



WILLIAM CARTER





the bus, but he had a car, which struck me as adventurous and independent and somehow transgressive too. Without explanation, he pulled off the highway to make a stop at his parents' house: a white Colonial with a circular drive.

I followed my future husband through the front door of the empty but brightly lit home, the lamps turned on and off by timers while his parents were on a Caribbean cruise. The purpose of the detour, I learned, was to "borrow" a bottle of his father's wine. Loot in hand, he flipped the switch for the dining-room chandelier in search of a corkscrew. I watched, mesmerized, as he turned a tiny key in the brass lock of the glass-doored breakfront where the Waterford glasses and vases were displayed and then rifled through the felt-lined drawers where the sterling-silver flatware and serving pieces were kept. By the time he opened the bottom cabinets, where my future mother-in-law's strawberry-pattern Wedgwood, her mother's lilac-pattern Villeroy and Boch, and the Christmas-pattern Royal Doulton were stored, I was a goner.

I didn't even really like these things — too fussy, too formal — but they signified a way of life that was orderly, genteel, calm. In the scent of silver polish and the hum of the chandelier and the quilted covers of the tea-and-coffee service, I could sense the woman for whom birthdays and anniversaries and holidays meant tablecloths she ironed herself and silver she polished herself and dinners for sixteen or eighteen or twenty that she cooked and served herself: prime rib or leg of lamb or center-cut hams, string beans or red cabbage or carrots cut into coins, potatoes mashed or roasted or scalloped. For her, Christmas was the centerpiece of the year, the shopping commencing before Halloween, the shrubbery along the foundation woven with colored lights right after Thanksgiving, the table set with the holiday china and the miniature red-and-white salt and pepper bowls with the tiny scooping spoon. There would never be a Thanksgiving in this house such as the one I'd spent at home a few months before, shortly after my chemistry-professor father had left and my health-economist mother had taken to brazenly smoking cigarettes, when at midnight I'd carried the still-rock-hard frozen turkey out to the trash.

Things

L.K. GORNICK

— for Millie

Before I fell in love with my husband, I fell in love with his mother's china. It was a frigid February night, my second date with my husband-to-be, who'd asked me to a concert in New York City, an hour's drive from Princeton, where I was a seventeen-year-old freshman (as we called it in those days) and he was a sophomore. I was used to going to the city on

For my parents, creating a home was about establishing distance from their own immigrant parents' households, where the atmosphere was infused with grief and poverty. In my parents' living room resided sophisticated but uninviting Scandinavian couches, neatly displayed piles of *Scientific American* and *The New York Review of Books*, artifacts from their travels. My mother was virulently opposed to anything that smacked of conventional fifties-housewife culture. She did not knit or garden or volunteer at my school. She did not wear nail polish. She did not bother with mattress pads or shower-curtain liners. She did not care about china and silver. Entertaining meant heated political debates at dinner parties that caused my mother immense anxiety as she attempted to make what she considered intellectual foods: Peking duck or



Elizabeth David's *scampi alla griglia* or Julia Child's coq au vin.

When my husband and I decided to get married, both of my parents independently asked me not to have a wedding. They were divorced by then, and neither wanted to be in the same room with the other. The truth is, I didn't much want a wedding either. The idea of getting up in front of a crowd to play the role of bride left me a little sick to my stomach. It's also extremely difficult, not to mention awkward, to have a traditional wedding without a traditional mother to occupy the traditional mother-of-the-bride slot. Moreover, as deeply practical as I was, and as scarce as money was for us then, I couldn't imagine spending so much on a single event. We'd been given some money by each of our families, but great frugality would be required to carry off anything that would be recognizable as a wedding to what I am abashed to admit was the key audience: my husband's parents and relatives and their boating and bridge-club friends.

Both my husband-to-be and I (though we didn't ever discuss it) believed that we needed a wedding not for ourselves but rather as a portal through which to enter the lives of his parents. Neither of us wanted the white Colonial, the father on the 5:33 train, the mother who had the children bathed and quietly in front of the television by the time he walked in the door. But neither did I want a home with furniture that was suitable only for Sunday mornings spent solving the mathematical puzzles at the back of *Scientific American* or discussions about Keynesian economics and Social Security. What I wanted was my mother-in-law's lavender-scented linen closet and her wrapping-paper caddy and seasons that each had its signature family gathering, but without having to live her life. I wanted a china cabinet with a service for eighteen. I wanted to be a woman who could cook meals for that many people without squinting at a cookbook and having a nervous breakdown. And to have this, it seemed, there had to be a wedding.

My wedding dress was the first place it occurred to me to cut corners. This did not, however, obviate my feeling that I should look "like a bride." Like a bride, in my day, did not mean what it had to my mother-in-law, who'd married in a dress sewn by her mother: chaste, high necked, white velvet with covered buttons and loop buttonholes. Like a bride, in my day, meant like a girl who'd spent multiple afternoons making the rounds with her mother of the finer department stores and bridal salons, then bought a beautiful gown, then had it perfectly altered — not like someone who'd bought her wedding dress on sale at Kleinfeld's discount bridal salon in Brooklyn, which, of course, is what I did. It was the least expensive dress in the store but still by far the most expensive item I — doctoral student and wizard at furnishing apartments from consignment shops and yard sales — had ever purchased. Don't get me wrong. It was a lovely dress: strapless brocade with a flounce at the top of the bodice and a mermaid shape. I liked it plenty, but a good part of that plenty was because it didn't cost three thousand dollars, a sum that, even if we'd had it to spend, I

would have anguished over paying for a dress I would wear only once.

Unlike my Jewish relatives, who would give us envelopes with checks or cash, no one on my husband's side, my mother-in-law informed me, would give money. They would expect us to "register" for gifts somewhere. Otherwise, my mother-in-law warned, we would be at risk of receiving ten sets of crystal salt and pepper shakers. At the time, my husband and I were living in a one-bedroom apartment, and I was writing my dissertation on a desk that took up half of the living room. Without a dining room, much less a dining-room table, where would we put china and silver for eighteen?

Store them in her attic, my mother-in-law announced. She took me to Michael C. Fina's to pick out my "patterns," and instructed me on which serving pieces to select, and advised that we forgo soup bowls in favor of bread-and-butter plates. Soon boxes were arriving at my in-laws' house, where they were carted up to the attic to be stored alongside my husband's crates of record albums and the chunk of a redwood tree he'd brought back from our postcollege years in Northern California, where it had served as a coffee table of sorts.

The final piece of advice my mother-in-law gave me regarding my wedding came after my honeymoon and concerned what to do with my now-worn wedding gown: it needed to be professionally cleaned and stored. Apparently certain dry cleaners provided this service. I felt torn about paying to preserve a dress I was quite certain I'd never wear again. In my mother-in-law's eyes, however, it would be sacrilegious, a jinx on the marriage, not to properly store my gown.

I no longer recall where I took the dress or whether my mother-in-law handled this for me, but it was returned to her house in a huge sealed box with a see-through plastic window, the bust stuffed with pink tissue. My mother-in-law directed my father-in-law to carry it up to their attic, where it topped the unopened boxes of china and silver.

A year later my husband and I moved into our first apartment with a dining room. Around this time we inherited his grandmother's breakfront, and — *voilà!* — there was a place for our wedding gifts. Washing my china and laying the mesh dividers between the plates, taking the silver forks and knives and spoons out of their plastic pouches and placing them inside that breakfront, I felt like a wife for the first time.

My mother-in-law never questioned that her china or her mother's china or her own mother-in-law's china were worth saving. She understood that a home with items passed down through the generations is different from a home where everything, no matter how tasteful, was purchased from Scandinavian Designs or B&B Italia, which is where my husband and I bought our sofa once we'd graduated from yard sales. And, indeed, I have felt this difference — a sense of reverence for lives once lived, a feeling of gravitas about life itself — as I have incorporated into my home my grandmother's fusty green-velvet wing-back chair that once sat in her International Ladies'

Garment Workers' subsidized apartment, and my husband's great-grandfather's painting of the Royal Poinciana Hotel, in whose shade he'd once done society portraits.

Still, it is best to stave off for as long as possible the question of what will happen to your belongings once you have left this earth. I was first made aware of the potential scale of this problem when a friend became mired in dismantling her parents' apartment after their deaths. Both of her parents had come from families that had lived in New York for a very long time. Her husband, who had first-generation parents like my own, mumbled sotto voce to me, "This is beyond us." By *us*, he meant our kind, whose grandparents had come through Ellis Island with only a few items in tow. Stored in my friend's parents' closets were a great-great-great-grandmother's confirmation dress and ancient autographed *Playbills*. There were doll collections and button collections and letters from the era of the Van Buren presidency. To keep it all would have meant renting a storage space — for the rest of my friend's life. And then?

In her midseventies my mother-in-law developed Alzheimer's. As is the usual course of the disease, her functioning deteriorated in phases. She became forgetful, she repeated the same stories over and over, her language skills dissolved. But because she'd expressed herself so much through her possessions and the care and physical upkeep of these things, and because these tasks were deeply and nonverbally ingrained, there were years during which she seemed relatively unchanged. She still dressed beautifully, ironed her husband's slacks and her own cotton blouses, polished her jewelry. Although she could no longer manage dinners for eighteen (too many planning steps), she continued to make meals for my father-in-law: peeling carrots, mashing potatoes, putting chicken pieces in the oven.

Strangely, during these early years of her disease, as she lost more and more of her words, it was as though the essence of my mother-in-law was thrown into stark relief, her domestic intuitions and graciousness existing in a part of her brain separate from speech. Even after she ceased remembering her grandchildren's names or grasping the idea of tomorrow, she would nod and smile at the appropriate times, making murmuring sounds that covered for her loss of comprehension. She continued to wash the dinner dishes and wipe down the counters and fold the tea towel in thirds and lay it to dry over the oven handle. She continued to serve my father-in-law cookies and milk in his recliner after dinner and to darn his socks. We joked uneasily that she had become his demented housekeeper.

Eventually, sadly, my mother-in-law's confusion left her agitated and paranoid, and eventually, sadly, even these ingrained household habits disappeared. She would wash the dishes but not rinse off the soap. She would put chicken pieces in the oven and then either forget they were there or forget to turn on the heat and take them out still raw. She would fold and unfold the pillowcases over and over. The dust that she

would never have allowed to accumulate on the tops of picture frames accumulated. She forgot about her cashmere sweaters and silk blouses and wore stained sweat shirts in the summer and cotton pants in the winter. She refused to let anyone cut her fingernails. She hid her purse and her rings and the car keys under the sofa cushions.

By the time she went into an Alzheimer's facility, the house had lost its scent of lavender and furniture polish and cinnamon. It smelled musty and acrid and a little bit like feces. My mother-in-law had entirely detached from her things — her furniture, her holiday decorations, her table linens — which, like children deprived of love, began to look shabby and even a bit cheap. If the person who for sixty years had made everything she touched lovely and orderly had seen the woman she'd become or the home where she now wandered in circles, no longer able to put into words what she was seeking, she would have been mortified.

A year later my father-in-law sold the house. In preparation for the sale, my husband and I made a trip to clear out the several decades' worth of stuff we, as New York apartment dwellers, had continued to store in their attic. There were my husband's record albums, the chunk of the redwood tree, the bins of toys and children's clothing we'd saved, most of which, by the time our much-younger second son had been born, had disintegrated or were hopelessly out of date.

On a shelf, next to my mother-in-law's Easter baskets, was my boxed wedding gown, which I'd forgotten about. I peered through the plastic window at the amazingly still-bright pink tissue paper filling out the torso of a dress I'd worn once, twenty-four years before. If I'd been quite certain then that I would never again wear a white-brocade mermaid-style dress, I was absolutely certain now that neither would any future bride of my sons. Still, when we made the pile of things that my husband would later bring to our storage room in the city, I put the box on top of the crates of record albums.

In anticipation of a future visit when my husband and his siblings would divvy up the household items, we walked through the house. The rooms looked smaller, darker. Recalling my first visit, I suggested that we put in our bids for some of the china and silver and a few other items that reminded me of the many happy family gatherings: a water pitcher, some Christmas ornaments, a set of small wooden chairs. My husband selected two paintings that had belonged to his painter great-grandfather. I was surprised that, from an entire household of furnishings and clothing and dishware and decorative pieces, this was all we wanted.

After the siblings had negotiated and claimed their items, what remained was turned over to an estate company that then attempted to sell everything from the glass-doored breakfront to my father-in-law's ties. Anything that wasn't bought would be discarded so that the property could be presented empty to the new owners.

A few days before the closing, I brought my sons back to

their grandparents' house to say goodbye. "Be prepared," I said. "It doesn't feel like Nana's home anymore."

The electricity was on, but the heat was off. With the furniture mostly removed, there were ghostly shapes on the wall-to-wall carpets, which the new owners would soon tear up. The walls were marred with nail holes, and the place smelled like an old person's body. A surprising number of my mother-in-law's dishes remained: her glass bowls, the red-and-white salt and pepper bowls with the tiny scooping spoon, a platter shaped like a fish. Unable to bear the thought that these items would be thrown into a dumpster, I put them in a shopping bag to take home.

I climbed the stairs, remembering the Christmas mornings when my older son and his cousins would sit on the landing, awaiting the signal that they could storm the tree to see what Santa had brought. I entered the wood-paneled bedroom that had once been my husband's, and the smaller bedroom where my younger son had played with the castoff toys of the older grandchildren.

What hadn't sold was now heaped in the upstairs hallway: the blue curtains my mother-in-law had bought when she'd redone the bathroom, the slender belts she'd worn with pleated wool pants for trips into the city to baby-sit my older son when he was a newborn, because I was afraid to leave him with anyone else — all destined for the trash. I entered what had been her bedroom, the mahogany dressers with the attached mirrors now gone. Still on matching hangers were the madras shirts my father-in-law had favored when they'd spent weekends on their boat, my mother-in-law glued to the galley kitchen, where she'd mix martinis and make crab dip for the long cocktail hour. By now I was crying. How could this happen, that her entire world could be dismantled, discarded?

More items that hadn't sold and would soon be carted away were spread on the floor next to the hall banister. I'd seen enough. I was ready to go downstairs. Then something caught my eye: a large, see-through plastic bag. Its contents were white with splotches of pink.

I leaned over and stared at my wedding gown. It had been taken out of the cardboard box but kept inside the sealed bag, still stuffed with tissue paper. I hadn't seen it outside its box in twenty-four years. I scooped the dress up in my arms as if it were a sleeping child.

Downstairs my husband had some explaining to do. Apparently, on the day he'd come to retrieve the items we'd set aside to put in our New York storage room, he'd overlooked the box. The estate company must have taken my dress out to display it better. Luckily no one had been in the market for a decades-old mermaid-style wedding gown.

There is a fundamental "thingness" to life — a fragility, an impermanence. Whether we consider the erosion of a beach or the rotting of tree limbs or the loss of our hair and teeth to be degradation or a natural cycle, we chip, we break, we wear away, and we are, in the end, disposed of and forgotten.

Even small children know this. Perhaps because of their size, their vulnerability, they think about it even more than we do, caught up as we are in our projects, our reputations, our relationships. This was brought home to me one night when my younger son was eight. Lights out, he began to cry in bed. "What's the matter, honey?" I cooed in that way of mothers who want both to hear their children's woes and to shut them off because it is bedtime.

"The sun is going to explode," he sobbed, "and the earth will be destroyed."

I held his little hands. "Honey," I said, "that's not going to happen for a very, very long time. No one we know, not your children or your children's children or their grandchildren's grandchildren, will still be living."

"It doesn't matter," he wept. "Everything will die."

When I think about the time I've spent going from store to store to pick out fabric for our shades, testing a dozen paint samples on our bedroom walls, ordering rugs and sofas and mattresses, purchasing sheets and phones and refrigerators, trying on shoes and bathing suits, I am appalled. The walls are now dinged, the sheets long since made into rags, the shoes reheelled and polished and then given away because I no longer liked them. The billions of dollars and hours we spend finding and caring for and then getting rid of all of these things — why do we do this? Would it not be better to die, like Gandhi, with twenty-five cents in our pocket, our only possessions three simple items of clothing?

But then, taking this argument to its logical conclusion, why save anything? What is the point of designating the Acropolis or Machu Picchu as World Heritage Sites or restoring a Vermeer painting? Why battle the Dutch elm disease infecting trees in Central Park or create partnerships to save the gopher tortoise? Why hold on to my grandmother's velvet wing-back chair or my mother-in-law's Christmas dishes? Why do I keep in a ring box my older son's baby teeth, now yellow pebbles? Why did I cry to see my in-laws' home dismantled?

Perhaps there is an impossible paradox: to live well, we must live lightly — accepting, as the Buddhists would teach us, the transience of our possessions, our loves, our bodies, our lives — while, at the same time, cherishing it all. Knowing the inevitability of our deaths, we still have our mammograms, still climb the stairs. Knowing the clock is ticking — just 5 billion years before the sun expires — we still protect our mountaintops, egrets, aquifers, coral, three-toed sloths, hoping that we will have every second and yet all the while understanding that the beginning is no more important a part of the story than the end.

When we returned from our final visit to my mother-in-law's house, my wedding gown in tow, I dusted off the outside of the plastic bag, plumped up the pink tissue paper, and got out a ladder. I laid my dress on the top shelf of a closet, where it will remain, I imagine, until I die, the next person to see it one of my sons come to pick over my things. ■