

Wet Kitty

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You learn a lot about people when you clear out their stuff. Like when somebody, a friend who can't be here, needs help packing their possessions. You and her mother signed on. Her mother is just now in the bedroom, packing clothing, and you are on your knees in the kitchen in front of a Tupperware drawer, sorting tubs and lids. And things are not matching up and you want them to—suddenly you are sad and very invested in the lids and tubs working out. (Why?) Because the trash can is brimming full and you can't find another liner and plastic like this may not recycle. (Does it?)

But it is not just the Tupperware drawer that brings on this melancholy, resting like a night-drowsy cat just above your sternum, breathing feral into your face, and you are hot, and sweaty. If it were just the Tupperware drawer you could shake off the night cat and turn over, leaving the kitty on the bed, purring in the dark, curled in another direction.

But it is not just the gathering of plastic or the drawers of corks for a project (leading to yet another cork board? Or corks cut in half, one by one tossed in a barrel, half full at the base, next to the free standing, motorized, jig saw in the garage. And the upper half is now full of trash a helpful neighbor threw on top, not realizing the corks down there were a work in progress—the cork floor or cork wall? Or cork mosaic mandala mirror? You cannot quite remember—there were so many flowing over Christmases past). Not just the gathering that beckons the cat.

And you are on your knees reading the instructions still pasted to the side of the largest, red, plastic bowl. *Fit the lid to the bottom-most bowl . . .* Ahh—it all makes sense, and you try; suddenly the possibility of a nested stack of colorful bowls is the only thing that will save you from the hot, wet kitty feeling resting on your chest, weighing down your heart, laboring each breath.

Your friend's mother has gone out for more packing paper and you are alone and you forgot to remind her to get more trash can liners.

The bowls are nested—all except the green one which has no lid. And it seems fitting to have lost one. So you move on to a cabinet of coffee cups and begin rolling them into paper. The paper is pulpy and vaguely reminds you of grade school, which clearly reminds you of your own mother and the caches of paper you packed up for her, (four-feet high and coarse and thick and large as watercolor canvas). Heavy and floppy and stacked, musty on concrete in humid Hawaii where the air is drinkable and dank, and it felt like a warm, wet beach towel was tossed over your shoulders, as you trudged load after floppy load to the little, borrowed truck. And when it was full you tied it down and drove to the pre-school, where they notified you that it was not safe for children, since they did not know what airborne spores might be contained within the pulp. And so you drove it to the dump, where the Hawaiian man in a county uniform and pukka shell necklace, notified you, in a soft velvet voice, it must be dumped and not

recycled, and you can't remember the why's of that, but he helped you sling it off into the hill of trash, while, in the distance, you watched a back hoe cover a trash mountain with dirt, seagulls circling hopefully above. And you drove back to your mom's condo to sort through paint tubes, and tissue paper, and brushes and batik wax and beads and feathers and glue and fixatives and framed and unframed art, and her last live-in-lover wandered up from his lair downstairs and told you which of her framed art he wanted to keep.

His eyes glittered tears and he was too overcome with loss to help, and you felt sorry for him and sorry for your sister and brother who packed and schlepped and sweated and tossed and wept, while you packed and schlepped and sweated and tossed and wept; and when he trudged up again, later that afternoon, to mention how he thought your mom would have wanted to split the proceeds from the sale of her condo with him, you didn't have the heart to tell him he was not in her Will or Trust and you and your siblings were the trustees. So you said, "We'll see." And your tears dried and were replaced by a panic, shared by your siblings, to keep moving, keep clearing out, keep forward motion on escrow and getting away from him and Hawaii, and you didn't know how, but you wanted to get away from the sadness.

You have run out of paper and your friend's mom is not back with more, so you move on to the bookcases in the living room. And you take off your glasses, a trick you know, because though neither a cork saver, nor a paper saver, you are a book saver, and reading spines will surely lead to a pile you might request to keep. And reading spines will slow you down and you will probably be caught, cross legged on the hardwood floor, reading the inside of a book, your friend's cat curled in your lap, and there is certainly no time for that, so you begin piling books into small boxes, taping them up and sharpieing the outside. Glasses off, you cannot read, so you are not tempted to categorize the books, so the outside of the boxes simply says, "Books"—not cookbooks, not art books, not textbooks, not craft books, not novels by magical-realists, or historical fiction, or modern-day refugees (all her favorites, you well know, and many with your name penciled on the front page, but she was not good at keeping track of those sorts of things). And the sturdy little book boxes are tidy and stack neatly and the books are dry and safely contained inside. And the 'wet kitty' feeling in your chest is getting up and stretching and you imagine it walking over to the kibble bowl for a snack, just as your friend's cat is doing now. And you are tempted to pet the sulky soft fur, which is grey and reminds you of the mice in top floor of the barn at the old homestead of your husband's forbearers, where you and he, in a week-long fit of industriousness, cleaned the second floor of the remnants of the lives of five siblings and their immigrant parents.

And the barn's hayloft doors are wide open, the wind blowing through the redwoods and the ravens circling black and cackling blue, and your husband backing his truck up to just below the hayloft floor, and way up high, you beginning to toss books into the bed of the truck. And you, sorely tempted to keep some, if only for the Finnish words, like calligraphy, beautiful and completely undecipherable, but when spoken, capable of lulling babies to sleep. And the bibles and leather-bound antiquities of history and geography and maps and how-to guides and

paperbacks and philosophy—and all stained with mouse urine, pages interlaced with rat pellets, nibbled sweetly, and lightly dusted in bat guano. Still you touched them and looked inside and one by one tossed them over the edge and they crashed into the bed of the truck, spines broken. And the sound brought up a wet and heavy melancholy, dense as the rain-drenched landscape. And after opening a mouse-bitten early edition of *Alice in Wonderland* and peering at the intricate plates of illustration inside, you took off your glasses and felt like screaming, but whispered because you didn't want to alarm your husband, "Jesus Christ, people; if you cherished these things, why the hell did you store them in a barn in the wilderness!" And you tossed and tossed and tossed, until whole boxes of books were being dragged over and kicked off the ledge.

The bed of the truck was mounded high with books and your husband tarped the heavy load. When he got to the dump, he told you later, the man in the county shirt with the SWOW emblem and his name embroidered above a pocket, notified him that books were not recyclable and he directed him to the trash section where the back hoe thrummed and bit the ground and carried and covered, the seagulls circling hopefully. And when your husband came back, the truck bed empty save for the well coiled rope atop the neatly folded tarp, you noticed a pile of books on the front seat of the cab, and then you were hugging your husband, your face buried in his chest, tears finding a safe home, muffled in flannel.

Your friend's mom returns bearing the pulpy packing paper, and deli turkey sandwiches, (since she didn't know what you like and turkey seemed safe), and, mercifully, a six pack of beer, (since who could stand to gather another cork.) And over lunch she smiles when she shows you the brochure on green burials, the ecological way to inter a body and the way she thinks my friend and her daughter would have chosen, had she thought about it, (but who, at the age of forty-two makes that morbid choice). You don't know this woman yet, but you notice she has the same smile her daughter had, which is a comfort, and she is trying very hard to keep the right tone here, (which you truly appreciate).

And the eco-interment idea helps a little too, as it floats in your mind, atop books, and paper and corks and Tupperware, and the hot, wet waste of your time, sorting and saving and dumping the accumulations of life's passions. And your friend's mom asks if you want to keep the cat. And you say no.