

## The Vacuum Cleaner by Rose Saltman

‘What’s in there?’ the woman from removalist Company A asked, tugging the handle. She’d been through every corner of our two-bedroom apartment, poking our clothes, inspecting our pots and pans, pawing at our furniture. Now she was trying to break the lock on the hall cupboard.

‘Nothing,’ I said, denying her one last assault on our privacy.

Company B, which ended up moving our goods from Cape Town to Sydney, provided cartons for any household contents Mike and I wished to pack ourselves. They were to be labelled “PBO” - packed by owner. Twelve dozen bottles of wine, the contents of the locked cupboard, went into these boxes, each bottle packed into a soft cardboard sleeve and sandwiched between rolls of toilet tissue. The boxes were labelled, “toilet paper.” Whatever they might have thought, the packers were discreet about our fetish and, in particular, its weight.

To save money at the other end, we bought new appliances in Cape Town. The vacuum cleaner came with one of those replaceable dust bags that fit inside the machine. We inserted an envelope with a parcel of US dollars into a dust bag and clicked it into place. No one would think to look there.

Within two weeks of arriving in Sydney, we’d found a two-bedroom rental in Glebe, a funky suburb a couple of kilometres west of the central business district. Our apartment was a tight space compensated by water views and easy proximity to work, entertainment and restaurants. It was also within earshot of a container terminal.

We made do with hired furniture until our goods arrived. We augmented this with a TV and two Ikea wardrobes, which introduced us to the concept of DIY and Australia’s fondness for abbreviation. In the absence of an iron, I found I could achieve an Elna-Press effect by arranging laundered shirts and trousers across the back of a lounge chair and leaning into them while watching TV.

The container terminal operated around the clock. The sound of containers being lowered onto the dock was more noticeable at night and the occasional bang of metal hitting concrete jolted me awake. Would our bottles survive the high seas only to be shattered within cooee of our front door?

The wine made it. I started to smile as I saw two items that had found their way, uninvited, into our container. Why my mother thought we might change our minds about leaving behind a scratched frying pan and saucepan set, I still don’t know.

But where was the vacuum cleaner? ‘We may have taken it out for fumigation,’ the removalist’s Sydney office said, as Mike tried to swallow his panic.

The vacuum cleaner eventually emerged in one of the boxes. The dust bag and its contents hadn’t been touched since we last saw them in Cape Town. We did not buy toilet paper for two years.

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**Written by Rose Saltman in April, 2024**

### **A word about me:**

Rose Saltman grew up in Cape Town and moved to Sydney in 1981. While trained as an urban planner, more recently she has come to writing as a creative outlet. Her short stories have featured in *The Guardian*, *The Brevity Blog*, *The Ilford Review* and *Overland*, among others. More about Rose is at <https://rmpplanning.com.au/> and <https://rosegaltman.wordpress.com/>.

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