SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things

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RAY - BAN Frame France
FOLDING WAYFARER II

Happiness

You would think I might nick a pair of sunglasses out of fashion hunger, style lust, but no. Not these. I wouldn't wear something as cheesy as a pair of folding glasses. I stole these in rage because I couldn't think of anything else I might remove from A's possession. I wanted a subtraction; something portable, something that he had about his person, that he would miss. The way I wanted him to miss me. This was in 1998 or 1999. It was a revenge theft, a quid pro quo.

I was living in Lisbon. In spring 1997, I had gone to Macau, Hong Kong and China on a research trip that I had managed to get funded. The working title of the project was *Sweet Dreams Are Made of This*. At that time, I was appropriating phrases from popular songs or films or books in my work.

My mission in Macau and Hong Kong was to gather *zhiza*. These are three-dimensional paper copies of techy consumer goods (laptops, radios, Walkmans, cameras, mobile telephones), clothes and accessories (Louis Vuitton handbags, Prada shoes, Chanel sunglasses), kitchen utensils, keepsakes, and money. The purpose of these paper goods is to be burned at funerals and at the traditional Hungry Ghost Festival on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Chinese calendar.

Hungry Ghost: is there any other kind? The idea of ghosts—the wraith-like revenants of the dead—still hungry for consumer items and luxury goods, high-status brands to accommodate them in their passage to the afterlife, tickled me. What next, I'm now thinking? Perhaps smoothies, face serums and pranayama for the hereafter?

The Chinese custom of ceremonially burning offerings as part of rituals of passage for the recently dead dates back thousands of years and is not unique to that culture in its desire to make provisions for an afterlife imagined as an extension of this one. The Egyptians did it. And dating to approximately 26,000 BP, the remains of a woman—the first

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known shaman—in what is now the south Moravian region of the Czech Republic, lie in a grave under two crossed mammoth scapulae; around her, a collection of clay objects in the shape of dogs, bears, horses, lions and mammoths.

The idea of delivering objects to the spirits of the dead, presupposing them consubstantiate with the living and therefore party to the same desires, is not that bizarre a notion to me. It existed in my own home. Repeatedly, my mother would press upon us her desire to be buried with her cigarettes so she might continue to smoke after shedding her earthly body and transitioning to the next life. We left a pack of Kents leaning against the headstone at its unveiling, ten months after Fay's death.

In 2015, German political philosopher, installation artist and curator Wolfgang Scheppe exhibited his vast collection of *zhiza* at the Dresden Royal Palace. The title of the exhibition was *Supermarket of the Dead*: *Burnt Offerings in China & the Cult of Globalized Consumption*. Working in the Situationist tradition (a dynamic critique of capitalism yoking art and politics under the banners of Marxism and surrealism), Scheppe's research probes the politics of representation. He looks at urbanisation, migration and consumption in projects that culminate in books and international exhibitions.

My proposal, long predating Scheppe's exhibition of his collection of *zhiza,* I hasten to say, was devoid of any overtly political intent, despite the potential for such critique lurking in my appropriation of the language of display of luxury consumer goods. Rather, it entailed working around the question of desire itself, making my own versions of these objects, and fabricating assemblages using vintage dresses. For various reasons, the project was never fully realised, though I made numerous individual pieces using gorgeous vintage dresses. However, the legacy of that trip was to remain with me for years, the *zhiza* still now enjoying an afterlife in my home.

A and I had met through T, a friend in Lisbon. She had been enthusiastic about introducing us because of our shared readerly interests, at the intersection (reader, do not roll your eyes) of *po-mo* and *po-co*. So 1990s. A was working in Macau that first time I went there, living with his wife and two young children. It must have been a year after we were introduced that I travelled to Macau.

Our romance began when we first kissed on a cloyingly warm night on a street called happiness—*Rua da Felicidade*—with its overripe smell of durian and the percussion of mahjong tiles slapping Formica.

Folding Ray-Ban Wayfarers. There's a hinge on the bridge, and then again, their wing-like arms double up. The whole thing, when bent in on itself, is flat, a small parcel that you could slip neatly into your pocket. He'd do that. I see him in a shirt: white or light blue Oxford, with a breast pocket. In Macau, the sleeves might be rolled up, the hair on his tan arms glistening with the humidity of the place; in Lisbon, he might be wearing a navy-blue blazer in the golden, slanty light of an early autumn evening. I'm not sure he even owned such a blazer, but he might well have. It was in part something sartorial that won him a certain nautical nickname among my closest friends, those who thought I was a very particular kind of idiot. Anyhow, I wanted him to be the captain of my ship, my own fucking admiral, maybe.

He was—he is, but I'll try to stick with the past tense—no taller than me, which is not at all. He's stocky and at that time, had thinning dark hair (now a bristly buzzcut through which you can see his beautiful scalp), a powerful, bullish torso and thick, short fingers; he had a clean, piney smell and an infectious laugh that emanated first from his troubled eyes. He had dark furry whorls on his chest. His feet were small. It was difficult to know what made him so appealing, but certainly his irony and his intelligence were entirely engaging, and not only to me. His always-ready humour. His gravelly voice and his way with words. And his emphatic physicality: he was sexy. But nothing was quite as compelling as the *noli me tangere* mantle he wore under the demeanour of the guy with a big personality and a great sense of humour. You couldn't really get near him; I couldn't.

For three years, on and off, we dedicated ourselves to the business of each other's bodies, in actuality and in fantasy and in words. I submitted his mind—or rather, evidence of its workings—to my stringent powers of analysis, shaping sentences and making drawings in a constant flow of nervous and creative energy. I cloaked my longing for him in large and compulsively undertaken bodies of work. My work was the outcome of my inability to touch him even when we fucked, even when we sat across a table overlooking a starlit bay, magnetised each by the other.

How many times I gave up, left him, ditched the drip feed of his impossible love, quit submitting myself to torture by hope. It mattered

to me in continuously renewed bursts that he found me desirable (that he still does now is a bonus) and that he found me smart (ditto): a fatal combination, to see myself thus reflected in someone else's gaze. Well, at least in someone else's sunglasses.

These Ray-Bans stand in for something, but they are, in a sense, nothing in themselves. Opaque. I seized these sunglasses, I captured them, because A refused to return to me something that was mine. This is not a metaphor. I'll get to that later.

The folding sunglasses bear no trace of A's intellect or humour; of the dark cloud under which he likes to sit from time to time; of how running makes him feel; of how succinctly poetic he is in his writing; of his catholic musical tastes; of his tireless reading. They bear no imprint of his touch or smell. I would more readily have kept a paper table napkin, or even, disgusting as this might seem, a cigarette stub secreted from an ashtray. Something abject and dirty, used and finished, yet intimate, corporeal. Elvis Costello knew this when he sang, in his heartrending, changeable voice, that country tearjerker written by Jerry Chestnut, *Good Year for the Roses:* 'I can hardly bear the sight of lipstick on the cigarettes there in the ashtray/Lyin' cold the way you left 'em, but at least your lips caressed them while/You packed.'

The Museum of Innocence

Some years later, I remember this desire, the wish for objects that I might narrativise, emotionalise and fetishise. A book reminds me of it. In 2009, my imagination is ignited on reading a review of Orhan Pamuk's novel, *The Museum of Innocence,* published in Turkish in 2008. I buy the English hardback as soon as the translation is available, and I immerse myself in a slow, long read; a fairly difficult read because the language, though beautifully fashioned in Maureen Freely's rendition, is a little stilted, almost courtly. I would imagine Pamuk's voice is similar in the original Turkish.

You could call this a historical novel about Istanbul, about the charms and hypocrisies of the inward-looking Turkish upper class. The images of this world are both splendid and faded; it is a world that Pamuk evokes as though through fog, through a haze of collective melancholy.

This book, I find, is just my thing, as I had anticipated it might be. Set in the 1970s and '80s, it is a tale of *amour fou* told through objects.

Much of the story unfolds in the vividly portrayed Nişantaşı quarter of Istanbul. The novel invites the reader (me) to eavesdrop on the collision of tradition and modernity in a stifling world in which social mores are governed by patriarchal codes. Its central protagonist is Kemal Basmaci, scion of one of Istanbul's grandest old families. A wealthy, spoiled playboy, in his thirties when we meet him, he becomes obsessed with an elusive and beautiful distant cousin, Füsun, who is a shop attendant and only eighteen when Kemal first meets and seduces her.

But as Kemal's mother warns him, 'in a country where men and women can't be together socially, where they can't see each other or have a conversation, there's no such thing as love [...] Don't deceive yourself.' We track Kemal's trajectory from infatuation to the pathological obsession that replaces love: 'by now there was hardly a moment when I wasn't thinking about her,' he tells us in Chapter 29.

Just as Nabokov's use of the first person invites us to see Humbert's erotic obsession with Lolita through the normalising lens of his own crazed eyes, Pamuk's use of the first person enlists us to identify with Kemal. We know from the outset that he creates a museum in memory of Füsun, and that, like a fetish or a memorial, that museum stands on the site of an absence, a loss. Indeed, we know that she has long left him. But we are only told of her death in a car crash towards the end of the book. Like Nina's death in another piece of fiction by Nabokov, the sublime short story 'Spring in Fialta' (1959), it is a dramatic loss that unleashes the melancholic reverie structuring the narrative in retrospection. Remaining untold for most of the book, Füsun's death informs the whole book's plangent, elegiac tone, figuring and fixing her absence into any picture Kemal might have of his own future.

Following him as he stalks Füsun, I am at once repelled by his passion and drawn to its steady, slow-burning flame. I recognise myself in his obsession. I am intrigued by the fact that both Kemal's age-appropriate fiancée, Sibel, and Füsun elect to give him their virginity: it is clearly, in both cases, a gift. In *The Museum of Innocence,* virginity itself is both a leitmotif and an evocative object. And Kemal is as obsessed with evocative objects as he is drenched in nostalgia: a desire for an obstacle-free immersion in a mythical place of wholeness and completion, a fusion with the mother of all memories.

Not surprisingly, then, after Kemal has lost both Sibel and Füsun, he takes refuge in the flat that his mother owns. This had been the private

setting of his affair with Füsun. He now turns it into a shrine. Bowing to the disconsolate, substitutive logic of the fetish, he surrounds himself with objects associated with Füsun, the things that knew random contiguity with her body and that now stand for her, and for the loss of her. As he collects and curates these objects into vitrines—and each of these eighty-three numbered vitrines earns a chapter in Pamuk's book—Kemal reflects on what it means to be an anthropologist, a museologist of his own experience. He visits strange collections and museums in different cities, becoming increasingly convinced that Füsun's possessions 'deserved display in comparable splendor.' The things that he collects include a spoon, earrings, stockings, underwear, sneakers, soda bottles, a half-eaten ice cream cone, 237 hair barrettes and—particularly mesmerising—4,213 stubs of extinguished cigarettes that were once—as if in a crazy hyperbole of a country and western classic—held between her lips.

It is a wall of cigarette stubs that greets the visitor to the Museum of Innocence in Istanbul, a narrow, corner building painted dark red, and yes, an actual place and a visitor's destination in the Çukurcuma quarter of the city. The gentrification of Çukurcuma is now manifest in the transformation of its many junk shops into boutiques and antique emporiums. Pamuk bought the property especially to house his museum, and in the late 1990s began buying and collecting objects with both the novel and the museum in mind. The two—book and museum—evolved in tandem, in reciprocity and interdependence, although neither is an illustration or an explication of the other. Separately and together, they attempt to dissolve the boundary between art and life, while never letting the reader/spectator fully lose their awareness of the artifice.

The Museum of Innocence—where collecting, curating and storytelling jostle and collide—opened to the public in 2010. A single admission ticket on page 520 of the English translation of the book, earns the reader/visitor free entry.

I go to Istanbul in the early summer of 2013. It is my second visit to this entrancing, complex city. Ian is almost three years dead. A's children have grown up and he has left his wife and taken up with a Brazilian woman. I hear she is wealthy and flies to Lisbon from Rio de Janeiro frequently but returns to Rio for weeks at a time. She has bought her own flat in Lisbon. I can see how this arrangement suits A. From time to time,

he and I exchange WhatsApps. Though sporadic, these exchanges bear abbreviated reminders of our past billets-doux; they hold the merest threads of long-gone entanglement, and yet they are still exquisitely intimate. We feel known and familiar, one to the other. We are all too aware of how those we have once loved might continue to lurk around unexpected corners, and mostly, though not always, we make sure to avoid those corners in our exchanges and in our occasional encounters in Lisbon. Every once in a while, he writes to tell me he wants to see me, plans to visit. It never happens; I'm not sure I want it to. Perhaps it's too late.

Still, I was infinitely grateful to A for the Christmas dinner we had together on FaceTime two months after P dumped me in lockdown, and for how much we were still able to laugh and enjoy each other. Occasionally over the years, we've succumbed to a deep, exhilarating, dangerous and nostalgic snog on some dark street or in his car: I love him for the fact that this is possible.

But I digress: back to the Museum of Innocence. I often enjoy works of art where the separation between lived experience and representation is fluid, uncertain. Sometimes, as in the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Tino Sehgal, the work is performative, collaborative and so indeterminate that you are not sure if you're a spectator or an actor, if walking through the artwork is the artwork. But I'm now thinking more specifically of work in which life is staged in a sequence of architectural/spatial gestures that entail a choreography of objects: artists like Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Jannis Kounellis and Theaster Gates. These installations are always first and foremost works of art, only pretending to be life, but in the most immersive and beguiling manner. Pamuk offers us such an immersion, slyly putting 'life' itself into quotation marks, displaying it in a vitrine. He prepares us for this by naming the curator of Kemal's museum, Orhan Pamuk. 'As Kemal had asked of me' writes this narrator Orhan Pamuk, 'I wrote under each and every one of Füsun's cigarette butts the note our protagonist had made about that particular day. [...] I felt more like a craftsman than a writer,' he writes in *The Innocence of Objects* (2012), the beautiful book produced to accompany the museum collection.

In the Museum of Innocence, I am arrested by the artful elision of words and space; by the spatialisation of words. The reader becomes a walker and a visitor in a museum that is simulacral and *meta*, a museum

of a museum. For the visitor, as for Kemal, the museum stops time in its tracks, distilling it in the simultaneity and present tense of display. Together, the objects in the cabinets constitute a meditation on duration, on the dilated time of waiting: the lover's time, the lover's agony, which, with A, was my agony too. He was always late, and eventually, too late. 'I have here the clock, and these matchsticks and matchbooks,' says Kemal, 'because the display suggests how I spent the slow ten or fifteen minutes it took me to accept that Füsun was not coming that day.' But as Kemal the lover is transformed into Kemal the archivist and museologist, his use of language changes, no longer focussing purely on subjective experience, but rather on a viewer's appraisal of it. 'As they go from display case to display case, and box to box,' he says,

> visitors will understand how I gazed at Füsun [...] and when they see how closely I observed her hand, her arm, the curl in her hair, the way she stubbed out her cigarettes, the way she frowned, or smiled, her handkerchiefs, her barrettes, her shoes, and the spoon in her hand [...] they know that love is deep attention.

This makes the most profound sense to me during lockdown, with the withdrawal of P from my life. I think about Simone Weil's famous observation that 'attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity,' and it strikes me, now that I have lost love surely for the last time—well I don't intend to seek it out again, as I always have done in the past—that I might miss attention—that intimate address—more even than I miss touch. And I miss touch a lot.

In the Museum of Innocence, it is not long before the visitor realises, as the reader has already realised in the book, that the installations in the vitrines chart not only a creepy obsession, but also a melancholy *flânerie*, creating snapshots of the city, its social and material history. Deep attention to the woman morphs into detailed attention to the city: 'this is not simply a story of lovers, but of the entire realm, that is, of Istanbul.' And so it is that we remain with the palimpsestic image of Istanbul presented through these artefacts, with their fictionalised histories: sepia family photographs, cinema tickets, tombola stubs, postcards, clocks and watches, trinkets, earrings, a salt shaker, ceramic dogs, clothes pins, menus, a pack of cigarettes, a ruler, a taxi meter, a driver's license, glasses and bottles, a thermometer, doilies, and more. The individual objects oscillate between their existence as markers in a

particular narrative, and as constituent parts of the material culture of the city, of its inhabitants.

Pamuk invites me to think about how I experience lived history in a city, but also at home. In my home, amidst my own idiosyncratic possessions, I feel constantly enlisted to think about how objects might lead to collections (of books, of bowls, of scarves) and how collections walk me through recollections.

Shame

I have not made these folding Ray-Bans my own: I don't wear them. They do not interest me as potentially useful or glamorous accessories. Rather, their status as relic informs my desire to hold onto them. But I also need to preserve them because they are markers of an exchange I could never quite fathom.

There was this ceramic figure that I bought in Macau.

That first time I visited Macau—then a Portuguese territory across the Pearl River Delta from Hong Kong—antiquarians filled their shop windows with the kind of furniture and porcelain that Portuguese visitors, still numerous, liked to purchase and to take back home.

This was half a year before Hong Kong reverted to Chinese sovereignty, and two years before the handover of Macau, which had been a Portuguese outpost for 400 years. I was particularly intrigued by a category of object somewhere between ethnographic curiosity and communist kitsch. They were polychrome ceramic statuettes, and though clearly mass-produced in line with iconographic prototypes dating from the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, I remember thinking this object that I bought was well-finished, not shabby or cheap looking. Although not exorbitant, it had not been cheap either. I cannot remember what prompted me to buy it. I was never—not even in youth—especially drawn to the iconography of revolution. I suppose like many people of my generation, I sometimes flirted—in a manner that I fancied ironic—with the idea of kitsch, its facile nostalgia, emotion cheaply bought or stolen, to tease out Oscar Wilde's definition of sentimentality. For years afterwards, I could not remember what this piece represented, so thoroughly had the purchase been subsumed by the fact that I no longer had the object in my possession.

A had offered to pack it in his container and bring it to Lisbon when he moved back from Macau early the following year. The piece was too heavy for me to transport in my luggage, and rather than post it and risk breakage, I accepted the offer, which seemed to extend a thread of possibility into the future (next year! There would *be* a next year!). My *thing* in his *container* excited me as a parodic reversal of our erotic connection.

But then, in an equally parodic way, A exercised control through noncompliance, keeping the connection alive by refusing to return the ceramic figure to me.

I did not see the piece again, not for all the time I wished to retrieve it.

Through the several years of our bruising affair, every time I asked A for it and met with his casual laughter, I stumbled into a feeling of utter exclusion, of banishment from his home and from his person, from the ongoingness of his life. By the time I did clap eyes on it, years had elapsed. A was living on his own in a flat in Lisbon; I had left Portugal and was living in England, married to Ian.

I was taken aback, at A's flat, to see how many of my drawings were hanging on his walls, how much I still inhabited his life materially and was distilled and museumised within it. As soon as I laid eyes on my possession, this ceramic *bibelot*, I was overcome by a sense of freedom. *You keep it*, I said, *it's now legitimately yours.* Seeing it, I could not imagine what I would have done with a thing like that. It represents a scene of shaming such as I would not have wished to live with, not even as an ironically ideological ornament.

However, it only occurs to me now, so many years after this all stopped mattering, that what was being negotiated between us in A's refusal to give me the piece I had bought, was a scene of gendered humiliation. This might have pleased me had I thought of it at the time, pleased me more than a trivial larceny involving a pair of folding Wayfarers.

The piece depicts a member of the Red Guard wearing the green hat and uniform and red armband of her office, and in her left hand, she is holding Mao's Red Book.

I do not think I realised this figure was female until now: now that I look at this photograph; now that so many years have passed. Youthful ideological dominatrix, in her right hand she carries a megaphone, ready to denounce publicly the man kneeling at her feet. He is submissive,

cowed. On his head, the pointy hat of a dunce bears an inscription which, translated, says 'down with the foul intellectual.' I am told by M, my ex-husband's Chinese wife, that the placard around his neck reads 'Reactionary Academic and Expert.'