AMAZON TRAIL

Baggage

Cultivating simplicity is fine, but weeding out the clutter keeps getting hindered by sentimentality and pack rat-ism

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by Lee Lynch

Life was so simple when I came into the world. It was the only trip I ever took without baggage.

I had no possessions, and more important, I didn't give a hoot. Now I can't go anywhere without wallet, checkbooks, pens, penknife, jackknife, bandanna, keys, a water bottle, at least one book, a list, an index card wallet so I can write more lists, a calculator/electronic address book—and that's just the belt back and jean pockets. My backpack's too heavy to sling over my shoulders.

What's happened? Why have I turned into this turtle that needs the security of my patchwork shell of paraphernalia to survive?

Packing to move was a revelation. Unpacking is even more disturbing. I keep telling Lover I want to keep it simple, but can I bear to part with this shirt, that book? Just how many blankets/towels/washcloths/tablecloths/napkins/platters/mugs/rugs/jugs does one materialistic American dyke need? All of them, by golly.

How can I throw out a mug from my first Living Sober conference in San Francisco? It evokes not only the powerful presence of thousands of women and men coming out the other side of the gay curse—substance abuse—it also puts me back in that urban wonderland.

And how can I get rid of the bird rug, bought from a Native American vendor outside the Grand Canyon? No, we have no wall space to hang it and here on the rainy Pacific coast where mud is a major agricultural crop I won't put it on the floor.

No! I can't part with that hideous peeling wooden bookcase that feels like it's been hollowed out and filled with concrete. It's so unusual, with its side wings designed to hold magazines or lost watch caps or dust puppies.

Are you kidding? What would I do without my old gray Sauconys? Sure, they don't fit, but one of these days I'm going to need to ford a creek or retrieve a piece of petrified wood at high tide.

What, after all, are attics and basements for? I can hear Lover at this very moment heaving and hauling old furniture and boxes of beach rocks around in the basement: sorting, stacking, filling shelves and drawers.

"Do we need five boxes of Styrofoam peanuts?" Lover didn't ask last night as she built a leaning tower of packing-material-we-might-need-someday-and-besides-it's-not-ecological-to-throw-it-out. And I agreed totally with her silent conclusion.

Not only am I weighed down by the enormous quantity of seedy unnecessary possessions I've gathered in the past 52 years, they add weight with worry. Back in the valley I packed photographs and manuscripts every summer to get ready for the lightning strike that would start the forest fire that would engulf our home within seconds.

Now it's the river across the street that bedevils me. Flood insurance is hardly the security I need. If those waters, which are shallow, slow-moving and most likely to flood the flatlands across the river, should come roaring up our hill—well, that would be a lot less file cabinets I'd need, wouldn't it?

My family never had much in the way of heirlooms, but when my mother gives me some trinket that belonged to her mother or gadget that brings back the essence of my father—what can I do? I can perch only so many on bookshelves and the rest go into newspaper nests (gotta save those peanuts for the right occasions) and boxes in the attic.

These legacies are probably the worst offenders. As my mother ages, she's jettisoning what she's treasured through her life. I feel a responsibility to preserve these choice items. While her apartment empties, our house is bursting at the seams. My niece isn't old enough to value such junk—some carried over the seas from Liverpool, some marked Made in Japan—and my cousin has her own family trove. So I get to fill half the attic with utensils, dishes, linens. Maybe we ought to start a bed and breakfast. Or a thrift shop.

Yet I took two van loads of discards to the dump. We gave away a small mountain of Stuff. We've got a box in the mud room filling up with giveaways. We could start our own game show. I'll be host Chuck Woolery and Lover can be Vanna White. First prize is my 9-inch black-and-white TV set. There are no stations here anyway.

Get back to basics, that's what I long to do. But I'm not willing to do it without my baseball cap collection and my dog-eared paperback library.

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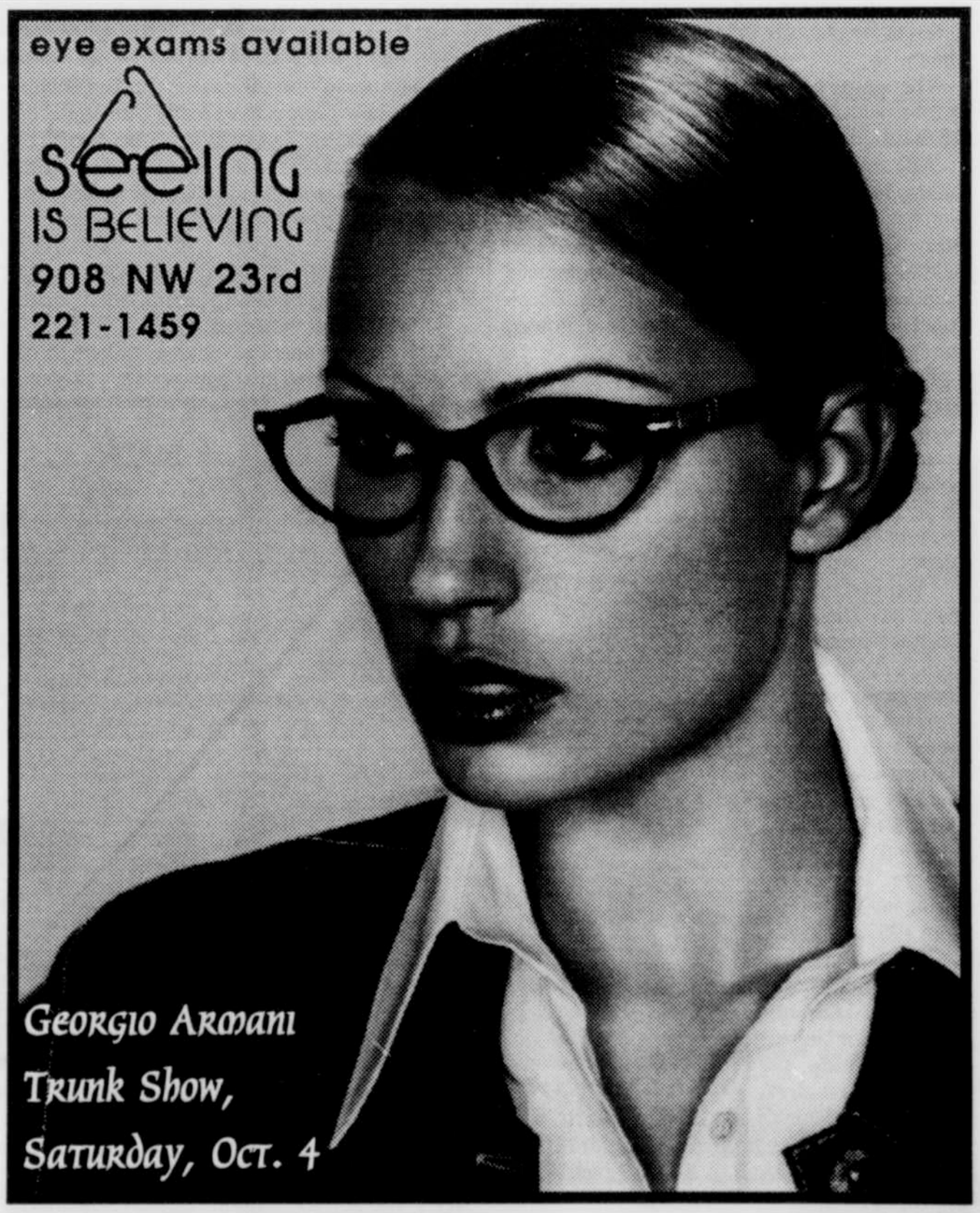
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