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ONE
WOMAN,
TWO

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BOYFRIENDS

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JULY 2004
USA \$3.50
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02492



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THE CLOSET CASE

WHY ARE MORE AND MORE WOMEN FINDING THAT CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO IMPOSSIBLE? THE NEWEST PATHOLOGY AMONG OTHERWISE SUCCESSFUL, PULLED-TOGETHER WOMEN IS CLUTTER RUN AMOK. BY KATHLEEN FIFIELD

Ron Alford's four o'clock is waiting outside her house in an outer borough of New York City. Dressed in black, wearing Uggs, and restraining a small dog in an orange sweater, Julie is a template of Sunday chic as she walks toward us. But a look of alarm threads her well-tweezed brows, and she apologizes profusely for the mess we're going to find inside.

Whatever lurks there, it's unlikely to spook Alford. As the founder of Disaster Masters, a "crisis management" company in Queens, New York, he's seen and cleaned it all: sewage

leaks, suicides, fire damage, brains. His background is in insurance and fire- and water-damage restoration, but for the past 10 years Alford, 63, has focused on a different type of domestic trouble: He calls it disposophobia, as in fear of getting rid of stuff. In a world obsessed with shelter magazines, where bad habits are cleaned up as fast as you can say *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Alford exposes the suburban reality that some people can't make peace, let alone design statements, with their stuff.

Like Julie (not her real name), a 42-year-old cosmetic surgery nurse, the pack rats Alford digs out are not, for the most part, old bars hoarding plastic bags. His disposophobics are "bright, educated, and almost always women," he says. They tend to cluster by type: health care workers who are "great at taking care of people but can't take care of themselves"; Madison Avenue matrons "with more money than brains"; schoolteachers who "live at home until their parents die and become completely dysfunctional"; intellectuals, including professors and "dozens" of psychologists; and shopaholics. "Out and about, they look wonderful," he says. Inside are the kinds of messes that take days to remove.

We saw one such mess during an appointment earlier in the day with another woman: a sweet, well-spoken 37-year-old MBA who worked, appropriately enough, for a toy and collectibles company. Her prewar apartment was a maze of mounds, with zigzagging pathways carved through the up-to-

eight-foot piles of clothes, appliances, and pet cages—all replete with droppings from her pet ferrets. She told us her refrigerator had not been opened in a year. A sign posted on an archway pointed the way to the bathroom. "Is there a couch under there? Do I see a chair?" Alford asked in all seriousness.

But inside Julie's recently renovated kitchen, things don't look that bad. The clutter consists of a Louis Vuitton knockoff handbag, nursing magazines, and Gevalia coffee shipments. The problem is her bedroom. Earlier, on the phone, she told me she honestly couldn't remember when the room had gotten so bad



that she'd had to close the door and bar everyone—from her boyfriend to the cleaning woman—from ever stepping foot inside. For the past few years, even she hasn't gone in; she sleeps on the couch. "The radiator is broken; the steam is so intense in there. I guess that has allowed something to...fester," she said, haltingly. The room that now gives her recurring nightmares (in which all of her things spill onto the street and block traffic) is the one she once shared with her husband, with the baby crib beside their bed. They separated when

her daughter, now a teenager, was one. "I have a lot of memories in that room," she said.

Not to mention mold. When we peek inside, it's splattered like black paint along the walls and ceiling. There are, as Julie notes, "no surfaces" or floor space. On top of the jagged heap, I spot the detritus of a seemingly normal life: a box of baking soda, Legos, a video promising *Secrets to Perfect Hair*, a paperback copy of *Withering Heights*. It's random, strange, but—if you can ignore the mold—not filthy or, in Alford's lexicon, "organic" (think waste products—which, yes, some people do hoard). It's just littered, as if year after year Julie opened the door and tossed inside whatever she happened to have in her hand.

Alford's goal for the day is to come up with an estimate for Julie's initial cleanup, but he's also interested in "fixing her brain," as he tells me later, or at least the part that seems to prevent her from putting anything away. Doing so, he readily admits, will not be based on any specific schooling. "Being

a certified hypnotherapist," he says, "is one of the only qualifications I have in terms of professional training. Other than that, I'm out of the box and off the radar screen." He calls the one-on-one coaching he often gives to clients a "bonus."

So after he crawls into the room, snaps a few photos, and turns off the radiator, which has spit out enough steam over the years to eat through layers of wall, he turns to Julie. "All of this is a reflection of what's going on up here," he announces, tapping his own head. He starts to dig around: "How long have you been depressed? When are you going to start living for yourself?" The topics of conversation meander from her demanding, appearance-obsessed clients to her daughter's recent search for her father, Julie's ex-husband.

"Here's the bottom line," Alford concludes after an hour and a half of conversation. "You've got great looks, a great skill, lots of assets. But you're allowing too many things to come in and f---k it up for you." Later, as we're sitting in his Volvo, Alford calls Julie's bedroom "chump change," not even a 2 on his 1-to-9 clutter scale (although he later upgrades it to a 5). "I can fix that room in two hours, but there's more going on in there than that," he says.

"This vase is not your grandmother. You can get rid of it and still have the memories."

Like her obvious shame over her clutter, Julie's underlying issues are typical of those of Alford's disphobics. But Alford predicts that unlike those forced by co-op boards or relatives to accept his services, Julie won't be a difficult client because she doesn't seem particularly attached to her possessions. As Alford puts it, "She's malleable. She's not obsessive, not making big noises. I think we can do what we want with her."

It was only recently, in 1996, that psychologists defined compulsive-hoarding syndrome, the condition used to describe the most severe pack rats. "The term *compulsive* was a reasonable fit for people's compelling need to acquire things and great difficulty getting rid of them," says Gail Steketee, PhD, a professor at the Boston University School of Social Work who, with Randy Frost, PhD, a psychology professor at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, has done much of the research in the field. So far they've focused on the syndrome's link to obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), an umbrella diagnosis that signifies the combination of mental obsessions and behavioral compulsions. As in you can't stop thinking that your hands are dirty, so you keep washing them.

But recently their research has led them to see hoarding as possibly distinct from OCD. For one thing, OCD, by definition, involves disturbing or upsetting obsessions. But many hoarders find the process of acquiring their loot enjoyable—making it more like an impulse disorder (such as gambling) than an obsessive-compulsive one. It's in their inability to dispose of things, Steketee says, that the negative-mood and OCD comparisons come into play.

One recent study by neuroscientists at the University of Iowa

discovered a possible link between severe and sudden cases of hoarding and brain damage to the prefrontal cortex, which governs, among other things, the ability to judge something's value. Steketee and Frost's research has shown that severe cluttering cases nearly always involve depression, anxiety, or both. Around 75 percent of sufferers are women, many of whom have a family history of the problem. The tendency to hoard is often first exhibited in the twenties and gets worse with age.

At the heart of most issues with clutter, pathological or not, Steketee says, are "strong emotions and beliefs that are in the way." Mike Nelson, the author of *Stop Clutter From Stealing Your Life*, thinks fear is often the roadblock. "It's usually fear of making a mistake, fear of making a decision, fear of lack, fear of failure," he says. "For instance, I'd better hold onto these recipes because if I get rid of them it's like admitting I'll never make those perfect meals." Shelli Alexander, a professional organizer who's been featured on TLC network's home-makeover show *Clean Sweep* and on *Oprah*, says that many of her clients quickly reveal the source of their ambivalent feelings. "A lot of times it's a reaction to how they grew up. They're pack rats because

their parents were. And they'll repeat, verbatim, things like, 'Money doesn't grow on a tree! Or they grew up in such pristine environments that they rebelled against that.'"

To that extent, clutter is like food—everyone has some issue with it. "It's definitely a continuum. All of us have a little piece of this somewhere in our lives," says Steketee. Although she also notes that there is a clear dividing line along the spectrum. Once you've crossed into having "living spaces significantly cluttered so as to preclude activities for which those spaces were designed" (as part of the definition of compulsive hoarding goes), chances are the regular self-help routes to order aren't going to help you. "*Organizing From the Inside Out*? I have thrown more of those books away than any other human on earth," Alford says, referring to the *New York Times* best-seller that tells readers how to organize according to their personality.

"The books about helping you get organized don't cut to the root of the problem, which is the volume," says Christine (also not her real name), 32, an IT manager in the Washington, DC, area. During the heyday of her and her husband's hoarding, they devoted three rooms and two attics to "storage" and had one closet stacked floor to ceiling with computers and a pantry filled with a several-year supply of canned goods. "We're so alike we kind of fed off each other," she says. "We started out with one fish tank. But we loved the fish tank so much we acquired more fish tanks. When we moved out of our townhouse we had 14 tanks. When we moved into our single-family house, we had 26."

Christine says she realized she had a problem soon after she passed the 1994 Foreign Service entrance exam: "I looked at

the house and thought, There's no way I could pack up and go to a foreign country. And what if I had kids? I know there are people who get busted by social services for having this much clutter." Finding Mesites Anonymous online helped her examine her prodigious stash with a new eye. "I realized I had been keeping it all because I thought it had value, even though it didn't have value to me." Five years and hundreds of bags of donations (and hundreds of dollars in tax write-offs) later, Christine considers herself in the end stages of recovery. "It's a successful week," she says, "if I've disposed of at least one Hefly bag of stuff." Maintenance includes regular viewing of *Clean Sweep*, as she puts it, "to hear the same things over and over again: 'This vase is not your grandmother. You can get rid of the vase and still have the memories.'"

Alexander says that regular purging, while critical, is just the beginning of clutter control. "There have to be systems in place for how to deal with things like incoming mail, business cards you get," she says. The idea is to spend time on the front end deciding where things belong and which routines you'll employ to put them there so that you never need to stop and wonder where something should go. If it sounds like an impossible dream—or a giant pain—Alexander says you might just need some outside assistance. "There's a huge gap," she says, "between the need and those seeking help."



At 9:30 one unseasonably cold spring morning, Julie's hired pros are stripping off their shirts in the street and pulling on their uniforms: black T-shirts emblazoned with DISASTER MASTERS in white. "The neighbors," Julie moans as she peeks out of her kitchen window, Alford bounces on his heels nearby.

As his "band of merry men" streams in, Alford starts up some of the day's "neuro-linguistic programming and Ericksonian hypnotherapy," which seems to amount to his planting himself directly in front of Julie's face and delivering a very long pep talk in which she is asked to imagine—and verbalize without using the words *try* or *maybe*—what she wants her space and her life to be like. "Minimalist," she offers at one point, without enthusiasm. Mostly she would rather talk about feeling physically ill about this whole project and her daughter's reunion with her father, which happened just last week. "You've told me that story two times, almost word for word," Alford says after one of Julie's panicked run-ons. "You need to create a new story for yourself."

Today's \$1,800 job entails four men spending four hours doing search, salvage, and debris removal. It is not, as the contract says, meant "to be construed as a decorating project." Nor does it sound like one as Alford barks out the day's assignments: "You: garbage! You: jewelry! You: papers!" The workers each kneel on a mound and start tossing items to

one another. "Jewelry!" Augustine calls, then sends a gold chain flying over to André, who's bagging valuables and photos. "Bathroom! Bathroom! Who's got bathroom?" someone hollers. "Bag! Over here! Bag!" Every item, every scrap, every single sheet of paper is eyeballed before it heads into a black bag (garbage) or a clear one (to be sorted later).

From the depths come a passport, checkbooks, an Amex card, an engraved invitation to Senator Edward Kennedy's sixty-fourth birthday party at the Plaza in 1996, a nightstick, approximately 20 duffel bags, naturalization papers, a *Saturday Night Fever* album, *The Body Principal* by Victoria Principal, and sure enough, *Organizing From the Inside Out*, the flash-card set. The pace of work is furious, but after an hour only a three-foot-square patch is clear to the carpet. After two hours,

Alford briefly jumps into the fray, sorting with both hands at a remarkable speed. "Look at that—pure mold," he says, waving a blackened finger at me.

Around 1 P.M., Alford brings a small plastic bag of papers into the kitchen for Julie to sort for practice. She warily picks out a sheet, reads, stops, and exhales loudly. She stares at the sheet, then lays it on the table. It's a petition she filed in the New York State Family Court and details a scene from her ugly split: "...did force his way into bedroom...threatening to kill her and take the child out of country...took out a knife...took child...police...."

Alford reads it over her shoulder and his face softens. "You can choose to dwell or you can decide you have a long life to live and you're going to put this behind you," he says encouragingly. Finally Julie tosses it into the trash. A few minutes later, she manages a giggle as Alford tears up a solicitation for donations. "You can't throw that away! It's from the Mayo Clinic!" she shouts in mock horror. In the bedroom the carpet is clear, vacuumed even, and three guys are working on scrubbing the mold. A second closet has emerged from what had been a wall of clothes and books.

Julie is summoned to start in on the larger-scale sorting. She hesitates in front of the sea of clear plastic bags. Then she roots through one, pulls out an animal-print scarf, and marks the rest for garbage. Next, a bag of books. "They might have value," Alford notes. Toss. "There are credit cards in there," cautions one of the workers, Pitch. "We could send some of this stuff to St. Mary's," Alford suggests. Nope. Gone.

By 2 P.M., two car lengths of industrial-size garbage bags line the curb. When I call Julie a few days later to check in, she says that even though it seemed silly when Alford took her hand and made her say it, she's been walking around repeating her new mantra, "I am an organized person." She and her daughter have scraped the walls in preparation for a fresh coat of paint. "Now it's just a room," she says, struggling to express her amazement. "It's just an empty room." □