

Instead of the Rat Pack

My mom has empty-nest syndrome, though her nest is filled with more junk than you could nail to the walls of the world's Cracker Barrels. In the cement-block house with the raccoon infestation on Missouri Avenue in New Port Richey, Florida, my glorious southern mama works on her knack for collecting and preserving everything.

The woman has two storage spaces, one for fabrics only, which goes to show what happens when you buy bulk polyester in the seventies. She has enough stuff in her home so that when you go there she must guide you through the living room like a seeing eye dog: just cling to the back of her shirt as she pulls you through areas you can't navigate alone. Rest in peace if you knock over centuries of teacups and they crash to the terrazzo. My mom would kill you. And how could you sweep up all the broken pieces? Sheldon The Cat would walk on the shards and then need expensive surgery.

Mom belongs to a club called Questers. This is a group of twenty-five or so women whose collective age adds up to the number of boxes in their living rooms. These women meet once a week to discuss pack-ratting.

"We're not pack rats," Mom always laughs. "We're Questers."

The quest itself is not to find a new knickknack—that's easy—but to find a space in your house where the knickknack will go. That is a long, arduous search.

My grandma was a Quester first. She was a lot of things first. I don't know any other woman in the world who shot a six- and seven-point buck with one bullet on the anniversary of her husband's death. That's another story though, and it involves too much venison. My granny hunted, fished, gardened, read romance novels, and bitched about Jeb Bush becoming governor of Florida until the day she died. She loved crosswords and saved stray kittens and squirrels and nursed them with baby doll bottles. She went to church religiously, cursed religiously, and collected used things like they were souls needing saving.

My mom learned everything about pack-ratting from Grandma. So did my sister and I. We'd go to her house every day after school, and each time there would be several new trinkets for her to show off. She often bought us stuffed animals at Goodwill and gave them to us when she picked us up in her giant wood-paneled wagon. I'd ride with my thrift-store teddy bear, crusty in parts, upon my lap. I'd pick at his fur until all the dirt nits were smoothed out, until he was *my* teddy. I loved every bear she got me. They all slept with me at night, dozens of them, and in the morning they'd be spread across the floor with their arms out like zombies.

"Hurry up, you old farts," Grandma would yell if we were behind a couple of blue-hairs. *She* wasn't an old fart. She kept her hair long and towhead dark and always tied it back with a ribbon that matched the color of her polyester pants and slip-on shoes. She ironed her hair ribbons every morning in her pink robe and curlers. It was her way.

"Try being dropped off at school every day of your life with the woman in her pink robe and curlers," Mom once told me. "One time she had to come inside the high school because our car broke down, and guess what she was wearing. I was mortified."

But guess who has that pink robe now? Guess who took all the curlers and put them in a storage space? Mom even has Grandpa's old chair, where one summer a booger forest

sprouted on the left side of it, and we vowed never to take his seat again.

Riding in the car with Grandma was like welcoming death with Clint Black on the radio. “Hold on,” she warned when she gunned it past old farts, heading into oncoming traffic. I’d hold my new teddy up to the window to see our ugly town. It could be the last time we’d ever see it. My grandma drove like she was in her son’s stock car. She was a stubborn woman too. One time, driving back from a family reunion in Ocala, the air-conditioning broke in her car, but she wouldn’t admit it. She wouldn’t let us roll the windows down. I about died from heat prostration by the time she dropped us off at home, her windows fogged up and all of us sweeter than glasses of iced tea. “Did the AC break?” she said. “I can’t tell.” That was the summer of “Achy Breaky Heart.”

Grandma was a passionate pack rat. These were a few of her favorite things: braided rugs, blue glass pitchers, a yellow porcelain bird with an actual chip on its shoulder. She loved little bird figurines. She always put the birds on the television, which for many years rested atop another television, large and archaic—the television of my mother’s youth and here, stacked upon it, the television of my day. It’s like that Jeff Foxworthy joke about you might be a redneck if. You might be a redneck if you quote Jeff Foxworthy in a nonfiction essay.

All good pack rats learn to stack from a young age. That’s why a lot of parents buy their kids Legos. My mom also bought us Jenga so we could see what happens when you take a piece away from its stack: everything falls apart. That’s why you don’t go throwing out the old couch with the rot-gut innards—which some vermin time-share with the roaches—in the garage. Because it is the foundation for the boxes of old *Vogue* magazines your mother hasn’t read since the 1970s, around the same time she collected all that bulk polyester. Some day you’ll need a place to keep your boxes of *Sassy* magazines, and where would you put them if that couch wasn’t somehow glued to the floor, Miss Jenga Expert?

Stacking is very important. I don’t want to beat you over the head with this point like I could, with a golf club Mom uses to hit the garage ceiling to tell certain animals to shut the hell up while infesting the house up there. But when you run out of places to put things, you have to put some stuff away in boxes. Baskets work well too. You don’t have to give things away. You never have to give away anything. Just stack it.

Much like life, if you start out with a bad foundation, your stacks of precious things will fall over and be ruined. Look what happened to the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Sure they fixed it a little, but we don’t have that fancy-shmancy Italian technology available at the house on Missouri Avenue. Where my mom has dedicated her life to building a nest of used furniture and piling it high with dead flowers, trunks of cloth diapers, baskets of baskets, lamp shades still in plastic, and mounds of old pictures of relatives on land we no longer own—with nothing to show for it but more baskets and some exotic potted plants. Magazines: Mom’s got piles of *Utne Reader*, *Marie Claire*, *Martha Stewart*, *Southern Living*, and surprisingly *Yoga Life*. She’s got a yoga DVD and a yoga mat, both stacked on the television along with the DVD player that’s never been hooked up. On one bookshelf, a rusty coronet and a Chia Pet bookend classic literature. On another, Easter Bunny, Dracula, and Little Drummer Boy point candles toward each other like

light sabers. Seashell pictures from Big Lots with orange discount price stickers still on the front never make it to the wall. Dust bunnies hop around at your feet because they want your attention. They want to tell you a secret. *We're all going a little crazy here at the house on Missouri Avenue. Shhhhh.*

When an old relative dies, pack rats take in all they can from the person's home as if they're adopting abandoned children. It's their duty. It's horrible. All of those precious belongings are like children. Sometimes, when it involves good furniture such as a used blue Lazy Boy, possessions are more important than children.

"I need them. I'm not getting rid of them," Mom says of her inherited things. Pack-ratting is her way of grieving, her way of wallowing in the dirty quilts of the past. They are very worn, dirty, buggy quilts with holes that let in the cold, and still she wants them all.

My grandma died in November of 2003. I wasn't there at her bedside like Mom was. I wasn't even in Florida. I was at my new home in North Carolina, about to drive to see this band called Crooked Fingers, when Mom called to tell me. I was expecting it. Grandma had been moving in circles from her bed to the nursing-home bed to the hospital bed with tangles of white cords coming out of her like tiny waterslides, as if maybe her brain tumor would come shooting down a tube one day screaming *yeehaw*. But the brain tumor was large and round like a golf ball and wouldn't budge. I never thought a brain tumor could be more stubborn than our sweet matriarch.

"It was peaceful," Mom told me. "I got to say goodbye to her, but we can't find Susie. We tried to call her and tell her it was Mommy's time, but we don't know where she is," Mom said.

"Oh," I said. What could I say about Aunt Susie? Maybe you should have called the one bar they got up in Dixie County instead.

"Go ahead to your concert," Mom told me. "Go be with your friends, and then we'll get you a flight tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay," I said. Except I didn't have many friends in my new town, and at the show the music was slow and quiet and the people all around drunk and loud. I couldn't hear the vocals at all. It was more difficult than listening to a twice-removed cousin's husband talk about gator hunting while your grandma sang along to "Winter Wonderland" at Christmas dinner. Except she always sang, "Walking 'Round in Women's Underpants."

When Grandma died, unexplainable things happened. My cat jumped out the second-story window. My ovaries cramped so bad doctors thought I had appendicitis. Uncle Jack strangled Aunt Susie in Grandma's kitchen while I ate a piece of fudge. Forget I said that. It had more to do with Goldschlager and Susie's third husband, Larry Brush, than with my Grandma's death. The hair ribbons Grandma draped over her bedroom door seemed so young and strange then, as if they belonged on the door of some little girl's bedroom. Then they vanished. Everything in her house vanished. Plants in the backyard uprooted and hitched rides down Dixie Highway. There was nothing left of her house. Storage units and a parking lot are what the land became.

The house on Missouri Avenue suddenly looked different. The terrazzo disappeared altogether, and the floor was made of cardboard that caved under footsteps. In parts, the

floor was made of old fabric, flour sacks, serving plates, and starched white linens. My bedroom disappeared beneath a sea of unhung pictures that stared at walls of my old surfer posters in envy. Somewhere on the front porch a pumpkin rotted. Somewhere a fake frog went ribbit-ribbit beneath the box crushing him. Mom's boyfriend, John, found a hole in the back bedroom, crawled into it, and found his bipolar disorder. Somewhere in this new inheritance, my mom sat and wept and blew her nose into Grandma's embroidered hankie.

For almost two years, my sister and I have avoided the house on Missouri Avenue. It's easy when you live in New Orleans or Wilmington. The rule is that we do Christmas at Mom's, but every other holiday is for the taking. We had Thanksgiving at my place this year. Then Molly tried to cop out of Christmas because of all the refugee travel she did when Hurricane Katrina hit. That's another story. She'd finally returned to the Crescent City and didn't want to leave.

"Oh no, you don't," I told Molly on the phone. "You get your ass to Florida. We're having an intervention."

Sounds fun, right? Well, Molly showed up anyways.

"We're gonna help you get rid of some stuff," was how we put it to Mom.

She went along with it. She was happy to hear it.

"Oh, wonderful," she even said when she saw us tip-toeing around boxes of fabric and hunchbacked furniture in my old room. "Yeah, if we get this room cleaned up, I can do my yoga in here. And I'm hosting a Questers meeting next week, so I can move some stuff from the living room in here if we get it cleaned up."

I said, "You're having the meeting here? You're on crack. That living room is a nightmare."

"No it's not. It'll be fine. I just have to take the Christmas tree down."

In my life, the Christmas tree has never come down before Valentine's Day so that we can thoroughly express our love for the tree each year. Dear dead, dead tree, be mine.

Molly and I buzzed around the bedroom. We cleaned out my old desk and closet. We had to work fast in the morning to get things thrown out while Mom busied herself with showering and getting dressed. No time to fawn over A+ algebra tests of the past. To run our hands over cotton-ball artwork or taste what red ink on paper is like. We threw folders, pencils, papers, 1980s schoolwork into white garbage bags until the bags threatened to bottom out and spread their contents across the floor.

"*Macht schnell*," we cried. "Get thee to a garbage can." If the bag bottomed out, one could interpret it as a sign that god wanted those old papers to stay in the house forever. And Mom was lingering nearby waiting for her chance to keep things.

We got in the closet, actually got in there. Nobody had been in there for a decade, what with the filing cabinet, basket of rugs, and dresser-turned-television-stand blocking it. Really anything can work as a television stand.

You'd think this closet was the long lost gateway to hell or worse, say, 1990. There, in flimsy boxes, we found a white leather purse, a faux gator-skin fanny pack, and various small baskets of beads and random Barbie heads, which we used to throw into the ceiling

fan. It was our first ceiling fan and it was amazing. Today, you shouldn't run the ceiling fan unless you want to know the speed it takes for the blades to snap off against mounds of boxes.

We piled crappy things in bags and put them outside the door. That's when Mom came to inspect the contents of these bags.

"You're not getting rid of this," she whined. "You can't get rid of this." Or this. Or this, this, this.

My dear mother with her orange kimono bathrobe and her head wrapped in a towel as if she were a living soft-serve ice cream cone. She looked at us like we were Grinches taking away her Hoo hash.

"You're not giving this stuff away," she told us, emptying the bags of stuff and, when that didn't work, yelling at us like we were adolescent turds again, not that we were so far from that at twenty-four and twenty-eight years old. Sweet Jesus, I thought. I hope she doesn't find out I just threw my math tests away.

"Why do you want to get rid of these plastic containers that fit inside your Caboodle?" She yelled at me, "You still have that Caboodle, don't you?"

"Yes," I mumbled.

"What?"

"Yes. I still have my Caboodle."

"Mom," Molly said. "Why don't you go blow dry your hair and let us do this?"

"Fine."

Hi, I'm fourteen again. I feel the braces cutting the flesh of my mouth into streamers. Hey, there's a karaoke machine underneath this mound of shoes. Let's party.

Then at the bottom of another box in the closet, there are tiny rubber bands. We used these for Barbie hair ties. We were supposed to use them to harness our twisted metal-covered teeth in place. Grades seven through twelve were spent in constant fear of opening my mouth wide enough for these rubber bands to break and snap against the roof of my mouth. Which means I kept my mouth closed tight while speaking too. I tried for years to convince schoolmates it was an Australian accent and not just me being a loser with rubber bands that could kill us all. Or even worse, fly out of my mouth and injure the face of Kyle Ulrichson, the hottest surfer known to mankind, or at least to geometry class. If I'd been called on to recite the Pythagorean Theorem in front of my peers, someone would have lost a blimey eye.

It took many years for my teeth to straighten up because they were so hideously twisted and small. Before I had braces, my teeth overlapped each other in front. They stacked on top of one another because every part of me was made to work like a pack rat.

I've fought off my body's urge to turn pack rat. To stack. To collect things. Like cysts—my ovaries keep wanting to collect those. I'll toss ovaries into the ceiling fan like ugly Barbie heads. Or I could send them to the collection agency that says they're worth thousands of dollars. I'll pull out these teeth if they try to stack again. These cursed teeth, white-trash teeth, some dangling today like sharp stalactites in the dank cave of my mouth. I should be thankful. I should be kneeling at the Christmas tree thanking the sweet lord for braces and a neon-yellow retainer with a frog sticker in it, though along with Mom's graduate classes my braces happen to be on a fifty-year payment plan.

Pack-rattling is something that is genetic but also contagious. Most people are born with it in them. There's no way to avoid packrattling once you're born into a nest of the wolfish beasts and their scent is all over you. Not even killing yourself or being killed will help, because hell and heaven are stacked with pack rats and clouds are just dust bunnies that go on forever.

I'll tell you a secret: I have the special ability to find porcelain squirrels wherever I go. Which leads to collecting them, which leads to buying a small squirrel house or two for them to live in, which leads to people, like your friends, thinking you're crazy. Well, I do have a squirrel flag hanging up with the phrase *Welcome to the Nut House* scrawled across it.

If you are not a pack rat, you are probably the owner of some five hundred pairs of shoes, including a pair of Birkenstocks you might wear with socks in the winter, so I don't want to hear it. Or, like my mom, perhaps you have an old pair of ballet slippers you keep in the garage, and sometimes you go out there and take them out of their box and rub the old satin of them, feel the days of your youth slip beneath your fingers like a long pink ribbon, so soft that you want to hold onto it forever.

When I was in sixth grade, my feet fit in Mom's slippers. Her feet were that small in college. Twiggy bird feet. I crammed my clumsy feet into the slippers and tried to go up on my toes as if I were meant to star in *Swan Lake*. I couldn't do it. It hurt so much. I couldn't take half the pain. I put the shoes away and pretended I'd never seen them. My toes bruised and I wore socks so Mom wouldn't see. She wanted her old things around, but she never wanted you to touch them.

"Do I go mess with all your things?" she'd ask me when she caught me dressed in her old purple hotpants or a velvet minidress, when I had her old photo albums or her old records out. She was a fashion designer for Frayne in the seventies and had, stuffed in drawers and closets, various artifacts of a previous hipper life. I couldn't resist any of it.

But now she's digging around in all her mom's old things. Maybe things her mom wouldn't even want her to touch.

"What are you doing with all Grandma's things like this?" I ask her during a low point in our intervention. "What do you want with all of this?"

This is how to upset your mom. This is worse than the time you all tried to play that *South Park* movie on Christmas Eve.

"You have a severe problem," Molly tells her.

"No. I. Don't," she says and does her lip pinch like a asshole scowl. "I just can't let go of all this. I'm not ready."

"Mom, we're just trying to help."

"Shut up. I don't need help. Everyone acts like I'm crazy, and I'm not. I know I have a lot of shit, but so what? It's my life. It's not some joke, so stop laughing."

"I'm sorry," I say. I can't help but laugh. I'm standing in an empty box because it is the only place left for me to stand.

"Just close that closet back up and stop trying to go through everything. It's not helping," she says. She screams. She cries. She walks across boxes just to lie down on her childhood bed.

Molly and I shut the closet and sit in the living room, where the Christmas tree explodes from the corner and blocks half the television. On the Weather Channel, I can detect five days of the ten-day forecast. Nice Florida weather. Blue skies the color of Lazy Boys.

“Hey, Mom. Why don’t we get out of the house? The weather’s great.”

An hour later she emerges from her room.

“That’s a great idea,” she says. “Let me throw on some clothes, and we can go shopping in Tampa. Did I tell you I won a gift certificate to Pier 1 at the Quester’s meeting last week?”

My grandma gave me a squirrel salt and pepper shaker when I was in high school. I wish I could show her my collection today. To let her touch all the pieces and laugh at some and hear her say, *Ohhh, he’s a handsome squirrel, isn’t he, dolly?* She always called me dolly.

I forgot a squirrel picture at Mom’s house after the Christmas of failed intervention, and she has yet to send it to me. I know she just stacked it on the dining table and walks by it every day. It is black and shiny, this squirrel picture. It’s made of resin and painted wood, so you can see your reflection in it. She’s looking at my squirrel every day and seeing herself in it. I’ll never get it back.

Molly and I failed. We just failed terribly like our family does at most things in life. How can you have any type of intervention with a woman who counts screaming as a hobby? We couldn’t even touch Grandma’s things to move them out of the way to get to our things without Mom’s face lighting up like a hot plate and shaking like a bobble-head Chihuahua. “Fine,” we went around saying. “We won’t touch anything. Just keep everything.”

“If it makes you happy,” I sang like a Sheryl Crow know-it-all, “It can’t be that bad. If it makes you happy, why the hell are you so sad?”

“If you get that song stuck in my head, I will kill you with your old nail clippers,” Molly told me. But the clippers were rusted together.

Surprise, Mom let us throw away the old bottle of Vanilla Fields perfume that had been rotting in a box in my closet since 1992. In middle school, I bathed in this vanilla scent, which must have killed off all the bed bugs and mites that harvested in my old mattress passed down from some ancient ancestor. I got scabies when I was in sixth grade, but nobody knew. Mom and Molly got them too. Scabies spread like pack-ratting through our house, infesting green carpet, white lace curtains, and *Star Wars* sheets on our bunk bed. Mom was ashamed and cried. Molly laughed to her friends on the phone and said, “I knew we were white trash,” then listened to Pearl Jam and cried. I just itched. I scratched at scabies with my fingers, with my Barbies, with my hairbrush behind my knees. The walls of the house weren’t rough enough for my back. I thought about heating the curling iron and burning out my armpits.

Not even this girl Samantha Day who rode my bus and played French horn with me in band knew I had scabies, because I wore more turtlenecks than an English teacher. At least my scabies went away. We washed everything in the house and stayed with Grandma.

Samantha Day got scabies in seventh grade and they lasted a whole year. I wasn't her friend. One day she told me, "You've turned into such a good horn player." She said this to sit next to me on the bus. She wanted me to give her compliments, but I didn't. She wore halter tops and high-heeled sandals.

When the bus drove past my house on Dixie Highway, because we looped past it twice before I got dropped off, naturally Samantha Day said, "That's your house?"

She knew it was. Just like I knew she didn't live in a house at all.

"Yeah," I said.

"That's cool you guys have a fireplace."

"What?"

"Isn't that a chimney coming out the roof?"

"Oh yeah. We got a nice fireplace," I lied. That chimney was really some vent for the old brown Kerosene heater that we never used except for stacking phone books on. If we used it, Mom swore, we'd burn the house down, so when it got cold we'd turn on several long brown space heaters from our collection and stand in front of them. The metal coils burned the hair off your legs if you stood too close.

"That's cool you got a fireplace," Samantha Day said and smiled. It wasn't comfortable to sit in a seat with two French horns and a girl who smelled like body odor, the type that doesn't belong to an eleven-year-old girl, the type that only rubs off on you if cheap men hug on you all the time.

"It's pretty useless," I said. "It doesn't get cold enough to use the fireplace, you know."

"Do you ever climb up inside it? I've heard about climbing up in one."

"No," I said. "There's bats in there."

"Bats?"

"Yes. A lot of bats," I said as she scratched at her arm. I'd heard bats in my grandma's chimney before she smoked them out into the daylight and they showered the sky like flapping tar.

I didn't say anything about Samantha Day's scabies. I didn't say, "Once I had scabies too, girl." Her scabies may have lasted longer than a year, but she stopped catching the bus and stopped going to school. She lived in the trailer park behind the Checkers where Molly later worked. Every day she got off the bus and lugged her French horn case down the highway toward home, strutting like a teen prostitute with a half-melted suitcase. Then one day she just disappeared. Maybe she went somewhere. Maybe she carried that horn to Vegas or New York or Tijuana. Maybe she carried that horn until her arm felt numb, and it must have been the best feeling. Do you know how that is, to not be itchy any more?

Today Mom has bites on her body. They get worse every time I see her. First she blamed it on Aunt Susie and the strange things skin does because of Larry Brush Third Husband. Then she blamed it on camping and then on the house. Now, she just curses her arms and legs and smears them with clear nail polish.

"You know that doesn't work, right?" I tell her.

"Well, it seems to be working." She shows me how the strange bite-rash on her arm has separated into colonies since she's used the nail polish.

"Perhaps they're getting ready to wage war on each other," I tell her.

“Stop being a smartass,” she says.

She’s always said life is not a sitcom, but here she is with bedbugs and not enough room to move a mattress in or out the door, any door. I can’t help but want us to be a primetime show. All they’d have to do is cast Barbara Streisand as Mom, Angelina Jolie as myself, and Lindsey Lohan as Molly but only if Lohan lost a few more pounds and got a huge smooshed-fairy tattoo on her ass so it looks like she sat on it. Instead of the Rat Pack, we can be the Pack Rat. One large mangy rodent. Nobody would mess with us.

“You need to get rid of that bed and get a new one,” Molly says. “And by getting a new one, I don’t mean one of the five mattresses you have in the garage either.”

“I don’t tell you what you need to get rid of,” Mom says as if the queen of telling you what to do has stepped down from her throne.

“Yeah freaking right,” we say.

She doesn’t continue this argument.

But she says, “I can use these,” about everything in the house. It’s like my dad’s dad told him on my parents’ wedding day: why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?

The things Mom could not part with: a Dudley Doorright mini lunch pail that came with fake M&Ms candy in it as a 1997 stocking stuffer; a manatee sweatshirt that was never cool, not even in 1991, the year all middle-schoolers said, “Fuck you, whales,” and moved on to saving new sea creatures; a *Little Mermaid* sleeping bag (she was my favorite cartoon, and alas, she too was a pack rat who wanted you to look at her stuff. Isn’t it neat—wouldn’t you think her collection’s complete?); Molly’s pink prom dress, size six with half the sequins missing from lord knows what type of dance action, which stays in the closet; and the empty Wilson Phillips cassette holder Mom wants to hold on (for one more day) to, in case she ever finds the actual tape.

“Are you really that attached to Carnie Wilson?” I ask her, though she doesn’t hear. She’s too busy going through a bag of my old track T-shirts yelling at me to keep them.

“Just give them to Goodwill already,” I say, because I want to see my precious things spread to people like a disease. I want to see a mohawked hipster in tight jeans and a Gulf track shirt with KNAPP on the back picking through the racks at a thrift store with his iPod playing Nick Cave and the Badseeds. One day, I want to drive down Dixie Highway and see a young girl wearing a Gulf High Cross Country dress with scabbed knees and a stick in her hand. *Hey, Knapp*, her mom might yell from the back porch of their house, which looks pink every evening because the sun sets that violently on the Gulf. *Get your butt in here. Yeah, you better start running.*