

welcome

Taking in Strays

Perhaps it started during my first years in New York City. It was the late '70s. I was an editorial lackey and had no money to furnish a rental that cost me an alarming three weeks of salary every month. This rental was hardly worth fixing up, I might add; its most distinguished decorative feature was a cockroach fossilized in paint on the kitchen wall, a prize frozen mid-flight by someone's perversely gleeful brush. I could hardly take my eyes off it. One day, coming home from work, I spotted an old sofa on the sidewalk; its mossy-green velvet back and arms were trimmed with a dark burnished wood elaborately carved with swags of fruit. Its bottom had dropped, but it was still stately and had the advantage of being someplace to sit, and so with the help of a kind stranger I carried the behemoth up three flights to my room. Those were the days.

Eventually I was able to afford furniture, but I still scan sidewalk sales and the Wednesday trash piles with a practiced eye. I can't help it. Some people take in cats and dogs; I take in furniture. Not off the streets, these days, though I confess to the fairly recent find of a wondrous pair of blown-glass lamps—Italian, probably 1960s—that had miraculously survived abandonment and were simply waiting to be recognized as worthy of a home. I can't take much pleasure in flea markets anymore; they fill me with a nameless dread and a sense of loss. All those homeless things. I've become too sensitive to mess and mustiness and germs and infestation. "One man's trash . . ." now falls into the category of "the things we used to do" (usually preceded by "If my kids knew . . ."). This is a sure sign of advanced middle age. Trash versus treasure also marks a great decorator divide, between the Rescuer (who boasts a great eye, great resourcefulness, and great marketing skills when it comes to marking up the trash) and the mere Shopper. (I mean, how hard is it to find a treasure at Sotheby's?)

I have managed to spawn a hybrid, which might be called the Rescue Shopper, and may possibly draw on the worst of both worlds. I will pay good money to buy things no one else wants from prestigious establishments. And as I now work in a place where I am

exposed to thousands of things no one could possibly want—and plenty that's desirable, too—this is a dangerous proclivity.

Some things are just irresistible. Certain pieces—tables, beds, chairs (and so on)—have a charming, insouciant ugliness (what we might call personality in a date) that lets you know they could care less whose house they sit in. They don't blend into the decor. They radiate presence. I find that appealing. I must have them even if I have no place to put them, just to keep them in the family. Just to take care of them until their intended fate reveals itself. And that is how I come to play my part in the great and mysterious tide of stuff that washes into our houses, and ebbs into sisters' attics and consignment shops, only to flow into the living room again. Listen, I'm small potatoes. Some people actually have warehouses full of stuff they just *had* to buy.

The cane chaise that looked so elegantly lonely? I learned why when I tried to sit on it for more than ten minutes. The upholstered settee that was far too handsome to pass up? Tight enough to bounce on. The enormous, gleaming wooden dough bowl that is so beautifully patched? Who needs room on the table to eat a meal? The intricate, mysterious clock that runs on air and *never needs winding!*? I can tell you what time it is—in Singapore. I suppose I could say I am practicing Making Mistakes. We all know that the only way to achieve personal growth is to push yourself beyond the frontiers of safety and risk Making Mistakes. As far as I can tell, the most important part of Making Mistakes is learning to let go of them—and of course the most lucrative part of Making Mistakes is foisting them off on someone else. This is often done in the name of decorating. From now on, I am going to play it safe. I'm turning a deaf ear to the cries and whispers of lost things. I've had enough—I have too much stuff, and someone else can feel responsible for all the hapless teacups and footstools and daybeds that are crying out for a home. But about that Venetian glass chandelier—someday I'm sure I'll have the right place for it, and until then . . .



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