

women get off welfare, we gave the suits she had amassed. To her women's group, her books and rosaries from pilgrimages. To her friends, pictures. It was important that nothing go to waste, that everything could be used by someone, not just to keep my mother alive, but because after seeing so much waste, it made me sick to think I could continue to contribute to it.

We never really finished. We simply ran out of adrenaline. Once my father and I could walk through the house and not trip over her shoes, once we could sit in a chair without first moving a sweater, we stopped. But shortly after, for the fourth time in as many years, I found myself stripping a life. This time it was mine.

Books I never read were given away, clothes I never wore given to a thrift store. It was compulsive. The boxes of photographs were weeded through for my favorites. I simplified, and became adamant that the sum total of my life would not be the burden of a loved one after my death. And perhaps more importantly, that I would not contribute to, in any way, the inevitable results of over-consumption.

An avid reader, I began utilizing the library more than I had since I was a kid. The books I feel I must own, I purchase second-hand. I have almost completely furnished my apartment on perfectly good furniture that for whatever reason, was no longer useful to someone else. My mismatched dishes are far more interesting than if I had purchased the carefully coordinated set for eight. I can't remember the last time I bought something new. Too many people do that. I'd rather re-circulate items than be the cause for new ones to be made and old ones to be discarded.

I can sum up my life in some plants, the candles I'm addicted to, a few pictures of loved ones, my favorite books, music, clothes and cookware. More importantly, a passion for the environment, a fierce loyalty to friends, service to others, a ferocious mind. And by paring down my belongings, my loved ones can remember me that way, instead of wondering where on earth I got a dragonfly votive candle, and if it mattered enough to me to keep. The mark I will eventually leave on the planet will be on its inhabitants and not on its resources.

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POSSESSION

BY MOLLY MCCLUSKEY



There's a stillness in a house where someone has died. Even if life lingers, remains in the form of the surviving, the house itself stops, as if holding its breath, waiting to purge its previous life and welcome the next.

The first time I felt the silence was after the death of my grandmother several years ago. Walking into her house, a house I had visited only sporadically, I found myself holding my breath, waiting somehow. Her possessions, collecting dust on shelves and tables, wanted to prove the existence of her life but only cemented the fact of her death.

She was a woman I had barely known, known only through the birthday and holiday cards, and one treasured letter after she had read my first article in the college newspaper. I was one of many grandchildren; the furthest away, the least interested in family. And yet here, in this house, was the opportunity to know her in a way none of her other relatives would.

She had gone to Vegas. A hurricane glass with sprawling obnoxious neon letters proved she had valued that trip, had drunk something frothy, had giggled like a schoolgirl. I smiled at the image of my conservative Irish grandmother in a bar on the Strip. There was knitting, a skill my mother had tried to teach me, but found I lacked the patience.

The dollhouses my grandfather, dead twenty years, had created in his spare time. There was one that had been the delight of all the grandchildren at Christmases back when holidays meant Grandma's house. Made by his carpenter's hands, I remembered it as the grandest, most elaborate house in the world. It now sat quietly by the front door, its inhabitants in permanent slumber.

A box of mismatched stationery, a book she had laid open and never finished, a calendar that would forever be turned to September. They all waited, as though she had only stepped out for a moment to get the milk.

They became things then. They had stopped being belongings or possessions and were simply things. Things to be sorted or discarded, things to be mourned over and sighed over. Memories of Christmases tied up in boxes, of spring in the garden planters. But ultimately too, things that would be packed into boxes and trash bags and hauled off to the local dump.

I grieved then, for the woman I wished I had known, for the one with whom I might have shared a pint. I grieved as the items that weren't worth

saving went into a landfill, mourned that the personality she had, and my greatest indication of it, would be just one more pile on a heap somewhere, lost among other people's things.

When my second grandmother entered a nursing home a year later, it was different. She wasn't dead, she was simply moving into a smaller environment; downsizing. I may have told myself she would leave it at some point, that her apartment would once again be infused with life when she returned. I held onto that thought, clung to the denial, until it was time to release her apartment and my mother and I went to clean out her things. We packed most of it into boxes, took some to the nursing home where she died four memory-less years later, never asking about her teapot or blue dress. And her piles added to the things we had saved of my father's mother, until we had boxes of things in our house that we never opened, never used. Boxes of costume jewelry we couldn't identify, books we never read. Until they too went out with the orange peels and wadded paper towels, and a lifetime of collecting and savoring the things money could buy and memories that could be held, was now simply trash. We saved what we thought was important, but how could we know what value someone had placed on mismatched dishes or a plastic carousel horse? We couldn't know if she had been given the horse on a windy day on the Asbury Park boardwalk, where she insisted living near. Or if the mismatched dishes had been painstakingly acquired one by one over the years. I look at my own meager collection and wonder what will become of them.

When my mother passed away last year, I found I could no longer view death and waste with the same detached eye. I had known my mother, lived with her, laughed and argued and cried with her. The things I found were things of my life. My first grade report cards (my teacher called me a "delightful child"), postcards I had sent from my first cross-country road trip, a necklace I had bought one Mother's Day. I was rediscovering her in her scrapbooks, the stones she saved, the shells from the beach near our house that always made her smile.

This was her life: whittled down to the things she owned, and it was my job to slowly and methodically cull out the important from the inconsequential. For nearly a year after her death, I had nightmares that she would come home and find that we had given away her things.

But give them away we did. This time, I insisted it be different. I simply couldn't stand for it to be the same. There would be nothing added to a landfill, nothing of my mother's thrown away, left to rot along with the diapers and the neighbor's leftover meatloaf. To an organization that helped