

Not There

I'm staring out the front window of my midcentury cottage when a rusty, black pickup jams to a hard-on-tires stop out front. It's the first wave of the Craigslist cavalry galloping in to liberate me. Immediately the driver, a goateed baldy, fifty-something white guy is out, slamming the door, hurry-waddling around the rusted tailgate. He stops to hitch his jeans up over his bulging black tee shirt, glaring first at his two passengers still in the truck's cab and then at Cornelia's mother's wheelchair.

With a little luck baldy will liberate Marilyn's wheelchair from my life, presumably she's been issued a hot new model – down in hell.

Baldy slaps the truck bed repeatedly until two twenty-somethings lumber out the truck's passenger door: A heavysset, olive-skinned woman in a long white tee-shirt and black yoga pants is followed by a tall, hunched pasty-white guy in a black tee-shirt and baggy jeans.

I step back from the window, not wanting to get caught staring.

"Leave NOTHING, my design obsessed friend, in your beloved cottage," admonished the last email from my persistently clear friend-attorney. "As of middle of the day Monday, every article you once owned will be the property of the vultures!"

Tomorrow three different judges will ply their legal instruments of mortgage default, bankruptcy, and divorce to deconstruct my physical, financial and emotional lives. By noon my life will consist of equal custody of Elsie; the \$23 in my wallet; a suffocatingly garnered salary as a staff architect, the divorces eliminates both partnerships; and a one-year prepaid lease for a tiny basement apartment pretty much equidistant from Elsie's First Grade classroom and Cornelia's bedroom in Malcom's McMansion – her new partner in life and design.

After a few moments standing back from the window, I hear the new mahogany screen door, that desperately trying to save money I installed myself, slam hard behind the Craigslist cavalry as they clomp through the front porch.

"Hi," the young woman says, in a singsong-happy voice.

Still smiling, she walks right past me, arms reaching out involuntarily at the furniture.

"We saw your Craigslist Free Furniture posting, so we rushed over – Newton always has good stuff. We just got our apartment an' we need ever...ree...thing."

Her pretty face lights up when her eyes land on the van der Rohe inspired, black leather daybed.

"OMG, I love that sofa! What'd you think honey?"

She stalks over to what Marilyn viciously dubbed "daddy's shrink sofa," inspiring a five-year-old Elsie to have me lay down on the low sofa when I got home from the studio exhausted, while she pretend-scribbled in a years old Day-Timer her "plan to make daddy happy again."

“Which one?” the young man asks clomping over in his unlaced Timberlands, his hunched shoulders apprehensively cocked.

“There’s only one!” she snaps. “Oh, my Gawd, there’s just sumptin about the shape of that sofa. An’ the black leather!”

“I don’t know Becca,” her partner drawls, his hand stroking his acne-pitted face.

“He says,” he nods his head extravagantly backwards towards baldy, “his friend Stumpy’s splittin’ with his ol’ lady an’ is givin’ us his sectional.”

“But this is beautee...full.”

“Stumps is stoppin’ by later taday with the sectional!” baldy clips with gravelly finality as he paces around in a circle, hands on hips, piggish eyes impatiently dancing across the dispensable articles of my life.

“Ain’t it a bed you lovebirds come for anyways?” baldy asks, his hand reaching involuntarily up for a cigarette that isn’t there and instead stroking his unruly goatee.

“Yeah-yeah-yeah,” Becca snaps, shaking her head, striding into the kitchen.

I hear another car door slam and walk back to the window. It’s the neighbors, who stare with pitying looks first at me in the window, then at the wheelchair.

“See, I’n tryin’ ta help these two,” baldy’s voice comes from behind me. “But they don’t got the brains of a pair a squirrels.”

“Oh, my goodness,” I answer emphasizing excessive empathy, turning away from the window to look at him.

“You Eye-rish?” his thick eyebrows scrunch together. “I seen the name on yer mailbox?”

“Well ...,” my head retracts in surprise at the question. “Somebody was ... way back. At least grandad drank like he was Irish!”

The words are out before I even knew they were in there.

“Mine too,” he grunts out a chuckle. “Some a them wuz Eye-rish, but we’re mongrels, a pile a the old-old ones come over on the Sunflower, or whatever the hell they call that boat, an’ some wuz pure Eye-rish, right outta Southie, but mostly I’m Injun, red Injun, ... not the dots.”

He scrunches up his face, his eyes narrowing to slits.

“See that’s why the hooch don’t suit me none too good. I mean I love it an’ all, don’t get me wrong, but you gotta be careful with it – right Eye-rish?”

He pats his bulging gut with both hands.

“See, he’s my nephew, but I’m kinda more like his dad, ‘cause my brother passed when he was just a little fuck: A one car wreck on 495 comin’ from a Pats game. Hooch didn’t suit him none too good neither.”

His scruffy goatee moves slowly from side to side.

“But I look out for him ... a little, ‘cause his mother,” the goatee shakes fast, his eyes narrowing, “she’s a fucking bitch an’ a half on a good day.”

I take a step backwards and try to summon an indignant look. But today I don’t have the emotional energy for a Newton glare or to say: “You know that everything you just said is a double offence in Newton. Not just for you for saying that, but for me too, for hearing those words!”

Instead, I simply nod.

“Yeah see, they just got a place together, in a shithole buildin’ down Framingham, full a Brazilians an’ perps just outta the joint. But I tol’ him”

He holds up his thick, calloused forefinger.

“I said, you stoopid fuck, don’t spend no money on furniture an’ stuff, ‘cause when the shit hits the fan with this thing they got for one another.”

He closes one hand into a loose fist, extends the thick index finger on the other and makes a Newton-illegal hand signal for human copulation.

“What’s he gonna do?”

He nods with sudden violence; goes for the invisible cigarette; then a goatee stroke; sweat building on his bald scalp.

“An’ the shit will hit fan!”

We both turn to look at the couple.

The nephew’s baggy-jeans are stretched tight as he stoops over with a tiny measuring tape, measuring the daybed they both know baldy won’t let onto the back of the pickup truck.

“An’ when the shit hits the fan, you know how it goes. Eye-rish knows how it goes.”

He breaths out so hard I hear a whistle from his lungs.

“You got a john I can use?” he asks suddenly.

I point him where to go.

A car door slams, and I turn to see a dark-skinned man, short, powerfully built, stand staring at Marilyn’s wheelchair. It was issued by the hospital for her recuperation with us after the stroke, but she refused to use it, preferring to badger Cornelia and I, even six-year-old Elsie, into being her crutch. He bounds up the walk; takes the front stairs in two huge steps; the screen door slamming behind him.

“Hello ... I am Sam...muel,” he says in a heavy accent, nodding, holding out his hand.

“I come Craig...list,” Samuel shakes my hand vigorously; nodding, smiling. “Furniture. Gurl bed, ... Emilia, four ..., wife say, you this place go.”

He beams a huge white teethed smile.

“There it is,” I point at a pink and white bed frame.

“Yes-yes,” Samuel says, head nodding rapidly. “Emilia this col...or love.”

I flinch as he immediately moves to grab the metal frame and wood base of Elsie’s bed for the past five years of her life.

How many times, precariously wedged on the side of that princess bed, Elsie fighting sleep next to me, had we chortled through a few pages of *Ten Minutes Till Bedtime*; both of us crisscrossing the sleep-wakefulness border, only for me to snap awake hours later, the oversized book flopped on my chest, Elsie sleep-breathing-soundly.

I want to stop Samuel, but he’s already headed for the front door.

It’s too late to stop anything now.

The screen door slams.

“I love these CDs, you have such good taste in music,” Becca says, smiling as she saunters out of the kitchen with a handful of CDs.

“Ooohhh no!” I say definitively. “They’re not available, just the furniture.”

“What?” she stops, her smile transforming into a frown. “I just been looking at them for like ten minutes.”

“Yeah sorry,” I say, holding out my hand. “Some of these are kinda not even mine, not with the divor....”

I don’t want to say the word aloud, but I can stare her right in the eye.

She hesitates, then hands them over.

“See I sing, that’s what I do,” Becca turns her face away from me. “I’m a blues singer; so, I really like some of those classic jazz an’ blues CDs.”

I’m flattered, almost to the point of offering some of the CDs, but these I listen to when sketching at home.

“Sorry,” I say again, unconvincingly.

“Yeah,” her partner turns and speaks across the room to us. “She sings a couple a nights a week at a lounge in Boston, for tips, it’s ok, but it didn’t count for the lease. Hey babe, maybe if you got in with a band”

She silences him with a sudden flash of her eyes.

“Ok,” baldy interrupts, hitching up his jeans. “We got a bed you lovebirds like?”

The screen door slams, and Samuel is back: He stands at the edge of the group, beaming a smile.

“I don’t see none,” the nephew says, mouth hanging open, hands held out interrogatively.

I point, but don’t look, at our wedding gift leaning against the wall: A cherry bed frame, box spring and mattress.

“What about this one?” Becca asks, pointing at a brand-new IKEA bedframe, some of still in unopened boxes.

“Yep, that’s good to go,” I say, ironically happy to dwell on my more recent mistake. “I bought the wrong sized bedframe, then I had it half built before I realized so I couldn’t ... anyways, it’s available.”

“Yer shittin’ me!” baldy laughs, rocking on his heels, patting his gut with both hands. “That’s the best one I heard in a long time, how the fuck’d you manage to buy the wrong bed Eye-rish?”

“Stoopid, vurry” Samuel says, shaking his head, still smiling.

“You wanting this?” he points at our deconstructed wedding gift and looks at the young couple.

“So that mattress there, would that fit this cool frame?” Becca asks, ignoring Samuel. “I like this frame, it’s like classic, all black wood an’ stuff.”

“I think Eye-rish’d be sleeping on it if it did hon,” baldy says, his hand back to stroking his goatee. “Right?”

I turn away and look for the front window.

“Let’s grab this one baby,” the young man says to the sound of cherry wood dragging across the parquet floor.

“An’ that dresser too,” Becca clips out her directions and makes to go down to the basement.

“No, no, no!” I say rapidly. “Nothing down there.”

Her eyes narrow, lips turn down. She stalks into the living room picks up a ratty ottoman and walks out.

Her partner follows close behind with the cherry headboard. Baldy grabs the mattress, and with a sudden movement, almost graceful for a man of his age and build, he slings the heavy-floppy object up onto his sideways leaning body.

Samuel smiles at them, nods interrogatively at me but not stopping, scoops up my “stupid, vurry” bedframe and departs for the door.

The screen-door-slams twice.

Baldy and his nephew are back. They pick up the dresser.

“This looks like something mom would have,” the nephew throws out carelessly.

Baldy, his mouth open, breathing hard, face mashed against the side of the dresser, catches my eye and rolls both of his until the lower pink edge is visible.

Samuel returns and with disquieting efficiency grabs two folding chairs and the box full of plastic bowls and glasses we used for camping vacations in the Maine woods.

“Tankin’ you, tankin’ you,” he says, nodding, smiling brightly.

The other three gather the remaining parts of our marriage bed and then, fittingly, bicker their way back to the truck; baldy waving his hand at me, a sardonic smile on his face.

The truck pulls off with a screech of rubber burning.

Silence.

Emptiness.

I return to the basement. Two days ago, while sweeping in what was Elsie’s playroom and my model shop, grief overcame me, and I dropped the broom.

It hit the concrete floor with a definitive crack.

Now, I go back down the basement stairs, pick up the broom and start to sweep away all that grief.

On the workbench sits a box filled with Elsie’s baby toys and a large tote filled with my scale models for the ten years Cornelia and I had our firm. She never saw the value in building a model. Being more business minded, she wanted the production drawings done and the invoice issued. Malcolm likely generates a lot of invoices “designing” all those Dunkin Donuts. She’ll at least get pleasure from that part of their partnerships.

The screen door slamming drags me back to my sweeping.

I grit my teeth. The polished brass closer looks good against the wood grain but the mechanism doesn’t work properly, so it slams the mahogany door into the mahogany frame.

“Again you specified based on aesthetics, not function!” I hear Cornelia’s voice reverberate inside my head.

I take the stairs in twos and threes, faking jauntiness as I try to spin myself out of this darkest of moods. Emerging from the stairwell, I see the grey rubber tip of an aluminum walking cane trying to tap the open front door.

“Hello!” I yell out.

The cane tip touches again, still making no noise.

“Hello,” I say, rushing to fill the front doorway.

An elderly, ashen-faced woman violently jolts back in shock. My hands shoot out instinctively in that sort of tragically futile effort humans make as they try to help one another but fail.

The white haired woman collapses sideways. She’s on two canes, each of which flails as she stumbles against the stack of logs left ready on the porch for never to be built cozy fires. The oak logs do what my hands couldn’t and hang her up for long enough,

that I then can help prevent this frail human from crashing to the porch floor. I grip her bony left arm tight and get her steady on her canes.

A car horn sounds impatiently.

Out the screen door, I see a taxi, the driver, a Haitian in a flowery purple sun shirt, leaning heavy on the horn.

“Dimitri ... my’s huss...band,” she gasps breathlessly, in a heavy Eastern European accent.

In the back seat of the cab, I see a tall, angry-faced man, talk-nodding rapidly at the cabby, his long index finger pointing forcefully at the horn.

I get her fully upright, balanced precariously on the canes. I stand back and look away with the shame of one who has witnessed another’s indignity.

My hands keep moving in the air in front of me, not sure what they should do.

“Chair vith vheels,” she declares, loudly, flatly.

“Oh yeah,” I answer, fake-jauntily, happy to have a task.

“It’s out here,” I angle myself around her on the narrow porch, push open the screen door and look at where it had been on the driveway.

Not there.

I take the front steps in two huge lunges, the door slamming behind me and stride down the walk with the intent of one intent on solving an annoying little problem.

Not there.

I hear the screen door slam again – damn that closer!

She’s propped up on the top step, the canes retaining her like flying buttresses.

I spin around, scan the front yard; driveway; sidewalk.

Not there.

I walk out onto the street.

Not there.

“I’m very sorry,” I say loudly. “Maybe someone came by an’ took it already.”

She’s halfway down the steps, all her focus on not falling, thus paying me no attention.

I wait for her at the end of the walk.

“Chair?” she almost yells, stopping herself on her mobile buttresses, her watery eyes staring at me hopefully.

“It’s not there. It’s gone.”

I shake my head repeatedly.

“Someone must have come by when I was downstairs sweepin’,” I hold out my palms to show my helplessness.

“Chair?” her eyes are befuddled now. “Dimitri no one leg has.”

“Jesus Christ,” I deliberately mangle the words in my out-breath.

She stares into the back seat of the cab.

I turn slow-dramatically to look: His white-haired head is nod-talking rapidly, his finger still pointing at the horn: The cabby’s hands are held up, palms facing the windshield in the universal symbol of human helplessness.

“Chair?” she asks loudly, but her eyes are already deflating.

I shake my head.

She shakes her head, stares at the cab.

“Twenty an’ five dollar taxi,” she shakes her head again. “No ... chair.”

“No wheelchair,” I echo.
“Twenty an’ five. Dimi ...,” she shakes his head.
The horn blows, one short toot.
Then a longer toot.
Then silence.
“Here,” I say, pulling out my wallet.
I hand her all my cash and start back up the walk.
As I mount the steps slowly, one step at a time, the cab door opens and out flows
a machine burst of Slavic vitriol.
I move faster, yanking the heavy screen door open, bounding into my once
beautiful home.
Behind me the closer slams hardwood onto hardwood.