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In Praise of the Ever-Practical Handkerchief

The humble hankie is no longer as popular as it used to be, which is a shame: Few everyday items are as useful for showing affection and concern.



Clark Gable offers a handkerchief to Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). PHOTO: ALAMY

By Stuart Green

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My father was born in 1925, and like many men of his era he was quite formal in dress. I never once saw him in blue jeans or a T-shirt. When he came home from his medical office at the end of a long day, he kept his coat and tie on until he was ready for bed. And he always carried a neatly pressed white handkerchief in his back pocket.

In fact, a handkerchief played an important role in a pivotal night of his life. In 1950, mutual friends set him up on a blind date with my mother. While at the movies, in my mother's telling, her hand became quite sweaty, and my father,

sensing her discomfort, took out his handkerchief and patted it dry. With this simple gesture, he won her heart: They were married six weeks later.

Despite the fateful role a handkerchief played in our family history, my own sons, now in their 20s, disdain them. “So, you’re saying that you keep a little piece of material in your pocket to blow your nose with, and when you’re done you fold it up and put it back in your pocket? That is so gross.”

I get it: The first line of defense for a runny nose will always be Kleenex. Still, since I was in college, I’ve regularly kept a handkerchief in the back right pocket of my pants. Think of the advantages that handkerchiefs offer: They don’t end up in landfills or sewers or require the cutting down of trees. They don’t get all shredded in your pocket. They’re way better than tissues for wiping a sweaty brow. You can use them to dry off a park bench or a seat at a ballgame after it rains. They can serve as a kind of tourniquet if you cut your finger while cooking. They’re perfect for cleaning your reading glasses. And you can use them as a head covering if you find yourself in the Gobi Desert without a hat.

Handkerchiefs hold meanings that paper tissues cannot. Othello gives Desdemona one as his very first gift to her. “There’s magic in the web of it,” he tells her. “The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk.” (Unfortunately for all involved, Desdemona’s handkerchief had so much meaning that, falling into the wrong hands, it led to tragedy.)

Rhett Butler also understood the power of the hankie. Moments before he leaves Scarlett O’Hara in the final scene of “Gone with the Wind,” he offers one to her as a gesture of comfort, accompanied by a characteristic dose of exasperation: “Here, take my handkerchief,” Rhett says. “Never, at any crisis of your life, have I known you to have a handkerchief.”

Barack Obama apparently knows the magic of the hankie as well. There is a wonderful set of images of him at the funeral of former Israeli President Shimon Peres in 2016. He is sitting next to Peres’s son, Chemi, who is crying his eyes

out. President Obama whips that little white cloth out of his pocket and offers it to the bereaved man, who gratefully accepts it.

I had a similar experience when I attended the funeral of my wife Jennifer's aunt. I was sitting next to one of the cousins, Paul, who was crying inconsolably over the loss of his mother. Having exhausted his considerable supply of tissues, he was looking around in a bit of a panic. I pulled out my trusty handkerchief and handed it to him. Every time I've seen Paul since then, he reminds me that he still has that hankie and intends to return it at some point.

My sons haven't yet seen the light. Jennifer, however, is a different story. Over the 30 years we've been married, she has benefited from my handkerchiefs at countless weddings, graduations and funerals. Still, it was something of a surprise when, early last month, she mentioned that she was thinking of getting some hankies of her own.

That was my cue. By the time Valentine's Day rolled around, I had managed to secure a box of lace handkerchiefs with little embroidered roses, which I gave to her, along with chocolates, at dinner that night. She hasn't had the hankies for very long, but the early signs are that she is now a true believer.

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