly people present themselves, they all spend their days thinking dirty, dirty thoughts. Some bury those thoughts deeper than others.)

I asked what sort of video. "Dear," he said in a clipped British accent, "a plotline won't be necessary." He inquired about what item a man might like to use with his wife of 30 years—then began mapping out a plan that would make Jenna Jameson blush, beginning with a dinner during which his wife would wear an oversize dildo in her rear. I coughed and interrupted, suggesting that perhaps a vibrator might be the sort of gift a wife would love to receive, to be used as she chose. I wrapped it and slid a store card under the ribbon with a note to the wife: *Please visit!* Then I grinned to myself, knowing it was a gift that would keep on giving. **mc**