

I FELT LIKE A HOARDER.

*Was my bedbug scourge an intervention
in disguise?*

I ONCE HEARD IMELDA Marcos' shoe collection had 3,000 pairs, and Sarah Jessica Parker had a walk-in closet dedicated exclusively to her extensive shoe wardrobe. On a much lesser scale, I, too, had been no slouch in amassing my own footwear stash.

I never imagined I owned so many shoes until I discovered bedbugs in my New York City apartment one summer.

My bedbug saga began at my job at a major Manhattan art museum when I suddenly became aware of itchy, unsightly reddish welts running down my arms and ankles.

"Look at all these bites!" I said to my colleagues, who gasped and cringed as I grabbed a Band-Aid to cover the bloody bite I had unconsciously scratched.

I assumed my welts were allergic reactions to mosquito bites. "No," said a nurse friend when I showed them to her a few days later. "We had a bedbug breakout at the hospital. Those are dead ringers for bedbug bites. Check it out on the Internet."

It took me a day to muster the courage to go online. Once I saw the photos of bedbug bites and read the first-person accounts of human bedbug suffering, I knew I was in deep trouble. As new welts appeared on my body that itched non-stop, I slept in jeans and long sleeves in 90-degree heat to ward off the bedbugs' parasitic feeding frenzy.

Even with the air conditioner turned on full blast, I found myself profusely sweating, unable to sleep. With my anxiety and insomnia levels soaring, I don't know how I functioned at work in the following days.

Feeling ostracized by my colleagues at work made me feel worse. Everyone stayed away from me, never offering support, even though I was clearly rattled by the bedbug situation at home. I later learned they were warned by museum management not to engage with me. Management worried I would sue them as the source of my infestation or report it to the media, which would have shut down the museum at the peak of tourist season. Worried about the stigma surrounding bed-

bugs, I stopped socializing with friends. Would you want to be near me or come to my infested apartment if you knew I had bedbugs?

Most upsetting was the fact I never saw my blood-sucking roommates. Their invisibility made me feel helpless, vulnerable, and at their mercy. Where were they hiding? The bedbug-sniffing beagle that visited my apartment three times detected their presence, not only in the mattress and electrical sockets but in shoes I had left on the bedroom and living room floors. Who would have guessed that bedbugs shared my affinity for shoes?

To rid myself of the home intruders, the exterminator instructed me to throw out my mattress and empty my closets and drawers. Every article had to be steamed or put through the dryer at the hottest setting and then sealed in a plastic bag for two weeks.

More than 60 shoeboxes, potential bedbug hideouts, had to be tossed. My steamed shoes alone took up five oversized garbage bags that sat in heaps in my living room.

Two months after the initial infestation, I was finally deemed "bedbug-free." My long-awaited return to a normal life without the creepy crawlers invading my body and space motivated me to embark on a fresh, clean start. I had the closets and bedroom painted. And I vowed to purge my home of clutter. Unnecessary papers, books languishing on shelves, and decades' worth of clothes and shoes that no longer fit, were "too vintage," or just took up space for no reason... all had to go! "Simplify! Purge! Let Go!" became my mantra.

My purge campaign took off to a stunning start. With the help of my sister, a natural-born purger, I sorted through the bags of clothing piled high in my living room. In one weekend, we lugged 11 bags of clothing to my neighborhood Goodwill Thrift Store.

I felt like a hoarder saved by an intervention. Was my bedbug scourge an intervention in disguise?

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A former New Yorker, Fredricka R. Maister is now a Philadelphia-based essayist/memoirist. Her personal essays and op-eds have appeared in a variety of print and online publications, including the Baltimore Sun, Miami Herald, Chicago Tribune, Philadelphia Inquirer, Big Apple Parent, New York Jewish Week, Philadelphia Jewish Exponent, The Times of Israel, The Forward, OZY, The Manifest-Station, Broad Street Review, and ICON. maisterf@gmail.com

painting will not look right in regular light. There was no shade to be had, so the only solution was to turn the easel toward the light. That way, the sun shines on the back of the panel, which casts its shadow on the pallet. Good for the painting. Hard on the painter.

I sat on the step and looked over my shoulder to see the pig inside; then I would turn back toward the easel, pick up paint, and add the brushstroke. A hat with a serviceable bill is a part of my standard kit, painting indoors and out, and I needed it here. I swiveled back and forth, observing inside and painting outside for nearly five hours, adjusting the angle of the easel as the sun moved across the sky. While exhausting, the constant change of direction did provide me with an even rotisserie tan.

The pig doesn't have a name; she is identified by a series of markings on her ear. It's a farm thing. I called her Rosie. She looks like a Rosie. Actually, she looks like a sofa. Rosie is a big pig, and she wasn't comfortable with the soon-to-be babies and the heat. She was stretched out on the wood floor, motionless, with not much more than a glance for me as I worked a dozen feet away. I knew I was taking a risk when I began—how long can you expect a pig to lie in one spot? About 20 minutes into the painting, she dragged herself up on her feet, grunted and spit, lurched sideways, and slumped against the other wall, facing the opposite direction.

It's important to have a Plan B. I had brought two panels—one sienna-toned and one light gray—so I swapped them out and started over. If she decided to move to a third place, there was no Plan C. It's not like I would pack up and paint someplace else if the first two fell through. It was Rosie or nothing.

The gestation period for pigs is a predictable 114 days, or as farmer Matt explained, three months, three weeks, and three days. I'll wait while you check the math. Of course, if you don't know when the sow had her big night, delivery day is a guessing game. When Matt thinks she is a week or two away, he will move her to a labor room, which is more appropriate for giving birth (what we in the pig-know refer to as farrowing), and a safer environment for the piglets. She could have a litter of seven to fourteen, and it's best to have them in a space designed to keep them out of trouble. (Update: she had nine)

After another 20 minutes, Rosie got up again, hacked and snorted, turned around, swayed a bit, and dropped against the first wall, taking the original pose. I couldn't have asked for a better repositioning and said thank you. She gave me a wink and slid back into her hot summer stupor. I put the first panel back on the easel and resumed working on that one. Those seemed to be Rosie's two favorite spots, and we went back and forth several times. Two poses, two panels. I ended up with two paintings, which is great, but it took twice as long, with me under the 87° blue sky sunshine. In a pig pen. That really ground me down. Rosie didn't care.

I returned to the farm when the weather was a little kinder and stopped to see my girl. She made her way over to the fence and gave me a smile and a big burp. She was obviously in better spirits than the last time, though I'm sure she does that for everybody. ■

If only the purging of my shoes had been as easy and painless! I left that task for the end, knowing my attachment to shoes would be a daunting obstacle. Sure enough, unlike my clothes, the bags of shoes remained heaped in my living room for months.

Parting with decades-old shoes that no longer accommodated my feet, a full size bigger with a matching set of bunions was a no-brainer. Shoes that were "a little tight" and had not been worn in years were



more problematic. For weeks I kept trying them on, limping from room to room, to convince myself they really were "too tight" to ever wear again.

And then there were my high heels, which I long ago traded in for what I dubbed "old lady shoes," i.e., flats or low heels purchased for comfort at the expense of beauty. Bidding farewell to my high heels, which always made me feel tall, thin, elegant, sophisticated, and yes, young, felt impossible.

For more months than I care to admit, the shoes stayed stuck in garbage bags, I stayed stuck in inaction, and my "Simplify! Purge! Let Go!" mantra stayed stuck on mute.

What then finally extricated me from the stalemate with my shoes? Quite simply, the constant eyesore of the garbage bags crowding my living room, an in-my-face reminder of my bedbug trauma. Even a glance could flash me back to my welt-covered itchy extremities, the sleepless nights, the bedbug-sniffing beagle visits, the endless loads of laundry, and social isolation. Letting go of my shoes and any residual "bedbug PTSD" had to trump holding on to the past infested with those bloodthirsty critters. With that realization, I packed up the shoes and carted them off to a thrift shop.

Even now, I fill with pride and accomplishment whenever I peer into my closet and scan my shoe collection—half of its former self—neatly stacked in transparent plastic, bedbug-free boxes. ■