

Furniture Fights

by Roz Warren

I drop in on Dad and Linda, in their new home. Dad answers the door.

"You're caught us in the middle of an argument," he warns as he hugs me.

"About what?" I ask, as if I don't know.

"Furniture," he says darkly.

Another furniture fight.

"The problem," my father says, "is that now that Linda and I have married and combined our two households, we've got two sets of patio furniture and only one patio."

"His and Hers?" I joke. Dad doesn't smile. Furniture, for him, is no laughing matter.

Linda, an interior designer, is obsessed with furniture. She thinks about it all the time. She will discuss at great length any room, even a shabby doctor's waiting room, or once, so help me, a Greyhound station. She analyzes each "piece" and its placement with respect to the rest of the room's furniture, and particularly, the entire room's "potential." Once you get her on the topic, which is about as tough as dropping a hat, she won't shut up until you run screaming from the room. Which, to be realistic, is rarely one of your options.

Linda comes into the hall. Her face lights up when she sees me.

"Amelia!" she says. "I'm so glad you dropped by. You haven't seen the living room yet, have you? I can't wait to show it off."

She takes my hand and drags me into the living room. The large room is filled with light and has a delicate oriental feel to it.

"It's beautiful!" I exclaim.

Linda's rooms are always beautiful and, professionally, she's in great demand. This doesn't stop her unlimited capacity to discuss home furnishing from driving everybody in her new family nuts. Except perhaps for Dad, but it's always tough to tell what he really thinks about anything. He's a psychoanalyst; never giving a hint about what he's really thinking is a built-in habit.

He stand behind her now, one arm around her shoulders. "You did a great job, darling," he says. "Didn't she, Amelia? Look at the design on that Tibetan rug!"

Does my dad really give a hoot about the pattern on a rug? Before he married Linda, he never paid attention to furniture at all, except to complain if a chair he was sitting on was uncomfortable. My mother never cared much about the stuff either. Her passion was art. My parents flew to New York several times a year to visit museums and galleries.

Dad and Linda fly to Manhattan twice a year too, but they spend their time visiting designer showcases and fabric warehouses. Dad seems to get as much pleasure from accompanying Linda on her treks through furniture land as he did visiting the Metropolitan Museum with mom. Perhaps the answer is simply that Dad loves his work so much that, for him, the world consists of two categories: psychoanalysis and everything else. Given this dichotomy, a great painting and a great table are indistinguishable.

He has certainly grown knowledgeable about furniture. As Linda shows me around the living room, he chimes in with pertinent information about fabrics and finish. Since my father's remarriage, and particularly since he and Linda moved into their new home, I have grown accustomed to these room tours. It isn't enough that I rave about the overall effect; I must "experience" each individual piece -- hear its story. As Linda tells it, finding each was an adventure, fraught with suspense and intrigue. The search for the turquoise lampshade. Stalking the perfect antimacassar.

As we move on to admire the crystal vase with the naked women etched on it (handmade in Germany) and then the ornate wooden screen that stands behind the sofa, I'm so bored I could scream.

How can my father stand hour after hour of this?

Because he loves her, I suppose. And she does take good care of him. He has some health problems, and after mom died my sister and I used to worry about his living alone. And he was lonely. We knew that after putting in his usual twelve-hour workday, he would

return to the empty house to fix himself a tuna sandwich or a salad, then read medical journals until it was time to go to sleep.

He deserved better. So we were relieved when he got engaged to Linda.

After they first began going out, Dad asked Linda to help him redecorate his house. Shrewd man; no gesture could have been better calculated to win her heart. They spent hours on each room, discussing which pieces they would keep, which would have to go, and what would replace them. I imagined them moving through the house, getting to know each other a little better with each room. At some point (as they redecorated the master bedroom?) they decided to get married.

One of the first things Linda did was get rid of all the furniture in the bedroom my sister and I had shared. She made it into a lovely new guest room.

"She sold our beds!" Sarah had raged to me on the phone, close to tears, after she found out. "She didn't even ask us."

I tried to reason with my sister. After all, a stepmother with a furniture obsession is pretty mild compared to what some of our friends had been stuck with. We were familiar with second marriages in which the wife hated the children of her new spouse. Or where the kids had gone to high school with dad's new wife.

"But the worst thing that we'll have to deal with is these interminable Hepplewhite discussions," I said.

If only this had been the case.

A month after the marriage, Linda discovered she had cancer -- ironically, the same type of cancer that had taken our mother. But Linda handles having cancer differently than Mom did. When my mother learned that she was ill, she became melancholy and remained that way until she died, three years later.

Linda, however, refuses to feel sorry for herself. She acts exactly as if she didn't have cancer, so successfully that I keep forgetting she's sick. The fact that she's a fighter is one of the reasons Dad loves her. She's also full of positive energy, generous, a good conversationalist and she has spunk.

Dad seems to have had a secret fondness for spunk, a quality that my mother, my sister and I lacked and had no interest in acquiring. Having covered the plexiglass and chrome coffee table, the Bertolia chairs, the travertine fireplace and numerous other items, our tour of the living room is over.

At last, instead of discussing furniture, we can sit down on it and ignore it. I sink gratefully onto a sofa of soft leather.

"And now that you're warmed up, you can help us decide about the patio furniture," Linda says brightly.

"I have to make a few phone calls," Dad says quickly and exits, ignoring the dirty look I give him.

Linda and I go out to the patio, a wide cement slab overlooking the rose garden, on which a collection of tables and chairs is crowded uneasily together. We regard my father's patio set: four chairs, a chaise lounge and a table.

"My set is brand new," Linda says. "Whereas your father's is quite shabby -- particularly the chaise lounge."

She actually means that it's not perfect; Linda is very demanding when it comes to furniture.

All I can think of when I see the lounge is all the carefree summer hours I've wasted dozing on it. This patio set is one of the only remnants of the landscape of my childhood that has escaped Linda's decorating mania. Irrationally, I want to save it.

"I rather like this old lounge chair," I say.

"How can you like something that looks so awful?" Linda protests.

"My set looks so much better -- admit it!"

We contemplate her chairs and tables. Her set does look quite spiffy; comfortable, elegant, spanking new -- smug, almost.

"Of course yours looks better," I concede, "but..."

"And it's based on a 1930s design by Marcel Breuer," Linda says, as if this clinched the matter.

I try to look like someone who knows who Marcel Breuer is.

"I know that your father is concerned about the cost," Linda says,

"and it's true that if we used his furniture we could sell mine, because mine is almost brand-new." She pats her table fondly.

“And my set needs a new chaise lounge, so we'd have to buy one. But I've worked so hard on this house and it looks so lovely. It's almost perfect -- and to ruin it with all this run-down stuff...” She sighs.

“Your father tells me that I should be willing to compromise, but I just know that every time I see that ratty old chaise lounge I'm going to be very unhappy.”

It amazes me that with everything this woman has to be depressed about, what really gets her down is an inadequate lounge chair.

“Can't you help me persuade him?” she asks.

This is tricky, since I agree with my father completely. Why spend good money on a new lounge chair when you've already got one? But I'm not dumb enough to come out and say this.

Linda is sensitive to being ganged up on by our family, and our habit of subterranean consensus isn't really fair to her. My family never argues or airs issues in the healthy, open way you're supposed to. We just always tend to agree with each other.

Perhaps this is the result of being raised in a psychoanalytic atmosphere; none of us ever gives any credence to what anyone is saying on the surface. It's the underlying message that counts, and it's impossible to conduct a really good argument on a subconscious level.

This mode of operation puts Linda, who is into confronting issues head-on and arguing them out, at a serious disadvantage.

Thinking of the subconscious, it occurs to me that perhaps Linda's obsession with the furniture is related to her illness. Maybe she deals with the helplessness she feels by displacing it onto her furniture. If she can control the landscape around her, she'll be able to control her inner landscape?

If I can help her see this, it may make things easier.

“It sounds as if you're fighting about more than just furniture,” I suggest.

“We are,” she agrees. “We also disagree about how to hang the Henry Moore lithographs. I want to put three of them on the dining room wall and your father wants them all for his office!”

So much for the subconscious mind.

"Well don't let him give you a hard time," I say, in an attempt to be supportive without committing myself.

"But he is!" she says. "He's being unusually stubborn about this. And, Amelia -- my hair is starting to come out. I'm being fitted for a wig next week. And I'm so tired all the time."

She sits down on my father's chaise lounge and begins to cry.

I'm stunned. Linda never cries. Linda hates to be pitied. In all the time I've known her, I've never seen her like this. I don't know what to say or how to comfort her. I'm at a loss for an appropriate response. I sit down on one of her lovely patio chairs, feeling awful.

"This is a nice chair," I murmur.

"It's Italian," Linda says through her tears.

"It's very -- distinctive." I feel like an idiot calling patio chair distinctive, but Linda looks up hopefully.

"Do you really think so?" she asks. She regards the chair thoughtfully.

"Wouldn't it be awfully difficult for you to find a lounge chair that matches?" I ask.

"But it would be a challenge," Linda says pleadingly.

Our eyes meet. It reminds me one of those old advertisements: you can save this interior designer or you can turn the page. I'm lost and I know it. Maybe I can use Dad's patio furniture at my apartment. Of course, I don't have a patio. Maybe I can put it on the fire escape.

"Thanks," Linda says quietly. No need to belabor the issue; she knows she has me.

"I'm almost sure I could find a lounge online, Amelia," she continues, "this morning I was looking through the latest Architectural Digest and they had an article about websites..."

I brace myself for another furniture monolog. I remember that my sister, in a bitter mood, once predicted that Linda would last just long enough to move dad from the neighborhood we'd grown up in, spend all his money on a bunch of fabulous new furniture, and then die.

We were furious at the time. But this woman hasn't a lot of time left. Who the hell are we to say she shouldn't spend it searching for the ultimate lawn chair?

Eventually, my father joins us on the patio. He looks at me, seated on Linda's patio chair, and at Linda on the lounge, chattering on about an article comparing the top ten home furnishing blogs. Her voice is animated, but her eyes are still red from crying.

For once, as he looks at Linda, I can read my father's face; he looks frightened. Then, smiling, he goes to her and takes her hand.

"Well, girls, what's the verdict?" he asks cheerfully.

