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Jun 4 · 3 min read



Wardrobe woes

or “What might have been, er, fit”

For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: “It might have fit . . . if only I had lost some weight.

Story of my life, Mr. John Greenleaf Whittier. My wardrobe is full of clothes purchased in a rush of audacious optimism. I was convinced—or was able to convince myself—that the mere act of buying them would ensure the loss of five or 10 pounds, whatever was the extent of my overweight at the time.

I have never had a great body. Weight is admittedly only part of the problem: I am short, with short arms, legs, trunk, and neck. Most of my life I have been chubby and sometimes outright obese, except in those rare periods when outside circumstances have brought about weight loss almost inadvertently: food poisoning, surgery, a death in the family.

Those few “almost skinny” (read approximating average weight for my age and height) periods have been both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because it is wonderful to walk into a shop and try on a dress of a certain size and, hey, it fits. A curse because the memory of such moments influences all other clothing purchases—when the dress Does Not Fit but you remember when it did and think that you will make it come again.

Unless we are the perfect size 6 or 8 (they do exist; I have seen some in communal dressing rooms, but they are a far cry from my own imperfect reality), we tend to comprehend early on what does or doesn’t work with our particular body.

In my case, the tenuous (if I want to be honest, the absolutely inexistent) connection between purchase and pound loss has never dissuaded me. Every spring or fall, or whenever circumstances force me to take an accounting of the contents of my closet and drawers, I find items of apparel with the price tags still attached. They wave in accusatory fashion: “Hey, sucker. What possessed you to think that I would EVER fit you?” My accusers are mostly pants, but there are some skirts, a few daring dresses (Versace-style), and the occasional osé blouse or European-snug jacket.

As the years accumulate, *fit* becomes a gerund as well as a noun and a verb. Not only should the garment fit properly, but is it fitting for my age? A 50-year-old woman may fit the same size four dress as a 20-year-old, but does it make sense? Or does it look ridiculous on one or the other? Our tops tend to thin out and our bottoms thicken with age—as gravity pulls our bodies south—so what may still “fit” technically does not work conceptually. Décolleté after 50 calls for the most advanced push-up bras, with the result more a triumph of technology than sensuality. Granny dresses are for 20-year-olds, not grannies. Baby doll waistlines idem. Short skirts don’t work with varicose veins.

So now weight and age have become an intertwined conundrum. The result is that little in my closet works anymore. Better turn back to Whittier for the wisest wardrobe counsel:

No longer forward nor behind

I look in hope or fear;

But, grateful, take the good I find,

The best of now and here.