

Cherry Dresser

Every time Mum and Dad had a fight, Dad sold another piece of furniture. He made Brodie and me help him drag the chosen piece outside to the furniture van while Mum sat wailing on the lawn in one of her beautiful dresses. She hated what she called 'synthetic attire'. Her wardrobe was crammed full of clothes made from silk, cotton, linen and wool.

Dad was still in his suit when I helped him to lift the antique dresser into the van.

"What if we have visitors," I said. "They won't have anything to say 'ah' about."

"They can say 'ah' about your mother," he said, bending down to brush dust off the curved wooden legs.

Mum was saying more than 'ah'. She was on the lawn in her red wrap-around dress tearing out clumps of grass and dirt and throwing them at him.

"Why do we have to carry things out?" I said. "Why can't the man do it?"

"Cheaper. What's that boy doing?"

Brodie was circling the van with his hands on his hips while the driver was scratching his head and looking at us all in amazement. He probably had a normal family to go home to.

A clump of dirt whizzed past Dad's face. "When you see sense, you'll get it back," he shouted. Then he went into the garage and worked on his Morris Minor.

Mum never did see sense and our home turned into floors and walls and the occasional soft thing you could sit or lie on.

"What's she got to see sense about?" I asked Brodie, who was sitting in the space where the brown La-Z-Boy used to be, with his legs on an imaginary footrest.

"Hmm...ah, yes," he said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully like Dad did when Mum was talking to him. They were next door in the kitchen eating their fish dinner and trying to sort out a way to get the furniture back. We could hear them yelling.

Mum stopped yelling years later when she went into a nursing home, not understanding much of anything. I tried to look after her but she kept running off in her Japanese kimono and sitting on people's lawns wringing her hands around the obi sash. I hated the nursing home, but it was the only one that let cats wander about and sleep with the patients. Mum loved cats, the one thing that Dad didn't send away in the furniture van.

"Ginny," she'd moan on a recognising day, "Ginny, where am I going?"

I didn't know, except that wherever it was, she'd already gone there. I buttoned up her leopard-print pyjamas, brushed her stylish white bob and made her up like a doll.

She liked eyeliner, but it was hard to put on because of her double eyelid. I'd think it was right, but, when she opened her absent eyes, the green line had jumped back into the crease of an eyelid on a fold of skin.

"Where's your husband?" she said, knocking the pencil out of my hand and rubbing her eyes like a scratchy baby.

"We broke up. It was amicable."

"Marriage is a compromise – look at the Queen; she'd never leave her consort." She went on, "I wouldn't compromise, so I lost everything. You take after me."

A nurse rolled by with a trolley taking dinner orders. The trolley made a clacking noise on the linoleum.

"Don't you take my furniture," said Mum.

The nurse poked her head into the room. "Of course not, dear. How are we today?"

'We' was right; Mum was a whole lot of people, most of whom I didn't know.

One day I got out a pad, wrote down the pieces of furniture that had gone missing on different pages and told Brodie to come over. I gave him a clipboard and a piece of paper headed up with 'brown La-Z-Boy', while I took a page that said 'antique dresser'. He looked like a contestant on TV who couldn't think of an answer to the question that would make him a millionaire, so I decided it was better to share the same piece of furniture and brainstorm together. I filled up our glasses with cheap bubbly and threw a few crisp packets around the pages on the floor while the tabbies played furniture-hop around us and stared with sorcerer's eyes at what we were doing.

"Brown La-Z-Boy," I said. "Mum was washing her hair."

"Dad was..." Brodie squinted into the time-tunnel, "...in the garage fixing the Morris Minor."

"You were on the roof spying on the blond girl sunbathing next door," I said in my hypnotist's voice. "I was outside with my hula-hoop and Dad came out of the garage. Elton John was on the radio."

"Honky Tonk Woman," said Brodie. "I can't see anything but the girl. Why do we have to work it out anyway? It's obvious it was Mum's punishment for buying all those clothes."

"Can't you stay in the same chair? You're as bad as the cats."

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"That's just coincidence," I said, jabbing my finger in the air. I was getting excited.

"Dad didn't buy the furniture. Mum got it out on hire purchase and Dad couldn't meet the payments because the interest was too high. He'd sell something or give it back and then Mum would get something else. She was working. That's how she got the clothes."

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"She worked two days a week."

I looked at him, sitting on the floor in an imaginary La-Z-Boy. "She probably got discount, you know what she was like."

"What if she wanted another baby and Dad didn't," he said, folding his arms behind his head and gently rocking. "Every time she went off the pill, he sold another piece of furniture."

"We have to find the link or we'll be psychologically disturbed for the rest of our lives," I said, looking at an upside-down Tabby scratching her way around the material at the bottom of my red and gold antique chair.

We couldn't remember a thing and we were getting drunker and drunker. We knew it was a crazy idea, but we decided to take a taxi to Mum's nursing home.

The Head Nurse looked at us disapprovingly, but she let us in. Mum was sitting up in bed knitting a blue mohair cardigan, with a white cat curled up beside her.

"Who's that for?" I said, patting the cat, while Brodie lurched around the room gagging when he passed a bedpan that the nurse had forgotten to empty.

She pointed to my stomach. "It's for the baby, dear."

"Oh, that's kind of you."

"If you had a baby," muttered Brodie. "Mum, the furniture..."

"I wanted it to match," she said, waving a knitting needle in the air and losing half the stitches. "Your father had no style. Is my sister coming today? She brought sunflowers yesterday. Where have they gone? Someone's stolen them. Find them, Ginny."

I patted her hand reassuringly and put the stitches back on the knitting needle, while she looked into a gold-plated hand-mirror and painted orange lipstick up to her nose.

A nurse with soulful eyes came in to get the bedpan, and Brodie and I followed her through to the sluice room. I

wished he'd stop bumping into the commode chairs.

"Nobody's stolen any flowers," she said in a soft lilt, emptying the pan into the sluice. "Mother's a wee bit confused today. We talk about things quite often when she's well."

We waited, breathless, for her to put down the bedpan.

"She worries we'll take the furniture away when she's out for a walk. A beautiful wardrobe she's got. She likes her clothes, doesn't she? Excuse me, won't you, I need to do the rounds."

"Please," I said, "has she told you why?"

The nurse shook her head. I wanted to tell her about how the furniture went missing when we were kids, but she picked up her clipboard and left.

I pressed my head against Brodie's bony chest.

"There goes hope," he said.

We were dizzy by now, so we went back to Mum's room and lay down on the floor, like we used to do as kids. Light reflected on the ceiling from a crystal prism hung in the window.

"We're never going to be normal," said Brodie, wriggling a rainbow finger at me. He looked so gloomy that I started to giggle.

"It's time for your nap," said Mum. "What are you still doing up?"

I leaned over the bed and gently stroked her face. "Tell me why Dad sold the furniture. What did you do?"

"There's meaning in some things, but not in others," she said, looking out the window at the red-hot poker. After a while she went to sleep.

I went over to the window and opened it. There was an old blue sofa in the garden. I took Brodie's hand and we tiptoed out the side door to sit in it.

"I don't think I need so much furniture," I said.