

**SE** SUNDAY STYLE  
**HD** ALL BETS ON BETTY  
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**WC** 1,834 words  
**PD** 9 November 2014  
**SN** Sunday Herald Sun Sunday Style  
**SC** NLSHSM  
**ED** 1  
**PG** 28  
**LA** English  
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BETTY HALBREICH, BERGDORF GOODMAN'S STORIED PERSONAL SHOPPER (LENA DUNHAM IS MAKING A TV SERIES INSPIRED BY HER) REVEALS HER CLOSET SECRETS

Work keeps me firmly in the present. It's important to have someplace you need to be in the morning. Plus, there's nothing like a 'much-needed' dress that doesn't arrive on schedule to the apartment of a very important client not habituated to waiting that keeps an 86-year-old woman on her toes.

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Yet I recognise how my job also ties me to the past. I cannot let go of the old routines, no matter how outdated or outmoded they may be. For example, I would never dream of going out in public barefaced. I have to put on lipstick and mascara even to travel half a block for a loaf of **bread**. How do I know I won't meet Prince Charming on the way?

The customs ingrained in me are permanent, for good or bad. Although I live alone, I don't eat standing over the sink.

Buying, chopping and cooking food, on the same Roper with six burners I've used ever since first walking into this apartment 60 years ago, gives me fulfilment. Unlike in my mother's dotage, when her larder contained only Champagne, coffee cake, coffee and peanut **butter**, you can walk into my apartment at any time and find plenty to eat for breakfast, lunch, cocktail hour and dinner. My tray is always set with a cloth doily and a napkin, **china**, silverware. I've always felt if I fall into any other habit, everything will take a downward spin.

It's the same with my clothing. I get home, undress, brush my clothes, put them on their hangers and give them an airing before they return to the closet - which, containing a lifetime of garments, is a Narnian portal to times and places that no longer exist.

My clients often ask for advice on how to get rid of clothing. I always say to keep the beautiful pieces: embroidered, beaded or one-of-a-kind looks. They are usually sumptuous and feel new when revisited.

Treat them like lovely antiques. Often the decision whether to keep a garment hinges on size. Bodies change over the years. If you're a size 14, the size 8 in the back of ye olde closet will never make it on the new you. Toss!

My biggest advice for closet cleaning, however, is: do as I say, not as I do. Tossing my own clothing is very hard. Every item seems to have a label attached, and I don't mean Dior or Givenchy. Rather, my mother bought it for me, or it was worn with Jim [her partner of 29 years, who died suddenly] on our last New Year's Eve together.

I'm my own worst enemy. I even had trouble bidding adieu to my wedding dress that began a failed marriage and that my mother-in-law returned to me the day I got back from the mental hospital [Halbreich attempted suicide when her disastrous first marriage ended]. To let it go, I had to find it a home, which took me years. It had little meaning yet represented something momentous. What's in a dress, anyway, worn for a couple of hours and rarely worn again?

Enough that I spent a year convincing the University of Minnesota's Weisman Art Museum, home to a large period clothing collection, to take it.

I can collect because I have the luxury of 12 closets. (Closet space is the one benefit of living alone.) That kind of storage space, which doesn't exist any more, is as anachronistically luxurious as the clothes they hold. (But, my god, do I need a Kenzo from my daughter's wedding 27 years ago or evening shoes I can't get a toe into but are too beautiful to toss?) Being very compulsive and single, I can arrange, rearrange and do whatever I please.

The closets in my bedroom have shoe doors constructed in the 1950s by a closet shop the kind we used for custom hangers, poles to reach high places, custom-made moulding and quilted cotton lining for the shelves, all done in the colour of your choice. My beloved shoe door that holds about a dozen pairs suspended by the heels leaves the floor bare so dust bunnies do not gather.

The first closet has one long rod where I hang pants, each on its own pant hanger.

Skirts, next, hang the same way. Long ago I found brace dividers that slip over the pole, with each divider holding three blouses, shirts or cardigans, so each garment does not get creased. On this gadget I hang all my shirts by colour: white, coloured, stripes, then prints. Above the rod are two shelves that house handbags. The top holds large bags, baskets or summer leathers. The lower has smaller handbags and clutches with two quilted boxes on either side for out-of-season items such as summer T-shirts or winter sweaters, depending on what month it is.

All are very easy to reach.

The second closet in the bedroom, which has another shoe door to accommodate the shoes I wear every day, has one shelf in the back that houses absolutely nothing. Imagine that luxury! It is too high to put anything on, and I don't need it for storage. This closet holds my dresses. (I wear a lot of dresses if I can find them. If not, I constantly wear my old favourites Geoffrey Beene, Issey Miyake, early Michael Kors.) From a lower rod hang seasonal jackets - lightweight summer in the back, a bit heavier cottons in the front. I keep sachets on hangers often to divide: pants, sachet, skirts, sachet, etc.

If any of the clients I had admonished over the years for being the "more child" could see my bedroom, they would surely tell the physician to heal herself. For beyond the closets are three dressers, sitting side by side, where the goods inside look as if they're about to be **sold**, so exactly are they placed.

The first dresser is filled with curios: old belt buckles, Mother's silk flowers that I often pin on my lapel in the spring, change purses from my grandmother, a fan of black ostrich feathers that was my great-grandmother's, a handmade satin Geoffrey Beene belt.

On to the second dresser, which houses scarves folded and stacked end-up, like index cards in a library's filing system. The second drawer is lingerie: nightgowns, underpinnings and petticoats from my original trousseau. I tie them in bundles with ribbon and, just like Mother, throw in an empty perfume bottle for good measure. In the bottom drawer are summer pantyhose in bags and turtleneck T-shirts in all colours that my adorable household person has given me over the years. I often wear them under sweaters. Cotton is kind.

The third dresser is my playground. The bottom drawer holds the evening bags that are no longer practical for me as a single woman to use without the availability of man's pockets to stuff - including a very rare minaudière of real gold from Venice that was a 50th-birthday present from a mother who wanted me to have the world. I've never seen another like it. I can't tell you the jewellery I have that's lying in gutters and taxicabs, yet there is still enough left over to fill the other two drawers of the dresser.

Clothing is no different from traditions or memories; it's a blessing when newer generations take them on happily. I love when children of clients pilfer their mother's closet same as I did to my mother's wardrobe as a young person.

That's a true compliment to taste.

I now have three generations of clients. There are the originals, or what's left of them anyway (fitting their walkers and wheelchairs into the dressing room is the hardest part!); their daughters, whom I knew as children and are now into middle age; and now their granddaughters.

I consider it the best commendation when I win over the 13-year-olds, because they're my toughest customers. As soon as they enter my dressing room, I know they're thinking, "No way this old lady is going to dress me."

My failproof method is to first send away the mothers. I send these 'helicopter parents' (a completely foreign notion, taught to me by my grandson) flying right out of my dressing room. These young people get to try their wings - and taste - with me. I will let them choose the outrageous, and I'll pull what I believe is appropriate, and we end up sometimes in their corner, sometimes in mine. But the end result is always sheer happiness for both of us.

The young girls of today all dress way too maturely, but you can't take one and make her stand out from the others in an adorable little chiffon dress. That would make for some kind of miserable evening! They dress for their peers - don't all women? - not for what I or their mothers want. I forget my own daughter and her smocked dresses; another life, when a 13-year-old chooses a silver bandage dress. I simply do it in good taste and show alternatives. I try to steer them away from the herd and make them understand the beauty of individuality.

When we did a sequinned dress for one of my long-standing clients' granddaughters ... her face lit up. And it kept getting lighter and lighter as we made the dress shorter and tighter. She kept looking up at me, and I kept saying, "That's OK." It's dress-up. I don't have a problem with it. I love that age **group** and what they have to teach me.

I can still learn, even though lord knows I've observed a lot over the years. Once, when a woman in the elevator found me familiar and asked, "Did you used to work here?" a buyer exclaimed, "Work here? She was born here!" Indeed, it seems to many that I'm older and more steadfast than the limestone that makes up the store's edifice.

People often ask me, "How do you do it?" I don't feel so great every day. But I rise, dress and am off to work, rain or shine. Ageing can be scary if you let it obsess you. As soon as I turn the key in the office door, I'm alive and ready for the fight of the day.

Idle hands and brain make for unhappiness.

This is an edited extract from *I'll Drink to That!* (Hachette Australia, \$32.99), by Betty Halbreich, which is out now.

**IN** i453 : Clothing | iclt : Clothing/Textiles | icnp : Consumer Goods

**RE** victor : Victoria (Australia) | apacz : Asia Pacific | ausnz : Australia/Oceania | austr : Australia

**PUB** News Ltd.

**AN** Document NLSHSM0020141109eab90000f