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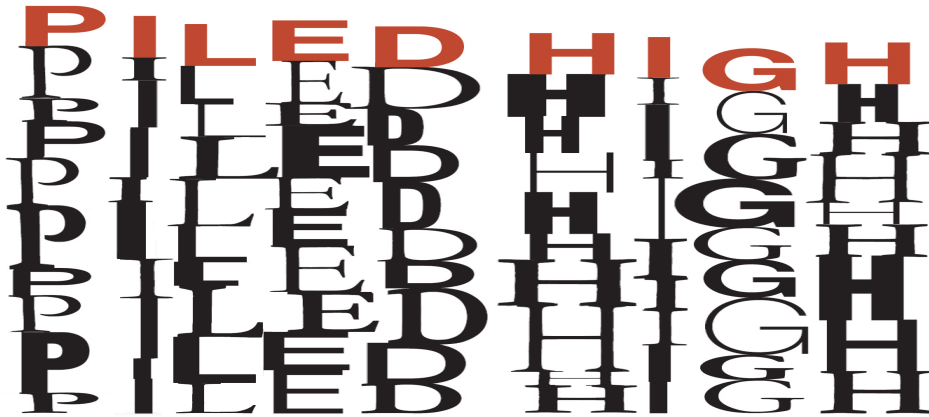


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Controlled by the Clutter

Laurie Thompson

The dining room table is draped with a puzzle from several Christmases ago. It was one that took her a long time to complete, wanting to display it for years as if to show an accomplishment, an excuse to leave things as they were. Underneath the table, there is a basket of birthday and thank-you cards, naked and ink-less, stacked so high that the envelopes spill out the sides like graceful gourds stuck in time. In a plastic box of mismatched trinkets sits a McDonald's toy still in its wrapper (*There are people who collect these things*), a Barbie's fuchsia high heel, a lonesome piece of colored plastic (*I'll find what it belongs to one day*), a screw or two, a half-sharpened yellow colored pencil, and dust. A cardboard box is hidden underneath the table, filled with black-and-white photographs from her childhood mixed with holiday portraits of us as kids. I had desired greatly for the pictures to be in albums, ones I could flip through and laugh at and ask for the stories that they carried. It was too overwhelming to sort through each picture individually, crumpling up the sides and mangling the timeline of memories. I would move one item on top of another, pushing it out of my way, only to find

myself creating another mess I couldn't fix. I would often give up.

On a shelf loaded with miscellaneous and useless Tupperware, there are several Dixie Stampede boot-shaped, plastic glasses from a feast of an entire chicken far too large for my child-size stomach; green alien cups from Kennywood amusement park that would pair perfectly with globs of fudge at the end of the night; mugs in the shape of the stubby alien creatures from *Toy Story*; and wooden salad bowls that would make me fear a mouthful of lettuce and splintered wood on my tongue. I've asked numerous times if we could throw these things away—seeing that we never use them anyway—but she insists they remain there, plastic memories from my brother's and my childhood.

As I touch the wooden table, shivers run through my nerves as I imagine what dinners could have been like here. Conversation between my mother and me was never dull. I would call her from my dad's to ask a quick opinion and it would turn into an hour-long conversation about anything on our minds, ending only because we would both have to

pee. At the dinner table, we might have had one of these conversations. Maybe my brother would have joined in, even if it were just for the food. But it wouldn't matter what the food was—we would at least have felt connected.

Each year she would make another promise for change, but I learned to ignore these promises. Every Christmas she would buy us some sort of game—either a mini ping-pong set, a new Scrabble board or another Monopoly to add to our collection. She would beg me to play with her, saying it was her motivation to clean up so that we could make use of these new activities as a family. The poor ping-pong set has been lost amongst the other untouched gifts that held meaningless hope.

As I make my way into the adjoining “computer” room, in which three nonfunctional computers sit on a desk, I stub my toe on the end table where Mr. Yuck Post-It notes are scattered, my face distorting in pain like the circular, green creature's visage. On my tiptoes, I try to avoid the touch of the cold wooden floor, all the while tracing my fingers against the spines of books by Anne Tyler, Nicholas Sparks, Alice Hoffman, Sarah Addison Allen, and others I have yet to read. Using a great deal of strength, I pull open the closet door in the back of the room. I get butterflies in my stomach just thinking about what I might discover:

A tiny, porcelain mask trapped in a box, caked in green eye shadow and deep violet lipstick with a joker's hat flopping on either side like a bloodhound's ears. I'm in awe—there is something about masks that make me smile... the mystery, the secrecy, the anonymity.

Brand new, rubbery spoons for infants with a sticker that read “Buy one get one half off” They were bought because of the sale, but for no infant in particular. I wonder if she'll still

have these by the time I'm ready for a child.

A Kermit the Frog notebook filled with jumbles of words about past boyfriends; there are several words I cannot decipher due to the youthful urge to write it all down.

There were times when I actually enjoyed the clutter, because it meant I got to rummage through things that hadn't been touched in years, things that had been forgotten from my mother's past. It was the only thing that kept my motivation high when I cleaned—the promise of a new treasure. The masks remind me of my childhood and the desire to dress up and pretend to be something I wasn't. The old notebooks my mom kept when she was in her twenties and thirties allow me to glimpse into her adolescent mind.

It is time to start. I begin with the stacked books, wanting to organize them alphabetically. Holding a few in my hands, I attempt to push more in between other spines, but to no avail. The books are crowded already, wanting to breathe, wanting to be taken down and felt, desiring a mind to absorb their stories. I frown and stuff the books one on top of the other, hiding the titles, isolating them from the world.

Maybe try somewhere else.

The desk. Maybe I could do my homework here one day. But first, I test out all of the pens. No use in being surrounded by dead pens. Sitting at the desk, I scribble pens, highlighters, markers, and sharpies onto a ripped piece of colored paper. My eyes drift to the rest of the room once again. Why am I wasting my time testing out pens when there was no path to the mysterious closet? My skin tingles with goose bumps as I imagine her thirty years from now, inundated with neglected books, drowning in useless knickknacks and old magazines she could not bear to throw away. All of it being

too much for her to handle, she is holding her mind hostage to the feeling that she would want these things one day, that she would find use in things that I saw as useless.

During my last few years of high school, I tried to make it a goal to clean some part of the house once or twice a week during the couple of hours before she got home from work. I would start in one room, but find myself getting distracted by something interesting I never knew we owned.

"I took at least six bags of crap up to Dad's to throw away," I admitted to my brother.

"You should just do that like every week," he laughed. We both giggled, finding Mom's problem funny when we felt like we were fixing it. I felt an immense sense of relief when I could rid the house of several garbage bags of junk. There were times I felt guilty for doing this behind her back, but I came to realize it was the only way I could help. When I first started, I made the mistake of throwing items away in the kitchen garbage can. I should have known she would look through it.

One time, I heard her from the kitchen, making an agonized gasp as if she broke precious china she could never replace. She came into the living room and asked me if I had done it. Done what? *Thrown away my cartoon.* For a moment I debated whether to just lie, say it might've been my brother. But I felt guilty. Yes, I'm sorry, I didn't think it mattered. *It does matter. This is important to me. Stop going through my stuff—seriously. Why would you do that?* I apologized again and again, but eventually stopped and went to my room, not wanting to feel the guilt anymore. I had not purposely thrown out that cartoon. It must have been collected with other pieces of paper and crap I knew were worthless. Or, I thought was worthless. I'm sure she didn't even

remember it existed, and I bet she'll never think of it again, never find it again in the rubble. It would have been better off in the trash.

Sometimes, we could laugh about it:

"Just so you know, I threw away some of the candy in that bowl," I told her.

"What!" she said, throwing her arms up in the air.

"Mom, I'm pretty sure it's fifteen years old."

She laughed. "You're actually probably right." I nodded, making a face that read I know I am.

"Hey! At least I'm not like one of those hoarders on TV," she said proudly, wanting acknowledgement.

"Sure yeah, okay, you don't have ten dead cats hidden under junk. Congrats."

It seems like a dream that there was a squirrel in our house for nearly a week. My mom and I were sitting on the couch cushions that hardly supported our weight, feeling more of the springs than the cushion, when I saw an animal perched on the top of the loveseat sofa across the room. It must have gotten in through the chimney, late at night, when the house was filled with sleeping bodies. I still get chills just thinking about how long it had been watching me as I did my homework. After frantically telling my mom, I ran as fast as I could up to my room and closed the door, leaving her to deal with the rodent. I imagine it frozen there, in shock, not knowing which path to take: perhaps he considered the piled-high celebrity magazines from the '80s, using them as stepping stones to some unknown destination, or maybe he would have put his hairy paws onto the Santa Claus cookie plate, covered in more dust than it ever did Christmas

cookies. He probably desired nothing more than to find some forgotten crumbs—he might have even enjoyed a fifteen-year-old lollipop—but he would have to take a journey through the skyscrapers of magazines, the buildings of abandoned board games, and the mounds of empty gift bags and tissue paper stuffed into the corner to get there. I felt sorry for him.

At the end, all that's left of you are your possessions. Perhaps that's why I've never been able to throw anything away. Perhaps that's why I boarded the world: with the hope that when I died, the sum total of my things would suggest a life larger than the one I lived. —Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love*

If there were ever a situation where I had to leave my house immediately, granting only enough time to grab an item or two, I would scavenge for my journals, my scrapbooks, and my photo-albums. Memory is hard to hold on to, and for me, there's nothing more satisfying than looking back on how I viewed life as a young teenager, laughing at the weird photos my friends and I took as spirited middle-schoolers. These are the things I'd mourn for if lost. But for the past several years, I have had a hard time grasping the sadness in a loss of possessions like decade-old magazines and dusty amusement park souvenirs. When I see what they have done to my mother, all I feel is anger. All I want to do is get rid of them, shovel away the problem at its roots, leaving nothing that could cause stress. I suggest one step at a time: starting with the plethora of magazines. All she needs to do is throw them away. But she can't—she has to look through each and every one of them, making sure she doesn't need to see that one picture, that one article, that one faded crossword puzzle.

"I know you hate when I try to clean, but I'm just trying to help," I say over the phone,

finding it easier to admit this when I wasn't facing her.

"Sweetie, I know you are, but it's better if I just do it myself," she responds gently.

I left it at that, not wanting to upset her more, not wanting her to know I feared she would never actually do it on her own.

"Why haven't I ever seen the inside of your mom's house?" A friend of mine once asked in elementary school.

"I dunno, it's just kind of a mess..." I replied.

"Oh, I don't mind! My house is messy too sometimes," they would say.

"You just can't."

And eventually, they would stop asking.

My mom adores Scrabble. She had played with her mom growing up, the only person that could beat her at the game. I would play with her sometimes, but she would always have to help me. Even with assistance, I always lost. I will probably never master the way words go together in this game, just like she may never fully know how I have felt in her house, surrounded by things I loved as a child, but grew to despise the existence of for their calamities.

Mom, I want you to not have to say, "Excuse the mess," or "Just warn them about the mess..." or "I'm just stressed about the mess." I don't want you to get upset because I'm trying to help. I want there to be room to play Scrabble on the dining room table, not on a small square space near the TV where you complain about back pain. I want you to laugh when the Scrabble pieces fall off the table onto the spotless hardwood floor; easily found, not lost in the couch cushions. I want you to be independent from the trap you have set yourself in. I want you to see how it's a trap that you have the ability to free yourself from. Go ahead, use Scrabble as your motivation, and I promise I'll play with you whenever you want, no complaints.