

Reducing clutter doesn't mean leaving mannequin, winter coats

Guest commentary

Moving. Say the word, and exhaustion settles upon me like a cold. There's only one color I dislike in this world: the color of cardboard. I've moved enough times to memorize its anesthetizing hue. So I've left my new apartment in San Francisco to escape the sea of boxes, the smell of tape, the popping of bubble wrap. I believe it's possible to wash away the travails of relocation with the joys of retail therapy.

After learning I'd be moving to San Francisco (and closer to the locales I cover in my travel writing), I experienced a gamut of emotions, all of which fell into the family of excitement. But the reality of a cross-country move hit especially hard when the moving estimates arrived on my doorstep.

"It's all determined by weight," said the representative.

"So what, are you saying I need to put my apartment on a crash diet?" I responded.

I called it Operation Downsize — a necessary evil, as it were, because I was halving my square footage and decreasing my number of closets by three. One week into the packing process, and the people at Salvation Army knew me by name. I confronted my winter coat addiction, following an intervention performed by a

few close friends who'd come to help me deal with my armoire.

"Well, at least I'll be able to use them now," I defended myself. "It's cold in San Francisco."

"True, true," said my pal. "But they're as heavy as humans, and almost as big."

"You'd be surprised how much this armoire holds," I replied.

I filled 14 boxes with its contents.

I pared down my mug collection — one that grew as a result of my travels with the magazine, as I bought a different one on each of my trips. "You could serve coffee to a small country," said my mother, who's now storing at least 40 of them in her spare bedroom.

I gave away four boxes of beauty products that were spilling from my linen closet. For a person who wears little, if any, makeup, I owned a superfluous amount of it. But that's what happens when one of your best friends becomes the beauty editor of a national women's magazine. (Think care packages.)

"I couldn't just throw it all away," I said, explaining the cargo to my friends, who swarmed like buzzards around the Bobbi Brown and Trish McEvoy goods.

I sold my sofa and kitchen table, gave away 30 cookbooks, and watched half of my material possessions disappear in the arms of my loving parents,

whose nest is so far from empty it appears I still reside there.

When the movers came, I bragged to the driver, Bill, that I'd relinquished the tremendous weight of clutter — and said goodbye to everything I could live without.

"What about this? You can't live without this?" he asked, carrying my mannequin to the truck.

"That's Dorothy," I said. "She's my roommate. She may not be good for rent, but she'll keep you company as you drive across the country."

Bill and Dorothy arrived in the Bay Area last weekend, and it took them almost as long to find a place to park Bill's 18-wheeler as it did for them to traverse the United States. The pair — and a host of hired movers — ascended the stairs of my apartment and scoped out the situation. "Hmm," said Bill, rubbing his chin and shaking his head, a gesture that foreshadowed future problems.

They got the bed in, and the dresser, and my desk. But when I heard a loud string of curse words coming from the street below me, I prepared myself for the worst.

The armoire. It was stuck in the front door frame.

This is the closest these men will ever come to delivering a baby, I thought.

They shoved, pushed, and grunted. I closed my eyes and prayed for a

smooth delivery. It wasn't to be. They finally gave up on the armoire and left it on the street.

"But that was going to be my coat closet," I told Bill. "What will I do now?"

"I hope Dorothy likes to dress in layers," he said.

I sat in my apartment, looking out the window at the armoire, which stood like a wounded soldier on the sidewalk. I debated my options, and saw that I had only one: to go in search of strong men.

I rounded the corner and found two movers who may not have been looking for trouble, but got a dose of it in me. Teary-eyed and fatigued, I begged them, in the thickest Southern drawl I could muster, to help.

They worked for more than an hour, but unfortunately discovered my armoire to be less limber than a deep freeze. Frankie, the talkative one, refused payment and suggested I call his carpenter friend, Johnny. "He could do a little surgical number on this piece and rebuild it in your apartment," he said.

I was all but ready to give the armoire to Frankie and call it a day when I got a second wind of hope and dialed Johnny's number.

Twenty minutes later, he was giving my armoire the once-over, creating a master plan.

"Yeah, this is doable. We'll just

take it piece by piece, you and me," he said.

It was painful to behold, really. The tearing apart of boards, the splitting of wood, the chipping of paint. My armoire was badly bruised by the time we hauled her up, in sections, to my apartment. But five hours later, Johnny had her put together again, standing with perfect posture in my living room.

"We've got to do something about those scratches on the side," he said. "What about Dorothy? We could put an eye hook in her so she'd stay close to the armoire."

"You mean drill a hole in her neck?" I said. "I don't want to hurt her."

"Lady, she's a mannequin," he said. "There isn't going to be any blood."

There wasn't any blood, but Dorothy now has a small, shall we say, hole in her throat that's in need of camouflage. And that's exactly why I've decided to hit the great shops of Union Street.

"Why on earth would you be shopping for clothes when you just gave half of them away?" my mother asked me when we spoke moments ago.

"This has nothing to do with me," I replied. "I'm shopping for Dorothy. She needs a new scarf."

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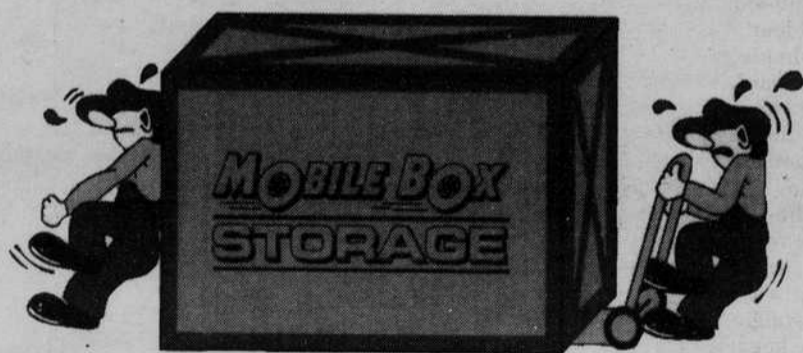
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