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Necessity and nostalgia

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Figure 1. Introduction

Why do we keep things? To remember.

Bedside tables are our modern-day altars, places where habit, respect, mystery, and love collide. Our physical materials wait while we travel through dreams, coaxing us back into activity come morning. Books and remote controls summon sleep, alarm clocks and written reminders startle the mind into a wakeful state. But not all objects are directly linked to sleeping or waking; some things simply exist to comfort us, reflecting our need to gather, collect, and nest.

I arrive at each house in the same manner: scheduled, dragging with me a step-ladder and tripod, a digital camera slung around my shoulder. Following brief introductions with dogs and husbands, I am led down hallways, sometimes up steps, past bathrooms and closed doors, to neatly kept (or grossly neglected) bedrooms. A tripod’s legs must summon a sense of great formality, for as soon as it expands, my hostesses most often slip back to the main carriage of their home, waiting in the kitchen to idly thumb bills while I work. This is where I begin, guiltily passing my eye around the bedroom, locating an open closet and second entryway. But the camera’s lens always, only, points at the bedside table.
Those who stay in the room talk. They talk about their kids, their boyfriends, their girlfriends, but especially what is on their bedside table. I listen to accounts of profound mourning before sleep, or of the cell phone turned harbinger of achingly tragic news come day. If the hands of the storytellers are anxious, they lift and hold objects of importance. A lamp is rarely touched beyond lighting, but a picture frame, or book, or figurine, is treated with the utmost tenderness. We may compare her bunny collection with my mother’s, or how his iPod cube works because you really don’t know who Matisyahu is? The shutter snaps like a gum-chewing teenager, providing a backbeat to the conversation. After one, or twenty, exposures on the digital sensor, I begin to pack up. The lens cap clips back in place, the camera is stowed, the tripod moved, and the bedspread serving as a makeshift table is smoothed. A manicured nail taps on something one last time before lights are turned back off and the room is left to sleep until night.

A certain part of life spins around the bedside table. Here is where we sink into a deeply private, and deeply vulnerable, place. The body is left nestled under covers, nurturing itself in its most primal way, while our minds dismiss all boundaries. And here, an arm’s reach away, are our most necessary things. There are things to feed our hungry duties, and
things to nourish our memories. Coats of dust are their wrinkles, for our possessions grow old with us. We keep things to remember.
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