The Home Issue

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Durability

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My apartment building is a concrete behemoth with more than 1,400 residents. Despite being packed to capacity, its hallways are always empty. There's an almost eerie silence that pervades the halls of River City, the product of a thousand strangers living side by side, above and below, yet rarely seeing one another. But behind every closed door is a story, and sometimes these stories offer profound moments of communion with someone you once thought to be a stranger. For me, that someone was my neighbor Judith.

Judith leaves her apartment just once a day to pick up groceries from the convenience store in the basement of our building. Her apartment is 800-square-feet of towering, sagging boxes and stacks of dusty recyclables. Her furniture, or what's visible of it beneath mounds of unopened magazines and unpaid bills, consists mainly of Arabic pieces from her years of living abroad. Judith once traveled the world; now she's withdrawn into her own. "It's a little messy. I didn't have time to clean this morning," she whispers to me through the slit of her safety-chained door. "And please, take your shoes off."

When she opens the door, the blockade of boxes lining her entrance hall leave a narrow space for me to squeeze through. At first, the sight of Judith’s apartment is overwhelming, and I stand frozen in shock, struggling to process it all.

Mountains of cans, wrappers, and other plastics are piled on every visible surface. Sliding my thumb across a thick, sticky layer of grime, I find food expiration labels dating back to 2011. Hundreds of packages precariously piled to the ceiling create a sense of claustrophobia. The space seems to shrink before my eyes. Unopened rent, medical and electrical bills are strewn throughout the wreckage, along with a discarded letter from a brother who hasn’t heard from her in years.

Beneath this clutter, however, lie hidden treasures Judith has preserved from when she traveled the world. As she guides me through her space, she plucks out piece after piece, stringing together stories into an overarching narrative of her life.

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She can recall with perfect clarity minute details dating back three decades, but often forgets what she told me only five minutes earlier. She talks with a sense of urgency, desperate to speak into existence every last recollection. I get the impression that she hasn’t spoken intimately with another person in years and is unsure when she’ll be able to again.

“Since I was a child, I’ve loved languages. My father studied German and was always teaching me little songs. I still remember them all,” she recalls.

Growing up in the small town of Macomb, Illinois, Judith longed to see the world. At the age of 15, she traveled to Switzerland to study German and French at an international language school. She remembers meeting children from all over the world, further fueling her passion for language and global exploration. She then went on to study German in college, but took a year off to live in Germany and backpack around Europe. After she graduated, Judith left Illinois to teach German in a central Indiana High School.

“I’m sorry, but high school kids are awful,” she says. “They’re hard to discipline. The salary was low. It was kind of like juggling 10 things just to teach the class.” After three years of teaching, she returned to Chicago to pursue a masters degree in linguistics at the University of Illinois at Chicago. It was here where she met the man who would one day become her husband.

Jeffrey was a linguistics professor. As a graduate student, Judith often assisted him in the classroom. Their relationship was strictly platonic. “In the beginning, he annoyed the crap outta me, but we hit it off right away,” Judith reminisces warmly.

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“He was an intellectual, traveled a lot, funny, cute... but we were just friends.” Together they attended movies, symphonies, and the dance floors of the ’80s disco-era. For a time they were inseparable, “but then he wanted to go back overseas.”

Jeffrey and Judith both accepted jobs teaching English as a second language. His job took him to Kuwait, and Judith’s to a Japanese school in Skokie. For years they lived thousands of miles apart, keeping in touch through letters and postcards. Over his nine years abroad, their communication faded, and they both pursued other romantic relationships.

“I had a lot of boyfriends back then. I was young and thin and cute,” Judith says.

As fate would have it, Jeffrey returned to Chicago just as Judith was ending an engagement. When she heard he was back in town, she got in touch with her old friend. “I was too chicken to call him, so I sent him a Christmas card with my phone number on it,” she says, giggling bashfully and hiding her face in her hands.

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To her delight, Jeffrey called a week later, and they spent hours on the phone reconnecting. He was everything she had remembered. They arranged to meet for lunch the next day. “I saw him, and he saw me, and all of a sudden, we fell in love,” she says. “We sat there for four hours just looking in each other’s eyes.”

But soon after this reunion, Judith accepted a job teaching English in Japan. She left the city to pursue a job “a million gazillion” miles away, and they spent the next four years saving money to visit each other and writing letters every week. Judith says she has saved them all—more than 100 love letters—in a box, but she can no longer find them in her apartment.

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Unable to bear the distance, Judith returned to Chicago. She and Jeffrey married in the basement of the Cook County Court House and moved into a tiny studio apartment. They slept on a pull-out couch, and had nothing but each other and some trinkets from their travels abroad. But they were happy.

Then tragedy struck. Early one morning, Judith awoke to find Jeffrey having a seizure on the floor, foaming at the mouth and choking on his tongue. She rode with him in the ambulance to the hospital, never leaving his side. After days of tests, they learned Jeffrey had a golf ball-sized tumor in the center of his brain, too deep to be operated on. He immediately began daily radiation treatments, and for three weeks Judith visited him every day, spending hours at his bedside. At the end of the third week, Jeffrey slipped into a coma. After another week, he died. They had been married only five months.

For a year, Judith lived with crippling depression. Without family or friends in the state, her only support in this time of grief came from Jeffrey’s mother. “It was the kind of grief where I had to go on medication so I didn’t commit suicide—it was that overwhelming,” Judith sighs, staring blankly out the window.

Eventually, Judith decided that she would find closure and celebrate Jeffrey’s life by moving to the Middle East. She found a job teaching English in Kuwait, and left Chicago again. “I wanted to honor my husband,” Judith recalls. “I used to walk everywhere. I used to be so mobile, but now I can’t,” Judith says, sitting amid the clutter. For the past three years, her knees have been in terrible pain, but she hasn’t pursued surgery yet. With nobody to help her during the recovery, she may never do it.

In 2003, after so much loss and grief, Judith moved back to Chicago for the last time, bringing with her two street cats she rescued in Kuwait. She moved into a building, and began drawing more and more inward. Soon after returning, her mother died. By 2015, both cats had died too. For the past four years, she has felt totally and completely alone.

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And that brings us back to the present, back to an apartment building she hasn’t left in almost three years. Her apartment is so packed with memories of pain and love, she leaves little space for herself. Her queen-size bed has barely enough space for her body. From her bedroom to the kitchen, she has carved a narrow trail that she struggles to walk down.

She can’t bear to part with any of this stuff. Whether it be cat food cans or candy wrappers, she refuses to throw it out. When our conversation turns to tales of her travels, she dives into this debris searching for buried treasure: an amulet of the Hamsa Hand, an ivory Mihrab, and a prayer box from Abu Dhabi. Holding these items up to the light, she carefully wipes them clean, turning them over in her fingers, feeling every texture and contour in their intricate designs. For a moment, the apartment around her fades away. For a moment, she is at peace.

And then the coffee runs out, or one of us becomes too tired to continue talking. I say a goodbye to her through the slit in her safety-chained door as I put my shoes on in the hallway. I walk back to my apartment, down these silent halls lined with hundreds of closed doors.