

Once Upon a Tomorrow

12.08.22

Issue No. 4

MONDAY



Stories are repositories of history, information, imagination and so much more. It doesn't quite matter what amount of "fact" they contain, what makes them so very real is the unwritten, unspoken compact that storytellers establish with their readers or listeners. The storyteller knows that in order for the story to resonate with their audience, they must tap into universal emotions that will transcend boundaries and even languages. Regardless of the outcome of the story, its emotions and themes must be recognisable to all who listen or read the story, even if they don't always agree with the storyteller's perspective. Whether the tale is about love, hate, loss, redemption, triumph or failure, the heart of the story must beat so loud as to echo through its receivers.

What is the foundation of such an agreement between people? Vulnerability. What does it mean to be vulnerable? To exist in conditions that might expose us to hurt or harm or risk in ways that one might not be able to overcome easily. By sharing stories, we are able to share our vulnerabilities. They may lie anywhere, inside our bodies and outside it – in our geographical identities, our socio-economic identities, ethnic identities, sexual and religious identities, our medical conditions and histories, our behavioural challenges, our educational opportunities – the landscape of vulnerability is vast and seemingly endless.

The past is a strange country; our first memories of experiencing the world around us live there. Our narrative experts know that some of the first stories they have told have emerged from their own histories, where all kinds of vulnerabilities have been tucked away from sight. In an exercise to tap into that vulnerability, the experts located a "lost object": something that once existed as a core memory of sorts, sometimes tied up with a socio-cultural practice, or an emotion that could not always be easily identified. And even though the object may no longer be "useful" or legitimate in the present day, it remains powerful for it is able to conjure a memory of a time gone by.

Another crucial aspect of locating the lost object is to share its history. In our previous sessions, we had learned to speak in each other's voices. What if the story about the object was told by the object itself? By doing so, one is able to establish distance from the emotion that is associated with the memory, and perceive it more clearly to be able to share its story. Does this method diminish vulnerability? No. Each member of the exercise is learning to manage vulnerabilities on their own but also as a collective. When we realise how difficult and courageous it is to share our vulnerabilities, we learn to be more accepting and gentle while receiving other people's stories.

So, welcome to the Gallery of Lost Objects: a collection of items and emotions that have been curated by our narrative experts, to share their personal and cultural histories in a way that makes space for each others' vulnerabilities.

Gallery of Lost Objects



I am Mela Motharam. I am made of gold and weigh around three sovereigns. Till about three decades ago, I would adorn the ears of Syrian Christian women in Kerala, and if you didn't wear me, you couldn't marry. Goldsmiths would come home to carve large holes in the earlobes of young girls, and on the upper cartilage of their ears. I would be fixed in a permanent band around the top of their ears, the gold melted at both ends and merged to form a "motharam" – a ring.



I'm a sofa in a little flat in Mumbai, but I've been around for much longer. I can't remember exactly when I was made, but I once belonged to a British-Indian family before I was hastily sold off in an auction to my new owners. I'm already 'o-pressed' to begin with, but I was designed as a symbol of oppression too. Just soft enough to be comfortable, but firm enough so you never forget that you're in a livingroom. People sit on me all the time, but not everyone can sit well with me. While the boys in this house may sit as they please, the little girls could never. "Sit straight," they're told, "no feet on the sofa, no eating on the sofa, no drinking on the sofa. And don't even think about spreading out! Sit like a girl should."

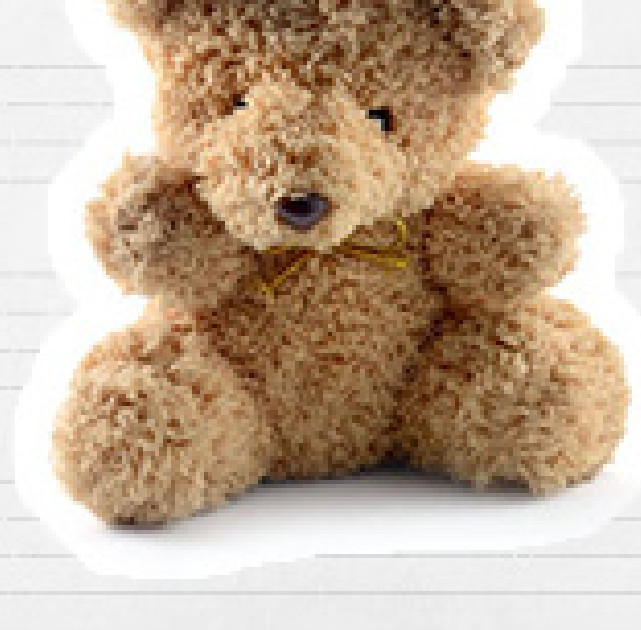


Yes, it's me, your suitcase. Now that you're clearing out your late father's flat, you've found me in the attic behind a lot of junk. You didn't expect to find me, did you? You didn't even think about me at all, did you? It's been a really long time. You were still a child. Remember how you grabbed me? How many times? Three times, as I remember. To move away from the orphanage. To meet a family. Didn't work the first time though. It worked the third time.

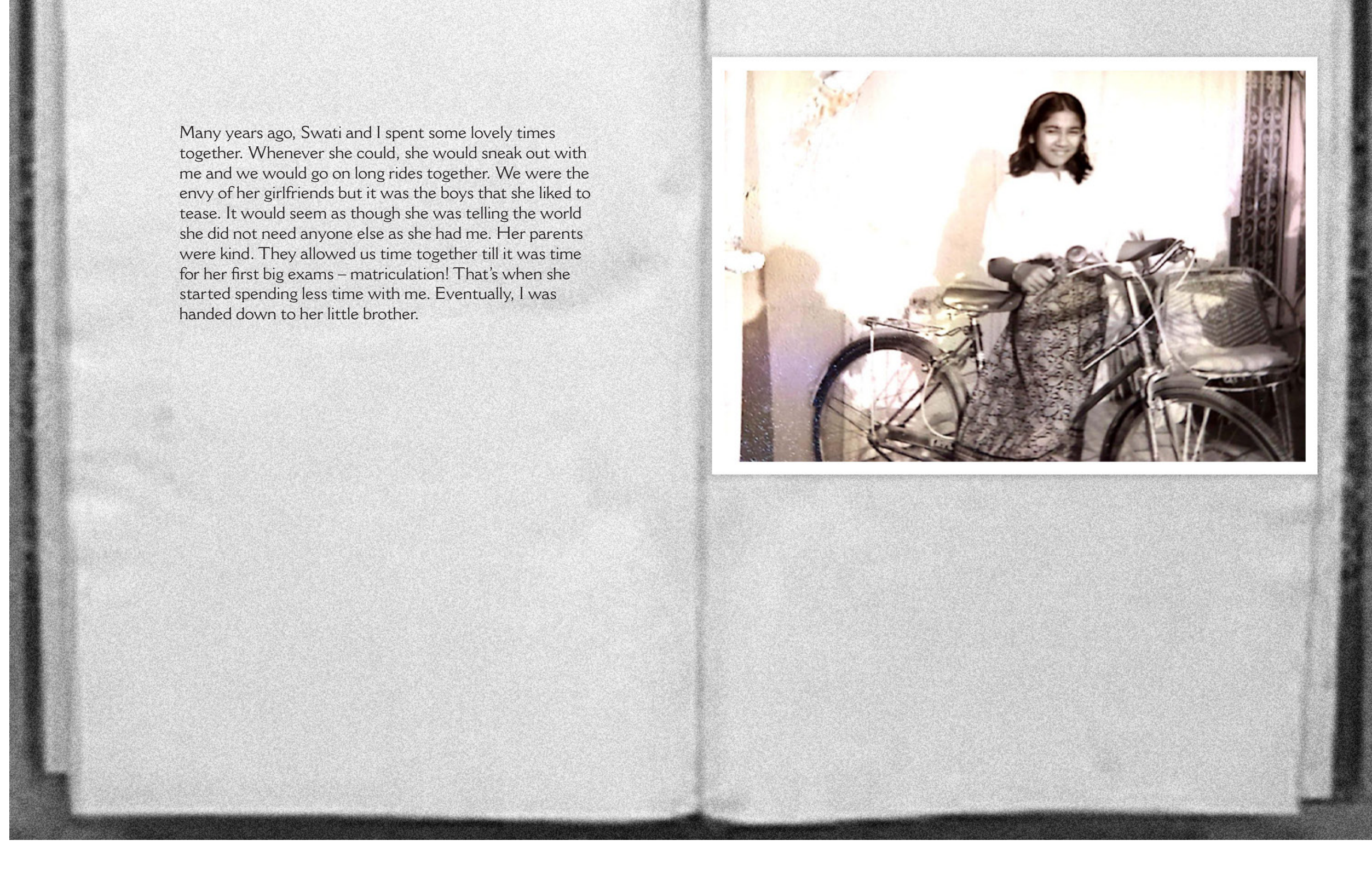
They put me under your bed. I stayed there for about a year, then I was in your closet. You packed me for fun, over and over. It was a game, a secret game. Your parents knew nothing about it. You even stored food there until your mother found it. It was the bad smell that revealed the secret. After that I was put away. I was gone. And now, when you lifted me up, the handle fell off. You don't have to carry me anymore. The handle is useless. I have become useless.

In spite of the instructions saying that I should be large, the maker of this teddy bear bought me in the medium size. Me, Mr Googly Eyes, well, the two of us, we're not the only problem, though. Everything about this 'teddy bear' is off: the dimensions, the cheap suede, the chunky cotton stuffed into it...my host is more mutant, less bear. This has made the world around us very noisy; every child in this craft class has laughed at our appearance, and told us how ugly we are; how wrong we are; what a waste we are.

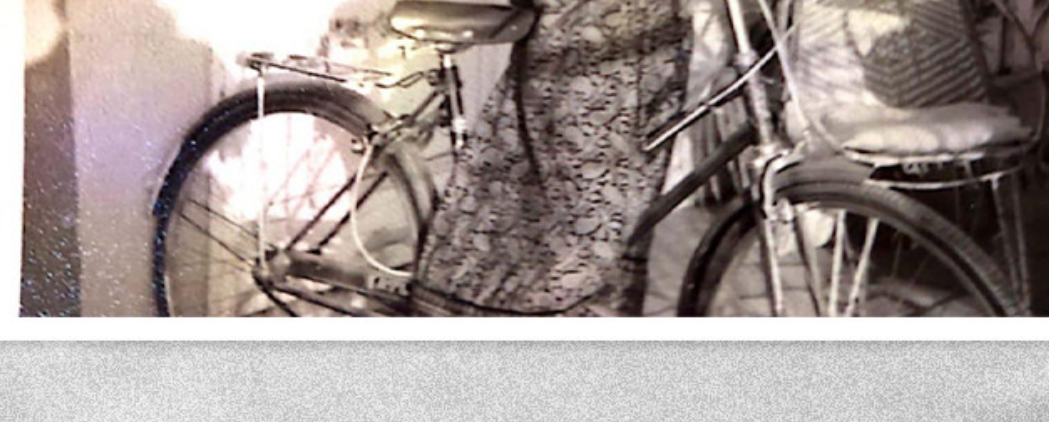
But there are two people who look into my eyes with something other than derision: the busy working mother who took time out of her packed day to build us, and her daughter for whom it was made. I'd fear of being tossed out after the end-of-term assignment was marked but it is a great comfort to me and bear that every night, we are hugged and held close by somebody who feels as out of place in the world like we do.



I am the tribal mark of the Yoruba people inscribed onto children's faces and bodies for identification purposes. I was a thing of pride, especially serving as a beautifying object on women's faces, when they came of marriageable age. I now belong to the past. I may not have outlived my purpose but I have now been criminalised and prohibited.



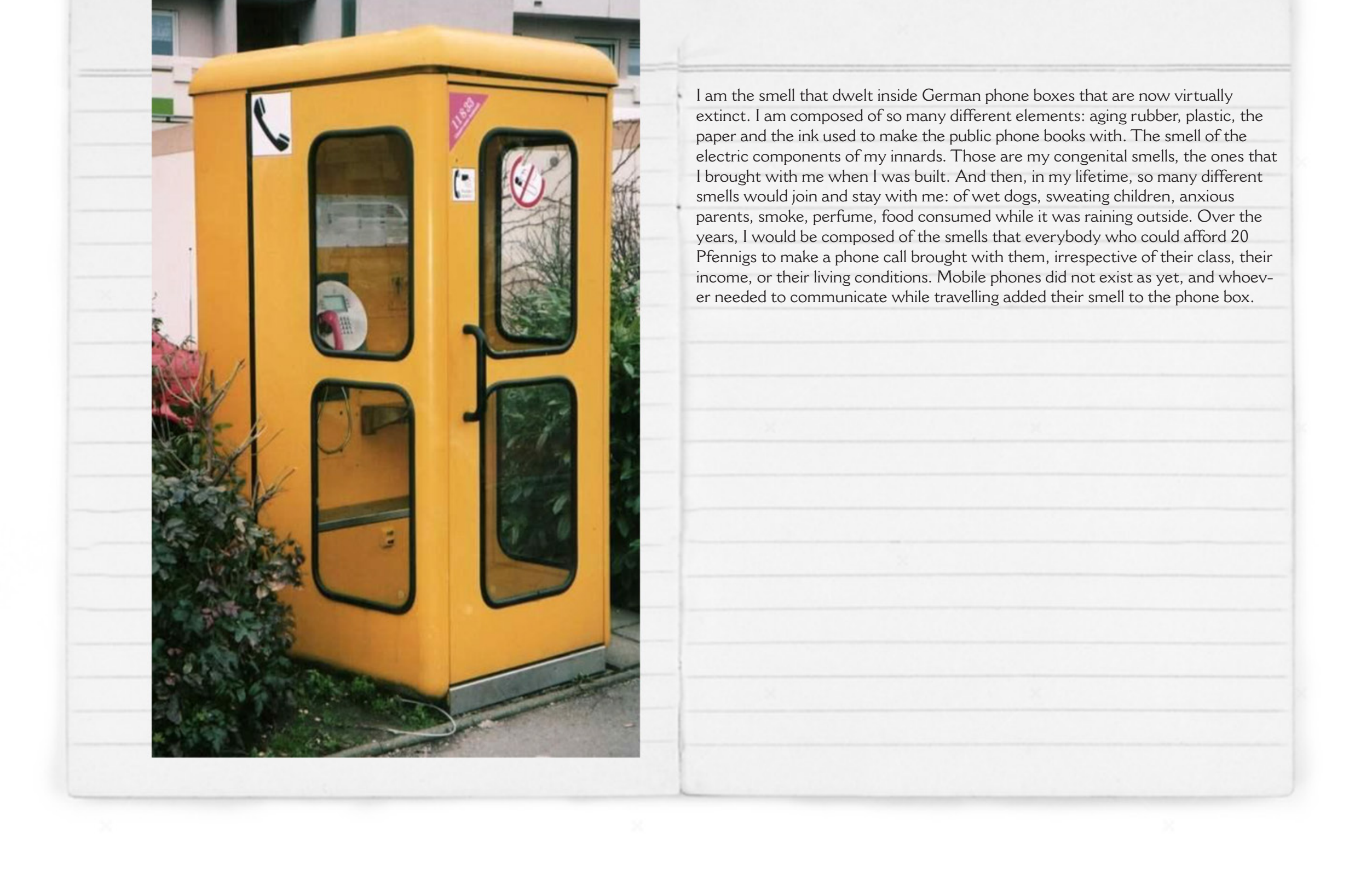
Many years ago, Swati and I spent some lovely times together. Whenever she could, she would sneak out with me and we would go on long rides together. We were the envy of her girlfriends but it was the boys that she liked to tease. It would seem as though she was telling the world she did not need anyone else as she had me. Her parents were kind. They allowed us time together till it was time for her first big exams – matriculation! That's when she started spending less time with me. Eventually, I was handed down to her little brother.



I am a Godhadi. I am not a blanket. A little thicker than a bedsheet, a little softer than a carpet. I am not stuffed; nor am I woven. I am layered. Layered with Swati's grandmother's sarees. Colourful sarees, faded sarees, used sarees. Sarees washed with sweet well water. With 'Sunlight' soap. They smelled of the lavender talcum powder that grandmother sprinkled on herself after shower. And the champa flowers she gathered in her palu. They smelled of spices she ground on a stone grinder, and the smoke from the chulla she cooked food on. Once, I had a taste of salty tears too. I am a godhadi layered with joys and sorrows, dreams and despair, hopes, aspirations and ambition, emotions carefully stitched with every layer. I am a Godhadi. Aisi gave to Swati when she was growing up... maybe to pass on to her children and their children with all the stories I have cherished in my heart.



Chihum chihum I jingle as I go. I'm made of silver, cool to the touch. The flowers engraved on me leave a loving impression on the wearer as if to stay with them even when I have been taken off. You can hear me even before you see me. I am the spirit of the dancer as my melody matches her moves and moods.



I am the smell that dwelt inside German phone boxes that are now virtually extinct. I am composed of so many different elements: aging rubber, plastic, the paper and the ink used to make the public phone books with. The smell of the electric components of my innards. Those are my congenital smells, the ones that I brought with me when I was built. And then, in my lifetime, so many different smells would join and stay with me: of wet dogs, sweating children, anxious parents, smoke, perfume, food consumed while it was raining outside. Over the years, I would be composed of the smells that everybody who could afford 20 Pfennigs to make a phone call brought with them, irrespective of their class, their income, or their living conditions. Mobile phones did not exist as yet, and whoever needed to communicate while travelling added their smell to the phone box.