

welcome

captured in wax

A friend recently turned me on (as we used to say) to Butcher's Wax—the stuff they use on bowling alleys, he helpfully explained. A long slab of an oak bench that had been sitting for years under a sunny window was in danger of drying out; one day I'd noticed, as if it had happened overnight, that the deep, ruddy color of the wood had bleached to an unhealthy pallor. This often happens with things that are so beloved as to become invisibly familiar. You stop paying attention, and they slip into an uncomplaining, decrepit old age. (The same thing can happen with pets, and parents, and marriages, too, if you don't watch out, but all of those are beyond the repair of Butcher's Wax.)

Anyway, the Butcher's Wax was produced only after my friend had applied a thick paste of mayonnaise to a water mark on the bench. "Great stuff, mayonnaise," he explained. "You'll be amazed." I was. The wood lapped up the mayo in a few hungry seconds; all that was left was a dark patch that looked suspiciously, well, greasy. When the noonday sun beat down on the bench, an odd smell began to waft through the room.

I was back on the bench project a few weeks later. The patch of mayo was still dark and smelly, as if the wood could not digest it. Never mind what your stomach must look like after your favorite sandwich of watercress, bacon, and mayo slathered on white toast. (This same friend rubs shaving cream into leather boots to soften them up; that seems to work, and you get tiny and deliciously fragrant Old Spice bubbles squishing out from your soles on damp days.) The mayo was problematic, and so my friend gave me a large, handsome orange tin of wax, the sort of classic package, with its strong, unabashed typography, that makes you want to decorate your cleaning supply closet, for heaven's sake.

It took my son and me several hours, using fingernails, nail files, scissor points (scissors now blunt-tipped), keys, the edge of a wind chime's clapper, and finally (duh) a screwdriver—but that was very hard to find—to pry open the lid of the can. It lifted with a satisfying air kiss, and a sharp,

sweet smell rose up. I inhaled deeply. The surface of the wax was smooth and glossy; I hated to mar it. But I dug my fingers in, scooped out a blob, and smeared it onto the bench. This was already a deeply rewarding activity; I felt like a child playing in some forbidden primal ooze. The bench was very long and the simple plank quite thick; it had clearly come from a tall old tree. It had been given to me years ago by my mother-in-law, who no longer had a place for it in her house. I could see why; it was so long (the sort of thing that might have stood in a meeting hall) that it was awkward to place, and I had moved it through various rooms in my own house. As I scooped and smeared, running my fingers over the crack and across the grain of the wood, I began to think about the bench. I had never had my nose so close to it. But I had spent hours with my feet propped on it, knees stabilizing my binoculars, watching the delicate movements of a crane fishing in the shallow edge of the pond. I had spent hours sitting in a chair next to the bench, reading, while it held my afternoon cup of tea, or my morning coffee. In a previous life the bench had displayed a son's collection of stuffed animals, ranged proudly down its length. In its next life, it had served as a bookshelf for the spillover from the library. The bench was old, and its legs were pegged into the top; while I smeared and rubbed I admired the tight fit and solid feel of it.

In short, the cleaning made me stop, for a few moments, and appreciate the steadfast service of this slab of wood. The smell and feel of the wax were intoxicating, and suddenly I recognized the ghost of a wonderful and familiar scent of that house in New Orleans that I had visited many times. Beeswax, blended with the unparalleled fragrance of excellent cigars, and a touch of gardenia—all this had settled deeply into the pores of the bench whose back I was now rubbing, harder and harder, trying to capture one last lingering moment in the embrace of a home I had long ago left behind. Or so I thought.



Dominique Browning, EDITOR