

## A LESSON IN DOWNSIZING

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If you boiled it all down, if you tried to find the logic of it all—you'd have to start with the punching nun. The punching nun was a hand puppet in a nun's habit and boxing gloves, who, when you worked the controls, started punching. This always cracked me up.

I came across her in the storage locker last summer, where she'd been languishing face-down for years in a bin filled with my grown-up daughter's teenage castoffs, looking a little the worse for wear. One arm was limp and weirdly twisted, so the best she could muster were spasmodic punches in her own face. This really cracked me up.

I was tearing apart the storage locker because I was downsizing from a loft in Toronto's Queen Street West neighborhood, where I'd lived for a decade, to a pied à terre a few blocks away. I was moving because I was splitting up. I'm tempted to insert a deft little joke here to skate over the muck of it all, but there's no way to varnish it. Splitting up is wrenching and awful and in the thick of it can feel as if the gods are napalming your soul.

On the other hand, I make it through. Miraculously I woke up one morning and saw hope twinkling on the horizon. When that happened, I realized that splitting up wasn't all bad, because it had brought me one step closer to my lifelong dream of living in an Airstream trailer. In my fantasy, I live a freewheeling life (albeit on retro cool wheels, not the nursing home variety) and hole up in anonymous places. Which merely proves that you can take the girl out of the '60s, but you can't take the '60s out of the girl.

The loft I was leaving was a vastly different space. 1,500 dazzlingly sunny square feet on two levels with 18-foot ceilings, art gallery brick walls

and a New York state of mind. I fell in love at first sight. But now the affair was over, we were going our separate ways, and I had to make some brutal choices—sort of like having to decide what to grab from the house if you were fleeing a hurricane. I wasn't fleeing a category 5—not exactly—but I was heading down the highway and I had to travel light.

I'd been dreading task, cowed less by its sheer magnitude than its emotional weight. These weren't just objects I was tossing overboard; they were pieces of my past—pieces of *me*. I might as well have been scraping off bits of my DNA and offering them up to Hannibal Lecter. What galvanized me was the promise of a re-imagined life and renewed acquaintance with a certain realm of experience that I'd too long denied in the service of coupledness.

But between Oz and me stood a mountain of stuff. To reach the Emerald City, I'd have to say goodbye to all that. So I went to the moving store and loaded up on cartons and tackled the monster room by room, sorting the archaeology of my life into scrupulous categories: garbage, undecided, Goodwill, undecided, sell, keep, undecided. It was an invaluable exercise in branding.

The kitchen was relatively painless. I simply envisioned myself cooking like Bob Blumer, the Surreal Gourmet, which wasn't much of a stretch because I already viewed him as a role model. After all he has an Airstream. With the art, I followed my heart, which led me to desire only two black and white prints of *Life* photographs shot in the fifties, totems of my infatuation with the American West: pictures of cowboys, Route 66, big sky country. I was yearning to reclaim a fuller, more free-spirited idea of myself, and those expansive vistas held a key.

My books, I figured, would be the worst. Being forced to abandon any would be like a mother being asked to choose which child she'd jettison. But I'd have only a fraction of my previous shelf space, so no mercy allowed. To my great surprise, once I embarked, it was shockingly easy—bracing even—to let go.

Off to the guillotine went the weighty volumes (and trophies) that I'd carted around since college. I tossed most of the Canlit and a good chunk of the Brits, except for Martin Amis, whose mordant wit cheered my soul. I surrendered a shelf load of Russian novelists. Even *Anna Karenina* got the boot—to my everlasting surprise, because I loved that book so much I can still remember where I was each time I read it. There's always the library, I reasoned. Do I really need a book about a doomed woman who threw herself under a train?

In the end, I wanted close at hand the books that were old friends and had first made me want to be a writer—especially those by female authors like Janet Malcolm and Joan Didion. I kept books that had inspired me in some way, like Nuala O'Faolain's *Are you Somebody?* I kept the stories of John Cheever because they were the stories of John Cheever, and William Styron's *Darkness Visible*, which had seen me through some despairing times. I kept Nora Ephron's *Heartburn*. It would never have occurred to me to leave *Heartburn* behind, especially at a time like this.

After the books, it got easier. When I was done, I went through the cartons I planned to move and pared down again. The process was a lot like writing actually—cutting, editing, refining, draft after draft, until the story of me was distilled to its essence. I'd reached a stage in life where what I wanted most was experience. Stuff held less allure, especially if it resonated with parts of myself I was leaving behind. Instead, I traded in old stuff for

cash so I could buy new experience—and, occasionally, a truly meaningful object.

I had a contents sale and cleared out as much as I could. A friend gave me the name of a private dealer who bought china and, without a whiff of regret, I sold my pristine but dusty 12-piece set of cobalt blue Coalport china—gleefully pocketing the thousand bucks. In the locker I found a 1980s glass and Lucite coffee table I'd completely forgotten about and sold it to a local retro furniture store. I tried to flog a Parson's dining table, chairs and a custom-designed sideboard and cupboard, but the dealers told me nobody wanted pieces like that anymore. Now people go to Ikea. After the sale, I called the junk guys to cart off a truck full of remnants.

I tried to photograph a few pieces for private sale—like my extremely funky 1950s green vinyl and black metal patio chairs and some African masks from an embarrassing early tribal period, but inadvertently pushed 'video record' and shot a frightening close-up of my chin and a documentary not unlike *The Blair Witch Project*.

I realized that I'd have to rent a storage locker. Some things I couldn't keep around but refused to relinquish either because they symbolized a part of myself I longed to reclaim or a treasured sense of continuity with my past. Keepers included a monster-sized photograph of me styled to look like a rock star—Joan Jett by general consensus—and a collection of my daughter's favourite children's books that I was saving for my grandchildren, should I have them one day.

In the end, it was as if I were taking carry-on and moving into a boutique hotel, which is exactly how my new crib feels. Hotels speak of romance, escape, renewal. Like Airstreams, they're where you go when you're in transit.

I loved the anonymity of starting over, of feeling unencumbered by the past. I loved the lightness of being. The road was open. The slate was clean. As for the rented storage locker, I can no longer remember what's there, either. Whatever it is, clearly it's nothing I need. In fact, divesting taught me a lot about need. It taught me, for instance, that you don't need much when you have yourself.

Figuring out who I was, exactly, turned out to be a rigorous but largely unconscious exercise. I had two criteria for deciding what to keep, aside from sheer indispensability (my ancient Cuisnart) and non-negotiable nostalgia (my late mom's iconic coffee cake pan). First, the object had to give me real and lasting pleasure, and second, it had to conform in some meaningful way to my new idea of myself. Which meant no to the bronze sculptures bought several lifetimes ago in a Togo market—I did not see African statuary in my future—and yes to the retro pink West Bend aluminum pitcher that had called to me from an antique shop in Jerome, Arizona, annoyed my husband to cart home, and made me rapturously happy whenever I gazed upon it. Only later, in my pared-down surroundings, did I realize the forces that had been guiding me.

You might say, for instance, that a strawberry huller does not, strictly speaking, constitute need, unless you knew that at certain family gatherings I am called upon to make my strawberry tart, and without the huller, I'm berry-challenged. You might say, for instance, that the Elvis pillow bought on a family trip to Graceland does not constitute need either, unless you knew that need can mean spiritual survival too, and something about that kitschy keepsake nourishes my soul.

Which brings me to the punching nun. She made the cut. As I type this in my new office, she sits propped against my printer, arms akimbo. Every

once in a while, I take her down, work the controls, and die laughing. It's not just that she makes me laugh. I brought her along because I see something in her that reminds me how I arrived here and where I'm going. I brought her along because she inspires me. She's feisty, that nun. Maimed but still punching. Could there be a more perfect metaphor for starting over?