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New York Observed: Her Objects of Desire

By JOHANNA BALDWIN

Shuck the linens. Discard the chairs. Donate the books. The less you own, the more you realize what you truly possess.



WHEN I was 20 and married and I desired a life in the fast lane of Los Angeles, I used to collect objects. After these phases and others passed me by, I gave away the wedding gifts, the plastic couch in honor of veganism, a mattress, linens, two bar stools, one director's chair, my sister's handmade shelves, the hanging things on the walls and the electronic devices of the '80s. Not that much, and yet all was offered to my secretary, a new arrival to Los Angeles. She brought her tall male friend along to take whatever they wanted. What they didn't take, Goodwill did.

It's not that I'm against having things. Often, I sit on other people's objects or sleep on them. I eat and drink from them. Whether I visit my friends in a garage apartment or a chateau, I appreciate every single comfort inside. Then about a year ago, something between a miracle and an intervention by friends and family members occurred. I was transported into an unfurnished apartment on Cornelia Street in the West Village. The two landlords committed the unlikely act of renting it without a deposit or a lease. A handshake agreement. The landlords explained that someday they would need their place back.

This is when the gifts from a group of people who don't necessarily know one another began to pour in. First up the three flights came my "afternoon angel boss," who brought in a painter to transform the dark floors, brick walls and paneling into expanses of light.

The tall male who had carted away my things in Los Angeles, and whose loft I was moving out of, inadvertently got involved, as his equally tall female cousin enlisted their uncle, a recent widower who was heading for Florida, to give me his old forks, plates, bowls and glasses. The uncle, whose wife had been an artist, also gave me a wooden drafting table.

Then the last living gentleman I know of carried most of the uncle's gifts up the three stories to my apartment. Another friend, an acupuncture student, gave me her grandfather's ancient pans and a cast-iron skillet. My Marxist lover offered a set of towels. My afternoon angel boss later dropped off his old flat-screen television set, his DVD player and a blender. A producer friend from Perry Street, the woman who had introduced me to my landlords, gave me a green chair.

My most sophisticated friend, who had already given me a couple of Swedish end tables, brought over a bottle of Fairy Liquid, Britain's celebrated dishwashing soap, to bring the apartment luck. Lamps had already been left behind by a former English roommate, known to some as Mary Poppins for her keen sense of magic. My mother and sister sent care packages filled with domestic objects — a stainless steel strainer, ladles, spices and cash —

while my brother lent me his credit card to buy essential items from Gourmet Garage and Rite Aid. My mentor sent unsolicited checks.

OTHER friends offered up help, tables and whatnots, but I declined. I didn't need more. Still, another producer friend with a passion for metaphysics sent over new speakers to plug into my laptop so I could hear music again and hear all the songs he composes.

Outside on Cornelia Street, among the crowds of people waiting for tables at the various restaurants, it was not rare to find abandoned items of furniture. Along with a fellow survivor back from the daze of Los Angeles, I carried up someone else's unwanted bar stools, even though I didn't have a bar. A newer friend who manages the landlords' Italian restaurant hauled a gigantic wicker chair up my three flights.

Nine months later, when the landlords needed their place back, I was not terribly daunted by the fact that I didn't know where I was going to live next. I should have been used to this by now. But I was overwhelmingly daunted by the fact that I had objects in my life again. None of these things had I ever asked for, and I couldn't very well abandon them. Or perhaps I could?

After I sifted through the objects, the ones to which I had no sentimental attachment were given away or returned to the street. I debated whether books that had personal inscriptions written in ink could be discarded and decided that, yes, they could. After making some agonizing decisions, I wrapped the new-to-me objects and wondered what was going to happen to them. Then another interventionist appeared.

My theater manager friend showed up with his station wagon during one of the city's monsoons. Drenched in layers of humidity and sweat, we carried all that would fit into his car, drove to the Prospect-Lefferts Gardens section of Brooklyn and carried everything into his family's basement.

Still, half an apartment full of stuff was left to contend with. The uncle's drafting table and I were picked up via courier, compliments of my afternoon angel boss, and shipped to the uncle's nephew, the tall friend in whose basement I also stowed a basket of lamps. Then, a creative and blond friend showed up with her car, and together, we delivered my day-to-day stuff to my acupuncturist friend's Gramercy Park apartment and to my sophisticated friend's West Village apartment.

Now I sleep between two friends' homes, wondering where I'll go next. I still don't hold possessions in all that much esteem, though I do suffer from a newfound embarrassment of riches. Not the objects themselves, but the group of humans who brought things, sent things or simply carried things. Friend after friend trudged up and down those stairs carrying object after object, and I ask myself, why desire more?

Johanna Baldwin is a writer and producer who is working on a collection of short stories.

(See <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/nyregion/thecity/06obje.html?ex=1200200400&en=48a07c264099124d&ei=5070&emc=eta1>)