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The things you accumulate over the course of a lifetime! Even if, like me, you've moved house a few dozen times and left most of your stuff behind in the process. Books, papers, documents, tax returns, bank statements, insurance policies and so on – they all have a tendency to pile up. On top of that, of course, there are clothes, household goods, pictures, photos, jewellery, candles, newspaper clippings, lamps, furniture etc.

When I was in Italy an elderly Russian princess and a former Italian general lived in the apartment next to mine, their seven rooms crammed with so many valuables and so much junk that it left only narrow corridors through which to gingerly pick your way. When they invited me to “take a seat” I was stumped. Ancient velvet sofas, chairs upholstered in worn brocade, rickety Thonet armchairs – everything was heaped sky-high with newspapers, books and items of clothing. In the end, I drank the coffee they gave me standing up. So did the princess and the general. At the time I swore to myself I'd never stockpile any objects beyond the necessities. When I left Italy, I took nothing with me except for what would fit in my VW van. During my first year in Austria this turned out to be a problem: I couldn't even sew on a button, because I didn't have a sewing kit. I didn't have anything. Three years on, the situation looks very different. I haven't a clue how all these useful bits and bobs have accrued and continue to accrue, leaving no room in our hundred-and-twelve-square-metre apartment to squeeze in anything else. I should probably note at this point that we're dealing with a top-floor flat, the sloping roofs contributing to a distinct lack of space for such items as wardrobes, dressers and so forth. Beneath the beams, instead, are crannies, cavities and cupboards you practically have to crawl inside if you want to jam in more of the things that, while indispensable, aren't needed every day – sleeping bags, tents, boats, roller blades, wool, blow-up mattresses, suitcases, bags and so on. Inevitably, of course, I lose a sense of what's in there. And because I'm too lazy to get down on all fours and squirm into the cupboards to fetch the most occasion-appropriate bag or occasion-appropriate suitcase

from among all the bags and suitcases inside, the end result is generally that one suitcase and one bag are pressed into service for all eventualities.

What's remarkable is that even after our grown-up daughter moved out, taking all her clothes, books, tables, chairs, drawings, sketches, objects, mementos and bookcases with her, we acquired not a millimetre's extra space. If anything, it made the situation worse. As my friend Karla correctly observed the other day, clothing and furniture have a habit of abruptly multiplying during clear-outs. They start popping up in all the places you'd least expect. Even when Bruno bought an extra, smaller apartment downstairs, one without sloping ceilings – we called it our library –, there was no reprieve. Quite the opposite. I have no idea where we originally stored all the books currently in the library. Certainly we seem to have just as many of them in our top-floor apartment as before, but now every spare inch of wall space in the library is similarly taken up with bookshelves. Bookshelves packed, of course, with books. Bruno also ordered for the library two sofas and two desks – one enormous and the other a smaller, adjustable standing contraption – plus a kitchen table with four chairs. On the floor are stacked a medley of documents, all of which it seems Bruno urgently needs. Suitcases, bags, semi-functional appliances and boating gear have formed looming towers in the corners.

I'd rather not discuss our two lock-ups in the basement, but I will say they're at capacity. When we want to swap out our summer tyres for winter, we more or less have to clear them out completely, and it usually turns out the winter tyres have burrowed somewhere underneath the patio furniture, toolboxes and solar panels.

Hans and Maria's apartment is also overflowing, which evidently happens even if you're as conclusively inoculated against shopping fever as they are. Fifteen years after retiring from the legal offices where he worked, Hans still wears his legal shirts; Maria tailors elegant dresses out of old, inherited silks. They don't even buy books any more, preferring material borrowed from the library. The overcrowding in their apartment is probably down to the fact that, while they don't buy anything new, nor do they throw anything away. The hoard consists mainly of keepsakes brought home from past trips, beautiful if on the whole rather dusty and desolate Chinese,

African and Venetian masks, Japanese puppets, but also doilies stitched by their very own grandmothers, a great-aunt's truly stunning chest of drawers, an Art Nouveau lamp ornamented with a young girl absorbed in a book, an old, richly decorated cabinet, countless rolls of fabric (a great-great aunt!), oddments of wool, two sewing machines and so forth. It's also worth mentioning Hans's assortment of Richard the Lionheart, Tintin and Asterix comics, gradually accumulated since boyhood, as well as his complete editions of Karl May, Karl Marx, Engels and Lenin. And of course Maria didn't want to chuck out all her psychological papers, her books and conference reports, etc., not so soon after retirement.

Karla, too, is in a bad way. She inherited four properties. Which is to say she has none at all. The chalet has been leased out for ages. So have the little wooden cottages on the lake, one of which Bruno and I are allowed to use over the summer. Rented! The apartment in Grado most likely belongs to an ailing aunt who lives in a nursing home – in any case, the documents that would authenticate her claim have proved tricky to hunt down. As for the gorgeously situated house on Wilhelminenhöhe in Vienna, she can't stand it. There's always something that needs to be repaired. In the sixties it was the height of modernity, but its carpeted floors, vaulted stone kitchen and omnipresent wood no longer appeal to the tastes of those affluent enough to afford such a house. They prefer glass and steel. After great effort, Karla managed to rent half the house to a bar owner and the other half to an actress during the Vienna Festival. The problem with renting the properties out, of course, was what to do with all the objects accumulated inside them. I don't need to reel through the list. I'm sure you can all imagine it. Karla's father was a sailor, mountain-climber and freelance auditor! It took Karla a solid three months. Thank God she'd given up wanting to become a famous actress, despite her extraordinary talent, or she'd have had no time to spare. On the other hand, she'd have had money. But Karla says no amount of money would compensate for the miserable life of an actress, especially one who, for financial reasons, also works in television. A clear-out, then – even if, to re-quote Karla's previous remark, clear-outs only seem to produce more clothing and furniture, not less.

Yet that's nothing when I think of Rudi and Franca, who live in a seventeenth-century castle on the Lago Maggiore amid valuable living-room suites, paintings, fusty old books, baroque chests of drawers, Renaissance cabinets, Art Nouveau desks of gargantuan proportions, canopy beds, tatty Persian carpets and halls of ancestral portraits. Their furniture is well-suited to the six-metre-high rooms, while the people inside them appear oddly small. Dogs, cats, a horse and a donkey (Fritzi), all of whom need to be fed and watered, romp through the extensive grounds. Franca, who comes from an impoverished arm of the Visconti family, inherited the lot – and now she's stuck with it. And don't imagine you can just sell a castle like that and bank the profits, because nobody wants to buy the ramshackle old pile. Or if they do, it's for one euro. Franca draws a reasonable salary as a university professor, but Rudi does not. Shortly before retiring from his role as professor of German Studies at the University of Bergamo at the age of sixty-nine he made a tactical error by refusing to fall in line with the new EU standards, only recently but strictly introduced in Italy, and according to which all records, teaching plans and examination reports had to be written in English. As he taught German and Austrian literature, Rudi wrote up everything in German, reasoning that students of German-language literature would be more familiar with German than English. In a subsequent meeting he was described as aggressive and cynical, which ultimately cost him the additional two years he would have needed to qualify for a pension. Now, when he's not doing laundry, preparing breakfast for the B&B guests, doing the shopping, cooking or watching football on the television, he sits sometimes in the castle grounds and writes haikus.

Franca and Rudi have tried to auction off pictures, first-editions and various items of furniture at Sotheby's, but all has come back unsold. This is due partly to the financial crisis and partly to three major break-ins at the castle – during the last one, conducted while Franca and Rudi were on holiday, the thieves arrived with a lorry –, the upshot of which is that by now all the best pieces have been stolen. Meanwhile the heirloom jewellery is nowhere to be found – Franca suspects she left it forgotten in a drawer in one of the monstrous wardrobes she discarded. Maybe, she says, some

bulky waste collector had a nice little income boost. Desperate for money, they've sold their most valuable books for less than they're actually worth. Fourteen thousand euros in cash was too tempting to wait for someone in the distant future to pay the real, tenfold price. After all, the castle had to be heated over the winter. That costs money. So do their two sons' university fees. And their daily bread. During our visits we felt so sorry for Rudi and Franca in their castle that we gave them a good meal with the best Prosecco and wine every evening. Usually the poor sods only eat the plainest pasta and drink cheap bubbly.

My writer colleague Willi has also remarked that it's getting a bit cramped in his country house. His two grown-up children and their respective partners have finally moved out, but even a reduction from six occupants to two hasn't freed up any extra space. It may be, of course, that the children have left everything they don't currently need at their parents' house so that their lovely new apartments aren't immediately jammed to the rafters, but Katharina's impulse to hoard also plays its part. Katharina doesn't collect everything. Mainly she collects Oriental and Mediterranean handicrafts: painted plates, colourful light fittings, embroidered blankets, cloths, small figurines and so on. Also mussel shells, stones, dried plants – items that, on the whole, are swift to gather dust. Willi has always been against it. Knick-knacks, he said contemptuously, hankering for white walls and bare shelves. But since his sixtieth birthday he has started creating dust-prone items of his own, items that, with characteristically ironic emphasis, he refers to as works of art. He seems to use whatever objects and materials come to hand. Household goods, junk, old stovepipes, car tyres.

For a while now I've been getting involved in artistic pursuits. Only, mindful of space, I've been working in Moleskin notepads of various dimensions, drawing in them with Copic pens. Mainly old industrial plants and flowers. Preferably industrial plants. The flower stuff quickly gets embarrassing. In one thick, large-format Moleskin I exclusively draw my own study. From my bed. In times of illness – which are only getting more frequent with age – I intend to keep drawing until well into infirmity. As long as I can hold the pen! The notepad is already nearly full with views

of the study from various angles, in various colours, scaled down and scaled up, fine-grained and wide-shot, abstract and concrete, meticulously executed and hastily scribbled, the perspective more or less offset. By now the Moleskines themselves occupy a bookshelf.

Probably that's the point of death, to finally make room.

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