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The season of giving and receiving is behind us; before us are the gifts we collect, save, and hoard. Once again, the cycle of excess has us in thrall. We are hooked on collecting.

A woman acquaintance close to eighty collects crèches. She owns hundreds of them, possibly over a thousand. Years ago, when friends caught on to her attachment, every birthday- or Christmas gift became a crèche. People returned with them from vacations in distant lands; they were colorful, unique, interesting.

What will become of the collection? Her children and grandchildren have unequivocally informed her, they don't want the burdensome collection. They might take one or two in remembrance of Mother or as an heirloom, but that's it.

A man I know collects large tools that have become antiques, from anvils to lathes. He finds them in junk yards, at auctions, through word of mouth. He thought he'd put them to use once he retired, but it's been twenty years and the only time he touches his possessions is to stack them atop one other to make room for more. When he showed me his workshop-cum-storage; I found it stuffed to the gills, and appallingly depressing.

During my sewing years I saved every pattern I ever used, though knowing full well I'd never use it again. I also saved every scrap of leftover fabric, thinking this or that would come in handy for repairs, quilting, or what not. It never did.

Ditto with sheet music and music books. I have songbooks in German that go back decades, their spines coming unglued. Occasionally I leaf through them, hum this or that tune, regret that no one but myself is interested—and resshelf them.

Knowing the burden for those who come after, we may force ourselves to throw something in the trash or recycle bin. Problem is, many of these possessions have acquired a place at the table, so to speak, and we've become fond of our guests. We know that collecting stuff can be an obsession, having observed crotchety elders' rooms and hallways stacked with every magazine and newspaper they ever read; still, we prefer not to think about the consequences. We'd rather not picture disgruntled heirs combing through our outmoded things.

T. C. Boyle's short story, "Filthy with Things" can become our call to action. Julian and Marsha, a California couple, are obsessed with antiques—one-of-a-kind, "precious and unattainable" antiques. Problem is, they've run out of space. The pool house, the drained pool, the prefab storage sheds, the crammed closets, the unlivable living room: everything is filled to the brim. Julian has just signed off on delivery of a mahogany highboy that won't fit onto the overburdened patio when his wife drives up with a piece of furniture strapped to her Land Rover, calling, "Julian! Wait till you see what I found!"

The next scene has Julian negotiating, "in the narrow footpath between the canyons of furniture that obscure the walls, the fireplace, even the ceiling," with an "Organizer" who says she's seen worse. Susan Certaine implies she has worked with the Liberaces, the Warhols, the Nancy Reagans. "You remember Imelda Marcos? Twenty-seven hundred pairs of shoes alone." Certaine serves as a purifying stream, she says, a cleansing torrent. "You're dirty with things, Mr. Laxner, filthy, up to your ears in muck." Silently he agrees—and brightens when she promises, "I'll make a new man of you."

She whips out a contract. She'll need seven days, seven short days, to have everything under control. "We'll inventory everything," she promises. "All we need is your go-ahead."

He wants to consult with his wife, but Certaine reminds him of the upstairs. "Come now, come clean. All those charts and telescopes, the books—there must be a thousand of them."

He's an amateur astronomer, he says; he teaches a class on the subject at the community college.

"You intellectuals," she tells him, "you're the worst."

When he protests that the one with the hoarding compulsions is Marsha, she cut him short. "It takes two to tango, Mr. Laxner, the pathological aggregator and the enabler."

On a pad from her briefcase, she jots down figures while inquiring about "family money." He mentions an inheritance. She regales him with anecdotes, informs him she'll charge a thousand dollars a day.

He gasps, protests. She reminds him he is dirty, he is "filthy. And I'm the one to make you clean again." He signs.

The following evening, just after supper, Susan Certaine arrives, as arranged, with a psychologist to persuade Marsha. It takes some doing, but the team prevails. The next morning, at the stroke of seven, the movers arrive. Certaine had suggested the couple stay a hotel for the duration. They do—and when they return seven days later, their house has been stripped clean. Not even a coat hanger is left.

The contract offers a gesture of grace: for seven days, they may reclaim one item per day.

The story ends on that note, but its message is worth pondering. I'm going to toss my German songbooks—right after my cousin's visit from Germany, with whom I like to sing.