

Happiness is but a leap away

By Ruth Ostrow

IT'S like Dante's inferno in the super-store. Hot, stuffy, uncomfortable. There are rows and rows of custom-made beds and mattresses and couches all looking terrifyingly alike, with a swirling array of bad colours and strange designs hitting the eyes.

Worse is what hits the ears. A red-faced woman is clearly upset at her husband not wanting to buy an apricot lounge suite. "You never ..." and "Why can't you be more ..." are echoing in my direction. You can feel his rage, her despair.

In another corner a money war is brewing. He clearly doesn't want to spend that much on an outside dining table, she is using words like "mean" and "cheap" loudly, as he fondles the plastic furniture.

My hands are clammy. Buying furniture is a testing time for people. You come up against all your money issues, your values, your aesthetic limitations or your partner's. But more disturbing, you walk into a shop full of other people coming up against theirs.

All that frustrated, exasperated energy is swirling in your direction, far as the eye can see. All that venting of a lifetime of resentment coming out in vomitous yellows and vermilions: "We never buy what I want. You always get your own way."

Today I'm braving super-hell alone, my husband running off like a sick cat when he realises where I'm going. I'm in a daze, wandering in circles. I know what we need. But I don't know how to get it. There's too much stuff. I feel overwhelmed, confused. And I realise how hard and tiring we all find the day-to-day struggles of life, choosing, compromising, purchasing, haggling, cohabitating, deciding.

I look around for a guardian angel. I see her coming towards me. She's in her 50s with an old-fashioned hairdo that has never moved a strand. She stands wiping the crumbs from her mouth. She smells of pie. She tries to smile but a sneer comes over her face instead.

"I was in the middle of eating my lunch," she informs me for no apparent reason, leading me through consumer hell. "We have sofa beds, lounge suites ... What do you want?" she inquires in a scalding tone. I search her face for traces of joy. Nothing. "We're refurnishing our home. So I don't know exactly what I want. Can you help me decide?" I say politely. "How can I help you decide if I don't know what you're looking for?" she scalds again, then, with an impatient flurry, goes off to answer a crying phone.

I crumple on to a nearby mattress. Defeated. Pathetic.

I feel the same in supermarkets. Trolleys are coming at you from all directions, too many choices, too many screaming children and unhappy people in a rush, irritated, overheated, under-financed.

And there's nowhere to stop. You just have to keep going, climb that Everest, wait in the queue while the salesgirl struggles with the broken thingo, and the person in front tries to pay \$160 in coins. At least in the super-furniture-store you can give up the ghost, curl up on a couch, or hide in a dark wardrobe.

Which I'm about to do, before I look up and see a sign which immediately cheers me up: "Please don't bounce on the beds." And suddenly I have an overwhelming desire, need, to bounce on the beds.

Before I know it I'm trampolining, low, then higher, then faster. My heart is thumping with excitement. "Baa boom", "baa boom," it beats, as I bounce to a bed behind a large cupboard and actually leap into the air. Leap with joy amid the decisions and indecisions and talk of credit cards, bad taste, who is right, who is wrong.

Leap to freedom. Liberated from the worries and petty things that are plaguing those earthbound souls, with their furrowed brows, making judgments about sofas and each other as if such things were life-and-death matters.

Up here, from this vantage point, there is nothing to stress about. It's all too silly. Too insignificant. And I break into a laugh as the guardian angel walks briskly towards me.

"Didn't you see the sign?" she spits, as I hop from the bed. And I fight the urge to drag her up with me for one moment of pure, child-like bliss, of bouncing breasts and flaying arms - her hair finally breaking free from its nest, her soul flying towards heaven. To grab the apricot-couch couple, and the "mean" plastic-furniture man, and get them all jumping, leaping, a million miles away from their troubled thoughts, and relationship dilemmas, into the glorious present. To write a new sign: "Happiness is but a leap away. Please bounce on our beds."

Instead I turn and walk out the door, empty-handed but smiling.

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