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All My Things Considered

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In September 2002, I made the decision to move from California to Australia to live with my partner, and by December I was flying to Melbourne. In just two months, I packed up or got rid of all my material possessions.

As forty-one-year-old middle-class Americans go, I had relatively few belongings, but packing was unpleasant and seemed interminable. By mid-November I was working some sixty hours a week on the move, yet I saw no progress. In fact, my belongings seemed to be expanding.

And worse, no one could help me: I alone had to consider every object in my possession, from safety pins to automobiles, from furniture to love letters, from dream catchers to filing cabinets, from fishnet stockings to special rocks. I had to think about and handle every sock, every old toothbrush (kept for cleaning silver), every piece of paper fallen behind the desk. I found endless, useless, redundant junk: Plastic Mardi Gras beads. (I've never been to Mardi Gras.) A couple of eyeglass-repair kits. (I don't wear glasses.) Dozens of paper napkins I never bought. Cat toys my cats never played with. Two (!) complete works of Shakespeare. Angela, my doll from 1963. A couple of hits of mescaline — enshrined since the early eighties in plastic wrap, inside tinfoil, inside cardboard — and a bag of pot, at least eight years old, kept for guests.

I gave away or recycled some 25 percent of what I owned, but for every remaining possession, I had to decide whether to sell, store, ship it, or throw it away. I hate to throw things away. A fanatical recycler, I cannot justify filling up landfills with plastic or metal junk. Tossing a perfectly good frying pan or pair of old pants seems not just wasteful to me, but selfish and wrong. And yet, some things really weren't good enough even for charity shops. I am sure Goodwill turned around and put a lot of what I donated right into the garbage bin.

I had *four* garage sales. Two should have been enough, but I was anxious about money. Although I had more savings than ever before, I had little income because moving was taking all my time, and I knew I wouldn't have a work visa in Australia. Feelings of financial insecurity made every sale matter, and fear made me ungenerous. I was determined to get *at least* four dollars for an incomplete set of wineglasses. A close friend and I got mad at each other over the price of a bed.

I hated negotiating and arguing with — or not arguing with but resenting — prospective buyers. I got angry if they bought nothing or haggled over my already ridiculously low prices. If I was selling CDs for a dollar, people asked if I'd take fifty cents. Sometimes, furious at their cheapness — and my own — I refused to bargain. Other times I took their quarters and nickels, and later, like Scrooge, I counted them up.

For the possessions I kept, it ended up costing about five hundred dollars to mail the smaller items to Australia, and another two thousand dollars to ship the rest by sea. It also took three thousand dollars to prepare, move, and quarantine my cats — about \$165 per feline pound. In the process, I gleaned much bizarre information about shipping. For instance, it is illegal to mail goods overseas in boxes that bear the logo of any liquor. It is not, so far as I know, illegal to ship alcohol it-

self — just the *boxes* are prohibited.

If not being shipped, the things I wanted to keep had to be stored. But where? With friends or in professional storage centers? For how long, and under what conditions, and how much might it cost? I thought of such questions day and night, even in my sleep.

Why do we keep these things? What is it all for? For the purpose of understanding my own compulsions, I came up with some categories.

Stuff Related To People

I kept gifts as if letting go were an insult to the giver, even when I was no longer in touch with the person; even if the person was no longer living. My mother (who is still living) had given me the most extraordinary range of presents, from things I used constantly (a food processor) to things that I kept well hidden (an ostrich-feather-tipped ballpoint pen).

I had to remind myself that the glass ashtray that had once belonged to my grandfather was not my grandfather; it wasn't even my memories of the man. Lo! I could get rid of it and still keep the memories. And, conversely, keeping the object didn't allow me to keep the person.

I discovered a small, diamond-shaped denim patch — the kind you might see on a car mechanic's overalls — emblazoned with the words "Silver Roadways" in white stitching. My first boyfriend (England, 1976) had ripped it off a pair of his jeans. At the time, my favorite song was Joni Mitchell's "Coyote," about the refuge of the road: "You just picked up a hitcher / a prisoner of the white lines on the freeway." Well, white lines, freeway, Silver Roadways: it was cosmic — when I was sixteen. It had promised me a nomad's life of romantic loneliness. But why had I *kept* it?

The patch showed up at the bottom of a wicker hamper that also held a bronze medal from a 1974 Mexican swimming competition. I'd kept the medal with the idea of sending it back to the friend who'd given it to me — a way of saying how much that person meant to me: *Look what I've held on to all these years!* But so what? It's not as if I'd rubbed the bronze weekly and reflected on its winner's significance to my life or the world of sport. I'd simply neglected to discard it. Anyway, I didn't even know where that friend was now.

I also kept items related to famous people (or people who might become famous one day): A concert T-shirt signed (on my person, above my left breast) by singer-songwriter Holly Near. A purple silk scarf given to me by novelist Alice Walker. A mouth stick that had belonged to poet and journalist Mark O'Brien, who'd lived in an iron lung and used the stick to type. It was a great reminder of him except that the mouth-piece had melted on the dashboard of my car and resembled flattened bubble gum. Handwritten words from Ferron, poet laureate of the lesbian nation. Letters of recommendation (and solace, when the recommendation didn't work) from literary critic Terry Eagleton. Some forty signed paperbacks by little-known authors — not one of them, I found, of any value on eBay.

Stuff I Thought I Would Use Someday

I had expected to find mostly mementos of the past, but as it turned out, the bulk of what I'd kept was not keepsakes, but tools for hypothetical future projects. It was as if I believed I could stave off loneliness, old age, and dementia by keeping a bevy of craft materials nearby.

Good Things

Around the time my first boyfriend was presenting me with patches from old jeans, my mother was taking me on shopping trips to Cambridge, where we bought clothes so well-made that I wore them into my thirties. I still have one of the coats.

That was the beginning of my buying "good things." Well before Martha Stewart turned the phrase into a consumer cliché, the English used "good things" to mean items of value, well-made and expensive. My Russell and Bromley boots were — and still are, twenty years later — good boots. I still believe in buying clothes that last. So why did I have leatherette wristbands? Why a folding hairbrush? Why so damn many hairbrushes when I had two Mason Pearson brushes, which cost a fortune and last a lifetime?

Unnecessary Clothing

I had a great deal of clothing, much of which I never wore. Some pieces were relics, marginally valuable to vintage collectors: a 1960s red paisley shirt with puffed sleeves and tight cuffs; a black, woolen English bobby's cape. I sold or gave away trunkloads of clothes. When I started, I had more than sixty pairs of underwear, fifty T-shirts, and thirty-four pairs of shoes. And these were clothes I *liked*.

I had to face a rack of suits I never wore and pants that hadn't fit since 1998. I'd held on to them as if their presence would slim me down. (On the other hand, I was always quick to get rid of trousers that got too big, whisking them to the consignment shop as soon as they needed a belt to stay up. I didn't want to give myself sartorial room, as it were, to regain the weight.)

Stuff That Could Be Valuable Someday

All the things I'd saved thinking they would increase in value had to go: A mink stole that probably had cost my great-uncle several months' wages netted me fifty dollars on Usedfurs.com. The pre-1960 pennies I'd hunted for and slid into keepsake folders were worth approximately one cent each. Why do we think that junk will appreciate with age? If I don't want that silver tea service now, why would anyone want it in the future? Antique shops, I've learned, are so full of old silver tea services that dealers won't even look at them.

Now when I go to such shops, I feel sad looking at the things that people held on to, thinking that their trinkets would be worth something someday. I imagine it's mostly little old ladies (like the one I am fast becoming) who hoard these trifles: the china sets and crystal glassware; the silver cutlery in creaky leather cases a little mildewed at the bottom; the Irish-linen tablecloths that have to be hand-washed because they shrink

to handkerchief size if you put them in the machine. Someone's mother treasured this mahogany box for sixty years and then died — probably without having laid eyes on the thing for decades.

These women and I save such heirlooms in hopes that our children's children will someday want them. I imagine getting a call from a great-niece in 2025: "Aunt Jill, do you have a pewter milk jug with a broken lid? You do? I'll be right over!"

Once, rummaging through someone's possessions after the person had died, I came across a wad of envelopes — *used, empty* envelopes — neatly rubber-banded together and labeled "Christmas Card Envelopes." Some were postmarked from the 1950s. I fear that when I die, someone is going to find something equally pathetic and strange. How about the cardboard boxes marked "Manuscripts to Work On"? Or the lottery tickets whose results I never got around to checking?

I once knew a professor to whom fell the unenviable task of cleaning out the desk of a colleague who had committed suicide. One of the drawers, he said, was wedged shut. When, after much tugging, he managed to open the drawer, he found it crammed full of tiny, ground-down pencil nubs. They were sadder in a way, he said, than the suicide.

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