

This is not stuff, it's who I am

Eleni Kyriacou treasures special possessions and would never part with them. She explains how her precious links to the past remind her of who she is, and that nostalgia brings her happiness



Yes, I like to keep things. Not just anything – I'm not a hoarder type who lines up empty yoghurt pots by the dozen, or buys a pair of shoes every week to feel validated, but I do think that decluttering is overrated. Simplifying your surroundings so you no longer have anywhere comfortable to sit does not make you a better person. For me, it just gives me some space... to fill with more things.

Of course, a clear-out every so often can help you feel lighter, perhaps more positive and ready to move on from difficulty if you're going through a tough patch. But it isn't the answer to your situation. It's not a magic wand. You don't fix everything when you delete your life. After all, you're always there. And, presumably, you're keeping you.

MY HISTORY IS NOT SUPERFLUOUS

'Oh, it's just stuff,' say those who love to purge, but that's not true. We all have items that are loaded with special meaning, that will mean nothing to anyone else. That's

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why you should never attempt a helpful crackdown on someone else's mess. You can't begin to know what should go and what should stay.

For example, there are some possessions you'd have to prise from my cold, lifeless hands before I'd let them go. They're an intrinsic part of who I am and, if I threw them out in a cathartic frenzy, I feel I might erase my history, my very being. (I'm not here to lecture anyone with a traumatic past, for whom throwing out a lifetime of belongings is a way of letting go and starting again. You get carte blanche to do as you damn well please.)

HAPPY HIDDEN MEANINGS

It's not actual things that are important, but what they represent. Tatty recipe books with my mum's handwriting all

over them; she was a fantastic host and they transport me back to happy family gatherings when there was always space around our cramped table for just one more. The first picture my son drew for me; not just a picture, but the culmination of years of wanting children, three failed rounds of IVF and, finally, adopting two gorgeous boys. I have expired passports where my younger self stares out. She's in her 20s, and

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had just started a dream job in which she could travel at a moment's notice. Piled in a cupboard are boxes of black and white photos depicting weddings and parties from the 1950s (I wasn't even born). Some of the people raising a glass are recognisably family members, but many aren't. They're bit players I only know through the photos. Yes, I may even have posed studio photos of couples I've never met, and haven't a clue as to their names. Those I really should throw out. But look at them! All dressed up, so happy. I just don't have the heart. I'll hang on to them a while longer.

I'm particularly nostalgic about my Cypriot parents. I lost them many years ago and, never having met either set of grandparents, they are my only link to the past. What with time, distance and a war to contend with, any Cypriot records have most likely vanished. Today, aunts and uncles have long since disappeared and, apart from a few cousins, there's no way to trace family back further than myself. No amount of searching on ancestry websites will help, but an old snapshot of them all dressed up in the late 1950s takes me straight back to the people I knew.

It's no coincidence that my debut novel

is set in 1950s Soho, the time and place of their arrival from Cyprus. Although fiction, researching the book felt like dipping into their lives. I'm a sucker for nostalgia and, as the daughter of immigrants, immersing myself in this research was the perfect project.

CAN YOU SEE ME?

Belongings matter and this is never more evident than when visiting someone's home for the first time. What

do you do on entering? You surreptitiously look around, peer at their pictures and scan their bookshelves. We all do it because we think it will tell us something about that person. The things we choose to keep, or display for others to see, are a reflection of who we are (or who we want to be seen as).

I think that's why we all feel a bit put out if we receive a gift that has really missed the mark. 'They just don't know me at all,' we think. Because we all want to be known; we all need to be seen and understood.

The things I keep help that happen; they're a shorthand, an emotional route right back to who I am. And all our emotional maps are different, as are our treasures. Hang on to yours, because they're priceless.

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She Came To Stay by Eleni Kyriacou (Hodder & Stoughton, £18.99)