

Clearing out the house reveals owner secrets

by Mary Ellen Collins

My family recently emptied our 96-year-old great aunt Annie's house in preparation for selling it. None of us had been especially close to her, so cleaning out her home provided a few interesting insights. We discovered that she was fashion-conscious (60-plus pairs of shoes and dozens of outfits, including silky lounging pajamas); meticulous (hand-written accounts of every bill she'd ever paid); and egocentric (two dozen formal wedding portraits, two of which included Uncle Mike and 20 that showcased only the beaming bride).

We traded theories about Annie and Mike's life, but the conjecture took some weird turns when my niece found a human molar in Uncle Mike's workbench; I stumbled on two dusty splits of Paul Masson wine in the guest room; and my sister-in-law discovered three clinical marriage manuals in a coat closet. I laughed along with the crowd, but a question hovered at the back of my mind.

"What on earth are people going to say when it's our turn?"

I start picturing my brother's kids going through our house after

John and I are gone. I know they won't run into a tooth or any other body parts. The closest we get is one drawer in the bathroom that holds too many dental impressions that we've hung onto for no good reason.

We own hundreds of books, but never had a need for a how-to marital guide. In the closets, people will find clothes organized by color (mine) and hangers hung backwards on the rods — John still hasn't convinced me that all left-handed people do it this way. The bureaus hold no surprises, except for the broken chair leg nestled in with John's T-shirts. It's his untested but handy weapon for nighttime burglars.

They won't find liquor in the guest room, but we might merit a comment about keeping scotch in the fridge, which everyone except us thinks is strange. They may wonder why people who never have young kids around stock a supply of Dora the Explorer Dixie cups. John bought them once because they were cheap and the right size for his morning hit of juice, so they became one of our regular, go-to items.

And what will they think about the dozens of magazine subscription



ILLUSTRATION BY HEIDI BIRKY GOLDMAN

cards they find on the floor behind the couch? I hate when the cards fall out while I'm reading, and dropping them back there turned into a bad habit. We do consign them to the trash when we vacuum, but whoever moves the furniture after my demise might see the hidden dark side of their otherwise neurotically tidy relative.

I mentally go through every room in our house, and decide that John's and my neatnik natures have created an environment in which there are no embarrassing surprises that would prompt the same shrieking reac-

tion that the tooth and the marriage manuals did. An exploration of our closets and drawers might draw eye-rolling commentary like, "Oh my God, they alphabetized the spices!" "They folded their rags!" "They organized the medications by ailment!"

And if that's the worst they can come up with, I will rest in peace.

Mary Ellen Collins and her husband, John, live in Boca Raton, Fla. When she's not grappling with the ups and downs of making a house a home, Mary Ellen reads, does yoga and worries about coming up with column ideas. E-mail her at maryellen@angieslist.com.