

Against the Empty Shelf

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Like a moth to a flame, every one of us, at some point, are seduced by the curious charm of the hoard. Whether we admit it or not, we are all collectors of something. There is almost nothing in this world that someone would not get a kink out of stashing away. I have even bumped into a few “fridge magnet hoarders” who acquired them on family vacations, transforming a kitchen appliance into a touristic attraction. Not to mention those who accumulate every airline kit convinced that they are being saved for a rainy day, when an emergency may arise and a package of earplugs can come in handy.

At the same time, not all collections begin with intention. Some slip from our attention until one day we open the socks drawer and realize we have become the pioneers of chaos. We tell ourselves we will find their pair although, deep down, we are sure the battle is already lost. Even those skyscrapers of “I-might-use-it-someday” plastic containers – whose lids seem to play a never-ending game of hide-and-seek, ensuring no complete set will ever be found– do not start as a deliberate treasure hunt, they just happen. The inclusion of each item in the collection started with a purpose, yet has eventually contributed to that peculiar human inability to throw things away.

This human impulse also plays a significant role in the digital realm. Here, every item is less about displaying trophies and more about the immaterial way of collecting –where every pixel becomes a potential fortune. The digital-hoarder is a careful and organized data detective. Screenshots from a beloved video game, every meme variation prepared for the perfect occasion or entire libraries of random audios are some of the things kept under a cloud or a hard drive. But in a timeline extensively separated from the digital –extending far beyond the tangible world of our homes– we may find the most meticulous collectors of all time: the memory-hoarders. These are individuals who, almost pathologically, can highlight every piece of gossip that was shared years ago, every minute of a past event, and even remind you about that memory you wish to commit to the void where lost socks go, filing them away in the archives of their minds. Their collections are perhaps the biggest baggage they carry, still, they seem never to run out of storage.

Some collectors are even driven by aesthetics rather than need: the aspirant-hoarders. These people do not pile up what they use, but what they *might* use someday. We may encounter unopened boxes with knitting material for a winter that never seems to arrive; language books opened just enough to see the index –as if linguistic fluency could be absorbed in the blink of an eye–; or a closet full of gym clothing patiently awaiting the miraculous day when their owner will finally wear them. Every clustered object represents a version of a collector who is more disciplined, more cultured, and definitely always one step ahead of chaos; these are trophies from battles never fought but heroically imagined.

I wonder about the hidden reason behind this *collecting obsession*. Principally, it seems that collecting is an activity that goes beyond gathering, organizing, and storing things. Every collection, however small or peculiar, demands effort, time and sometimes even sacrifices. It keeps us delightfully, sometimes absurdly, occupied. It is about the thrill of the hunt, the satisfaction of completion, but most importantly, the personal experience gained. Ranging from a bag full of bags to useful souvenirs picked up at a fancy hotel, or (probably expired) dressings collected at some fast food restaurant, all of these have the effect of producing a

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rewarding feeling. Maybe it is somehow related to our intrinsic self-preservation instinct; or maybe, it is simply our species' most effective and puzzling self-defense mechanism against the horrifying scenery of an empty shelf.