

One Man's Obsessive Search for Skivvies

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

I confess: I have an underwear fetish. It goes above the simple appreciation of comfortable undergarments and beyond the fondness for fine skivvies. This is a full-blown, obsessive, find-a-treatment-program-and-a-scientific-name problem. Of course I don't see it that way. For me, underwear is a necessity ~ the basis of what we will present to the outside world. It provides the support and underlying confidence that will bring us personal triumphs, or at the very least a secret smile as we bounce along on the highway with all the ignorant tighty-whitey-wearing masses.

I realize this borders on a sickness. I cannot pass an underwear display without scoping it out. All those larger-than-life men staring out at me with their subtle come-hither smiles, rough and studly in five-o'clock shadows, bending over and pulling their briefs on (or off?), and daring me to slip into their cotton-stretch-dreams. By stepping into their product, I am promised an instant transformation ~ a set of impeccable pecs and a pronounced package to match, where once was a set of scrawny ribs and an empty package. It's all in the underwear ~ success in romance, success in sex, success in life. In the right pair of Calvin Klein boxer briefs one can conquer the world. Just look at Marky Mark and Antonio Sabato, Jr. These are my heroes, my idols. I need not spend hours toiling away at the gym ~ I need only the perfect pair of underpants to achieve greatness and glory. Of course, one pair is never enough. This is where my harmless fetish turns the tiniest bit addictive.

When I went away to college I brought with me a fully stocked arsenal: thirty-one pairs of underwear, representing the full array of styles ~ boxers, button-fly boxers, boxer-briefs, square-cut-boxer-briefs, full briefs, mid-rise briefs, low-rise briefs, bikini briefs, string-bikini-briefs, sport briefs, fly-front briefs, no-fly briefs, and a total of two never-to-be-worn-longer-than-a-minute thongs ~ and a wide variety of fabric ~ cotton, silk, spandex, satin, velvet, linen, and all their combinations. I needed thirty-one pairs so that I could go for up to a month without doing laundry.

At the end of the first semester I found that I had doubled the number of my original compilation. This would have been worrisome had I not seen a goal to such spending: I was simply going to get all the styles that existed and then stop once I had a complete collection. The problem was that every few months brought a new style, or a new designer. All of a sudden underwear seemed to be everywhere. It ceased being the dominion of Calvin alone and gave birth to new lines from all the big-wigs ~ Versace, Gucci, DKNY, Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren, Kenneth Cole, Perry Ellis, and Hugo

Boss. No longer was I safe outside of the department stores. It was all over, from the chic places by the Ritz to the Diesel selection and Calvin Klein left-overs at urban outfitters

Once this designer stampede took place, the original undergarment companies awoke to the power of fancy underwear. The old stand-bys added color, stripes, and dare-to-bare styles, while other companies were born with the realization that men's underwear was taking off faster than a pair of sheer Velcro-rip-away boxers from Frederick's of Hollywood. Joe Boxer, Jake & Co., Alfani, Chereskin, Hanro, and 2(x)ist each made cotton-covered head-way into the fashion stratosphere. Never far behind the trends, the big mall-stores quickly followed suit; Gap, Banana Republic, Abercrombie & Fitch, Structure, Old Navy, and J. Crew unveiled their own lines of undies. And, lest I miss out on the chance of finding the one pair of underwear that will bring me true happiness and contentment (a blissfully elusive search, I'm afraid), I must continue buying any and all of the stuff. This search has led me to the ends of the earth ~ from the Philippines (colorful briefs, but the fabric's all wrong; either too thin or too starchy) to the Emerald Isle (where I found my favorite pair of "Brass Monkey"-brand black briefs, complete with a gold emblem of a monkey on the waistband).

One need not travel such distances to find distinctive underduds. In fact, an extensive selection of European-style shorts can be found just over-the-border, and I don't mean New Hampshire or Taco Bell. I'm talking about Canada. For once, this country is not to be blamed; their underwear stock comes in large part from Europe. It was in Canada where I first happened happily upon the 2(x)ist brand a number of years ago in a glorious moment of discovery.

Montreal and Toronto offer the most cosmopolitan assortment, and it's easy to go overboard and claim Canadian/American currency misunderstanding. A word of warning: there are limits as to how much one is allowed to bring back into the U.S. On my last underwear expedition I was mortified to find myself being pulled over by the border patrol, interrogated about how much money I spent and on what, and having two guards search my car, the entire back-seat of which was strewn with a choice smorgasbord of underwear. (I was about to see if I had the wherewithal to put on a new pair while driving; thank goodness I didn't get that far.) Fortunately, none of my risqué purchases were contraband. I had also fallen fortuitously below the legal limit by a few dollars, thus saving my fashionably-attired ass.

Where does one find the latest in undergarment designs in this country? Well, the newest ones are going to cost you, but are readily available at Lord & Taylor, Saks Fifth Avenue, Macy's, Filene's, and the designer specialty stores along Newbury. However, do not limit your search to these places. Just the other day I found a pair of red briefs rolled into the shape of a rose and being sold at the 7-11 a few blocks from my house for the obscene price of \$6.99. (You should be able to get three briefs for that price, as well as a better fit, but I had to try them. You, now that I've told you, do not.)

There are a number of mail-order catalog and on-line underwear offerings, but be wary of these. Making a worth-while purchase requires that one sees the pieces in person. It's imperative that the underwear is seen and felt, though you must never let the sale-folk witness you tearing open the underwear boxes as seems to be very-much frowned upon. Still, such hands-on examination is necessary for those who fluctuate between standard sizes. The only way I can tell which one will fit is by feeling it in my hands, holding it up to the light, and going on the expertly-honed instinctual feel that I have carefully perfected over years of undergarment purchases. If you're still willing to take the risk, and find that you are a size Large unfailingly across-the-board, then by all means take advantage of the numerous mailings done by Undergear and International Male. These twin publications sell enough underwear to make even me feel like an amateur.

If money is a concern, all is not lost. I cannot stress enough that Underwear Is A Necessity. Imagine the horror of getting hit by a car, only to be taken to the nearest hospital where insult will be heaped upon injury as you struggle to maintain consciousness so they won't see those cheap, ratty, hole-filled jockey shorts without your permission as they use the excuse of resuscitating your life to inflict such embarrassment. Who wants to be in such a position?

As I was saying, the cost of good underwear does not have to be exorbitant. A quick trip to Marshall's or Filene's Basement will cure you of that worry. The offerings may be a little dated, and the selections a bit picked-over, but no other place beats the low prices. For those of you who may be seeking even better bargains, I offer one essential caveat: NEVER BUY USED-UNDERWEAR. This is not negotiable.

If you do have a little cash burning a hole in your pocket, or a credit card for that matter, I strongly suggest you invest the funds in new undergarments. Underwear is like liquor: you can never have too much. Prices really are reasonable. Consider how much money we spend on shoes, which we put on our feet, and compare that to the money we spend on our underwear, which we put on our you-know-what's. Am I the only one who finds something askew with this? Go for the good stuff ~ your privates are worth it.