



LIVE WITH THE THINGS YOU LOVE

...and you'll live happily ever after.

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INTRODUCTION

I recently rewatched *Nomadland*, the 2020 drama film about a woman named Fern who later in life embarks on a journey in an old van packed with a few essentials. I thought maybe one day I'll do what she did. I'll get rid of all my possessions, except a few things that really matter, pack them into a vintage airstream and take to the road.

You laugh because many of you know how much I love my stuff and how I'm known as a collector/junker and letting go of all the things I've collected for my seven decades (who's counting?) on this earth would be astounding and anathema to who I am and how I've lived. But maybe *astounding* is what we are ultimately looking for and how we want to live our lives, not just at the end, but every day, and right from the beginning.

What makes life *astounding*, I think, is not the things we've collected and lived with but the people and the memories we associate with them. We cling to those things that connect us to those people and the stories that emanate from them. They are the things we want to live with because they give character, meaning, warmth, and a personal kind of beauty to the places we call Home.

Truthfully, I've not had that many homes.

(I've never been a nomad, except for the years after two fires uprooted our family when I was ten and sixteen). My life has been dug deep into just a few places: my childhood bedroom on the third floor of our family's home on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia; a room above our storage house at River Barn in Virginia's Tidewater area; my private lair in the basement of the seventeenth-century house we moved to later; a fifth-floor studio apartment when I started life on my own in New York City, the apartment I've shared for almost five decades with my husband and our two sons, with a view of the treetops of Central Park and the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum; and finally, the country home in Upstate New York that sheltered us during the pandemic and is our refuge on weekends and holidays.

I once read that every single object has a god inside, and that's why we cherish them. I believe that. And I would add that each object in our homes—passed on, gifted, or collected—also has a story that reveals not only how it came to be and how it came to us, but how it shares who we are and where we've been. Taken together these collections of things create the memory and personality of the places we call home.

Yep, that's me surrounded by a crazy collection, of things I've collected over the years. Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "That which we elect to surround ourselves with becomes the museum of our souls and the archive of our experiences." I doubt my plastic chicken, paint-by-numbers poodle, my wooden daisy handbag, or my hand-knitted doll would have been the objects he might have elected to surround himself with, and yet these are some of the things that are the "museum of my soul" that I couldn't live without.



So, what are the things I've carried with me from home to home so far, and what are the things I would take on my pared-down journey—the things that matter, the things that last? On my desk a yellow poodle lamp sheds light on a village of my personal objects—a small metal statue of George Washington (see him close-up on the following page) flaking paint and lassoed with a red tag bearing a handwritten message To DAD love American Junk; a pair of primitive pottery vessels, one turquoise and one brown, made for me by my young sons long ago; an iron green frog weighing down a pile of postcards; a framed love letter from my mother—Dearest Howard, Tippy, Carter, Sam, I love you—Pat.

During the pandemic, like a lot of us, tethered to our homes, I spent a lot of time revisiting the things I have collected and lived with for over five decades in this apartment. What I discovered was the joy certain objects have brought to me and my family and the character they have added to the way we have lived. Walking through our rooms I focused on the things that brought them to life, things that seemed to have always been there, that told a story preserving a certain sense of familiarity, of memory, of recognition that this is indeed our home. They are the things our sons gravitate to when they visit, like the dancing Pierrot music box still standing in the little cabinet of their childhood treasures in what had been their old bedroom. They wind it up and, in that moment, listening to the tinkling tune, they

are happily reassured that this was and still is their home sweet home.

Live with the things you love, and you'll live happily ever after. That is my mantra and the title of this book. Throughout its pages I will share with you the things I have lived with in our apartment in the city and our house in the country that for so many years have brought me and my family a special kind of happiness. They are my personal totems—a funny concrete mushroom, silly garden elves, a raggedy bear rocking chair, the piano that belonged to Howard's mother that our grandchildren love to bang on now. Each of us cherishes the beauty of different things that tell different stories, and so I visited the homes and get-aways of many old friends who have shared the things and lessons learned that have made their living special and each of their homes distinctive and joyful.

I once heard an old hymn sung whose message seems at the core of all of this—

*Where your treasure is, there your heart shall be.
All that you possess will never set you free.
Seek the things that last; come and learn from me.
Where your treasure is, your heart shall be.*

Nope, I'm not packing up a van. I'm not becoming a nomad. Everything I need to make me happy is right here around me. Turn the page and follow along.

My desk, an old farm table, tucked into the back of the living room in our apartment (see pages 20 and 21) is cluttered on top with so many things like the statue of George Washington (can you find it?), and above it is an exhibit of flea market paintings surrounding a little red and white cabinet with my initials painted on it and a mysterious red hand-pointing at the oval portrait of a ballerina, and down under wobbly stacks of some of my favorite books.





Mary Randolph Carter

ILVING with TOO MUCH STUFF

I'm not good with change. We, my husband, Howard, and I have lived in our apartment twelve stories up with a view of the treetops of Central Park and the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art for over five decades. Never once did we consider moving. Oh, take that back! There was one time when our two boys were young and rambunctious that we thought about moving out of the city, finding a house, and commuting back and forth to our jobs in Manhattan. As an experiment we took a train to a town 45 minutes out of the city and halfway there decided the commuting life was not for us. So, here we are—the two of us (our boys, now men, moved out long ago)—living as we have for all these years surrounded by the things we have collected, been gifted, cherished, and tripped over packed into these sun-filled, lived-in five rooms. It is our home.







Look around and you will see the things that we have lived with and loved. There's the slightly tarnished pewter collection of plates, bowls and goblets, a wedding gift from my mother and father, shining out of the big pine cupboard. It was a gift from Howard that took over a living room wall that I always dreamed of as a spot for a fireplace, but now with the sun reflecting off it warms the room just as well. On the chest of drawers, starting left, are a marble Buddha, a pink doll's chair standing guard along with a pink metal bloom on either side of a pine lockbox filled with homeless detritus, and a pair of carved wooden animals (with very long tails) atop a round Shaker-style pantry box. The paintings of the horse and the cow on the wall followed me home from a favorite London flea market. An auricula blooms above them. I have always thought it to be the most romantic flower but have never actually grown one.

Previous page: Bardot, my vintage French elephant, oversees a vignette of loved things in our living room: a childhood portrait of me in a blue velvet dress, and our Lady of Guadeloupe. On the old English cricket table that's home to a wire basket of marble grapes, a long-eared stone jackrabbit, and a stacked tower of old books. When I'm not wearing the romantic hand-painted cowgirl vest, it clothes the yellow French-style cane-backed chair.



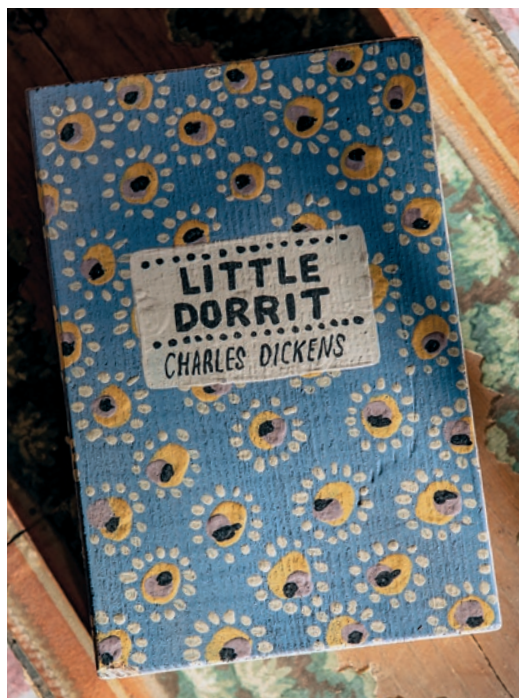
“The things I
can’t live without
are always tied
to my family.”

Mary Randolph Carter

Clockwise from top left: We grew up with Saint Bernards, and this vintage portrait was a present to my father, who loved them so much, and a reminder to the nine of us children who were cared for by them like Nana, who watched over the Darling siblings in Peter Pan. This little orange-and-green-glazed cup and saucer made by our younger son Sam when he was six always deserves a place of honor. My husband, Howard, always asked my mother if he could have her beautifully tarnished Junior Championship golf trophy from 1937 and she always said, “One day.” In our kitchen now, we look at it every morning and think of her club in hand.



Clockwise from left: Perfectly sized for our sons when they were young, these two little chairs still accommodate children (and every so often a grown-up—yikes!) in our living room today. A 17 ½" rustic folk art wooden carving captures the elegant form of our sixteenth president Abraham Lincoln—all six foot four of him—standing book in hand. An Easter present to my mother, this giant wooden rabbit crouched for years in our family home in Virginia, now she crouches in our living room (page 20). I love Charles Dickens but this is one of his classics I will never page through thanks to artist Leanne Shapton's strikingly realistic hand-painted wooden interpretation.





Wooden fish swim happily around a bleached cow skull displayed on the trapstake partition that divides our long living room, yet allows the light to shine through. The crumbling nun, prayed for many years in my family home in Virginia. She now keeps watch over ours moving from place to place.

I was a young wife and mother-to-be when we moved into 12D. We had lived a few blocks away in a smaller apartment when we first married. It was the New York City apartment I had always dreamed of—a charming brownstone with a working fireplace, a tiny kitchen, and a cozy bedroom. Though practicality wasn't exactly our thing, with a child coming we decided we might look for something larger. Luckily, we had good friends who told us about an apartment in the building they were living in—12D! We moved in with the things we had furnished that first apartment with, but, sadly our handcrafted bed constructed of pine driftwood posts didn't make it (too wobbly), so my father built us a rustic facsimile. An old worn floorboard became the sturdy headboard secured on either end by a pair of driftwood posts like the ones in our living room partition, and salvaged from our original bed. (See a smidgen of one opposite strung with a faded construction paper chain and a picture of my mom and dad balanced on the ledge next to it.)

In the little space between my side of the bed opposite and the towering green storage

cupboard(see following pages), is my personal altar of sacred objects. I have carefully placed them there over the years as totems of comfort and security to protect my nights from anxiety and restless slumber. (No sleeping potions for me!) When the lights go out (a funny yellow wooden lamp with a green tin shade), my old black rosary beads nestled at its base are just a reach away. The giant wooden pair dangling from a portrait of St. Theresa belonged to my great aunt Liza and were a Christmas gift from my sister Liza who was named after her. On the shelf to their left is a blue plastic holy water receptacle in the image of the Blessed Mother. Below the shelf is a faded tin ex-voto of a young boy kneeling in thankful prayer to the Blessed Mother for saving his life from a tragic fall. Below that it is a romantic photograph of Howard's mother as a young girl, and to its left are more modern photographs of me with my infant son Sam. The oil painting leaning on the wooden cabinet between a basket of cushy clothes and stacks of comforting books reminds me of a heroine from a Virginia Woolf novel.







Clockwise from above: A wooden carving of a mother embracing her two sons reminds me of me and my boys. A shelf of miniature books and tiny objects, like the green teapot, candlestick, wooden pony, and white swan, are protected above by a sacred assembly of miniature saints. A close-up of the giant wooden rosary dangling (seen on the previous page) was a gift from my sister Liza; Before they moved in with us, this chummy pair of Ralph Lauren Polo bears, a gift to my father, lived in Virginia, where presumably the moth holes originated.

Opposite: A peeling green cupboard stores wardrobe essentials—socks, scarves, and underwear, as well as the open precious collections of books, favorite saints, a wire birdcage, and paintings. A blue painting by my mother tucked behind St. Theresa standing her ground on a wooden box decorated with red florets.







The first thing you see when you enter the world of 12D is a giant wooden dough bowl filled with a cargo of metal painted bananas. Howard gave them to me so long ago that neither one of us can remember why or when or where he could possibly have discovered them. For sure they send a message to all that enter—"Do not take this home too seriously! Just come on in and have fun, fun, fun!" They are so heavy that once they found a home on that long wooden table in our hallway they've never wandered. The handmade wooden violin above is another fake—a stage prop of some sort. The pair of framed mirrors, one of which reflects a pair of huge birds in a painting by my friend Tom Judd, were a housewarming present from my mother and father. I smeared red paint on the plastic battery-operated candles to give them a little life. The large rusty lantern is lit every night in homage to the distressed statue of an unknown saintly woman in prayer who stood for years next to a fireplace at Muskettoe Pointe Farm, our family home in Virginia. That was where we grew up with hordes of Saint Bernards, and because my father loved them so, I was always giving him vintage portraits of them, like the one crouching under the violin.