

The Amazon Trail: Sentimental Shopper



lee lynch

It's funny what we find nostalgic years later. Five and Ten Cent stores rate high on my list and no Wal-Mart or Dollar Store will ever replace the romance of wooden-floored emporiums of cheap junk.

Woolworth's and Kresge's, Ben Franklin's and McCrory's and J.J. Newberry's – what kind of person am I that I enshrine in my heart such capitalist monuments? I'm an American who lives in the land of the free to shop, in a consumer society that is addicted to recreational shopping.

My acquisitive side developed under the tutelage of a mother who was called a housewife, but who was actually a shopper. So many of the stay-at-home-and-take-care-of-the-kids women who reached matu-

guns and holsters, the toy cowboys, the tiny trucks and red wagons. If I was lucky, I might get a book of paper dolls to take home. If I was very lucky, one of the dolls would be a boy; they were more fun to dress than the girls.

Eventually I grew into my teens and could meander downtown on my own. It was on one such early excursion to a Five and Ten that I lost my first transistor radio, my constant companion, my personal rock and roll concert hall. The trauma of that day is still with me.

"Transistors" were hot new items then and I'd left mine in a photo booth, one of those machines where you got three shots for a quarter. One of the sales clerks put it carefully behind her counter. This was no

first t-shirts (back when they were not fashion statements but underwear), my first Zippo lighter – all came from the Five and Ten. Suzy and I got our engraved I.D. bracelets, sort of like lesbian engagement rings, there. Even a queer kid could find what she needed at the Five and Ten.

Later, when these relics were no longer to be found in the cities, I came across one in tiny Lee, Massachusetts. It was small, but dense with goods, and an essential part of every visit to my in-laws' vacation place. All the women in the family would crowd the aisles, exclaiming over doodads and gewgaws. Laughing, we'd buy ultimately useless stuff – three generations of us, my girlfriend, her mom and her grandmother – for the memories invoked.

Maybe gay kids born in the twenty-first century will get sentimental over Wal-Marts and malls in the same way. Do young femmes ever get busted for ripping off lipsticks from Wal-Mart? Are there young butch mall rats roaming J.C. Penney's in packs? I'll watch for young queer couples sitting far back in the food courts, shar-

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riety in the depression years had no resistance to a shopping way of life. Nothing could have seemed better on a hot summer day than sitting on a stool (with a back) in the air-conditioned cool, chatting with the waitresses and lurching on tuna on white toast (with a toothpick flag speared into pickle chips) and a wickedly expensive milkshake. Nothing except sitting on that same stool in winter comforted by the smell of wet wool mingled with a cup of hot chocolate (with decadent marshmallows). All for well under a dollar. Those women must have felt, after the lean years, like they'd gone to heaven before their time.

I was an apprentice Five and Ten shopper, roaming the aisles wearing (horrors) a sun dress or (horrors) a snowsuit. Occasionally I got to stay in the toy aisle while my mother explored the cosmetics and perfumes. A well-behaved child, I didn't touch, only longed for the

small town, but the anonymous clerk looked as pleased as I felt by the reunion.

That photo machine was to figure more prominently in my life a couple of years later when I had another first: a girlfriend. I still have one of the pictures Suzy and I took, self-consciously squeezed as close as we dared inside the booth.

When we weren't documenting our defiant love I hung out in the hardware aisle while Suzy, rather than my mother, lingered over the makeup and jewelry. How I yearned for a set of screwdrivers, a wood-handled hammer of my own.

You could say I grew up in Five and Tens. My pet turtle Klem Kadiddlehopper, coloring books, a child-sized trap drum set, my collection of 45s (those ancient disks played one song on each side; I still want to flip my CDs for the rest of the music), pads of paper, ballpoint pens and clunky mechanical pencils galore, my first tie, my

ing an Orange Julius. Making memories. ▼

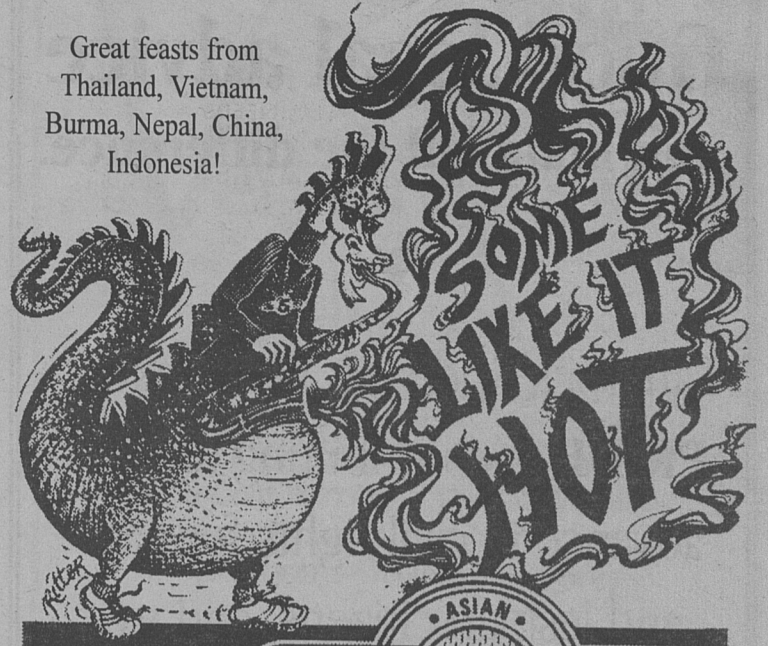
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Lee Lynch is the author of eleven books including The Swashbuckler and the Morton River Valley Trilogy. She lives on the Oregon Coast, and comes from a New England family.

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