

Empty

Written by Vivian Bikulege

Tuesday, 10 May 2011 17:23 - Last Updated Wednesday, 11 May 2011 10:25



Car is parked, bags are packed,

But what kind of heart doesn't look back

—□ *Sara Bareilles, Breathe Again*

One of the hardest things I did in the past month was to leave my dad's ladder at the Franciscan Center. Wobbly and wooden, the ladder was splattered with paint like a canvas in Jackson Pollock's studio. A broken, red metal hinge still held the creaking legs together in their V-shape.

I leaned the ladder up against the building and considered how many times my dad had climbed up and down and up and down his ladder.

My mom made her share of treks on its steps too – painting bedrooms, hanging wallpaper, climbing into the attic – ladder kinds of stuff. I remember the ladder leaning on the walls of our basement and garage. Now, I turned my back and left it to an unknown fate, hoping some

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needy laborer would adopt it for a second life.

By the time this “Whatever” column is published, my mom’s house in Beaufort will be sold and that’s a good thing, right? The economy still stinks, there is a glut of houses on the market, and my mom is uncomfortable living alone, so I should be happy about selling the little tan house with black shutters on Brickyard Point. Three yard sales later, and after my mom gifted grandchildren and friends with china and kitchenware, my sister and brother picked out just a few things to keep, and my mom’s singular decision to give away her 42 inch, flat screen television to a lucky and deserving young man, it is all good. It is also very, very hard.

Six years ago, we dismantled the family home in Pennsylvania and packed half of a moving van with enough furniture and family treasure to furnish a three-bedroom home on Lady’s Island. It was tough enough to give away my parent’s bedroom set, and remove the tools my dad had carefully mounted to nails driven into plywood he hung on the cinderblock wall in the garage. Even cleaning out the junk drawer beside the kitchen stove was a journey into memory – screwdrivers and tacks, string and old watches, a folding measuring stick and needle-nosed pliers. The things we used the most had risen to the top. All gone. Say bub-bye.

This second household dismembering was less challenging. My mom’s bungalow was a bit more sterile. A family of five and successions of dogs had not lived in the Lowcountry residence for forty-four years like our homestead in Bethel Park. The memories hadn’t seeped into and swollen the walls and baseboards, but the thought and feeling that stayed with me as I cleaned every closet, moved pots and pans from the cabinets to the countertops was that slowly, but with great certainty, pieces of my family’s lives were disappearing. With even more surety, I knew that little by little, my dad was drifting away. Every slip of paper with his handwriting, his gray Samsonite briefcase, packs and packs of playing cards, slide rules and drawing pencils, and cocktail glasses engraved with the initials “SAB,” were packed, sold, or given away. Stanley Albert Bikulege was evaporating before my very eyes.

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I know. Someone is gone for ten years and one must come to terms with the fact that there are things whose time has come for the sweet goodbye. Still, it is not easy. Over and over during these past months I thought to myself, *this is how it happens*. It is subtle, and yet as my mother and I let go of every item for a quarter or a buck, or collected a receipt for another donation, I could not release the thought of how every human being fades away. My father's silent vanishing was accented by my mother's quiet presence, sitting at the back of the garage or in the kitchen, watching a lifetime drift away. There were moments when I could barely look at her, charging ahead in my daughterly duties to move on with her life and mine, knowing that we would pack what was left into a single bedroom at my house.

I do not let go easily and that is a problem. Of anyone in my family, I am the very last person that should be selected to sift through, sort out and dispose of stuff. I hold on to everything – old keys, dustpans, birdhouses, and coasters. Sometimes, buried in an old coffee can or a piece of Tupperware, a gem lies hidden. My dad's key ring with a pewter medallion engraved with his initials had another fading engraving on the back – "LOVE SBB." I will be sending that keeper back to my brother as a reminder that love never fades away. Our life as a family is too rich, too deep, and too valuable to be quantified in garage sales or tax receipts.

Letting go of the stuff of life is hard, and today my garage is a testament to the fact that it will take my lifetime to completely give it all away, but there is virtue in the act, one that I have hardly mastered when it comes to material things and buried emotions. I see myself in cut-off sweat pants and ink-stained tee shirts, moving around my garage in dirty tennis shoes, sweeping the floor and tinkering with the tools hung on the bench that my husband and dad built for me. When I consider who I am, I realize my father hasn't vanished at all. I have absorbed him, even his bad habits of saving things, things I might need one day, things I will never use. Hopefully I will remember that the things that have vanished, those bits and pieces that once formed a home, are just things. Who I am is the mixture of Stan and Irene, well-seasoned and aging in the person of Vivian. I am still present and ready to open a new chapter in the epic novel of my life.

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