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The Objects of Our Lives

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My mother, Harriet Bonowitz, was tall, voluptuous, and glamorous. People said she looked like Rosalind Russell. By the time I was eight, she was homebound in Brooklyn, with three children and my stepfather, a civil servant who worked as a waiter on weekends so we could afford school clothes and summers at a bungalow colony at Rockaway Beach. My mother's ambition, her heart's desire, was not so much financial as flamboyant—less a house in the suburbs than an evening at the Copacabana. Young as I was, I knew she had decided that her best chance to achieve such dreams was to experience them through me. I was clever, and in my mother's boundless love she assumed I could excel at anything. If I had shown the slightest talent for the stage, she would have become a stage mother, mouthing my lines in the wings. But despite my total lack of musicality or dramatic gifts, for several years she was convinced that I would become a nightclub singer.

We lived in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, and for my tenth birthday I was taken to a local supper club, the *Eléganté*, on Ocean Parkway. When the chanteuse came onstage, my mother

nudged me and urged me to pay close attention. I knew she hoped the performance would inspire me, and I remember feeling immune to her exertions. I was armed with a powerful idea: To be good at a job, you had to love the stuff of the job. I had gotten this idea from a book I owned, a book in my home. I remember its title as *How to Choose the Right Job for You* and its introduction was specific: If you love hammers, wood, and tools, think about being a carpenter. If you love makeup and high heels and sexy dresses and pianos (my mother!), think about being a nightclub singer. If you love paper, notebooks, different-colored binders, and schoolbooks from all over the world (myself, even at ten!), think about being a writer. While my mother was imagining me as a nightclub singer, I was imagining myself as a writer. More than that, the idea that I would do best professionally if I felt a connection to the objects I encountered on my job sparked my imagination. Little by little those objects inspired curiosity about what content, intellectual and emotional, they might carry. Today, as an ethnographer and psychologist, I study the subjective side of our encounters with technology; I am concerned with the human meanings of the objects of our lives. The idea that objects have more than instrumental effects has stayed with me all my life.

That I first encountered this idea from a book that I owned was itself unusual, because there were so few books in my home. There was Carl Sandburg's biography of Abraham Lincoln and then there was my personal library. My library had three elements. First, there was the twenty-four-volume Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia that my grandmother Edith Bonowitz had bought for me at \$1 a volume—the volumes were released one every two weeks—at her local A&P supermarket. Second, there was my stash of Nancy Drew mystery stories—my half of the collection of books, tied up in neat parcels, which my best friend Helene and I had removed from the incinerator room of our apartment building. This was the way books got passed from family to family in our apartment building; most of the families there did not know one another but had similar backgrounds and incomes and knew

that others in the building did not have extra cash to buy books for their children. When it came to reading, parents and children alike used the public library, about a half hour's walk from our building. So for Helene and me, finding a pile of the very precious Nancy Drews was dizzying. There were nineteen of them. Helene had made the discovery and called me to the incinerator room, so she got to keep ten and I got to keep nine.

In order to solve her mysteries, Nancy was usually called upon to decode an object: a brassbound trunk, an old clock, a diary, a pair of twisted candles, a moss-covered mansion. Some of the objects had hidden compartments or secret drawers that would suddenly open. Sometimes these secret places were physical—trapdoors that Nancy's deft fingers would find after days of assiduous searching. But sometimes they were metaphorical—secrets that Nancy's deft intellect would unravel after days of turning the object over and over in her mind. I searched my neighborhood for mysterious objects to decode. There was no lack of candidates. But unlike Nancy, my efforts did not make me a heroine. Our neighbors complained that I was prying. My mother was mortified. I told her I would stop, but I made a promise to myself that I would find mysterious objects to decode outside of Brooklyn. Indeed, I have sometimes wondered if this is how my unconscious interprets my work as an ethnographer (I have studied psychoanalysis in Paris and high technology mostly in Massachusetts and Silicon Valley)—as a way of playing Nancy Drew without breaking that long-ago promise to my mother.

The final element of my childhood library, and in retrospect the most precious, was a pair of guidebooks that had belonged to my mother's sister, my Aunt Mildred, and had been passed on to me. The first was *New Horizons World Guide: Pan American's Travel Facts About 89 Countries*, which Aunt Mildred had received from her travel agent when she booked a trip to Spain, her first trip overseas. My aunt, an unmarried woman, a "working woman," was the first person I knew who had ever traveled beyond the confines of Brooklyn, not to mention the confines of the con-

tinental United States. Aunt Mildred was exotic and beloved. I wanted to be a working woman. And I wanted a travel agent.

New Horizons contained information on all the countries of the world, including their capital cities, their average temperatures, their forms of government, their best hotels and restaurants, their main sights. I was able to hold on to the copy my aunt gave me, the 1953 edition, for many years as I changed cities, schools, and jobs, but it finally got caught in a flooded basement and had to be thrown out. I found another copy last summer at a flea market in Wellfleet, Massachusetts. This was a moment not only of pleasure but also of great relief; I felt as though something I had been missing had been returned to me. What is most remarkable, as I read it today, is that *New Horizons* makes every country, from Vietnam to Iran, from Pakistan to Cuba, sound accessible, safe, one call to a travel agent away. In order to set up a vacation both cultural and relaxing in, say, Cambodia, one need only get used to pesky changes in currency and communicate some preferences about one's favored mix of sightseeing and spa elements. *New Horizons* discussed the *aguinaldos* of Puerto Rico, tipping habits for French taxis, and sailing and canoeing in Greece. But its larger message, its message to me, was that access to all of these things was matter-of-fact. This book provided more than information. It gave me permission. At a time when a subway ride to Manhattan was still forbidden to me, the left bank in Paris was taking shape as a future certainty.

The second guidebook was, of course, *How to Choose the Right Job for You*, the book whose good counsel had sustained me at the Eléganté as my mother poked me in the ribs. This job guide was published by an employment agency that gave it free to all of its clients, which was how Aunt Mildred came by it. If *New Horizons* gave me wanderlust, *How to Choose the Right Job* gave me a sense of differences among people and a first strategy for defending my sense of difference in my family. Beyond this, it got me curious about people's connections to the objects they love. Our apartment was small. My grandparents shared a dresser. Each of them

had space for so few personal objects on its surface. How did they choose these objects?

My mother had a Brownie camera, but in my family we did not take many photographs. There was always a lot of talk about the expense of film and the cost of developing a photograph, which meant that a photograph in our home was not so much an object as a special event. There was, too, the unspoken consensus that each family member had a small allotment of photographs to be "spent" on them. When it was my turn to have a picture, I filled it with my special objects. In a photograph of me at ten, I am at my grandparents' home, seated on my grandfather's chair. I am wearing my grandmother's white gloves and holding two of my most treasured objects: a small figurine that Aunt Mildred had brought back from Mexico and a doll she brought me from France. The photograph contains objects that represent the people who most love and ground me, as well as objects that represent the world beyond Brooklyn that my aunt had access to. France and Mexico were my first destinations abroad, representatives of the world into which I imagined myself at ten, and in the photograph I concretized my fantasies with my object treasures.

If my mother had dreams of me on the stage, triumphing on opening night at Ocean Parkway's Eléganté, my grandparents, Robert and Edith Bonowitz, offered a certain refuge because they had no dreams for me at all, and so I could have my own. As far as I could tell, my grandparents wanted only my love and for me to avoid the evil eye, this latter a constant threat because of envious neighbors. My grandmother tried to ward it off as best she could, by frequently spitting on my forehead.

My mother was divorced when I was two. Until she remarried, when I was five, we lived with my grandparents and Aunt Mildred in my grandparents' one-bedroom apartment. I slept on a cot between my grandparents' twin beds and my mother and aunt shared a foldout sofa in the living room. When my mother and I moved out, my aunt had the sleeper sofa all to herself. After we left, I missed my grandparents and my aunt terribly, and until I

was about thirteen I had a "sleepover" at my grandparents' home almost every weekend. My weekend sleepovers had a fairly regular routine. On the television there was Perry Mason, Perry Como, Jackie Gleason, and the Hit Parade. On the kitchen table, my grandfather and I built complex houses of plastic snap-together bricks and other architectural elements. My grandfather worked as the manager of a movie house in Times Square that had a very rough clientele. I knew that my grandfather loved to build these plastic-brick houses because he was good at it and because he could watch me discover how good an architect and designer he was. And more important, since we were working on the kitchen table, my grandfather could watch his wife and daughter see him excel in something that took planning and taste. They knew he was a strong and honest man who could handle the rough trade in Times Square, the vagrants who frequented his theaters and whom he affectionately referred to as "my bums." But every weekend the brick cities we built revealed him as a man of refined imagination. I loved the plastic bricks, a simple, transparent material that not only gave pleasure but encouraged and revealed talent. In later years, when I found computer software that had this transparent quality, it gave me pleasure to watch people use it, and when I found computer software that closed down people's sense of mastery and understanding, I approached it with skepticism. I am aware of my bias: I have sometimes described myself as an instinctive modernist in a postmodern world.

So on a sleepover weekend with grandparents and aunt, I would play several rounds of making buildings with snap-together bricks and sit with the grown-ups through several TV shows before I retired to my special place. Space in my grandparents' apartment was limited, but all of the family photos—including my aunt's and my mother's books, schoolbooks, notebooks, and photographs—were stored in a kitchen closet, set high, just below the ceiling. I could reach this cache only by moving the kitchen table in front of the closet and standing on it. This I had

been given permission to do, and this is what I did, from age six to age thirteen or fourteen, over and over, weekend after weekend. I would climb up on the table in the kitchen and take down every book, every box. The rules were that I was allowed to look at anything in the closet but I was always to put it back. The closet seemed to me of infinite dimensions, infinite depth.

I never remember a time when I did not find something new in the closet. Each object I found—every key ring, every postcard—received the care and attention that Nancy Drew gave to her objects. In the closet, every high school notebook with its marginalia—some of it my mother's, some of it my aunt's—signaled a new understanding of who they were and what they might be interested in; every photo of my mother on a date or at a dance became a clue to my possible identity. My biological father had been an absent figure since I was two. My mother had left him. We never spoke about him. It was taboo even to raise the subject. I did not even feel permitted to think about the subject.

My grandmother, grandfather, and aunt would sometimes come into the kitchen to watch me at my investigations. At the time I didn't know what I was looking for. I think they did. I'm looking, without awareness, for the one who is missing. I'm looking for a trace of my father. But they had been there before me and gotten rid of any bits and pieces he might have left—an address book, a business card, a random note. They had cut out my father's image from every photograph. Once, I found a photograph with the body still there and only the face cut out. I never asked whose face it was; I knew. And I knew enough never to mention the photograph, I think for fear it might disappear. It was precious to me. The image had been attacked, but it contained so many missing puzzle pieces. What his hands looked like. That he wore lace-up shoes. That his trousers were tweed.

If there is a sense of vocation to become attentive to the detail of other people's narratives, mine was born in the smell and feel of the memory closet. That is where I found the musty books,

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photographs, high school class notes that made me feel connected. That is where I determined that I would solve mysteries, that I would use objects as my clues to the heart of the matter. That is where I decided that when the objects could not tell a full story, I would find a person willing to talk to me before a voice was silenced—before someone was forever cut out of the picture.