



every ironing pile  
needs a hero

stories inspired by  
photographs of home

photos from the series 'domestic drift' by clare gallagher

## words ellie phillips

It is a truth universally acknowledged that if, in the first three weeks of moving into your home, you do not unpack the cardboard box full of shoes, then you will become a person who keeps their shoes in a cardboard box.

The ability to adapt has ensured the survival of the human race, but it can also get you into some fairly lunatic living patterns. My partner and I bought a tiny table-top ironing board when we moved into a large loft-style apartment with very high ceilings. We never found a table for the ironing board to go on top of and so for four years we knelt in a corner of the cavernous room to do the ironing on the floor. It was like a religious ritual. Kneeling in a corner once a day gave us creaseless clothes, but it gradually drove us nuts. "Normal people do not live like this!" my partner would shout several times a week, usually while crouched in an almost fetal position putting a crease down the arm of his shirt. One day I bought a normal ironing board, and we wondered why we hadn't done so before.

A ritual we have moved from our last flat into our new house is inexplicable to the uninitiated: every morning my son throws his socks down the staircase. We had a mezzanine level in our old flat and he used to love watching them falling over the balcony into the lounge. Now we don't have a mezzanine, but still he throws his socks down the stairs. If anyone asked me why he did that, things would get complicated.

Think of your own household rituals. Do any of them actually make any sense? Do you avoid a certain stair because that's where the cat threw up five years ago? Do you have to stand on tip-toe to look in the mirror, but would never dream of moving it down an inch? Do you sing in the toilet and wedge the bin against the door rather than put a lock on it?



For me, home is all about these patterns and routines that are not necessarily time-saving, sensible or aesthetic, but which we often carry throughout our lives. The Piles of Crap are a feature of our home-life and always will be. A Pile of Crap is the place where you put your keys, your glasses, old batteries, hair elastics, dental appointment cards. Sometimes they spawn, and before you know it another Pile of Crap has appeared on another surface. In our new house, the day I crossed the threshold and put my keys down on the side in the kitchen next to the landlord's business card and a one pence piece, I had unwittingly planted the flag for our new Pile of Crap.

One pattern which we did successfully manage to stamp out and leave behind us was the Cupboard of Doom, but this was only after it nearly killed somebody. The Cupboard of Doom was above head height and contained all the medicines out of the reach of small children. However, it was so high that you had to stand on a stool in order to access its contents. No one could be bothered to fetch a stool and so we spent many years just lobbing things in and hoping for the best.

One day my mother-in-law opened the Cupboard of Doom and a large bottle of Medised fell out and hit her on the head before shattering on the floor and splattering her with sticky paracetamol and tiny pieces of glass. Handily, the first aid kit fell out too so we were able to tend her wounds without getting the stool out.

## words victoria watts

I remember drawing the house in primary school: a square with four windows, a roof and a blue door. A line of blue for the sky and green for the grass and a yellow circle scrawled in the corner. Number 18. I drew four figures outside: me, my mum, my dad, and our cat Rupert. That was home.

The house and I are the only things that remain from that picture and last year we parted ways. Mr Blackburn moved in. I didn't meet him, but I know he's disabled. I was



pleased to sell it to someone who could use the ramp and appreciate the garden like Mum did.

The day I said goodbye, I stood in the living room and remembered a party I had aged eight. There was a long table, party hats, cake. That was the room where I'd sit in front of the fire on a weekday night, playing solitaire while Mum and Dad watched TV. It's where I hid a pancake in a drawer after greedy eyes got the better of me, and where Dad would fall asleep after too much beer. I hated the sofa, but wept when they took it away.

The house was full of firsts: first step, first fall, first joint. I sat in my old room and stared at the wall that, aged 16, I'd pasted with cuttings, secured eternally with PVA glue. The wall was alive with memories encrypted into a code only I could understand. I wonder what Mr Blackburn made of it.

Unsure how to leave, I traced old redundant paths: taking Mum a cup of tea, watering plants in the garden, running downstairs late for school. I finally rested in Mum's room. Sitting there, I could have drowned, swept away with what was and could have been. The past can consume or make you. I had to move onwards.

Now I have a new home. My boyfriend and I bought it last year. I imagine one day we'll leave it. We'll walk around and think about the day we first stepped inside, the parties we had, the people we had to stay.

Our lives are layered with the things we've done, the people we've known and the feelings we've felt. Senses, situations and symbols will trigger them but nothing can erase what's been. When I walked away from number 18, I didn't leave the memories, but I learned not to try and live in them. Someone once said, "You can clutch the past so tightly to your chest that it leaves your arms too full to embrace the present."

## words jason ward

When do you become an adult? Legally it's 18, of course, but it used to be 21, so that takes some of the fun out of it. If it's already changed once, then what's to stop it changing again in the future? I remember turning 18 and not feeling any different at all. It's hard not to see how arbitrary it is.

Instead, we turn to milestones in our lives. The first time you vote, or have sex, or get drunk, or get drunk and then have sex. I remember all of these moments in my life, how they happened and how they felt. I remember what they meant to me then and know what they mean to me now. And on reflection I'm not sure if any of them made me feel the way I did when I bought my first toaster.

I was 16 and living alone in a bedsit in Carlisle. I knew no one else in the city and my nearest parent was miles away. The reasons for this are as hazy and complicated now as they were then, but it meant one thing: I was free.

Living by yourself when you're 16 is a glorious and bizarre experience. You're young enough to appreciate the transgressive joy of parental absence, while being old enough to actually do something with it. Mostly I just sat around and read, or worked on my abysmal writing. I tried to go for a walk every time it rained, and would venture outside just after the sun rose and before people started heading to work. The world was lonely and mine.

Retrospectively, it was all pretty grim. I was on a minuscule allowance and was resolutely unemployable, so I had no money and lots of time on my hands. There was no internet connection so I would have to copy internet pages onto a floppy disk at college and read them later at home. I once spent four days eating only nutella, unable to afford anything else. I became afraid of people. My bedsit was above the communal kitchen, and I would lie on my floor trying to listen for signs of life, only going down





when I could be sure that I wouldn't see a neighbour, even if it meant burning the dinner I'd left cooking in the oven.

It's difficult to describe those days without them sounding depressing, but at the time it felt anything but. There was a feeling I could do anything I wanted to. I learnt how to be alone, and how to enjoy it. One evening I went by myself to the cinema, then came out and sauntered to a different one to see a second film. It was one of my favourite ever nights. I discovered how to live independently, even though it meant combing my hair with a fork. Everything I did that year I did terribly, but I was free to do it.

All of this leads to that wonderful day in my life, the one where I woke up and fancied some toast. Because the bedsit didn't have its own toaster, I decided to go and get my own. I chose the one I wanted from the catalogue, headed down to the shopping centre, paid for it and headed back home. I had learnt that I was in control of my own life, and that I was responsible with finding the things that would make me happy. In time that would be a satisfying job, creative fulfilment, friendship and love, but for then it was just a nicely-buttered bit of toast. I ate about ten slices that day, and each one was divine. I was an adult.

## words elizabeth heather

Portrayals of calm domesticity are hard for me to look at, because they make me think of their opposite: partings. My mother was talking to her Brazilian neighbour the other week, whose sister was leaving to go back to Brazil. "I can't go to the airport with her," the neighbour said, "I will melt like butter!"

'Melt like butter' is a literal translation of a Brazilian-Portuguese phrase. It's a phrase for those times when you are so overcome with emotion that you break down. Melt like butter is a potent expression, and airports are prime places for melting like butter.

I am not a frequent flyer and I was a little surprised that most of what happens in arrivals lounges is routine. Most people aren't met by anyone at all. Most of the others are taxi companies with signs saying "Mr Ebersbacher" or "Grupo Manzanares". The ones that are fun to watch are friends and relatives, of course. The children are the best: "It's Daddy! Daddy's come home!" It always makes me smile.

I didn't really notice other people last time I was at arrivals. The flight I was waiting for was from Montreal and I was looking out for signs that passengers from it had started to emerge: people who looked like they might be Canadian, or have been to Canada on holiday. (Maple leaf souvenirs? Snow jackets? Neither of these stereotypes seemed to be true that day.) But my heart wasn't in the meeting-and-greeting voyeurism. I was acutely tense. I tried to pick people out in the distance through the swing doors before they reached them. I was looking out for a person with a rucksack. I wasn't afraid of anything in particular, but I wasn't sure how I could stand the next half an hour or hour of waiting. I felt as if I would implode.

Knowing that your longing is insignificant in the scheme of things does not make it lose its bite. Here is what I long for: discussions about how far to leave the window open at night, conversations about a new set-up for the stereo, weeks consisting of nothing more exciting than the fitting of a cheap, new sink rack. I want to have the same arguments about dirty cups and leaving the sponge in the sink over and over again. I still don't agree with the Chinese proverb that an interesting life is a cursed one, but I'm beginning to concede that it has a point.

After I'd been waiting for about 35 minutes, he with the rucksack arrived. He saw me first, actually. I think I may have been distracted by trying to work out if the family who were standing next to me had Canadian accents, and I wasn't expecting a vibrantly purple t-shirt. I had that strange feeling when you see someone again after an absence who had become as familiar to you as yourself. It's as if they are suddenly a separate being. You notice what they look like again. I melted like butter, of course. I told him I would never let him leave again. Now he has left again, and I avoid pictures of beautiful, homely, stillness.

