

EVERYTHING I CARRIED

Notes on leaving home and finding myself



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ONE

The blue suitcase

My father weighed the suitcase on the bathroom scale, then weighed himself without it. This was how we discovered that leaving home cost twenty-three kilograms, provided you did not count the person doing the leaving.

He wanted me to take the heavy coat. I wanted the books. We negotiated in the hallway while my mother wrapped a jar of apricot jam in a towel neither of us admitted I would keep for years.

I remember the objects more clearly than the goodbye. A loose button in the pocket of my jacket. The chipped mug left beside the sink. The key I put on the hook, then took down again, although I knew the lock would be changed before I returned.

At the station, my father lifted the suitcase onto the train. He did it easily. I had expected its weight to prove something. Instead he stepped back onto the platform and asked me to call when I arrived.

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Things with no use

The first room I rented contained a bed, a desk and a wardrobe that smelled faintly of oranges. I unpacked the practical things first, arranging them as if good organization might make me belong.

Then came the objects with no use: a cinema ticket, a photograph of a dog long dead, a stone from the river behind our house. I put them in the desk drawer, embarrassed by how much of my allowance they had taken up.

For weeks I ate the jam directly from the jar. I told people I was too busy to cook. What I meant was that I had not yet learned how to make a meal without making it for someone else.

One evening the woman across the landing knocked to borrow a pan. I gave her mine. The next day she returned it full of soup. It was the first useful thing that happened to me there.

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A place at the table

Her name was Ruth. She had lived in the building for eleven years and still described it as temporary. Over soup, we discovered that both of us kept a suitcase beneath the bed, ready for a departure neither of us had arranged.

'You can unpack the rest,' she said. I asked how she knew there was a rest. She pointed to the bare wall above my desk.

That night I pinned up the photograph. The dog looked pleased with himself. Behind him, half outside the frame, was my mother's hand.

I had thought leaving would teach me which things I could live without. Instead, it began to teach me how a thing could change its purpose. A towel became a memory. A borrowed pan became an invitation. A photograph became, for a little while, a way to stay.