

Secret Weapon

MYRA BROWN

I CARRY A CONCEALED WEAPON. It's a wallet I purchased last year after Christmas — a flashy red Liz Claiborne I discovered under the cover of scarves and other accessories relegated in the afterglow of the season to the 75% off sale table. It wasn't until I got it home that I discovered the label tucked inside that read *Secret Weapon*. Wow! It suddenly became even sexier than it had been an hour earlier when that splash of lipstick red compelled me to a mad dash across the store with a clean swipe of my credit card. Just opening this wallet transformed me into an amorous James Bond girl and whisked me away to an exotic underworld filled with intrigue inhabited by beautiful and dangerous people. Exhilaration engulfed me, as I envisioned a triumphant escape from the grasp of my enemies in a climactic employ of the secret weapon at the last chilling second.

Health insurance costs soar, slam S.C. workers

Employees bear brunt of skyrocketing premiums

— *The State*, Columbia, SC

November 2, 2003

Not only did the unexpected glamour that was unearthed in my new wallet generate a fantastic end to my shopping excursion that day, the sense of adventure renews every time I use the *secret weapon*. A furtive smile launches across my lips and emerges as the twinkle in my eyes when I hand my check to an unsuspecting cashier. A less stealthy exchange occurs as my daughter, in pursuit of some cash, quips, "Mama, where's your secret weapon?" The metaphor will stick around long after the bold color and sex appeal of the wallet are worn and faded.

Most of us carry a secret weapon of our own stowed away in our wallets. Small, compact, and versatile, our insurance card stands guard 24 hours a day, an

ever-present protection against the financial pitfalls of injury, illness and disease. Lately, though, the security of our system has been breached. We find ourselves parachuted into unfamiliar territory, uncomfortable with the same level of confidence we have previously entrusted to our secret weapons. They are now more expensive and no longer guarantee as sure an escape from the dangerous world of healthcare costs as we are conditioned to expect.

In the swift current of rising medical costs, employers scaling the walls of insurance benefits are opening the dam and allowing a greater portion of the costs to flow to their employees. Accustomed to the safety net of low deductibles, minimal office visit co-pays and generous prescription drug plans, employees are feeling the squeeze, as the escape hatch by which we avoid monetary disaster shrinks. The masterminds behind our secret weapons are re-programming them, so that they no longer recognize a higher level of vulnerability to healthcare costs as dangerous to us.

Americans are opting for faux glow

Spray-on tans becoming popular alternative to sunbathing, booths

The State, Columbia, SC

November 1, 2003

In a world of ever-present danger, how are Agent 007 and his woman supposed to get their tans? Even while relaxing on the Riviera, they're on constant alert for the move of the enemy, postured to pounce in the scare of a second. Ah, life on the big screen does have its drawbacks. Despite them, we crave that golden look that says we just flew in from a month of sunning at the shore, even in the middle of winter. Thanks to the capitalist vigilance of entrepreneurs, we can rest safer tonight. The newest option for achieving that desirable tanned body seals our sexy fate quicker and easier than ever before. No more valuable time wasted in the tanning bed. No need to risk damage to our soft, luxurious skin by over-exposure to those harmful ultraviolet rays. Tomorrow, we'll duck into the local spa, indulge in sun-kissed radiance via spray on tans, and enjoy a whole week of bronzed romance.

Cell-phone dumping could present hazard

The State, Columbia, SC

November 8, 2003

Can we afford the hazardous distraction of concern for the environment due to the discarding of cell phones? I think not. Communication is imperative in our line of work. We need our cell phones. They are an important prop, too. We can't proceed without caution into our top-secret mission without that sleek, small accessory pinned to our ear. People might get the mistaken impression that we are not involved at the highest level in an all-important maneuver of mind-shattering proportion. It is imperative to present the extreme sense of urgency that is implicit in our activities. Besides, we may need it to communicate our location, should the enemy discover our whereabouts and the secret weapon fail to deploy.

S.C. Lottery

Monday, November 3:

Pick 3 Midday: 3-8-9

Pick 4 Midday: 1-8-8-7

Pick 3 Evening: 8-2-8

Pick 4 Evening: 8-9-8-6

Sunday, November 2:

Pick 3 Evening: 0-7-3

Pick 4 Evening: 0-1-8-4

The State, Columbia, SC

November 4, 2003

Gambling! 007 does it in pure, unadulterated Las Vegas style. Glitzy. Glossy. High class, high stakes gambling. Dressed to kill in a black tuxedo and red bow tie, he downs a martini and casts a sideways glance my way, spinning his charm with a roll of the dice. I sip champagne by his side, seductively poured in a sequined, black cocktail dress, wisps of sleek blond highlights framing my face. Long acrylic nails with a satin scarlet finish accent the glitter of the diamonds that dangle from my ears, caress my hands and arms and embellish my neckline. All eyes are on us. Even the poker chips unwittingly join the collusion. It's red glamour, black intrigue, and green money.

Road Test: 2004 Mercedes-Benz SLK 230

Warming up to a good thing

The State, Columbia, SC

October 31, 2003

Optioned out, this car drives for \$44,620 and goes from zero to convertible in 25 seconds. With the press of a button on the center console, the windows go down, the rear deck lid rises, the top unfastens and folds itself into the rear, and the deck lid closes to cover it up. Race car red, of course. Base price \$39,600. Sound extravagant? Not compared to a James Bond ride. And, not much more expensive than the high-end mommy-mobiles laying claim to those tight parking spaces at the mall. I know. I know. We digress here. Mommy-vans at the mall are not exactly the sultry stuff Bond movies are made of, but the life of 007 isn't for everyone. Someone has to raise the little agents of the future.

If NASCAR revs you up, check this out

The State, Columbia, SC

November 8, 2003

So maybe you're Bond material and maybe not. Maybe the mini-van is your style and maybe not. Either way, check out NASCAR. Lose yourself in the roar of the engines. Bask in the cheer of the crowds. It's an exciting sport the whole family can enjoy together. A profitable one, too. Sales of licensed NASCAR products total approximately \$2 billion a year with an estimated average of \$700 per fan. You've just got to feel for the overwhelmed licensees of NASCAR. Clothing, accessories, collectibles, electronics, toys, gift novelties, and home furnishings. They have the pedal to the metal to keep up with all that demand. Don't fret for them, though. There's a rest area — oops, I mean a pit stop ahead. Sales will drop speed when the little pit crew gets their check ups next year.

Many uninsured are middle class

Soaring premiums, job losses have left 43 million in U.S. without health care coverage

The State, Columbia, SC

November 16, 2003

Oops! Agent 007, in an uncharacteristic and unexpected departure from his usual svelte style, slips while secretly searching an enemy locale and breaks his leg. Definitely not a sexy turn of events. But, not to worry! The beautiful, physically fit Bond girl of the hour leaps quickly to his rescue. Beads of moisture enhance her flawless complexion as she clutches him close to her well-sculptured body and

dodges the beams of the building security system in a breathtaking run to the rooftop. As they bolt into daylight, they are instantly exposed to forces of dark clad security. They make a daring dash to board the enemy helicopter and complete their airborne escape amid the blare of the sirens.

Next scene...007 relaxes in his luxurious and secure hospital accommodations. He rests, seductively reclined in bed with his leg elevated. His room is guarded 24 hours a day by a dozen sleek, long-legged women, armed and highly skilled in martial arts. His silk pajamas and tousled appearance set the stage for this latest act in the play of his inescapable sex appeal. His recuperation is quickened by the attentions of the carefully screened nursing staff whose skilled hands prove the healing powers of massage on his body.

Maybe I'm getting carried away with my fantasy at this point. But, hey, wouldn't we like to see a strong woman rescue a helpless man for a change? And who gets hurt if I embellish the hospital scene a little? After all, the British government is footing the bill for Mr. Bond.

Peace at twilight

Hospice care helps people die with dignity — and helps families say farewell

The State, Columbia, SC

November 16, 2003

Everyone knows that should he ever be caught between that proverbial rock and hard place, 007 would never allow himself to be captured alive. It's unspoken and understood. If he succumbs to one of the enemy's poisoned darts and his capture or death is imminent, he'll use his secret weapon to self-destruct. Truth is, in the movies, old Bond agents never die. They retire from active service (i.e., replaced by younger actors). Why, I don't know. Honestly, can anyone argue with the fact that Sean Connery is still the epitome of 007?

In real life, though, when death's inevitable stalk manages to penetrate the force field shadowing 007's door, his cruel fate is still protected. The mission is still secure. Mercifully dosed by morphine, the old agent dreamily relives his youthful days of red glamour and black intrigue with the roomful of aging yet still beautiful Bond girls.