

Suspenders

by John Olson

Oriana gave me suspenders for Christmas. Two pair, one black, one beige. Oriana is my wife. We have been married for 30 years.

I opened the black one first. Putting it on was much harder than I'd imagined. Suspenders are more like hardware than clothes. They're like a machine. Unlike socks, which are easily negotiable, suspenders are a mode of engineering. They're mechanical. They have movable parts, clips and elasticity. They're deceptively simple, quirkily counterintuitive, a combination of pliancy and applied physics, and a little ornery, like old men and mathematicians.

The shorter straps go over the back. It would seem as if the longer straps should go over the back since they would be easier to reach. Nope. It's the shorter straps. You just have to make sure they're pulled as far down as possible without sabotaging the situation on one's chest. If the longer straps flop over the shoulders, it all ends up on the floor, and the process must be restarted. It's like the occasions when you set out to explain a complicated interrelationship of ideas and it all collapses into a rat's nest of contradictory facts and far-flung speculation.

As soon as I got the suspenders adjusted I felt different. I felt like Wilfred Brimley. Like one of those old guys in a hardware store who knows a little about everything, a range of wonder and enigma from Socrates to needle-nose pliers. Once those suspenders are fastened you're not going to look like James Bond or John Shaft. The suspenders are all about utility. They're there to keep your pants up. It's tedious in the extreme to have to keep tugging at your pants all day. I'm modest about my butt-crack showing. And on several occasions my pants fell all the way down.

Suspenders are a surrender. A surrender to gravity. A surrender to vanity. A surrender to youthful illusions and besotted chimeras. They're an adaptation clever as Australian frogs cocooning themselves in mucus, or cuttlefish detecting wavelengths of light to mimic their environment. Once I get the damn things on, the reward

is uplifting: a tug of elastic support pressing on my shoulders down to my waist, the limber physics of a snug suspension.

There's an aura of wisdom surrounding suspenders. It's not suspense. There is no suspense. Suspension, yes. You can feel it in the shoulders. Two straps pulling down to keep your pants up. Some practice is necessary, particularly for those moments in public when I will require the facilities of a rest room. I have the option of popping off the two front straps so my pants can ride down my legs, but I don't want my suspenders to lie on a men's room floor. I'm fussy that way. Germaphobe. I want to get so good at releasing them and putting them back on that I can snap them off and snap them back on with the grace and legerdemain of a seasoned magician. And hope for a hook on the bathroom stall, where my suspenders can hang, idle and at rest.

My old leather belt, which I've had for over 30 years, is now retired and hanging from a hook on the bedroom wall. The belt is embossed with symmetrically repeating geometric patterns. The buckle is big, and square, like the buckle on a 17th century pilgrim's hat. I feel like I've crossed some form of Rubicon, a divide between two manners of living, one a hangover of youthful activities long abandoned, except for the belt, and the other a resignation, a capitulation to gravity and pants and the limitations imposed by one's mortality. Clothing as parable. A reversal: rather than a suspension of disbelief in order to fully invest oneself in a drama, a suspension of pants in order to fully invest oneself in a diminishing future compensated by a disburdened past. One begins feeling the realities of age pulling us down as the prospect of heaven pulls us up.

