

NANCY ROMAN

Family Heirlooms

I almost hit the sofa. I had zipped right around the corner hardly slowing down, because it was as familiar to me as my own driveway—it actually being my own driveway. And I almost hit the sofa.

Towards the end of my blackout was a nicely arranged living room. A sofa, flanked by two end tables with doilies as well as matching lamps, and, at a tasteful angle, an armchair and ottoman. It was my mother's living room.

I was glad I had been able to stop the car before any collision. My mechanic already thought I was an idiot, ever since I had locked myself out and tried to jimmy the lock with a nail file. My spare key had been hiding from me for three years. The neighbor's kid came over and opened the passenger door using a coat hanger with the kind of skill that may eventually earn him an impressive prison sentence. I climbed over the shift and drove to the garage, where Roy managed to pry the broken-off file out of the lock. It would have been difficult to tell him that I had hit a sofa, so I probably would have said it was a deer, but Roy would have found animal parts in the grill that looked an awful lot like floral upholstery.

The new formal patio was my sister's work. It was not a peace offering. Not a gift. It was a scolding. I had not helped Janice clean out my mother's house.

If my mother were alive, this would have been her kind of joke. My mother once wrote Janice a letter, purportedly from the Humane Society, informing her that she was enjoined from any further practice of the clarinet, as her playing had caused permanent mental imbalance in the neighbor's dog, Skippy.

But my mother was not alive. I sat down on my spot of the sofa. We had permanent positions in my mother's living room. The left side of the sofa was mine, and I usually sat sideways, so I could better see the TV and so my toes could touch my mother's lap. I loved touching any part of her. Sometimes she held my foot absentmindedly during *The Big Valley*. Janice sat in the armchair. She cringed if even a piece of my clothes touched her skin.

I lay down in the dark with my head on my mother's worn place. I couldn't see the green and gold flowers in the tapestry, but I traced their outlines with my forefinger. The neighbor's cat, Joseph, came wandering over and after he finished criticizing the decor, he hopped up and lay beside me.

I woke up after two in the morning. I was freezing—all except my right shin where Joseph had tucked himself. "Come on," I told him, and he followed me into my house and onto my bed as if he had done so every day of his life.

I lay in bed and shivered. I remembered going to the beach with my mother and Janice. Janice was a little fish; she could stay in the water for hours. But I trembled from the cold after just a few minutes. Janice would sneer in disgust at my chattering teeth and bluing flesh. One fabulous day I sat with my mother on her turquoise beach blanket, she glamorous in her Esther Williams swimsuit; I swaddled in my Minnie Mouse towel and shivering spastically. My mother took a mirror out of her straw satchel and frowned at her reflection. "Honey," my mother said, "You should have told me . . . I need to fix my face." And she took out a lipstick in the most astounding shade of purple and

elaborately painted her mouth that ridiculous color. And she smiled and kissed me, purple lips to purple lips.

I couldn't empty my mother's house. I couldn't bring her clothes to the Salvation Army. I couldn't stand in the yard and haggle with strangers over the value of her best china. And I couldn't cart away her mattress, still smelling faintly of her lavender cologne, and leave it at the landfill.

I had waited for Janice to pick a fight, which never took long—it was the day after the funeral. She accused me of stealing my great grandmother's beanpot.

"It's our only family heirloom," she cried, and although "heirloom" was perhaps an exaggeration for something as mundane as a beanpot, I knew what she meant. We had nothing else that had been handed down from mother to daughter and down again. "It should be mine," she added, "You'll never have anyone to give it to."

And I had stomped off. I left Janice with the house. I left her to be the responsible one, as usual.

Joseph woke me early with a paw to the eyelid. He sat in the sink while I showered and we breakfasted together on a can of sardines. It was an appalling meal for me at 7:00 A.M., but I owed Joseph a special offering in gratitude for his company.

I opened the back door and he trotted off, tail up and head high. He didn't look back.

I took the top off a cardboard box and wrote in big letters "FREE." I added in smaller print at the bottom, "to a good home". I walked out to the sofa, and sat one more time with these things that were not family heirlooms. These possessions that were the backdrop of our whole lives. They shared Christmases and birthdays and confidences and arguments. They showed up with us in every family photo. I left the sign on the sofa and went to work.

When I got home that evening, the furniture was gone. One doily lay crumpled on the driveway, and I picked it up and brought it in. I placed it in the center of my kitchen table, smoothing it carefully with the flat of my hand. I went to the linen closet and reached behind the mismatched sheets. I put the beanpot on the doily and called my sister.