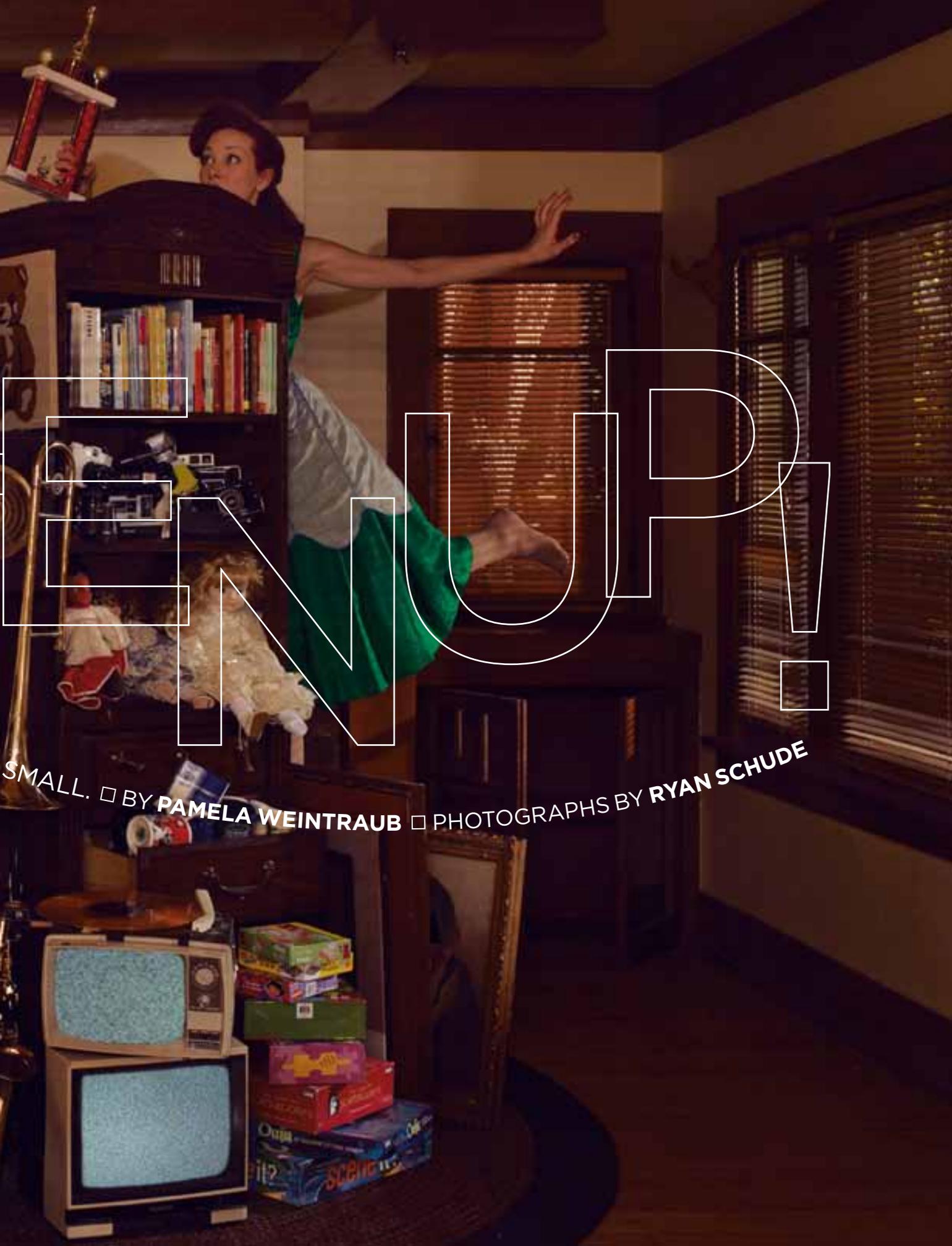


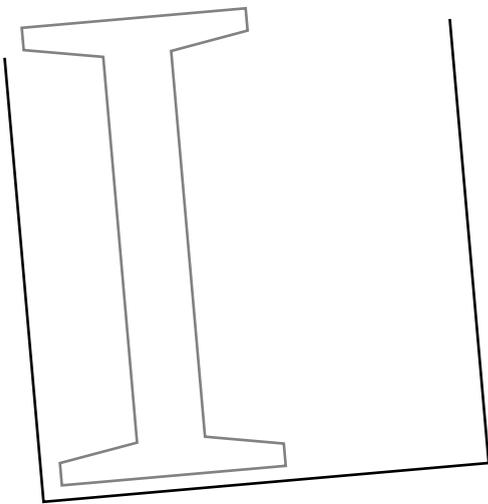
A photograph of a cluttered room, likely a living area, with warm lighting. In the foreground, there are stacks of vinyl records, a guitar, and a small basket of lemons. In the background, a lamp with a textured shade sits on a dark wooden table. To the right, a television set is visible on a shelf, surrounded by various figurines and decorative items. A window with blinds is visible in the center background.

# LIGHT

HOW I DISCOVERED THE POWER OF DIVESTMENT AND LIVING



SMALL. □ BY **PAMELA WEINTRAUB** □ PHOTOGRAPHS BY **RYAN SCHUDE**



## documented my life by collecting things—letters from friends and old boyfriends along with a series of

notebook diaries, but also every check and credit card statement since the '80s and every ratty, dog-eared pad from every interview I ever did. I saved vinyl LPs and political buttons from high school; the patched, embroidered jeans with the sexy knee holes from college; my kids' artwork from every epoch; and the mugs, snow globes, and other kitsch picked up on rambling family trips to places like Tijuana and Niagara Falls.

I wasn't a hoarder—I didn't save old newspapers, junk mail, or plastic bags. Instead, my collection was personal, a kind of journaling through stuff later consigned to dark closet corners and the spaces between socks in dresser drawers. Inhabiting a series of ever-larger apartments and eventually a house with an attic that spanned its length, my collection grew.

After selling that house, my husband and I moved to Brooklyn, to a warren of rooms so cramped that our possessions obscured the windows and blocked our escape out the door. We could have put things in storage, but scanning a wall of boxes from a gorge that was really the floor, I knew I had gone too far. In the age of iPad and Kindle, we owned thousands of printed books, many of them review copy freebies from my work in publishing. My children, now young adults, had also left a trail: hundreds of limbless action figures, musty stuffed animals, jerseys emblazoned with teams named after

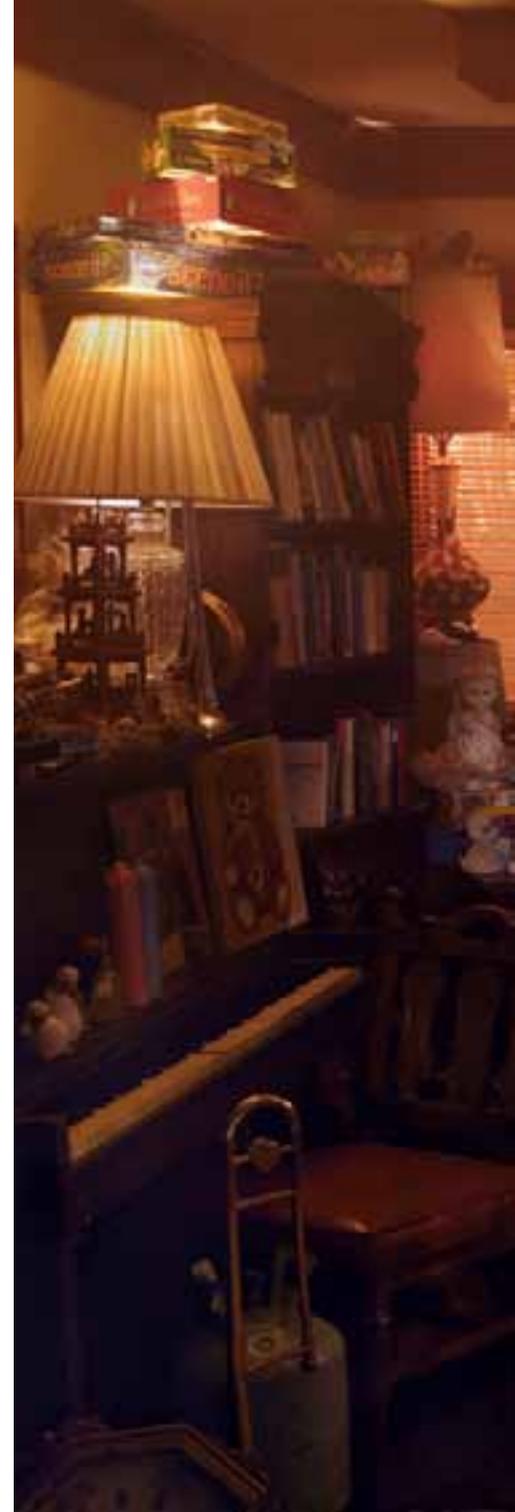
pizza parlors and hardware stores—and the unyielding instruction that we maintain these possessions in our home (not theirs) till the end of time.

I had to take drastic action, and I wasn't alone. With foreclosed McMansions blighting the suburbs and gas-guzzling SUVs too costly to drive, with factories closing and jobs in free fall, survival meant flexibility and leaving excess behind. Just a decade before, Americans had fueled a frenzy of acquisition, pumping up shares in the dot-com bubble and collecting ski condos in Vail. The drive to acquire was so over-the-top that the self-storage phenomenon had soared to new heights, with one in ten families renting lockers for the overflow.

But in sync with the ailing economy, an ethic of sustainability has eclipsed the culture of "more." Look no further than the demand for tiny dwellings or the soaring readership of the magazine *Real Simple* to see the new normal. We are so grossed out by the concept of acquisition that a reality show called *Hoarders*, part intervention, part rolling in muck, tops the ratings. In step with the zeitgeist and in hopes of restoring order, I too aimed for the Spartan aesthetic. In my effort to divest, I sought a design miracle for my apartment, a shot of clarity for my brain, and an antidote to stress caused by stuff.

### NATURAL BORN ACQUIRERS

AMONG THOSE WITH a tendency to over-



collect, compulsive hoarders are the most extreme. These are the folks with a psychiatric disorder, who accumulate objects most of us see as useless, until the clutter gets so severe it prevents them from using their homes and isolates them from friends, creating chaos in their lives.

Hoarders arrive at an impasse through many routes, says David Tolin, director of the anxiety disorders center at the Insti-



tute of Living in Hartford, Connecticut, and an adjunct associate professor of psychiatry at Yale. Some don't want to be wasteful; if there is any conceivable use for an object, no matter how remote, they won't give it up. Yet others see possessions as personal friends.

Tolin says the rate of the disorder in the United States approaches 5 percent; a smaller group has symptoms that are

especially severe. Many more are what Kelly Haws, a marketing professor at Texas A&M, calls pack rats: High-functioning and environmentally concerned, these are the frugal among us who would rather store that old sofa in the attic, lest the wood come in handy, than take it out to the curb. The fact is, we are all on the spectrum. The human urge to acquire is so deeply ingrained that even when we

aren't diagnosable, we can be overrun.

For the vast expanse of human history, we faced deprivation. Our brains evolved to maximize acquisition in a time when food and shelter were sparse. Today we inhabit a different world: Despite the sluggish economy, food remains plentiful and most of us have homes—but our brains have not caught up. "If you dump all the food in the goldfish bowl, the

goldfish will eat itself to death. We are the same way with possessions,” argues James Burroughs, an expert in consumer behavior at the University of Virginia. “We aren’t good at turning that off.”

This deep-seated bent results in counterintuitive, sometimes illogical, relationships to stuff. It was University of Chicago economist Richard Thaler who demonstrated the endowment effect—the phenomenon in which just owning something causes you to overestimate its worth. When Thaler gave half his experimental subjects mugs and the other

half pens, no one wanted to trade—even though the rate of trade, by chance alone, should have been 50 percent. Yet other researchers extended the endowment effect to money, showing that sports fans would spend far more for a ticket bought with a credit card than one bought with cash; parting with paper bills caused true emotional pain.

“If you own the Picasso, you place more value on it than the market allows,” says Stanford psychologist Brian Knutson, who has used fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) to track

these effects in the brain. In Knutson’s experiment, subjects could either buy or sell desirable products, like an iPod Shuffle, while being scanned. Regardless of whether they were buying or selling, when they saw something they liked, activity increased in the nucleus accumbens, an area near the base of the brain implicated in anticipation of reward, including money, food, and sex. However, when subjects thought about selling valued possessions, greater activation was also observed in the anterior insula, a brain region implicated in antici-



pating punishment, from social rejection to electric shock. “People who showed more activity in the insula when asked to sell were more vulnerable to the endowment effect,” Knutson says.

But everything is relative. The more an object reflects our self-worth, the more its loss hurts, says Rosellina Ferraro, an assistant professor at the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland and an expert on unconscious consumer choice. Those who value relationships most feel saddest at the loss of possessions that reflect

relationships, such as gifts from friends. The career-driven person values possessions like diplomas and awards; the spiritual person, symbols of faith. “Our stuff is an extension of who we are,” says Ferraro. The more an object symbolizes domains that give us self-esteem—from work to parenting to religion—the more we grieve its loss. “The strong reactions we have to the loss of things such as baby teeth or a dingy table cloth may seem difficult to understand, but we don’t grieve for every possession—just those that are linked to our sense of self.”

Sometimes the meaning is sacred—for instance, the value we place on a wedding ring far exceeds its cost. People often expect to get much more for their house than the market will bear. But sacred meaning is idiosyncratic, varying from person to person and object to object

WAS THIS MUG WITH THE TEDDY BEAR STUFFED INSIDE TRULY IMPORTANT? DID I TREASURE THE MEMORY EVOKED?

throughout life. I’ve kept the “hippy” garb I wore in high school, a time when hope was enormous and possibility vast. Tossing such garments would feel like “a visible admission that that chapter of life is past,” Burroughs explains.

Other times we invest objects with the essences of people who have owned or touched them, says Matthew Hutson, author of *The 7 Laws of Magical Thinking*. Perhaps that explains the weirdly distorted, egg-shaped figurines I keep in bold display on a shelf; cooked in a kiln in the ’70s by my old college roommate, these early art efforts bring back her soft lilting voice and those soul-searching late night talks. Counterintuitively, the tendency to imbue such possessions with the spirit of an object’s creator or owner may be a twist on our fear of disease. “It

is a form of magical thinking that may have evolved after our ancestors learned to track biological contagion,” Hutson explains. Though fear of a distinctly unwanted contamination is at the root of this belief, it manifests as a “positive” contamination in objects connected to adored individuals.

“Memories fade but mementos stick around, constantly regenerating those memories. If you don’t keep the souvenir from that one vacation, the vacation feels less real, like a vague dream. Were you really there?” Hutson asks. Adds Ferraro, “When something you love is lost, it feels as if a part of you has died.”

## WHEN STUFF BECOMES THE ENEMY

IF THE STUDIES are right, then keeping those embroidered peasant blouses from Israel; my boys’ baby shoes; that complete set of OMNI magazines, where I’d worked for 16 years—all that was healthy, reflecting my values, my passions, and some of the best times of my life. In fact, keepers are often laudable. “People who retain more tend to have more concern for the environment and a flair for creative reuse,” says Kelly Haws.

And if I’d gone too far, my misstep was typically American, less homage to the past than immersion in the daily grind (which bumps housekeeping down on the priority list) in the land of plenty. “Our innate tendency to acquire and collect has become especially problematic in the United States,” where everything is so big, says Burroughs. “There is so much space that we have large dwellings and we put off prioritizing our possessions, sometimes for decades.” That sprawling raised ranch in a northern New York suburb had seduced me with its spaciousness. I filled the attic; I filled the garage. And then I moved. A pack rat in one space can seem like a hoarder in another—and in Brooklyn I’d crossed the line.

Too much stuff can put you in danger, warns Tolin, who says hoarding is linked to respiratory illness and injuries from falls and fire. A study from Melbourne, Australia, found that hoarding accounted for 24 percent of fire fatalities over a period of 10 years.

The emotional toll is great as well.



When stuff overruns the home, the owner can feel isolated, too embarrassed to open the space to relatives or entertain friends. The more things accumulate, the harder it is to get anything done. Clutter and depression seem to go hand in hand.

But even small amounts of clutter can impede our lives. “There is so much psychic energy involved in maintaining our stuff,” Burroughs points out. “Small items need small amounts of care, but it all adds up. A house needs upkeep. A car needs maintenance. You have to dust your books. The more you have, the more energy it takes from your relationships, your religious life, and your career.”

## MY DIVESTMENT

RECLAIMING MY LIFE meant divesting, but it was easier said than done. “Our survival has shifted from a need for growth to one of sustainability,” says Knutson, “but our instincts are rooted in the past. Parting with things can fill us with fear.”

I tried to get past the dread.

The strategy favored by Haws is formalizing divestiture. “We need a process for determining what we should hold onto and what should go, be it once a month or twice a year,” she recommends. An “outgoing” pile can ease the process. Before you throw something out, put it in limbo. Consider its value. Let go when the weighing is done.

Determined to unload, I spent my weekends in formal sorting. The physical labor was notable, but the psychic exhaustion was worse. “When you downsize, it takes psychological effort to evaluate everything you have accumulated over the course of years,” Burroughs says. “As long as we aren’t forced to deal with it, we can put it off until we run out of room.”

Years of deferral had taken a hefty toll. Every item collected over decades needed weighing: Holding it in my hands, breathing in its essence and smelling its smell, reading its pages, churning through memory for its source and its role in my life. Was this mug with the teddy bear stuffed inside truly important? How much meaning did I draw from the Man Ray poster I bought when I moved back to New York? Did I treasure the memory evoked by those faded blue curtains or that Connie Conehead doll?

THE CLEARER  
MY SPACE, THE  
LONGER MY VISTA  
AND THE FASTER,  
MORE LUCID MY  
THOUGHTS.

The easiest send-offs were the books I never planned to read, especially those ancient review copies. I took to the closets and went through my clothes, parting with apparel I hadn’t worn in years—frayed woolen coats and boots from the eighties; stretched-out sweaters with riotous colors and moth-eaten holes; singleton gloves and shoes. There were lamps that no longer worked; mismatched chairs crowding the kitchen; extra tables, blenders, and toasters; an exercise bike we hadn’t used since 2004. I dumped the duplicates: Who needed six separate frying pans, half with the Teflon peeling off, adding toxins to our food? I had 50 file-size boxes of records and statements; I went through every page.

Then there were the unquestioned keepers: family photos; sports trophies; hard-won diplomas and precious professional awards; interview tapes and disks; decades of correspondence with friends. For these I went to Ikea, buying storage boxes, each with a label.

The largest impediment was my family: They wanted to keep it all. “Sometimes you need others to divest things for you,” Haws advised. “That’s why we hire real estate agents to sell our houses.” In Brooklyn, I was the agent of disquieting change and the executioner.

It was all negotiation. Crazy, we had one closet packed with dozens of soccer balls and basketballs, most depleted of air, along with hockey sticks and a full-size Ping-Pong table with paddles and net. “These are memories,” my husband said, arguing for bequeathing an entire closet (one of five) to our kids’ past sports glories, our work clothes be damned. “You can keep three balls,” I said, taking a stand. In a wrenching executive decision, I sent

Twirl-a-Paint down to the street, along with a huge crate of Legos. Over arguments and protests, I dispatched moldy blankets and ripped stuffed animals.

## LIVING SMALL AND LOVING IT

THE MORE I tossed, the lighter I felt. The clearer my space, the longer my vista and the faster, more lucid my thoughts. Without a closet full of sports equipment, I could hang my clothes without crushing them. With hundreds of dusty books gone, I could see the treasured ones I loved. Every stored item eased my mind, but all the tossed clutter set me free.

The need to cut back has been enforced by the economy, says Burroughs, but it has also been a boon. “By thinking more carefully about what we truly need before we buy it, we’ve had the chance to re-center. Things don’t guarantee happiness,” but a spare, clean navigable space might help. “Live your life with the concept of one in, one out,” advises Burroughs. “If I buy a new suit, I give an old one to Goodwill.”

Given our hunter-gatherer roots, materialism will always be with us. That’s why, when it comes to lightening the load, my outgoing pile keeps growing and my work is never done. My latest victory involved Carrom, a tabletop cross between puck hockey and billiards that friends bought in 1992. The picture on the box had two beaming young parents with a child around age 6. The box, unopened since the ’90s, had long since been eclipsed by Sega, PlayStation, and finally the journey to college itself. Every time I put it in the “got to go” pile I keep by the front door, my husband raced to the rescue. There was Carrom balanced against my bed or ripe for tripping in the middle of the floor. “It was a good game. I like to remember when we played it,” he explained. “Just put it where I won’t break my neck,” I finally gave in.

But it wasn’t possible. “This is too much trouble,” he said after two weeks of effort. He took Carrom to the street and it was scavenged in hours—I hope they have the space, and that they use it well. **PT**

**PAMELA WEINTRAUB** is features editor at *Discover* magazine and the author of *Cure Unknown: Inside the Lyme Epidemic*.

