

The Brown Couch

We'd been dating for nine months before Bryce asked me to move in with him. It would be a first for me. I'd lived with roommates through college and into young adulthood, but living with a partner, I'd never had the chance before now. We were giddy with the prospect of sharing a space, starting a life together, holding hands and kissing lightly like the happy little couple that we were.

The first blow up came two days after we made the decision to move into a studio apartment above my parents' garage. It was out of town and would give us a chance to save a little money before putting any eggs into a more permanent basket. From the moment I agreed to the move, I knew one topic would have to be broached: the couch.

Bryce had one of those very masculine, bachelor-pad, sink-in-and-don't-get-out three-piece faux sued brown sectional couches. In his apartment, it hugged two of the three walls of the living space and faced his 20x36 Vizio HD tv complete with Xbox and surround sound. Uninhabited, it was the type of couch you could picture three or four men perched on its bulky brown pillows, their forearms resting atop spread thighs, video game controller gripped between each hand, eyes glazed over yet alight with the action playing out before them on the screen. A beer by their feet, the haze of freshly smoked pot hanging in the air.

That fateful morning, over breakfast tacos, I suggested he put the couch up for sale in the classifieds.

"What do you mean?" he said, eating half of a taco in one bite, pico juice ran down his right forearm and trickled through his dark brown arm hair. He licked it off and finished his taco in one mouthful.

"I mean we should try to get some money out of it when we move," I said.

"What are you talking about? The couch is coming with me."

He stared at me, his eyebrow cocked in the way that it does when he's not really confused but rather perplexed.

"It's way too big for that space," I said. I felt my heartrate rise and my face heat up. I hate confrontation.

"No, it's not," he said, his tone final.

I stared at him unblinkingly.

"Yes, it is," I said. "It will take up the entire space and I don't want our whole apartment, our whole life, to surround the tv. And that's what will happen if we bring that couch." The words tripped out of my mouth, now suddenly dry. My lips felt swollen and clumsy.

"First of all, I bought the couch for good money, it cost me \$900. And it's the most comfortable couch you'll find. It's big enough for both of us to sleep on it comfortably, and for visitors to sleep on too."

"We'll have a bed in the same fucking room to sleep on," I said.

His green eyes flashed.

"I'm not getting rid of the couch," he said. He sat back in his barstool, crossed his arms over his chest and stretched his long, sinewy legs out from below his favorite black sweatpant-shorts.

"This conversation isn't over," I said as I picked up my plate and tried to take his.

"I'm not finished," he said, grabbing his plate and looking at me with a horrified look on his face. There was still a full taco left.

"Are you finished with that dish, Helen?" Holly's sharp voice rose over the clang of steel pans on the range.

My knife moved with ease through the steak I held under my left fingertips, the blade brushing familiarly against my knuckles with each slice.

"Thirty seconds," I said and fanned the pink-red flesh framed in brown along the left edge of my plate. A line of green spinach puree peeked out from below the flesh. On the right half, small dots of orange and purple colored the blank white surface. I sprinkled a pinch of white allium flowers over the top half to unify the dish and handed it to Holly.

"Runner please!" She shouted over the pass as she put my steak and David's pappardelle up.

"So he asked you to move in with him?" Holly said, turning to me as I wiped down my board. I had about two minutes to breath before the next rush.

"Yup."

"And?"

I took a sip of my water, the ice had melted long ago, it was already warm.

"I said yes."

She laughed.

"Don't sound so excited," she said.

I took another sip of water.

"I am, but we're already fighting about his ugly ass couch and we're both digging in our heals."

She laughed again, the sound raspy yet high-pitched and loud. Holly's laugh.

"It's not funny," I said.

"Oh honey," she said, picking up an order as it clicked through the ticket machine.

"Welcome to domestic bliss."

Over the next three months, we argued the matter of the couch at nauseum, to each other and to our friends. What began as an argument over the couch, slowly morphed into one of principle and stubbornness.

"So, have you decided when you want to put the couch up for sale?" I'd ask over dinner, on a walk, as we'd fall asleep, as we woke up. Sometimes it escalated to a full shouting match, at other time's it resulted in some passionate fucking in the folds of said couch. Needless to say, when our move-in date approached, February 1st, the conversation became less frequent and more terse: we'd reached a stalemate.

"Fine," I said one late night in mid-January. We'd just gotten back to my apartment that I shared with two girlfriends. They were both out for the night. I had just poured us both a glass of red wine.

"What," he said as he sipped from his glass, his eyes glued to my face.

"You can have the couch," I said.

His eyes widened and his beard twitched just enough that I noticed, but also enough that I knew he was trying to be cool.

“But only two parts. One has to go.”

His eyebrows furrowed.

“Wait,” he said.

“One piece goes,” I interrupted him. We held each other’s gaze.

“Deal,” he said. He grinned fully and took a big gulp of his wine, then leaned toward me to kiss me.

“Don’t get used to winning,” I said, before giving him a swift peck on the lips.

February 1st: move-in day. Bryce’s truck hummed as we sped up the mountain road towards our new home. The previous night’s snowfall hung heavily from the pines that lined the road. My arms were already tired from carrying each section of the couch down a flight of stairs and it into the back of his truck.

The engine groaned we turned a steep corner.

“These roads are definitely not regulation,” Bryce said. The engine rumbled as he pushed harder on the pedal. I looked back to the truck-bed where we’d managed to stuff both pieces of the couch we were taking with us. Bryce had tied them down with ample rope and cords as they hung off the back of his Dodge. It took us over an hour to move them from his apartment to the truck.

After ten minutes of constant climbing, we made it to my parents’ house. Built by its previous owners in the 1970s and tucked into the woods overlooking the Snake River, it’s an idyllic mountain home. The light orange tinge of log walls half buried in snow as we pulled down the narrow driveway.

He parked the truck ass-in, sprang out and began undoing his tightly tied knots. I took a deep breath and dropped my feet slowly from the car down to the snow-covered ground. With the ropes untied, Bryce jumped into the bed of his truck and pushed the smaller two-seater section towards me. I received it, held it close to my chest, and began walking backwards through the snow towards the steps to our front door. Snow quickly found its way between my lulu leggings and boots, nestled into my ankles and melted quickly through my socks. Carefully, I backed up the five un-shoveled steps, opened the door, and quickly pivoted towards the next staircase.

“Hang on,” Bryce said from outside. I felt the couch shudder as it met resistance and almost dropped it. “You need to angle it a little upwards and pull the bottom corner in your left hand downwards.”

I followed his instructions. The couch shifted and slid again through the doorway with ease. He pushed while I pulled the two-seater up the staircase and into our studio. We set it down and I collapsed onto it, my breathing heavy.

“That wasn’t so bad,” he said standing at the top of the staircase with satisfaction in his eyes.

I looked at him but didn’t say anything.

“Let’s get the other one in.”

He shuffled quickly down the staircase back out to the truck.

I took another deep breath, my eyes closed, and stood up.

The next piece was the bitch. She was the fat overfed cow that stood stuck in the mud and made sure everyone knew it. After three steps, me pulling him pushing, I had to put her down. She was so big I could barely get my hands under her and see over her armrest. And I'm 5'9". We continued on, a few steps at a time, the edge of the couch digging into my fingers and leaving them red and raw. My ankles felt hot with the cold snow that continued to pile into my boots and I pictured steam streaming from my ears. I avoided his eyes at all costs. We made it up the steps and as I pivoted towards the doorway I heard "fuck, STOP!" The couch rested on the railing its ass moving towards the bushes. My arms began to shake but I couldn't let it down or it would crush my boyfriend. Well, I could, but that would probably make this even worse.

"You need to push your end higher up, over the top of the railing," he said, "and I'll push it up from this side and move straight towards the door."

I tried to lift the couch a centimeter higher but my fingers felt like they were going to fall off.

"I can't," I said, choking back a hot tear.

"Baby, you got this," he said.

I bent my knees, put the bottom of the couch on my chest and pushed upwards with all my strength. The couch miraculously moved up and over the railing and I backed into the doorway. Thunk. The couch was stuck again.

"We have to turn it on its side," Bryce's voice came muffled from the other side of the door.

"How the fuck are we going to do that?" I said. "We're stuck!"

"No we're not. Just push it out towards me a little, there you go now stop."

The couch quivered in my hands.

"Push the top towards the left side of the door. NO your left, not mine."

I did as he said and the couch shifted slightly. I could see a crack of light between it and the doorframe.

"Ok, now pivot and keep the couch angled that way but pull it upwards towards the stairs too."

I dropped my side to the floor.

"What happened?" his voice came again from outside.

My breath shook in my throat.

"It's not going to fit," I said quietly.

"Yes it is," he said. "I promise. Just listen to my directions."

I looked at my hands, deep red lines cut through my fingers.

"Please, baby, just try one more time." His voice was calm, collected and kind.

I swallowed a hard lump, crouched down, picked up my side and pushed it over my head as I began to pivot up the stairs.

"There you go!" His voice was celebratory and encouraging.

I felt a surge of pride as two thirds of the couch slid through the doorway. I was five steps up the staircase. Thunk.

"Shit," I heard come from the other side. The last piece, the armrest was wedged into the doorway. Above me, the top corner of my side of the couch had stuck itself to the wall.

"Hang on," I heard, "I'll be right back, don't move."

Again I choked back a tear. I was stuck under the couch as tightly as it was stuck into the doorway. Then I heard a sound I will never forget: the sound of a power drill.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I said, any sense of cool and calmness had completely left my voice.

"I'm just going to take off these legs," he said, his voice strained as I felt the couch shiver and the hum of the tool got louder. After two minutes I heard the definite clunk of victory. The tool hummed on, and another clunk.

"Ok," he sighed, "again."

"It's stuck up here too numbnuts."

"Don't be like that. Just push it a little down towards me its unstuck here now so we should be able to wiggle it up."

I did as he said. The couch shifted downwards. I pushed it away from the wall then felt it push towards me with force.

"Hang on!"

The couch slumped.

"What?" His voice sounded annoyed for the first time.

"I wasn't ready," I said, my voice cracked. Shit. My arms shook from exhaustion. I swallowed hard.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

I picked up the couch one more time. The wood dug into the fleshy bit of my knuckles again, aching now more than stinging. I stepped backwards up the stairs, one step at a time, my thighs burning under its weight. One. Two. Three. Flatness. I walked quickly backwards and the couch followed me into the studio, bare but for the sofa's companion, and put it down without looking at Bryce.

"Will you hold this side up while I screw the legs back in?"

His voice came soft, almost pleading but not quite so sad.

I walked over to his side, careful to leave the brown hunk of furniture between us. I bent over, let the bottom cut into my palm one more time, and heaved upwards.

After a few moments of shrill drilling and sofa shaking, I put it down and walked towards the staircase that led down and out into the cold February air.

"Helen—"

I put my hand up.

"I just need a minute," I said without turning around. "I'll be back in an hour."

"What're you doing here?" Holly looked at me from the spliff she was rolling on our desk. She'd tied her fire-red hair into a neat bow right at the crown of her head.

"We just moved in the couches."

A smirk slid across her mouth as she sealed her drugs with the tip of her tongue.

"Just needed some space."

"I get it," she said. "Wanna roll some pork wraps?"

I looked at her, eyebrows raised.

"Merlin sent us a case of ground pork instead of porkchops. So. Japanese steamed cabbage with pork."

I picked at a scab on my forearm. A remnant from an oil splatter last week.

“Don’t do that,” Holly said. “You’ve got enough scars as it is.”

It started to bleed.

“You know what pissed me off the most?”

She grunted in response.

“He just wouldn’t give it up. It didn’t even fit through the door. He had to pull it apart to get it up there. He just couldn’t give it the fuck up.”

I looked up when she didn’t respond. She was looking at me with knowing smile on her face.

“You really love him don’t you?” she said.

I thought about it. Saw his face, his prickly but tidy beard, his warm blue eyes, the nose that might have been big and wide but fit just right.

“Yeah,” I said. I got up and walked over to the door.

“So no pork rolling?”

“No,” I said. “I should get home.”

The steps up to the front porch had been shoveled clean when I got back, a narrow wooden pathway cleaved through the snow to the doorway. I opened the door and heard The Band playing softly upstairs.

“Helen?”

The air was warm and welcoming on my face.

“Yup.”

I heard the door of the refrigerator open and close, the clink of glass and four big footsteps. Bryce appeared at the top of the staircase, a bottle of Chrystal I’d gotten from work in one hand, and two champagne glasses in the other. His favorite plaid slippers covered his feet.

“Welcome home,” he said and popped the bottle as I climbed the stairs slowly.

When I reached him, he gave me a glass nodded into the studio with encouragement.

Against the dark red half wall that separated our bed from the kitchen-living room stretched a dark brown sofa. A grey woolen blanket we’d found visit my family in Norway lay neatly over its back while my two smaller Turkish blankets hugged each arm. His two striped, fluffed pillows sat nestled into each corner, beckoning me to have a seat. Facing it from across a wooden coffee table lit with candles sat a brown two-seater, his mother’s quilt draped over the back in oranges, yellows, purples, greens and blues. I smiled. We were home.