

My Middleclass Dream

In one of my anecdotal writings last year, I mentioned that all I had ever dreamed about was to have an ordinary middleclass household. A spouse, two children, a medium-sized house with a small garden, some lawn furniture, a gas barbecue, and so on. Alas, woe is me. While I have achieved some of the items on my list, many things still elude me. I have often wondered why this is and, I think, I finally have some answers. I will leave it to you to suggest what else might be the reasons.

One answer is that Tim and I have not gotten out of our poor-as-church-mice graduate student mindset. We have always been frugal because that is how we started out. It is something that has come to define us in everything we do, especially as far as acquiring things is concerned. Besides, while growing up, neither of us had many things that middleclass households have. For example, a dining table with placemats, matching crockery, and cutlery. I tell Tim about how we dined in Hyderabad and Bangalore. Placemats were as far in our imagination as the moon. This is an example, of course, but the die was cast for me. I still don't see the need for placemats. The list goes on and on. I don't see the need for many things, and this has really affected the way I think. Add to this my hatred of shopping. I often make the lamest of excuses to stay away from shopping malls and stores.

Then, there was the issue of inheriting things from Tim's aunts and parents. Obviously, he cherishes these things, but they all fit into our house as members of a mismatched menagerie. Our curtains don't match. Our furniture has nothing in common. There are two sofa-cum-bed like structures that Tim's dad made. The Dickinsons call these catafalques. Each one has a built-in box underneath, which we use for storing things like extra bedlinen, etc. For the longest time, I thought that this piece of furniture and its name were unique to the Dickinsons, and the word catafalque was a made-up word understood by three people, Tim and his parents, but in one book I read recently, the word catafalque was mentioned. I was happy to see the word in print because I had wondered for almost 40 years if it was a word. Finally, I saw it in one book.

The problem is that Tim does not want to part with the catafalques, which means we don't have space to put any furniture that we might buy to achieve middleclass status. Then, there are curtains, some short ones, some long ones, some weird shaped ones, etc. Again, because of our church-mouse mentality and absolute abhorrence of shopping (Tim hates shopping more than I do, which seems impossible but true), we used the things we were given. They also have a lot of sentimental value. "You don't want to get rid of aunty Gertrude's curtains, do you?" Thus, our mentality and our commitment to use the inherited stuff are stopping us from having a house full of things others would recognize as ordinary middleclass stuff.

I have been thinking about these reasons when an incident involving our front curtains happened. It was/is pretty funny, so Tim asked me to write.

When we moved into this house, we had absolutely no money. I used all sorts of mismatched curtains, and when they faded, I sewed curtains out of white cotton that I had bought while visiting India. Things seemed to be working well until our front window curtains were beginning to tear, and bits and pieces were coming off when we drew the curtains, an everyday activity because we like to let the sunshine in in the morning and draw the curtains at night. On top of this, I started raising seedlings in trays on the ledge of the front window. The ends of the

shabby curtains touched my seed trays and wicked up water. Pretty soon, the curtains looked ghastly with tears and water marks, and I knew I had to make a new set to replace them because, remember? I hate shopping. Besides, there is reams of cloth stored inside two catafalques!!!

Today I was taking a break from my marking, so it seemed like the perfect time to sew curtains. I rooted around in the catafalques and found huge stashes of cloth accumulated over the years. For someone who hates shopping, this is quite a collection, but I do like Indian cotton fabric. It is one of the few things I overbuy.

I chose a fabric and set to work. My plan was to make the curtains long enough to cover the window but short enough not to touch my seedling trays. I measured the dimensions and thought I had it down pat. I am happy I learned how to sew and glad to have inherited my current sewing machine from Lenore. After sewing, I washed the curtains, and ironed them. When we finally hung them, my heart sank as much as the curtains had shrunk! I had neglected to take into account one thing. Some kinds of cotton shrink like crazy, and this happened to be one such kind. Tim looked at the gaping gap between the curtains and the window ledge and said that they were “flood curtains” like flood pants (“high waters”).

Thus, we have added one more endearing item to our menagerie of mismatched things. Note that the two curtains in the porch do not match. We got the one on the right from Tim’s parents. The yellow ones are the infamous “high waters” that I just made. The white one on the ledge is the shabby one with water marks.

On the bright side, the “high waters” will not be able to suck water from my seedling trays. This is the only solace I can take while pondering the unachievable middleclass dream.

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