



Let It Pour

Getting a handle on the best umbrella

IT WAS POURING THE DAY MY WIFE AND I DROVE INTO town to finalize our home-equity loan and, as if to underscore our dire financial need, we had nothing to keep the rain off our heads except our 7-year-old daughter's cutesy, child-sized umbrella. Actually, we were once given a standout faux-rustic Neiman-Marcus umbrella, but its stout handle is the shape, size and heft of a tree trunk, and our car lacks a trailer to tow it along. Somewhere, we have a highly portable yellow model with "HBO" emblazoned on it that I received as an inducement from a local cable franchise, and a nifty \$5 collapsible number that I once purchased from one of those downtown vendors who sprout up in the rain like mushrooms.

But where the hell were those umbrellas now? Not in the front-hall closet, not in the catchall wicker basket by the door, not in the trunk of the car. We found our daughter's two bite-size umbrellas hanging by the door, but the plastic rainbow-patterned one snapped in two when I tried to raise it. The other one worked,

thank God. So off we raced to the bank with a teeny purple umbrella adorned with flying saucers. We got our loan.

Why is there never an umbrella around when you need one? That's one of life's big questions, right up there with "Who is taking the best parking spaces?" "Whatever happened to New Coke?" and "Where did all my socks go?" Roy Blount Jr. once pondered the lost-socks issue in a memorable essay, and he concluded with the immortal line "Dust is socks."

What does that make umbrellas? Cobwebs?

There are two kinds of umbrellas in the world, as you probably know: the cheap kind and the expensive kind. Neither one of them lasts very long, but for different reasons. The cheap kind breaks before you lose it, and the expensive kind gets lost before you break it.

About the cheap, breakable kind you probably know too much. The basic problem is that these umbrellas are too ambitious. They don't just open and close, as the expensive ones do, but they also shrink

down to pocket-size, and they are often spring-loaded to pop open like an air bag at the touch of a button. They are really meant to be used only one single, dramatic time, like a hand grenade.

With the pricey ones, you have to like the way they stay within themselves, with a nod to sports lingo. I've lingered over the exquisite Frenchness of Hermès's \$295 *parapluie*, admiring its sexy sleekness (when closed) and lovely curves (when open) and, inside, the little piece of black lace that is coiled like a garter around the union of the spokes on the shaft.

But my heart was taken by the glorious bumbershoots of Swain Adeney Brigg and Sons Limited—simply Brigg to its many devotees—that have been keeping Londoners dry since 1750. Brigg sells not only to the queen but to the Queen Mother, and, as if that is not endorsement enough, the boutique Louis, Boston has rated the company's colorful, aluminum-ribbed, double-reinforced golf version one of the best umbrellas in the world. That one probably is most suitable for a hurricane, but for garden-variety downpours, I'll take the \$115 cherry-handled, silver-collared dandy. The covers are all English silk (or nylon, if you must), and the handles are carved of every wood imaginable, from chestnut and hickory to malacca and scorched whangee, whatever that is. Sensibly, Brigg eschews the prophylactic-like sleeves of its competitors' models, knowing such extras only get lost anyway. Brigg sticks to necessities: One variety used to come equipped with a hidden sword to cope with any unpleasantness, another has a "racing pencil" secreted in its shaft, to tally up one's racetrack winnings. Not one, however, has a manacle to permanently attach it to your wrist. Other than that, a Brigg is prepared for every eventuality—even rain.

—JOHN SEDGWICK