

Sometimes you let something new into your life and it suddenly turns everything upside down.

Nothing looks right anymore; nothing feels quite pulled together. This happened to a friend of mine recently. She was walking along, on her way to something banal, like the grocery store, say, when she popped into the shop of one of her favorite dealers. There, an ebony table with a beautifully turned leg caught her eye. She had never seen anything like it. Entranced, she inquired and was told it was designed in France, in the '40s, but that was all that was known. It wouldn't have mattered who the designer was; my friend has decidedly French enthusiasms, but they don't usually go much past Louis XVI. She bought the table.

When it arrived at her home, it turned out to be a bit more substantial than she had anticipated. I went up to see it because it was unusual for something so close to contemporary to turn up on my friend's radar—much less in her entrance hall—and I was curious about what had captivated her. The table had undeniable presence: its legs were thick and almost bottle-shaped, and the ebony had the luster of a grand piano. It looked nothing like all the feminine, chalky-white fauteuils and bergères and canapés in the rest of the rooms; indeed, it stood in the place occupied a week earlier by a Louis XVI console that had been beloved. No more.

A month later it happened again—another dark, handsome table. As she was strolling through the Paris flea markets, a slab of mysterious, green-black stone caught my friend's eye. The legs had strong, architectural lines arranged in a triangular pattern. This time the table's designer was known—Ado Chale, a Belgian—and the piece was probably made in the '70s, but again, that was meaningless to my friend. She didn't care who he was or where he came from; she simply had to have the table.

She had fallen in love, the way people do, violently and unexpectedly. And nothing else seemed the same. Suddenly she was talking about getting rid of everything and casting a baleful eye over all the possessions she had so carefully assembled during the past decades. No more chandeliers; no more curtains; no more Nile green walls; no more Louis anything. Her husband developed a sudden and severe case of gout and had to remain sequestered; he no doubt feared that the very sofa on which he reclined would be removed, with him on it.

I could sympathize. This sort of thing happens to me almost every day. I'll look at a picture of a beautiful room, different from any of the rooms in which I've happily lived, and I'll suddenly be seized by the urge to reinvent my life. The slippery slope starts when you actually do something about such desires. Just as you can't be a little bit pregnant, you can't do a little bit of redecorating. Paint one room that desperately needs help, and before the

paint dries, everything else—perfectly fine before you fanned open that color chart—looks shabby. Reupholster the armchair that the dog used as his nest, and before you know it the rest of the furniture looks like it belongs in a zoo. Even buying new sheets is dangerous. Bring in the Porthault, and suddenly your bed isn't quite up to snuff.

And just try moving to a new house and taking all your old things along. The truth is you can't take it with you, and this may be a rehearsal for the ultimate one-way trip. I'm beginning to realize that the ownership of stuff has its life cycles, too. Tastes change. And that's a good thing. Remember cringing when you—or worse, your children—stumbled on that photograph of you in your prom dress? You might feel the same way if you saw a snapshot of your living room 30 years ago—unless you're still living in it. In which case, time to wake up.

How is it that one's taste can suddenly, irretrievably, change so radically? Does it mean that what came before was simply wrong? Or that, simply, we've outgrown it? We've all had the unsettling feeling that, even though there isn't any real reason to feel dissatisfied, we are. Things seem dreary, and we feel shackled to the furniture for an eternity. Some of us don't evolve slowly; we go along pretending all is fine, and then fall at a stroke of lightning that comes out of the blue, when we are the least defended—and least prepared. Actually, I think that's a pretty lucky situation. (Lucky, too, for the husband: at least it's only a table.) Maybe it means that there still beats within a heart a yearning for adventure, or a desire never to be done with the growing, the learning, the exploring. It is one of the markers, I think, of character as one grows older. You have a choice of one of two paths: do you shun the unfamiliar or do you embrace it—with all its challenges and difficulties? Two different ways to turn, each valid but wildly incompatible with the other.

Of course it's one thing if you fall in love with something completely inappropriate. You'll never be happy, and beyond a certain point in life, you do grow weary at the prospect of breaking up, again. But if what you've brought into your home is something interesting, something that takes you to new places, casts your life in a completely different light, and asks you to question your assumptions about what is beautiful, then the trouble it causes is worth it. Whether that new table turns out to be a crush or the opening chords for a major and enduring love affair, who knows at the start? But you'll never find out if you simply walk away. Where's the fun in that?



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