

Fridge Magnets

By

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There is an olive-green bathmat in what is now his bathroom. It matched the colour of the soap dish and the handwash bottle. I had bought it thinking it would add the subtle colour the all-white bathroom needed. The bathroom was still not lively enough; it was too plain, too business-like. So, sometime later, I placed four candle cups on the windowsill, beside the incense. These cups were green and yellow and contrasted with the bathmat, the soap dish, and the handwash bottle. I thought there was adequate colour in the bathroom then, still not enough but it was getting somewhere. What about the candle cups? No, those I had not purchased. I took them over from a friend who was moving cities and had things to give away; I like to add lights, colours, and pictures to rooms. I do not, however, always have the money for such bourgeois frivolities, so, I pick things and accept giveaways.

There is a thing in Germany, where I had been to pursue my doctorate, people often leave things by their doors with handwritten notes reading “*Zu verschenken*”, “to take away (to gift)”. There, people’s incomes are high, things are plenty, and so is the rate of people’s mobility and goods turnover. There are things “to gift away”. The city I lived in also had designated days for throwing away the *Sperrmüll*, “the bulky waste” consisting of furniture, crockery, frames, paintings, lamps etc. The *Sperrmüll* is placed out on the street on the designated day for a company to collect. People - of the hippie type or miserly bents, the environmentally conscious or advocates of sustainable lifestyles and scholarship students like me, look forward to the *Sperrmüll* days. They meander the streets searching for an old mirror, a cabinet, a kitchen stool, or a shoe rack. A hippie-environmentalist hybrid friend of mine used to proudly proclaim that all the furniture in her apartment, except the mattress and her plants, was from the *Sperrmüll*. On one of those days, I too had picked two rather nice-looking lamps off the street. One for the bedroom and one for the living room of what is now his home.

Do I bore you with these mundane stories of things in someone else's home? You see, when a metaphor breaks, we rush to tangibles, however small, to scramble for reality. When of all the love spent on building something for years, there is nothing else to claim back, materiality assumes salience. The things scattering the remnants of a shattered home, poorly so, but can imbue the thought, time, energy, effort, and love, building that home consumed. Am I obsessing over the poster of the Wanderer above the sea of fog, from the Hamburg Kunsthalle? Or am I mourning the loss of home? Carrying those bits with me, in between my travels, I had felt both stupid and petty given the limited baggage allowance on international flights. But I was making a home.

I had always dreamt of my own home. Ghulam Abbas wrote a story of a middle-class man and his unrequited quest for a home. "*Katba*" could mean both a "tablet" or a "gravestone". A man has his name engraved on a marble tablet. He aspired to build a home one day; he imagined the tablet to adorn the front door of his home with it. Life happens but home never did until the tablet morphed into an epitaph. It was a man's story who could imagine having a tablet with his name outside his front door. Do women imagine having plaques with their names outside the doors of their homes? I had wondered as a young girl growing up in Pakistan; how many homes have names of women engraved on tablets on their front doors?

Yet, is it the home that I mourn, or do I mourn the memories of those unseen years of my life? The home is still there, and so is the poster, but the memory is lost. Our lives are spent collecting witnesses and evidence of our stories. The diplomas bearing our names, guests at our weddings and funerals, pictures, videos, and Instagram stories, witness our lives. Who bears witness to what transpired between two people building a home while hoping for a life of togetherness but in the outcome falling apart?

There is a conflict between wanting to forget and wanting to remember when two people fall apart. To forget some parts of our own stories is essential for one's sanity. As your world falls apart, there is hardly any choice better than embracing the cruelty that one must move on. The heart and mind must indispensably clear the debris of the past to make room for embracing the new and uncharted, even if reluctantly. Though the mind still wonders, what to say to the next person in your life about the illustrated biography of van Gogh on your table? He too will flounder while narrating bits about the Wanderer to his new woman friend. Perhaps (of course), he would want to forget how playfully he ridiculed me for what he called my attempts to appear cultured by bringing those things home; the traditional yellow, orange, and brown cushions, those plants, Einstein's action figure imploring you to ponder when placed in sunlight. These are the remembrances of a life lived and now lost, and when hundreds of minutes from one's life are lost, there is only grief, mourning and the frantic scrambling for the tangibles. The tangibles that mutter, yes it happened, you were there, you existed and most of all, you mattered.

I cannot pinpoint the reason for wanting a home with a plaque announcing my name outside the front door. It could be because the society I grew up in told me I could not have a home of my own; a woman is supposed to move from her parents' home. If she is lucky, she becomes a partner with her husband in his home, otherwise, she is a guest at the home of her parents-in-law (father-in-law?). I refused to behave and act like a lady; I enjoyed playing in the street and borrowed bicycles too big for me from boys in the street. On these bicycles, I pushed the limits of the radius I was supposed to stay in. I was ten when my father passed away. I often overheard mourners say in their condolences to my mother, "thank God you live in your own home. With four children, where would you go?". It perhaps stuck with me – one must have a job because anything can happen to anyone, and one must have a home of one's own.

I dreamt of having my own home – my front door never locked, open to my friends, and family, where women wanting respite from the suffocations of their parents' homes, or their in-laws' would always be welcomed. I would host parties celebrating one friend or another or just the change of seasons. We'd read each other poetry well into the night, passages from the books on my bookshelves, laugh, play music and dance. It would be like those European homes from the movies with big windows, lamps, colours and pictures, not like our homes where our mothers put coloured cloth sheets with crochets over their big *pettiyan* and guests sit in those same rooms. I refused to imagine such embarrassments as my own home.

Life happened, but my home did not. It is impossible to buy a home on a 17-grade government officer's salary. It is almost impossible to rent a home in Islamabad with that salary too, more still when one is a woman – there is your intersectionality. The years I spent with him, were in his house. Looking back, I believe that when Mohammed Hanif said, "love is not just blind, it's deaf and dumb and probably has an advanced case of Alzheimer's", he meant it muddles your grasp of semantics. Ceasing to distinguish between his, mine, ours, own, as long as I lived there, I assumed these meant the same thing.

It was not typical to read feminist voices in our schoolbooks back in the aughts. There was this one story though, from Khadija Mastoor, or her sister Hajra Masroor, my memory betrays me. All told in a single scene, a husband and wife in an argument. It was more of the husband's tirade against his wife in front of their neighbours whom he had invited. The reader is acquainted with the wife's stream of consciousness; her thoughts wavering about the immediacies as the need to change the curtains in the drawing room or wash the table covers. She felt anxious about the approaching dinnertime, and children's homework. The husband, on the other hand, boasted of fulfilling his duties: providing for his wife and children,

putting food on the table, for building that house. The wife had sold her gold bangles to build his house – he conveniently forgets. The provident fund from the job she left to give time, attention, and care to their children financed his house but is forgotten too. The husband was dissatisfied; exasperated, he says out loud words a traditional woman lives in fear of hearing. A stranger to her husband now, she is immediately asked to leave his house, empty-handed.

I thought I had known better; I had not sacrificed my career for my relationship (although it is difficult to not sacrifice one's career when one is in a relationship with a cis man who grew up in a society as patriarchal as ours. Patriarchy taught him that his work, his ambitions, and his routine are first and foremost and a career is only a part of the self a woman must sacrifice for the relationship to work. The man finds such ideas too convenient for himself to unlearn). I shared expenses with him, sometimes taking on a smaller, at others a bigger share. Not as much as I should have but I saved for rainy days. We never had a joint account or children (those things further complicate break-ups). We shared housework (did we?).

Feminists have a term for it. Reproductive labour – the endless sundry duties performed by women every single day, cooking, cleaning, caring for the children, elderly and the infirmed, laundry, ironing, grocery and it goes on. These endless tasks consume all of the women's time, yet they continue to perform them unacknowledged, unrecognized, and unpaid. Think of preparing and cooking at least three meals every day for a family of four. It starts from the mental work of deciding what to cook, its availability, affordability, nutritional value, taste, preferences etc. Following these mental gymnastics is the buying, sorting, cleaning, cutting, and finally cooking it. Further, it must be well-prepared and served warm and fresh. It does not end here as washing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen remain. Every single day. Men can work to earn because women work. With the

value of women's time, women build houses they do not own. Men's homes stand on the erasure of women's lives – because the hours, days, and years being put into these tasks are life being spent.

We are thankful to feminists for giving us language, but what do you call the labour of making a home? Filling a house with colours and memories? I had picked up *Purple Hibiscus*, and *The Cost of Living* from that bookshop in Prague. It was by coincidence I found that bookshop. I was on my way to the Beatles Wall. It can be difficult to find a bookstore with a decent collection of books in English in Germany; German bookstores (quite impressively) offer German translations. To have come across this bookstore had me on cloud nine. Those books were my memory of Prague and of that rush of excitement. Those coasters from the Vatican Museum, of Rome. The poster of the Chair, of London. We had met a street hawker from Pakistan who was selling hand-painted posters of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. He told us his wife paints the posters. I had wanted to buy a woman's artwork, so we bought it. It was our memory of Barcelona.

Relocating from a home is a violent and simultaneous uprooting from the past, present and the imagined future. A forced re-imagining ensues, of a more difficult, more uncertain future devoid of what was till then the only certainty in the imagination, that one person. The practicalities of the re-imagining and the simultaneous scrambling for the past and the present leave much unprocessed. There are the expediencies of the present to be attended to after it becomes his house - find shelter, safely move the pieces of life to that shelter. In the attempts to numb the aching, broken heart, it becomes mechanical: collect papers, sign contracts to end things, and sign contracts to begin things. Lost in the mechanics of this migration of the past, present and future gathering pieces of oneself is a priority. So, irrevocably, you leave behind so much of what comprised the past and the many things, big and small, bought and picked up, cleaned and organized,

moved and assembled in what one had truly, honestly and lovingly, considered one's own home.

He used to keep a Rubik's cube at his home worktable. I knew the cube had been a gift from his former lover. Conventional ideas of love, monogamy, and fidelity, I believed were too narrow. I flirted with notions of critically examining their principles for which the French philosophers are somewhat to be blamed. I taught myself there did not exist the one, a person may love many people at the same time in similar and different ways. Loving him meant accepting him with his past and the residues of his love for that person and that person's love for him. I honoured this love. As homage to the memory of their relationship, I did not move that Cube or that bracelet that was not mine but lay in one of our dressers. There was a woman's T-shirt too in one of our cupboards. As long as I lived there, I let it stay.

I found out recently that moving is among one of the most stressful life events after a death of a loved one and divorce (or a separation). It is cruel that to be a woman entails having to deal with one of the most stressful of life events while dealing with another one of the most stressful of life events. To this day, I have not moved all my belongings from his place. As scattered as my thoughts, some lay in my office, others at my apartment, a few in my mother's home, and a good many at his. I had moved far to a small, temporary shared place. I never found an appropriate time whenever I was back in what was our city to pick up those things. In actuality, I have not healed enough to go back to our place. But when I think of my future home, I think of the things in his home: the dinner set for special occasions, the embroidered cushion covers hand-made by women artisans in Bahawalpur, those upholstered multicoloured stools now more ubiquitous but were a novelty when I had fallen in love with their colours, and

texture and the canvases I brought from South Africa. Contestations of ownership abound as well – who gets to keep the fridge magnets (and their memories)?

Christmas markets in Germany, the *Weihnachtsmärkte*, are islands of warmth, laughter, and lights, in the dark, cold, wet winters of northern Europe. These are known for expensive kitsch and deep-fried food. In my early years in Germany as a scholarship student, I did not buy any kitsch from the *Weihnachtsmarkt*. The year I was moving to my small, temporary shared place, I did. A string of lights for the window. My mum and I later bought a carpet too. A friend gifted me a camel skin bedside lamp. An old Ajrak covers the second-hand dresser. Pictures adorn the walls. I asked my landlady if I may hammer a few nails in the wall? She said, “of course! It’s your place”. My small, temporary place has adequate light and colour; still not enough but it is getting somewhere. The dream of having my own home feels more like a long-lost friend whom you think of sometimes, fondly and poignantly, but no longer talk to. Maybe we will run into each other again. However, for the moment, life is happening.

I recently received an unexpected message as it has been years now since he and I split up. It was from his mother. She asked how I was? When I called her in response she asked when will I take my belongings from his place? Continuing, almost lovingly, she assured me that she looked after my things whenever she visited her son. I knew it then, only a woman, one without a home herself, must truly know the meaning of those things for me.

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