

End Grain

by Joy Baglio

In her final days, my wife begins hoarding furniture. She's grown so weak that she can't leave her bed, but she insists on flipping through local catalogs, circling all the wooden chairs, end tables, and nightstands she wants in red marker.

"There's a particular oak armoire," she tells me. "A one-of-a-kind piece. Saw it years ago around here," but she's too weak to go out searching and she can't remember more than "It has this end-grain look," and so she contents herself with her unexplained love of all things wooden and carved and practical.

Armoires are her favorite. Beautiful, hand-crafted armoires with whole universes of drawer space; armoires that smell like hardwood forests, with doors that open like fairy portals. I sit on the end of our bed and order each one for her. She hands me the catalog with its dog-eared pages and circled items, then watches, hawk-eyed, as I make the calls, whispering "Make sure that's cherry!" or "The Cuban mahogany, not the Honduran!" as I speak with the sweet-voiced salesgirls. My wife is a tough, loud woman, even with the cancer ravaging her in its last stage, and there is something in me that, even now, believes her incapable of demise.

Our grown daughter, Celia, has moved back to assist with her care, and neither of us has the guts to ask why, suddenly, she cares about new furniture.

She says things like, "If I'm gonna die, for fuck's sake let me have that walnut dresser." Or, "Christ, Dan, if my dying wish is for this cherry footstool, are you really going to tell me no?" The answer is, of course, no. I will not be the one to tell my dying wife "no," to deny her simple wish to surround herself with what she loves, even if I do find it strange that a woman confined to bed craves an armoire in her last days.

She has a thirst for hardwoods. She wants to be encompassed, she says, by the smoothness of sanded maple, to be flanked by the sturdy thickness of oak. For years, the basement and spare bedroom were full of her old clothes, boxes of our daughter's childhood artwork, shoes that my wife might wear one day, bins of craft fair angels and Christmas ornaments, all of which she forbade me to purge. Yet now, in the final months of her life, it's all shoved into one ceiling-high mountain to make way for the heaps of our old furniture, while the upstairs fills with her new acquisitions: excessive oak desks, wooden benches, towers of stacked pine chests, each "a find" according to my wife.

"A find?" Celia scoffs. "I don't know how someone can say that about a piece of furniture."

Celia's in the middle of a painful split from her fiancé of eight years, and we have to run fans at night for the white noise in order to block out her phone conversations—mostly venting sessions with friends, but sometimes we hear her crying on the phone with Adam, who would have made a good son-in-law, but now is the source of our daughter's swollen eyes and sleepless nights.

"She's not here for me, Dan," my wife whispers to me under her breath. "I know you'd like to think we're all coming together now, but that girl has her own misery front and center."

I try to brush this aside. "Whatever the reason, she's here now," I say, and my wife huffs and leaves it at that.

"Mom," Celia says, standing in the doorway in a way that suggests brute confrontation. "There're three new boxes for you today. What's the point to all this? You don't need anymore! There's no place for it in the house."

My wife doesn't take this well. She's in the middle of a shopping spree, propped on two dog-chewed pillows, a stack of catalogs spilled on the bed beside her.

"Do you know," she says, slowly raising her eyes to Celia with great deliberation, still gripping the catalog. "Do you know even a fraction of what it all means?"

Celia's baffled by the question. "What it means?" She doesn't know. Neither of us do. What does a table mean, really? What do a jumble of oak desks symbolize? An armoire?

"What *does* it mean, Mom?" Celia asks, and I wait, in earshot, listening to find out as well, but my wife slumps down on the pillows, exhausted, face sideways on the bed.

"Everything," she whispers. "It means everything."

Not the kind of answer that illuminates.

Every day there are new shipments, and my wife requests they be brought to her room, where they line the walls on either side of the bed. When that fills, we leave them in the living room, floating islands of perfect craftsmanship that we sometimes bump at night, a hard corner to the hip or a toe stubbed against a carved table leg.

"What the hell is she gonna do with another coffee table?" our daughter wails. "Why don't you put a foot down? Take away her credit card!"

"It's her only comfort right now," I say, although I'm fed up, too. "Let her distract herself."

When my wife can no longer sit up and our magnificent wooden bed is replaced by a foldable geriatric hospital frame, she seems to tire of new furniture and asks again about that particular oak armoire.

"It exists in one of the local stores," she says. "I know it. All this furniture was just to fill the void of it, but I know it's out there."

I am to find it for her. How will I know it when I see it? Photos, she says. I must take photos of all the armoires I encounter. At first I love the heroic nature of my mission, and I don't question her. I go around taking photos of different oak armoires with the old camera I used years ago in my days as a journalist, reporting all images to her, which she surveys with a listlessness that gives my quest a new urgency. After a week of visiting different carpentry guilds and furniture stores, I show her a photo that elicits silence. She stares.

"This one," she says. "Get it. Get it for me."

Here's what you should know about me and my wife: We've been together for thirty years. Sometimes I hear that snappy, demanding voice, and I think, "It's still her, despite everything. The same woman who laughed us out of a movie theater in our twenties, who nailed our roof down with me, who nursed me through prostate cancer and pneumonia and gave birth to our children. We are two parts of the same mind, even through this journey of disease." I think this, and I want to give her the world, even then.

It's not hard to order the armoire. When I call the store, a young woman answers and tells me, quickly, that it's not for sale.

"Why?" I ask.

There's hesitation in her voice. "Can I put you on hold?"

So I wait. In the background, there's a muffled conversation, then a man picks up.

"Hello sir, may I inquire what purpose you have for the armoire?" His voice is kind but firm.

"It's for my wife," I say.

There's a moment of silence, then, "Your wife?" There's a curiosity in his voice. "What's her name?"

"Evelyn Clongowes," I say without thinking. "She requests it."

There's a long pause. "The armoire is available," he says. "For your wife, Evelyn."

For the briefest moment, it strikes me as odd that her name should matter, and then I'm moving quickly through the details of the order. I ask for expedited delivery, pay two thousand on my credit card (a final gift for her) and that is that.

"Evie," I ask her when I'm off the phone. "Why this armoire?"

"I always wanted an oak one. Always," she says.

When I tell her I hadn't ever known that, she smiles and says, "Well you know basically everything else about me," then waves her hand emphatically towards the cluttered wall. "I want to see it against that wall before I'm gone."

A few days later, I'm passing by her room when I hear her talking to Celia who's taken to tending to her bedside needs. Normally their conversations are dominated by

Celia venting her frustrations about her failed relationship, the "stupid, creeping eye" of her former fiancé, the "primate nature" of all men. Evie lets her rant, then offers up some generic platitude about the ever-present nature of love and "all the fish in the sea" that Celia could be catching.

Today I hear sobs from Celia, loud and unfeminine, and then my wife's voice, more tender than I remember it: "It will pass, I promise you. There are other fish in the sea."

"Says you," says Celia. "Married for thirty years. How would you know?"

I'm about to continue on, when I hear my wife again:

"I can't say this to your brother," she says confessionally, "And I certainly can't say it to your father..." Then her voice drops very low, very quiet, and I can't hear.

Now you should know this about me: I'm not someone to snoop around. I've never checked her phone, her purse. Never rifled through her desk papers. I'm not one to stand eavesdropping by doors either. I feel guilt easily and quickly, but this "certainly can't say it to your father" part baits me good and hard, and I creep closer to the door and stand with my ear gently against it, waiting.

"You can't tell them," my wife says, hushed, then continues without waiting for an answer. "That armoire, the reason I need it, the reason I needed all that wooden furniture..."

"What about it?" Celia's voice is low and child-like.

"It because of a man," my wife says. "Someone I knew."

I hold my breath, waiting. The mention of another man, at a time when she is close to her last breath, hits me. Our daughter says nothing. Everything in the house seems silenced, mute.

"We lived together, before I ever met your father, before you." Her voice is very soft, and I move closer to the door. "He made things, furniture. Always the finest wood. Filled our house with it so it smelled like pine forest, like cedar, like oak groves. I still remember his face, such dark hair, light skin. He was the first man I cooked for. First to see me naked." She laughs. "But I was going away to school, and when I met your father that semester—same year as me—and was conflicted, he ended it. Said marriage wasn't in the cards for him, that your father was a better match for me, that I should marry him. Made me promise I would." She laughs again, as if the whole thing is some kind of comedy, and something deep in me snaps. "When I refused at first, he made me the bureau. Told me to take it in place of him; it was his height, his weight, made by his hands."

"But you don't have it?" I hear our daughter say.

"I couldn't take it. Dan and I were still students, just starting out. It would have driven me mad to see it there, in our bedroom. But years later, we moved back here, and I never searched for it. He said it would be here, waiting. That he'd never sell it."

I can hear Celia mumble something, insist that my wife turn over on her stomach. Then a groan.

I hear my wife's dry cough. "Yes, and now your father found it for me. Some end-grain thing he made out of scraps, but to me the most beautiful piece. He saved it for me all these years. Didn't sell the damn thing. I half expected to never find it."

"What about the man himself?"

"You can't have it all," she says. "Wife and kids, I imagine, same as me. We promised we wouldn't interfere, you know? And your father's a good man, don't get me wrong. But the armoire, the armoire he said was always mine. He said it would be here."

I'm shaking, my breath lodged somewhere in me, like a stone. When I hear my daughter move towards the door, I step quickly away, around the corner and pretend to be studying a newspaper lying on a table. I hold it up to my face and allow my breath to come in gasps.

Later that day, Evelyn becomes very weak. She coughs endlessly, her throat parched "like a desert" she says. She hangs on until the next day, waiting until the end for the armoire to arrive, but it's that evening that she leaves for the hospital in an ambulance, her pain too intense to bear at home.

When we're all clustered around her bed in the hospital—the damp, cobwebby, smell of sickness thick in her room, her breath a slow raspy heaving, all of us waiting, clutching a hand, a foot, the children crying—I am flipping through the years of our life, like flash cards, wondering who he was, which smiling friend had he been? Had I ever met him? I hear again the firm, kind voice of the man who sold me the armoire, "Your wife? What's her name?" and I think, Was it him? I'm shaking again, sick with nausea that makes me hate her, even in her blurred delirium, her too-listless-to-speak haze. There is one clear-eyed moment, when she looks around, searching for me, and I am here but not here, holding her hand, looking quickly into those eyes, then lowering my head, pressing my lips to her withered fingers.

Days after the funeral, the armoire arrives, encased in cardboard. I leave it wrapped for a week before I tear it open, my whole body tense at the smell and sight of it. I pace around it, studying it, smelling the raw oak. The end-grain top gives it a strange cobbled-together look, and he's carved a kind of lover's Braille into the back. I recognize her initials, what must be his, an infinity sign, some more letters whose meaning I can only guess. At first it pains me, a kind of museum etching to their love. I wonder if I should bring out my own tools and efface the armoire, return it to a more pristine state, but somehow I can't bring myself to tamper with it. It's huge and tomblike, and I move it into the room where her bed used to be, a kind of memorial that only I understand. I move my reading chair into the room and sit there each night, its presence somehow comforting. Sometimes, in the dark once the lamp has been turned off, I wrap my arms around the wooden shape of the armoire, the square, unhuggable corners, the tongue-oiled oak, this relic of her life before me, her secret, held to the end, and cry into the deep solidity of its wooden sides.