The Chair of Rejection

by Stacey Richter

Before I published anything in a literary magazine, I was rejected by literary magazines, dozens of them, and these rejections gave birth to one of my more strange and long-lived art projects. At that time, before email, literary magazines would reject a person (me) with slips of paper inscribed with polite brush offs that usually included a combination of the words pleased, quality, at this time, honored, we, the future, and however. I collected these slips in a box, and when I had enough saved up I began to use them to decoupage an old wooden chair. I called this The Chair of Rejection and sat in it whenever I felt like a sucky writer and a worthless human being, which was often. This was fun because I don't like to be cheered up; I like to wallow, I find it restorative and oddly calming. However, I was pretty sure I was the only person who thought this way, so I kept quiet about the chair. But after a while, news of its existence began to leak out.

The problem was that even though I was rejected incessantly, I didn't have enough rejection slips to decoupage the entire chair from top to bottom (as my artistic vision commanded). So eventually I invited my friends to contribute their own rejection slips, and explained the idea of the chair to them, and was surprised to find that they were enthusiastic about it. I might even say that they were pleased with its quality and honored that I invited them to contribute to its future at this time. And I guess people liked the idea of having a specific place to go when they felt pathetic, because after a while my friends began to ask to come over and sit in the chair when they were rejected. The chair was hard, high-backed, and uncomfortable, which made it even better. More people began to drop by, and then a few more, until it became clear that sitting in The Chair of Rejection had become a new kind of emotional experience in my social set, a sanctioned wallowing. Everyone was into it.

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Then something shifted—I think this was after a reporter I knew published a short piece about the chair in a weekly newspaper. After that, it wasn't just my friends who stopped by. Acquaintances I'd only met once or twice began to come to my house and ask for the chair; sometimes complete strangers even showed up. Every time I heard a knock on the door, I wondered if I'd open it to find an unshowered person waiting there slack-faced, maybe a little hung-over or possibly still drunk. I think the chair emitted some sort of silent whistle only the forlorn could hear, and it seemed like they were helpless to refuse the call. “Can I use your chair?” the person would ask. I'd usually let them. They'd shuffle across the room, they'd collapse in its embrace. The rejection slips were glossy with lacquer and singed around the edges (this is how I learned to decoupage in summer camp), and the dejected person would press their knees together and slump into a cloud of disheartening words: “Despite the quality of your submission…”

It took a while, but eventually everyone I knew, no matter how smart or talented or pretty or fortunate, sat in the chair. There was something mystical about this. We all sit in the chair. I knew this! But metaphors are just words that zing around in your head. Until you actually sit in the chair of rejection—until you actually see everyone you know sitting in the chair of rejection—you don't really know that someday everyone must take their seat. I was learning this. The chair was teaching me.

Though my rejection slips were from literary magazines, my friends brought over other kinds of rejections—from employers, graduate programs, foundations, ex-lovers; there was even one from the Army. It didn't take long to collect enough slips to finish decoupaging the chair. Once every surface was covered, including the bottom of the legs, I had to consider ending the project. Yet it seemed wrong to end the project. If it ended, what would people do with their rejections? It was boring to learn from them when we could make

something out of them instead. So I found a little wooden table and covered that, and then a foot stool. Then someone had the idea to wrap a six pack of beer bottles with various rejections (eventually to be known as Thank You for Your Application Beer); by then it was almost starting to be fun to be a loser. Almost, but not exactly. There's no way quite to describe the feeling of sitting in The Chair of Rejection, with your feet up on The Guggenheim Foundation Hates You Footstool, drinking a bottle of Thank You for Your Application Beer. It was awful, it was wonderful, but mostly it was strange to feel how something as trivial as decoupage could change the pain of smashed hopes and shattered dreams into something different.

Then, one day, I got a letter that said I'd been accepted. And then another. And after a while I got an agent who screened things and the rejection letters didn't pour in at the same rate. Time passed and my friends began to be accepted too. They found good jobs or got into graduate programs or had wonderful babies that were better than any residency program on some stupid harbor. I moved and moved again. I still sat in the chair, but after a certain number of acceptances I didn't need to sit in the chair anymore. Other people stopped wanting to use it too and the chair migrated to a back room where it gathered dust. I guess I got out of the habit of sitting in the chair. When I felt like I sucked—when I feel like I suck—I'd sit by myself, in any random location, and feel bad without any special fanfare or equipment.

When I moved the last time, The Chair of Rejection wound up in storage in the shed of a pothead friend. The awful thing that's happening now, which is also kind of great, is that the bank is foreclosing on his house. This wouldn't be great except for the fact that he's started using the notices from his creditors as wallpaper. When I was over there a week ago, he'd brought the chair into the kitchen, which was already half-covered with threatening notes, and started plastering over the appliances. I sat there smoking his brain-melting indica as he went on about his grand scheme to cover every

interior surface of the house with letters from creditors, rejection letters, dear John letters, divorce petitions, whatever he could get his hands on. If he had enough time before he was evicted, he said, the entire house would eventually be transformed into a giant monument to pain, failure, and disappointment. Everyone would want to see it; even winners would want to. It's human nature. He'd charge admission.

“Uh, I don't think so,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“It sounds like a stoner fantasy. I don't think it's actually feasible.”

For a moment my friend stared at me with bloodshot eyes. Finally he said, “Write it down,” and handed me a slip of paper.

Though we are pleased by your insane idea, I wrote, we do not think it's actually feasible at this time.

I handed it to my friend. He brushed some glue on the back and stuck it on the oven door.