

HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION

By Lili Wright

While most Americans frittered away their summer with idle sport and leisure, my family spent six weeks on an island in Maine throwing away my grandfather's stuff. Grampy, as we call him, is a retired bio-chemistry professor, a kindly man with reddish hair and freckles, who in the nineteen intervening years since my grandmother died, managed to fill not one, but two, houses with junk. He cluttered up his house in New Haven, Connecticut, and then he cluttered up the family summerhouse in Maine. After ninety-one years, a man has ample time to acquire, and my grandfather never saw a dry eraser board he didn't like. Or a magnifying glass or surge suppressor. Somewhere he developed a fetish for jar openers, particularly the floppy rubber kind that look like handcuffs for lovers on a budget. For most of his life, he's lived by two credos: "Never throw anything away," and "If you like something, buy two."

Last summer, Grampy fell down the stairs in Maine and had to be life-flighted to the hospital and later rehab. Though he suffered only a bruised hip, he finally had to give up his car keys and his home. When his perky physical therapist asked if he was excited about moving into an upscale assisted-living complex, Grampy lowered his two-pound dumbbell and closed his eyes, as if the indignity of it all were too much to bear.

“I guess I’m a loner,” he said. “I don’t like people much.”

This summer, for the first time in years, Grampy didn’t come to Maine and though we missed his company, his bottles of cod liver oil lined up in the fridge, we gleefully set about to do what we’d longed to do for decades: clean house. We threw away biochemistry syllabi dated 1969. We threw away bouquets of fake yellow flowers, a plastic watch that zaps mosquitoes, a magazine article describing how to cure psoriasis with beets. We threw away paperbacks with titles like *The Vitamin Bible* and *What Your Body Language Says About You* and a lab manual called *The Basic Biology of the Fetal Pig*. We threw out dozens of empty peanut jars labeled with a single word printed adamantly in black ink: SAVE.

When it became overwhelming, we hired professionals. A hazmat team with gas masks arrived on island to throw away my grandfather’s chemistry set, which had been molting in the basement for thirty years. Many of the labels had fallen off the bottles, but a few still retained Grampy’s hand-scrawled poison labels with grinning pirate skulls.

Of the myriad toxins stored next to Nana’s rusty chaise lounges—on which, back in the day, she would bask in the sun with a Scotch and a fly swatter—were several containers of picric acid. When dry—and ours was very, very dry—picric acid is highly explosive, a sister, the hazmat man with the dreamy blue eyes explained, to its more stable sibling, TNT. If the jar had fallen off the shelf, we could have blown up a good portion of our summerhouse, which, I later realized, would have saved both time and money.

My burgeoning crush for hazmat man number three quickly faded when we learned he was too cowardly to remove a small yellow bottle whose contents were radioactive. No amount of eye-batting would sway him. Or my brother or my father, so we’re offering a free vacation in Maine to whoever will stash the three-ounce vial in their trunk and dump it somewhere in New Jersey. The

total cost of removing my grandfather's chemicals was \$12,000. When asked why he'd put our lives and bank accounts in such danger, Grampy replied with a giggle: "I was a bad boy."

Still, cleaning up Maine was a picnic compared to the mess in New Haven. For years, my dad begged Grampy to purge his sprawling house in Connecticut, but every year he amassed more. One day, fed up with my dad's carping, Grampy stood at the doorstep and refused to let my dad in. After that, they went out for lunch when my dad visited, burying bad feelings in piles of pastrami, and no one knew just how dire the situation had become until it was time to rescue Grampy's valuables—the first step to selling his house.

Grampy gave me careful instructions over the phone. "The German pistol is under my armchair. The gold bullion is in the vitamin closet."

Needless to say, we were surprised to learn that Grampy had removed his valuables from the bank. Then again, we hadn't heard about Bank of America's dastardly plot to seize customers' safe deposit boxes and pawn the contents to line their secret slush funds in Monaco. Luckily, right-wing conspiracy newspapers like *The Spotlight* kept Grampy in the know, and he snuck the family heirlooms home, hiding them in the debris.

When we reached New Haven, we opened the back door, recoiling at the filthy kitchen and its stench. Grit covered the counters. A pile of eggshells balanced on hundreds of bottles of magnesium, melatonin, and B-complex. The bathroom sink had no plumbing; the water simply fell onto the basement floor. In places, the ceiling had crumbled. Half of the rooms were impassable: boxes on boxes on piles on stuff.

Worse than the mess was the smell, a rancid combination of dirt and mothballs and body odor that stuck to your hair, your clothes, the back of your throat. We could only stand 15-minute stretches before staggering onto the lawn in search of fresh air. (Later, the demo crew we hired wore gloves and masks, but that didn't stop one viral fellow with tattoos from barfing in the bushes. In

the end, they filled two and a half commercial dumpsters.) Giddily, we climbed over boxes and furniture, looking for monogrammed silver trays, Venetian glasses, all the treasures my grandmother had traveled the globe to collect. Peter found Nana's sapphire pin hidden behind olive leaf extract. My father walked out a bedroom wielding the P-38 my great uncle brought back from Normandy. It was loaded.

At first, the treasure hunt was funny. Like a game show or reality TV. Then, I felt guilty, then inconsolably sad, then sick. How could we have let my grandfather live like this? The answer was simple: This is what he wanted.

Even after he'd settled into Eisenberg, he complained that he'd arrived five years too early. "I was keeping up with things," he wrote me in a wistful e-mail. Walking past the shrouded windows, the molded Steinway, I wondered: Is it more humane to let people live as they wish or force them to live as they should? I don't know the answer. I only know that we love my grandfather and we let him live in a house that was killing him.

After the New Haven debacle, our summer cleanup in Maine should have been easy, yet all summer I teetered on despair. I'd like to think I know the difference between a person and his belongings, between the beautiful and the mundane, but I am capable of getting sentimental over a grocery list. When faced with chucking Nana's fifth casserole dish, I hemmed and hawed, examining the vessel, remarking on its merits. Does anyone even make casseroles anymore? I should make casseroles! I should bring back the casserole and when I do, this noble dish will have its renaissance.

My husband does not suffer this disease, and we locked horns one day in early August over a pair of rusty grass clippers. They were lying in the chuck pile on the lawn.

"Are we throwing these away?" I asked. "Don't they work?"

“They work,” Peter said. “But we have a weed whacker now so I don’t use them. Besides, we already have a pair.” He pointed to the garage where a similar pair already hung from a nail.

That he was right made no difference. I dug in my heels: We were not throwing away the clippers. We’d thrown away enough.

Sensing a fight, Peter repeated himself, slowly this time, his eyes turning steely. “I will never use these.”

Divorce seemed possible. Marriages have ended over less. You never know when the proverbial last straw will be, but by God I plan to have the grass clippers to cut it.

A half hour later, I wept in the kitchen, as Peter looked on with amazement. It felt like we were throwing out my grandfather, I explained, jettisoning him jar by jar. The clippers were more than clippers. They were memories. When I was a girl, we did not—as our eight-year-old daughter did—spend the summer doing community theatre. We did yard work. My father mowed and my brother and I snipped around trees, daydreaming, listening to the Red Sox lose, itching mosquito bites, sneezing. I am convinced this combination boredom and hay fever is what made me a writer. Chekhov clipped around trees as a boy, I’ve been told. So did Thoreau. To throw away the clippers was a little death. Of my childhood. Of me as a girl. Of my family and the peculiar way we operate.

My mother has been dead two years now. She is fading in my memory as her things disappear in boxes to Goodwill. We have saved her most beautiful possessions, but even ordinary things are hard to part with. Her swimming sneakers. Her last shell collection. People we love die. Their things outlive them. It is up to us—the living—to throw away their things, even those things that remind us of who they were and what we loved. To cheer ourselves up, we buy new things. Retail therapy. And one day our children will lug all these things to the dump, no matter how darkly or emphatically we write the word “Save.”

You might call this recycling. Or the circle of life. *There is a season. Turn. Turn.* But I am digressing. I am singing old folk songs. And people with this much crap to throw away have no business digressing or singing folk songs because the dump is about to close and it's already August. Lest anyone worry about my grandfather, don't. At ninety-one, Grampy has fallen in love. At Eisenberg, the ratio of mobile women to mobile men is ten to one. "I have been chosen," Grampy announced one day with pride. Her name is Lillie and she is a lovely woman, an Italian American with jet-black hair and skin as white as paper. After six months of dating, the two of them have a better social life than I do: They see jazz, eat Chinese, and there is even, Grampy confided, "kissy wissy." That Lillie is suffering from the beginning stages of Alzheimer's makes little difference because she thinks the world of Grampy and he likes caring for her and she recently won Eisenberg's best-dressed award and Grampy is—like most men in my family—a sucker for a beautiful woman. After a complete medical workup, a new wardrobe, testosterone supplements, and, yes, eye-lid surgery, Grampy looks like a million bucks.

As he should. Because despite years of pleading poverty, it turns out our favorite Swamp Yankee is rich, which means if he doesn't live to be one hundred and twenty—his goal—or buy too many flashlights, we may have enough money to get the radioactive goo out of the basement.

So we have our happy ending. In a single year, my grandfather has gone from misanthrope to millionaire, from loner to lover. Meanwhile, next summer, my husband and I will head up to Maine to sweep mouse poop and whack weeds, tending our own private Superfund site.

And so it should be. The old fall in love again. The children do curtain calls to wild applause. And those of us in the middle carry on.

But some day, some summer, we will run out of things to throw away. And on that fine day, you will find me on an island in Maine, reclining on a chaise lounge with a Scotch and a fly swatter,

savoring the summer I have waited for my whole life. I will be happy then, happy with a casserole in the oven.