

“Belongings” by Jennifer Lang

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Finder's keepers, loser's weepers

“Mommy, can I keep this?” asks six-year-old Simone. “Please.” She’s holding a scrap of apple-green wrapping paper with irregular-shaped red hearts suspended in air. It was left over from wrapping a present for her friend’s birthday party.

“What for?” I was just about to crumple it up into a ball and toss it in the trash. “It’s garbage.”

“But I like it,” she says. She looks at me with her big eyes, turning the corners of her mouth down in a pretend pout. “I could use it for a blanket for my doll or for a collage.” She knows she’s saying the right thing. I’m all for imagination and artistic expression. But her need-to-save, have-to-keep-it-all behavior makes me crazy.

Of my three children, Simone is the only one with these keep-a-holic tendencies. If it’s not remnants of wrapping paper, it’s a worn-out shoebox, a bracelet missing half its beads, or an empty candy wrapper. Recently, we received a gift box filled with gourmet food. Before I had even finished removing all the contents, Simone was at my side.

“Can I have the box? I could use it for my sticker collection.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “Give it up. You’re going to have to let go,” I wanted to say. Instead, I repeated that vague, noncommittal phrase that, at her age, still seems to satisfy her: “We’ll see, Simone, we’ll see.”

To have and to cherish

Saving certain things doesn’t bother me. I get a thrill from taking pictures, keeping our photo albums up to date as each season passes. I love writing the names and dates on the backs of the pictures, recalling the exact moment the camera clicked, then slipping them into their shiny plastic sleeves to protect them from fingerprints. And in this world of electronic communication, I am overjoyed by the occasional handwritten birthday cards and postcards from friends and family. The words on paper are a testament to their thoughtfulness and good manners. And I will certainly keep most of the kids’ artwork and gifts they have made for us.

It’s everything else that irks me: mass-market invitations to birthday parties, perfunctory thank you notes, pamphlets from places we’ve visited. It’s all the things Simone wants to save; it’s all the things my mom made me keep for the first half of my life. But, now that I’m the adult, a parent, I wonder why. Who needs proof you were somewhere if you know you were there? I despise clutter and piles of papers and any object that has the potential to attract dust. I enjoy art on the walls, not knickknacks on the shelves. It’s a system, a way of being, that works for me.

When my kids come home from school with worksheets with their teachers’ “Good job!” scrawled across the top or stickers, I acknowledge them and then immediately put them by the back door for the recycling bin. As soon as the mail arrives, I sit out on my front stoop and sort it into piles—mine, my husband’s, my children’s, recycling. Whatever falls into the latter, I take directly to the bin without passing by the kitchen counter, where hard-to-classify papers can pile up. When people first walk into my house they marvel at the open space, the sparsely decorated living room, the absence of random objects. “Where’s all your clutter?” they often say.

Sometimes I let go of things too fast. At a luncheon for my first cousin’s fortieth birthday recently, I was overcome by my shortcoming. One by one, the women stood to recite a poem or make a toast.

“Were we supposed to prepare something?” I asked the guest to my left.

“It said on the invitation you could bring something to read aloud if you wanted,” she said, fiddling with her own paper in her hands. My face flushed, realizing my error. Shortly after receiving and replying to the invitation a month earlier, I had marked it on my calendar and chucked the hardcopy. It wasn’t a first for me and knowing myself well, it probably won’t be the last.

What if one day I want to write a memoir and don't have the material to back it up or to help fill in the holes? I'm not sure what will happen if I want to give my children their great grandmother's china, which has been misplaced during our multiple moves. Having certain possessions might not have mattered to me, but it could to them. The to-save-or-not-to-save debate is ongoing in my head, one I am sure to wrestle with for years to come as my children grow up, leave home, and make their lives elsewhere, or as we pack up to move to a different house in another city or country.

The gene pool

My fear is that Simone will become a *bona fide* pack rat. Sometimes I imagine her all grown up living in a house crammed with curbside throw-aways like lava lamps and end tables, mountains of magazines and reams of cocktail napkins with crazy and colorful prints (her most recent collection). She will be so bogged down by her stuff that she'll beg us to store her childhood possessions because she'll never have enough space to accommodate everything she continues to collect. Moving will be out of the question and even traveling will be tough. Packing light is difficult for Simone.

When I was a kid, my mom made me save everything or just did it for me. By the time I reached college, I had throngs of boxes filled with childhood treasures collecting dust in the attic—alongside some of hers. I've often wondered why my mom is a saver extraordinaire. Being a post-Depression baby who grew up without excess, perhaps surrounding herself with things makes her feel richer. Or, because she left home at the age of eighteen, saving things helps validate who she is and the life she's created. But she says my ideas are silly, so we've agreed to disagree.

When my parents decided to move while I was away at college, I was called home to help pack. I unearthed every report card from kindergarten through twelfth grade, every birthday, Hanukkah and Valentine's Day card ever given to me, every theater program, museum ticket stub and book report.

Faced with the detritus of my life, I took the easy way out: I threw away a little but kept the bulk. I moved it to their new house and shoved it in the attic.

The second time around, however, was different.

Fifteen years later, married and a mother of three, I was forced to take ownership of my past. "Dad says all your boxes in the attic are a fire hazard," my mom announced during a visit one day. I looked at her to make sure I'd heard correctly. Downsizing wasn't on their to-do list, but I knew they had accumulated a lot since moving into their house. Some by choice, some not. Following the death of four family members, my parents' attic had become home to their worldly goods—Grandma Bea's miniature box collection, Baba's hats, Zaida's books, and Uncle Sid's artifacts from traveling around the world. "You better go through your stuff soon, because we're tripping over it every time we go up there," she said with a hint of anger.

For some reason, I was reluctant. It wasn't just laziness. For the first time in my life, I was forced to think about those things that had been kept out of sight and out of mind for decades. It was easy to live without them because I didn't have to think about them. In my parents' attic, they were safe.

Months passed after my mom's first request to remove my things from their attic. When she brought it up a second time, I knew she was serious. So, one Saturday, I hauled a box of heavy-duty black trash bags and a stack of empty cardboard boxes upstairs. Bit by bit, box by box, I began sorting my life. I made piles—one for garbage, one for give-away and one for me. To keep.

At first glance, it was relatively pain-free to decide what went where. The three "like" letters from my fifth-grade boyfriend Craig Roberts were keepers, the hundreds of holiday cards with the standard Hallmark prose and someone's name in his or her best cursive were not. I tossed all the ticket stubs I could find, but re-read every aerogramme my hometown honey sent while I was studying in France during college. I admit the letters from the childhood friends whom I had known and kept in touch with for years meant more to me than I realized. They took me back in time, not only because they recalled to memory what was going on in our lives then, but also because so few people actually sit down and hand write letters today. So again, I made piles, stacking correspondence by friend and wrapping a rubber band around each.

By the day's end, there were three mid-sized boxes. One contained only letters. One had my third-grade autobiography, my sixth-grade geography report on Israel, my report cards and yearbooks. And the last had my Master's thesis, as well as an aborted book proposal for a memoir about my brother and me, and my proudest pieces of work from my first two jobs in Paris and Israel. These are the things I will take with me wherever I live.

Learning curve

Six months after my parents moved across town, I took a college course on Buddhism. I remember being struck by one of the basic tenets of the religion: detachment, defined as renunciation, the determination to be free from suffering. The idea was that clinging very strongly to anything or anyone creates a dependency; if you lose that thing or person, you'll be miserable. Not only will you suffer, but you also won't be free. Being detached doesn't mean you can't enjoy or desire anything or anyone. It simply means: "If I get the house or the job I want, great. If I don't, it's not the end of the world."

Given the context of my life at that time, the idea of detachment made sense. I had already said goodbye to the home where I spent my entire childhood, not knowing if I would ever live in my parents' new one. And soon, I would be packing to spend a year in Paris. I had no choice but to detach myself from clinging to the people and the things I loved and would leave. If I wanted to take advantage of the adventure and enjoy the unknown ahead of me, I had to let go, to be strong.

Throughout the past twenty years, I have moved halfway around the world and back again—first alone, then with a spouse, and finally with children. I have allowed myself to develop close bonds to both the people and the surroundings, yet at the same time, I have learned how to let go so that, once settled in a new place, I don't waste my time looking back and pining for the past.

But just because this approach works for me doesn't mean it works for the rest of my family. I see Simone struggling. And I need to figure out a way to let her hold on—even if my gut response is to make her let go.

Remains

All three of my children each have a large, plastic, personal Target-bought tub for their schoolwork, artwork, certificates from swimming, gymnastics, ice skating. Simone clings harder to the objects and pieces of paper than the older two. I try to let her keep things she feels she needs—for whatever reason. I accept that I might not be able to understand why.

Every June, after school ends, they love sifting through their tubs. It's like therapy. They check in with their past, revisit their accomplishments, see how much they've grown and learned. And, like me, they enjoy the pile-making part, too: one to keep, one to discard.

"Oh, this is so ugly. I'm getting rid of it," says the one in the middle. The one who rolls her eyes at me when Simone asks if she can keep a kids' clothing catalogue that came in the mail or some unidentifiable found object. The floor of the bedroom is littered with colorful, glittery works of art.

"No way," I say, sitting nearby to oversee. In an effort to pass down what I have learned—that memories are often triggered by objects—I add: "That was your first self-portrait you drew in preschool. I love that and one day when you get older and think back you might, too." I want to make sure they understand the holiday cards they've made for each other over the years or the long-term assignments they slaved over are part of the permanent collection.

I don't want any of us to look back and wonder.

"Belongings" first appeared in The Griffin.

A Pushcart Prize nominee, **Jennifer Lang** has been published in *Under the Sun*, *Assay*, *Ascent*, *The Coachella Review*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, and *Dumped: Stories of Women Unfriending Women*, among others. "The Fabric of Peace" was a finalist for the *Crab Orchard Review's* 2017 Literary Contest. Currently, she serves as CNF Editor for *The Flexible Persona* literary magazine. Since receiving a MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts last summer, Jennifer has been obsessing over every word in her first memoir. Find Jennifer's writing [on her website here](#) and follow her [on Facebook](#).

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