

A defining moment



Month end means moving day for many people. The minivans stuffed haphazardly with cardboard boxes, couches tilting

from pickup truck tailgates, and blue tarps flapping in the breeze conjure memories.

I moved numerous times in my teens and 20s. My best friend at the time, who we'll call Eddy to protect the names of the innocent, dutifully lugged stereo speakers, albums, dressers, beds and other stuff. I'd call, buy beer, and steady Eddy was there. For the most part, he was, and is, one of the most accommodating fellows I've known. Perhaps, when we were younger, too much so. But that was not the case one summer day in Dallas in 1987.

"Louie," he said over the phone, "my sister-in-law is moving to South Dakota and I need help. Gonna start early Saturday morning. I'll buy the beer."

Enough said.

Saturday broke sunny, hot and humid. Whistling, congratulating myself on my maganimous helping of a friend, I strolled around the corner of the sister-in-law's apartment complex and into a moving day hell.

"Hold on, fellas, hold on," Eddy hollered.

Across the open-air quadrangular, Eddy's lanky 6-foot-2-inch frame arched backward over a second-floor iron railing, a couch crushing his chest. Three slight guys clung to the other end, hands slipping on the slick Naugahyde, and stag-

gered down another step.

"Stop. Stop, for God sakes," Eddy yelled, panic piercing his accommodating soul.

I froze.

In the golf movie, "Tin Cup," Kevin Costner's character, Roy "Tin Cup" McAvoy, talks about defining moments.

"You know why I still hit that shot?" he says to his caddie Romeo (Cheech Marin) after losing the U.S. Open by refusing to lay up. "I hit it again because that shot was a defining moment, and when a defining moment comes along, you define the moment ... or the moment defines you."

Eddy's back was to me, the three little guys blinded by sweat.

I take no pride in admitting this, but, yes, fight or flight kicked in and flight won hands down. A defining moment stretched before me.

Perhaps it was Eddy's good deeds and/or my own guilt. Perhaps a solid upbringing by two parents who survived the Depression and WWII and never complained. More likely, it was the free, cold beer awaiting at the end of the day.

"Hey, hey," I shouted and ran across the quadrangle and up the stairs.

Eyes-wide, Eddy gasped in relief.

"OK, guys," I said, grabbing a corner of the couch. "Now you can come down ... slowly."

Headline grabbing, "look at the stupid way this guy died," death averted, Eddy and I reconnoitered at the apartment.

Now, there are certain laws, etiquette, codes, if you will, that we live by in order to maintain civilized society and

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keep the barbarians at the gate. They mostly go unspoken, sewn deep into our communal moral fabric:

Don't speak ill of the dead. Every baby is beautiful. Don't ask what's being served when invited to supper.

Here's another: When asking people to help you move, do as much packing as possible prior to moving day.

As Eddy and I surveyed the two-bedroom apartment, there was one packed box and dirty dishes in the sink.

"Hey," I said hey to Eddy's wife, Polly, a petite brunette.

"Mr. Pemberton, thank God," she said, rising from the floor, an assortment of, well, junk and partially filled boxes scattered around her. "I'm really sorry."

"No, no," I said, following another unwritten protocol to feign an all-is-well-don't-be-embarrassed attitude toward friends who are in an awkward social position. "Glad to help. I'd feel awful if I wasn't here."

Silently, I chastised myself for ignoring my God-given,

genetically wired right to flight.

"I've got one question, though," I said. "What's that?"

"That," Polly said, pointing toward a 6-foot-tall, wooden pole with real tree limbs protruding and various boards attached, "is a cat tree."

"God, I hate cats," I said.

The sister-in-law, a taller version of Polly, popped her head out of a bedroom.

"Time to attack that bedroom," Polly said, with a wave and smile, employing her own all-is-well etiquette.

Eddy shrugged his shoulders.

I shook hands with Larry, the brother-in-law, and the two other tiny guys, who soon left, exercising better judgment than the stairwell episode foretold.

Daylight burning, the Dallas heat rising, Eddy and I attacked as well. Larry did what he could, packed, carried some lamps, but truth be told, it was best he stepped aside.

Eddy and I knew each other so well having worked together since we were teenagers unloading boxcars, walking beans, along with playing basketball and tennis, that we did not need to speak much to communicate. Plus, we were 26 years old and in great shape.

We packed, hauled out trash, lugged chairs, tables, box springs, mattresses, bed frames, recliners and box after box down the two flights and up the ramp of the U-Haul. Larry ordered pizza. We gulped it down, guzzled water and kept rolling.

By supper time, the truck was full. Not an inch to spare. Dripping sweat, Eddy and I

high-fived and plopped down on the bottom step.

"Don't forget the cat tree," the sister-in-law called, materializing from the apartment doorway.

Larry lurched down the stairs like the Hunchback of Notre Dame, cat tree in tow.

"Stop right there," Eddy said, leaping to his feet. "There's no room in the truck for that thing. It's packed. Tight."

Polly joined her sister and stared down at us.

"Honey," Eddy said, "there's no room."

"But we have to take the cat tree," the sister-in-law insisted.

"I suppose," Larry said, halting his Charles Laughton imitation, "we could go back to U-Haul and get a bigger truck."

I stood with Eddy. We're the same height, but at that moment, at that defining moment, Eddy was taller.

"Well," Eddy said, voice rising, "if you do that, you better get a truck big enough to drive this truck into, because there's no way Louie and me are going to unpack everything and reload it."

The sister-in-law turned toward Polly. And, God bless her, Polly shook her head.

Larry, sister-in-law and Polly drove off to South Dakota.

"C'mon, Louie," Eddy said, as we locked up the apartment, cat tree in the corner. "Beer's on me."

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