

an armchair odyssey

NOW THE CHAIR WAS MINE. WHEN I SAT IN IT, IN MY OWN PLACE, I FELT PRETTY GOOD.

Lesley Quinn

I was in my early twenties before I acquired my first piece of adult furniture. Until then, everything in my apartment had been temporary, handed down, or scooped up at the tail end of someone's yard sale when everything was free. This was my first experience living on my own, and my life, like my apartment, felt unoccupied, tentative and slightly broken.

An old brown chair began to change that, quietly ushering me from a post-adolescent, pre-adult limbo into the wobbly beginning of adulthood.

My friend Sherwood had already completed his transition to confident maturity, and this was evident by the sophistication of his home decor. While the rest of us were setting up our own makeshift housekeeping from free-boxes, Sherwood and his girlfriend were filling their house with real furniture. They had wonderful, if threadbare, rugs, a mahogany coffee table with a glass insert, arty photographs and rock and roll posters in frames.

He had also come by a dignified, rounded-back, claw-footed brown mohair chair at the flea market where he went in search of deals at dawn on Sundays. It wasn't just Sherwood's furniture that impressed me; they had healthy houseplants, well-seasoned cast iron skillets, a good sound system, and shelves of alphabetized albums. They even had a copy of *The Art of French Cooking*, out of which we once attempted *boeuf bourguignon*. Theirs was the life I wanted.

Things changed the day Sherwood brought home a leather recliner, and the brown mohair chair was up for grabs. Sherwood made me a deal: \$25. "Delivery included?" I asked, because



there was no way I could get the chair into my attic apartment by myself. He agreed, and so we struggled it up three flights of stairs and installed it by a small bay window.

Now the chair was mine, and when I sat in it, in my own place, I felt pretty good. Eventually I bought a rattan chest, perfect for propping my feet when reading a book in the brown chair, and for supporting a chipped mug of Lipton's tea. I next adopted a wooden table to replace an old door propped atop saw horses, and soon thereafter I was given an iron bed dug from the dark soil of my boyfriend's grandmother's basement. By then I had a job and the wherewithal to have it sandblasted and enameled an eggshell white at an auto body shop. A set of paisley sheets, an old lace tablecloth as bedspread, and my apartment felt like a real home. I had a base, a quiet, safe place to feel the first quickenings of an adult self.

Years passed. When the brown chair, once the jewel in my home furnishing crown, began to bald, I decided to make a cautious foray into the world of upholstery. I found, through the grapevine, a shy young man who restored old furniture in his garage. He had a hard time making eye contact. As did I because he was dark and handsome in a *Tea for the Tillerman* sort of way.

“Here it is,” I said when he'd ascended my back steps.

“Yes,” he said, slightly winded.

We gazed at my chair in silence. “The fabric...?” he finally asked, turning his dazzling, curl-framed face in my direction.

“Yes. Well...I was thinking...”

“Mohair's expensive.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I can bring samples up.”

“Nothing too...loud. What do you think?”

“Me?” he shrugged helplessly.

We flipped through sample books and narrowed it down to five earthy colors. He smelled very nice. “Would you like a cup of tea?” I asked.

“Tea?” he said. Better to stop confusing him.

After much uncertainty we settled on the exact same shade of brown, except instead of mohair, we selected a more affordable cotton velour. Once we had jumped this major design hurdle, the rest of the decisions came quickly: taupe trim, plain upholstery tacks, carved wooden legs to be stripped and stained.

Three weeks later, my brown chair looked the way it had before, except newer, and it pleased me very much.

“Perfect,” I told my upholstery man as we gazed in opposite directions and shook hands. I felt wistful watching him descend the steps, and for good reason: I would have other upholsterers in my life, better ones even, but he would forever be my first.



The renovation provided a lift for both me and my brown chair. Together we journeyed deeper into adulthood. Two decades passed, and my husband—whom I'd acquired ten years earlier—was exhibiting a surprising affinity for technological thinking. Suddenly, after many years of hand-to-mouth marriage, we sort of hit the high tech jackpot. We were able to pay off our student loans and sand-mountain credit card debt, consider buying quality dirt for landscaping our backyard, and vacation in Hawaii.

This exhilarating period of plenty continued for several years and was responsible for our move from a teensy old house in the flatlands, where my brown chair had proudly reigned, to a two-story home in the hills. With a view. I began to metamorphose from a person with a harmless appreciation for French soap, into someone who sniffed at anything but Egyptian cotton sheets and professional quality cookware. I even had standing weekly appointments with a manicurist and a masseuse.

To fill our big new house, I spent thousands of dollars on new furniture, all at once, as if I were someone who intended afterwards to sip Chardonnay at the swanky restaurant across the street with her interior decorator, to recuperate.

“Okay, let's see...,” I said to my saleslady after spending hours with paint chips and fabric swatches. “This chair, this couch...”

“And how will you be paying for this?” asked my saleslady.

“American Express,” I replied self-consciously, sliding her my Platinum card. Did she think I'd stolen it?

Though the furniture I bought that day—big off-white overstuffed brocade things—dwarfed my old brown chair, it looked pretty good with the Indonesian hutch and quirky folk art I'd been breathlessly buying.

All the while, our friends struggled to continue loving us in spite of our tendency to quickly slip coasters under sweating beverages on our new coffee table.

For us, like many 40-somethings, the cash stopped flowing, and we were slowly turned back into people resembling ourselves. We acquired a child and two hairy dogs, and, without much discussion, agreed to be people who allow them all on the furniture. I stopped keeping an eye on tipsy friends waving their goblets of Zinfandel a little wildly, and soon thereafter the couch stopped being off-white.

Now, we lounge on it with our shoes on, wondering once again how we're going to pay next month's mortgage. We're grown-ups now, no question. And through it all, my brown chair continues to sit quietly in the corner, holding me in place.

