

Socks in search of a sole mate

By Ruth Ostrow

A FEW weeks ago, a strange thing happened. I bought a new pair of black socks to take away camping. I carefully unwrapped the packet and folded one sock into the other the way my mum taught me and put them in the suitcase.

I wore them -- only once -- inside my walking boots. They were not too tight around the ankle, not too saggy or baggy around the toes. It is indeed one of life's unsung pleasures to find the perfect sock.

When I returned home, I pulled the pair out to wash, unfurled them and, to my complete horror, discovered that one of the socks had gone from a brand new black sock with ribs to a rather skimpy old black sock with a yellow stripe at the top.

Like any person who opens their washing machine to find that one odd sock has transmogrified into something unfamiliar, I searched the realms of logic for an explanation. Did someone I camped with mistakenly merge socks with mine? No one had a matching black and yellow sock.

And so I have begrudgingly had to accept that my right sock wandered out into the night, dumped its mate and took off with a sock more to its liking.

Or else pay homage to the theory that there is a Bermuda Triangle of socks, pens and teaspoons out there that sucks odd socks into an energy vortex and takes them away to another dimension.

Sharing this mysterious story with friends around the dinner table just for a laugh, I suddenly realised that stories of missing socks haunt people to obsession. A group of high-browed professionals sat for nearly two hours sharing spooky stories of odd socks, including the enigmatic tale of a friend who put two spotted socks into the drying machine a few months ago and was aghast when only one came out.

Three months later he went outside to water the garden and waiting for him on his doorstep was the lost sock. Torn in many places, wounded, worn out from its travels and unable to function any more as a sock, it had come home to die. It is now used as a rag.

"Where did it go off to, and why?" he asked, seriously perturbed, as another friend told of how she recently put a pair of small, red socks into the washing machine, and ended up with only one red sock.

Meanwhile, she inherited a long yellow one. "Is there a parallel sock universe where another woman is standing there looking horrified at my red sock?" she asked.

The best part of the evening was discovering that, a few years ago, then president of the Byron Shire Chamber of Commerce, Tony Narracott, decided to launch an "odd sock day" to see if he could help people marry together their "sole mates".

People came from far and wide with bags full of odd socks which were all placed on large tables, and everyone went around seeing if they could find their sock's

partner. The manager of the local National Australia Bank, who himself had had sock ponderings, volunteered to string odd socks outside teller booths to see if anyone found a mate in the throng.

"On a serious note, it was a good idea for a fund-raiser, with people paying 50c to charity each time they found a match. But I also felt that there is so much guilt around about odd socks, with no one wanting to throw them out, always clinging to the hope that the mate will one day return from its travels, that it was time to take action," says Narracott.

Apparently a lot of socks did turn up in other people's bags -- which begs the question: coincidence, gremlins or secret canoodling? One friend, Christopher Dean, the founder of the tea tree and natural-health empire Thursday Plantation, has a scientific theory: "Socks are independence seekers and grab on to a jumper or scarf through electro magnetics and hitchhike their way to freedom, dropping off the jumper the minute they are in someone else's car or home." However, he can't explain how he recently put a pair of black socks into the washing machine and ended up with a green sock with animals on it -- which he brought out to show me. "I have never owned a sock with animals on it and yet over the years a dozen have come out of the wash. That's a phenomenon worth examining." My mother's theory is that doona covers eat socks, and you can often find a mouldy sock at the bottom of the cover. "But I can't explain how coat-hangers multiply in my cupboard." Barbara Turner, Narracott's partner, holds the theory that manufacturers put a mutating gene into one sock so that when it turns into a different creature, you have to buy a new pair.

As the world lurches towards World War III, it's good to know that the best and brightest of our society still spend hours sitting around tables trying to solve the really important issues of life.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 08 FEB 2003