Eighteen Hours

By Tim Roduner

The only make-up Mom wore was lipstick. Perfume, if she used any at all, was relegated to a small dab behind each earlobe. Her hairstyle was whatever was in fashion, as long as it was easy to care for. She wore sensible shoes, along with inexpensive pantyhose. Her clothes were very practical, never flashy. She was seldom without her black, cat-eye glasses and always wore her wedding ring, sometimes accompanied by earrings and an occasional necklace or brooch. But the one thing she never left the house without was her girdle. Underneath all of her functional, practical clothing, Mom was always strapped tightly into her girdle. It was 1969, and in those days she wore the best and most popular brand available to the average American housewife: the Playtex 18 Hour Girdle.

My three siblings and I were quite familiar with Mom’s girdle because two or more of us were always recruited to help her get into it. Once she stepped into the leg openings, it took a couple of us kids to pull it up and lock her in. The routine was simple enough: a kid on each side of Mom, pulling up as hard as we could over her ample flesh until the girdle was snuggly in place. Mom would then suck in her stomach and hold her breath while she barked out the command, “Zip Mommy up!” One of us would grab hold of the zipper while the other grasped tightly to the two sides of the girdle, drawing them together until the zipper could inch upwards and reach its end. After that, Mom needed help pulling on her slip and dress over the girdle, making sure everything was lined up and in place. Since she was a stay-at-home mother, this ritual was almost exclusive to Sundays, when we all wore our best clothes and went to church in the morning and in the evening.
The First Baptist Church of Lakewood had been built in 1963 and was quite modern for its time period. It was a traditional brick structure on the outside, but inside it sported a more contemporary, space-age feel. I often imagined that *The Jetsons* would have felt at home in our church, with its futuristic design: upswept ceiling, geometric shapes, and bold use of steel, glass, and wood. It was all tied together with sky-blue walls, upholstery, and carpeting. During the service, Mom would give me the church bulletin and a pencil. I would keep myself busy filling in with lead all the Os, Ps, Qs and any other letter that contained an enclosed space. This would keep me occupied for most of the service, and if I ran out of spaces to pencil in, I often ended up drawing little pictures of my imaginary worlds in the margins of the bulletin.

When church was over we would head home, and the moment Mom was in the door, she’d shout out, “I need some help getting out of my girdle!” Once free from the thing, one of us would fold it up and try to fit it back into the package it came in. I often stared at the packaging, reading its fancy gold type: “The original and still the best. Playtex 18 hour girdle.” To my nine-year-old brain, I thought that the eighteen hours was the total amount of time it could be worn. For example, if Mom wore it for three hours last week and five hours this week, that meant that she could only get nine more hours out of it before she had to replace it. But my older brother set me straight on that idea. He told me that the fibers magically regenerated themselves after taking it off for a short while, therefore becoming practically brand new the next time Mom needed to wear it again. So, through my powers of deduction, I surmised that one could only wear the girdle for a total of eighteen hours before it would begin to unravel and explode off the body.

When I explained my theory to my brother, he confirmed my belief and swore that he saw the girdle on a teacher’s aide at his junior high school explode one day. Just like that, my
suspicion had an eyewitness account. I doubted I’d ever be able to witness such a sight. Mom never wore her girdle for that length of time, and I sure didn’t want to be around if she ever did. Imagine a tsunami of elastic fabric, thread, snaps, and a zipper, traveling at lightning speed, all aimed directly at those closest to her. Someone could get their eye poked out! And there would be my Mom, her dress and slip ruined and hanging in shreds off her body, looking like a sandwich board of torn and tattered clothing. Everyone would laugh and point, and my Mom would be humiliated, all for having worn her girdle for eighteen hours and one second! It would simply be exasperating—a word I was quite familiar with as a nine-year-old since Mom used it often to describe my antics. A scary thought indeed. But I never had to worry about that happening since she only wore the thing in smaller increments of time. At least she did until one particular Sunday. Time became the enemy, and I was certain that my mom was flirting with a clothing disaster.

The Sunday in question Mom was dressed and out the door before any of us had gotten up; Dad helped her into her girdle that morning. Mom was part of a ladies’ group that sponsored different missionaries associated with the church. Once a month the church had a missionary Sunday where those out in the field would come in and host a luncheon, along with sharing reports about their experiences in their chosen corner of the world. Mom’s group worked with families that were missionaries in French Polynesia. Since the theme of the luncheon was tropical, Mom spent all day Saturday in our kitchen cooking up little cocktail weenies that she then pierced on a toothpick with a chunk of pineapple. This was exotic food in my estimation, and I secretly wished my family had been called to be missionaries so we could indulge in these tasty, tropical treats. She also made several Jell-O salads and carted them, along with the weenies, to church the next morning. She and the other ladies set everything up, and then she
headed off to engage in her regular Sunday morning routine. After church we were all together at the luncheon until we had our fill. Afterwards, Dad took us kids home while Mom stayed and helped clean up. We eventually met up with her again for the Sunday evening service.

Sitting there in the pew with my parents and siblings, I hadn’t given Mom’s girdle much thought. It normally didn’t cross my mind much anyway, outside of helping her in and out of it. As I sat there in my seat, pencil in hand, busily blacking in the enclosed letters on the church bulletin, it was probably about as far from my mind as it could get. We stood up to sing a hymn. When that was over, we all sat down. Mom leaned across me and whispered to my Dad words that ignited terror in my heart: “Boy, I can’t wait to get out of this girdle. I’ve been wearing it all day."

My brain raced as I tried to take it in. How long had she been wearing that thing? Was she anywhere near the eighteen-hour time limit? Anxious, I tried to total up the number of hours. It was now about 8:30 p.m. When would she have had to start wearing the girdle to make it eighteen hours? My mind busily added and subtracted the hours. In the end, I panicked and came up with about seventeen hours and forty-five minutes. If I had kept a cool head, I would have realized that meant that Mom would have had to put on her girdle at about 3:30 a.m. However, when you’re nine years old and anxious, logic doesn’t necessarily factor into things. So there I was, certain that I was sitting next to my Mom and her soon-to-be clothing disaster.

I snuck a glance at my parents. They looked completely unsuspecting of the terror that was about to visit them. Mom looked weary, and I could tell she was in one of her no-nonsense moods. I reached across her lap and tried to get my brother’s attention, but he was only interested in sticking his tongue out at me while he picked his nose. What was I going to
do? Was there any way to avert this catastrophe? I turned and looked in the row behind me. There sitting with his family was Larry Fink, a kid from my Sunday school class. He was bigger than me and loved giving me wedgies when I wasn’t looking. Because of that, I was careful to avoid Larry Fink at all costs. Suddenly, I wasn’t as worried about Mom’s potential embarrassment at having her girdle explode; I was thinking about Larry Fink and the golden opportunity he was about to be handed. I could never live it down. He’d tell everyone he knew that I was the kid whose Mom’s girdle exploded in church!

I looked at Mom’s wristwatch. Ten minutes had passed; I needed to do something quick. I grabbed Mom’s arm and tugged at it. “Let’s go to the bathroom!” I whispered to her.

“Oh, you’re a big boy—you can go by yourself,” she whispered back to me.

I sighed and slumped in my chair. Very well, Mother, I thought to myself. I tried to remove you from your audience, but if you won’t leave, then there’s only one thing for me to do. I got up and walked quickly out of the sanctuary. I pushed open the wooden and steel doors leading to the large lobby with its miles of sky-blue carpeting. Once on the other side, I stood there resting with my back against the doors. At least I was out of there. How much time did I have? It must be pretty close to exploding now. Well, I wasn’t going to stand there and listen to the screams and gasps. I hightailed it out of the lobby and headed to the men’s room. Might as well take care of a little business while I had the chance. Going to the bathroom, flushing the toilet ten times in a row, and drawing a face with soap on the mirror took up plenty of time, as did walking slowly backwards through the hallway and into the lobby. Once there, the only sound I heard was of the Pastor preaching. No screams or shrieks.

As the minutes slowly crept by without any unusual noises coming from the sanctuary, I found myself hoping I had dodged a bullet. Eventually, singing wafted out to where I was
waiting. The final hymn—that meant that church was almost over! Sure enough, once the singing was done, people began to pour out of the sanctuary and fill the lobby.

Spotting my family, I ran up to them, squeezing in next to my brother. I told him that Mom’s girdle was past its explosion time. He just smirked at me, rolled his eyes, and shook his head. I checked the time. It was now about ten after nine. What had happened?

The next day at school I told some of my friends about the incident, and most of them agreed that they would have done the same thing I had done: waited out in the lobby for an explosion that never came. All except David Lindburger. He said he would have stayed with his Mom and waited for her to explode. But he ate paste, so what did he know.