

Grace

"That cobweb looks like a teapot."

Anabel looks up from her book in the direction her husband Gordon's pointing. Hanging from the soot darkened beams above the inglenook fireplace is an oddly shaped spider's web. Anabel squints at it, "I think it looks more like a rabbit."

With a decided clink Gordon puts his tea cup back on his saucer. Anabel sits up grinning, when the teacup went down she knows it means war. She meets Gordon's grey eyes, "it's definitely a rabbit."

"Rabbits don't have spouts."

"That's not a spout, that's an ear, teapots don't have ears."

"Maybe it's a hybrid, a TeaRabbit, rare and unique, maybe we have genius spiders."

"Or a Rabbitea"

"Sounds sort of like a manatee, do you think they can swim?"

"Might be a bit hard if they're wedge wood."

"What if they're furry willow pattern?"

"They could use the spout like a snorkel."

Gordon immediately starts imitating a snorkelling Rabitea, Anabel can't help laughing and Gordon throws his arms wide in delight "I win!" His flailing hand catches the teacup, sending it flying. Anabel dives for it, but not before the unicorn cushion is soaked.

Gordon looks so contrite Anabel hugs him, "no harm done, the unicorn's been through worse." She absently runs her hand over the wet pillow as she pulls the cover off. "How long have we had this for?"

Gordon frowns in thought. "Not sure, did we have it when we moved in?"

"I think so. We got it in France on that trip in the mid 80s, just before we bought this place."

"Well if we go by our crest above the door..."

"I think crest is too strong a word,"

"Alright, spontaneously drawn shape to represent our family that we carved into the door lintel."

"Much more accurate"

“Then we’ve had that cushion for more than 30 years.” He pauses “in fact, tonight is our anniversary.”

Anabel’s thoughts scramble, has she got the date wrong? They were married in May and it’s August now. She looks worriedly at Gordon, suddenly concerned he’s losing it, then she sees the expectant glint in his eye and throws the de-covered pillow at him, “explain.”

Gordon catches the pillow deftly and stands, grabbing the standing lamp and holding it up as far as the cord goes to illuminate the words carved into the heavy oak beam above the door. “If you look beneath our... symbol?”

Anabel stands too and smiles as she reads aloud “Anabel and Gordon Grace 3rd of August 1989.” She takes his hand, “you’re quite right, we moved in exactly thirty years ago today.”

Gordon puts the lamp down and Anabel squeaks as he swings her up in his arms, “hey you great oaf- careful of your back.”

“Back schmack, I carried you over the lintel just like this.” He opens their front door, with a protesting Anabel still in his arms, carries her outside, turns around and carries her back in again, placing her back on her feet while puffing exaggeratedly.

Laughing, Anabel hits him fondly on the arm, “idiot,” standing on tiptoe to kiss him.

He smiles against her lips, “that’s what you said thirty years ago.”

“And I’m still right.”

They stand in silence, wrapped in each other’s arms and surveying their cottage, both just thinking. Gordon says softly, “aside from the unicorn pillow what’d we have when we moved in?”

“Not much, that second-hand lounge suite of your mother’s that went to the tip decades ago.”

“What about that chair?”

Anabel looks where Gordon is pointing; a red brocade armchair that fits perfectly into the niche next to the window. “Aiden’s chair? We certainly didn’t have that when we moved in. I think I remember when our son was born.” She flings herself onto the couch, “I was there after all.”

Gordon plops onto the couch, putting his feet in her lap. “So was I remember? But we had that chair before Aiden- he just commandeered it.”

Anabel ostentatiously ignores him, smiling fondly at the chair, “remember when he used to sit there watching the storms and thinking he could command the thunder?”

“And when he poured juice all over it and tried to blame it on the cat?”

“I nearly believed him! It’s exactly the sort of thing Schrodinger would’ve done.” She glances over at the photo of the ginger cat on the mantelpiece “I miss him still; I keep expecting to see him coming in through the cat flap to disdainfully lay a mouse at my feet.”

Gordon takes her hand, “I know love, but we’ve still got Bog.” The elderly Labrador wags his tail at his name, but doesn’t move from his spot flaked out in front of the fire. They both smile at him, as he whuffles a little and settles back into his dream. “Remember when Aiden told your Dad the dog’s name was Bog.”

“Yeah, the look on his face. Then we explained it was actually Bartholomew, Aiden just couldn’t pronounce it, and he didn’t think it was any better!”

Gordon laughs, but then leans in intently, “I do remember, but you will not distract me with your fiendish nostalgia.”

“Won’t I?”

“No. I’m right, we had that chair when we moved in. It was an old one of my aunt’s- covered in that hideous paisley fabric, the frame was battered pine and the cushions were all lumpy, but we were so broke we were grateful for what we could get.”

Anabel frowns “So, over the years we’ve replaced the frame, the cushions and the covers, but you’re still arguing it’s the same chair?”

“But it is.”

Anabel sits back, pushes Gordon’s feet off her lap and swing her feet up into his, she smiles, as he absently began to massage them, and settles in for a good long comfortable argument. “Prove it.”

Gordon cracks his knuckles. “Well, you see, it’s like your grandfather’s axe. It’s been handed down through the centuries, you’ve replaced the head and the handle and the binding over the years, yet it’s still your grandfather’s axe.”

Anabel raises an incredulous eyebrow “are you saying that Aiden’s chair is a ship of Theseus.”

“Absolutely.”

“Well we’re never going to reach an agreement then; people have been arguing that one for millennia.”

“We could agree that the concept of Aiden’s chair existed when we moved in?”

“But can we? The concept of Aiden himself wasn’t really in existence.”

“I like to think he existed as a concept; he did put in an appearance not much more than nine months later.”

“Alright, fair enough. We can agree that both the chair and Aiden existed conceptually.”

“The chair had a physical manifestation though- not purely conceptual- you have to agree with that.”

“Do I?”

“Yes.”

There is silence as Anabel tries to think of a way around it. She grins slowly
“Varmint”

“Resorting to antiquarian insults now?”

She gives him her best withering glare. “Not that you don’t deserve them, but no. Varmint the rocking horse. He moved in with us. I remember you swearing, and cursing makers of hideously expensive Victorian toys, when you had to carry him into the room that became Aiden’s, but at the time was the ‘room to put all the random stuff that didn’t work anywhere else.’” She squints; “I seem to remember it had lots of things that people had given us for the wedding.”

“Hmm, I’ll concede Varmint, but didn’t we have something like five decanters? What happened to them?”

“Three. I think we managed to regift two, and the other became a flowerpot before it got used as a flask for one of Aiden’s mud concoctions.”

“Sounds about right.” Gordon settles back again, his eyes closed in thought. “So, we had an antique rocking horse, the unicorn pillow, a conceptual chair and bunch of detritus. The rest we built between us?”

“Well, things have come and gone, been replaced. When our parents died, we added things of theirs that we loved, we’ve got things as presents, things we’ve bought from around the world, things from our own childhood, Aiden’s things too.”

“Yes, he keeps saying he’ll come and pick up those boxes, no idea where’s he’s going to fit them in that tiny flat of his.

“Oh leave off about the boxes, he’ll get round to it. But that’s part of it too, the detritus as well as the carefully chosen things, the stuff we’ve just ended up with. We’ve built a life here.”

“I’ll tell Aiden that you called his boxes detritus.” Then he sees the look on her face and continues tenderly. “Sorry love, and a good life it’s been too.” He looks at her in such a way that she decisively puts her feet back on the floor and snuggles up in his arms. She rests her head against his chest, feeling his heart beating reassuringly. She can feel the words forming as he says softly “it’s been a privilege building a life with you Anabel.”

She snuggles closer, “for me too Gordon.”

They sit there in total silence, enjoying the moment. Bog breaks it by standing up, shuffling to the window whuffling, his tag wagging excitedly. Anabel sits up immediately, “he only ever reacts that way to one person.”

“Yep, Aiden’s come to collect his boxes.”

Anabel pokes him “Gordon, be more pleased to see your only child.”

He grins unrepentantly, but before he can come up with a retort Aiden is through the door, brushing snow off his hair and dropping a backpack on the floor. He throws his lanky frame into the red armchair with such enthusiasm that it creaks alarmingly. He grins at his parents, ruffling Bog’s fur while the dog growls contentedly. “Hello Mother, hello Father. I have returned. Adore me.”

Anabel stands and goes over to hug him. “We’ll leave the adoration to Bog, he hasn’t moved from the fire for anyone for months, but we can do tea.”

Aiden sighs dramatically, “I’ll have to make do with tea then.”

Anabel kisses him on the top of the head, “good to have you home darling.”

Gordon calls from the kitchen. “I’ve just put the kettle on, shouldn’t be long. Good to have you home kiddo. Come to get your boxes? Did you realise your chair is a ship of Theseus?”

Aiden’s raised eyebrows disappear under his fringe. “I haven’t come for the boxes; I’ve come with news, but it might relate to the boxes.” He looks at Anabel. “First though, how exactly is my chair connected to an ancient Greek?” He laughs when Anabel explains. “So, this is what you get up to when I’m not around, philosophical discussions about the furniture.”

Gordon chimes in “and Varmint.”

“Of course, we can’t forget Varmint. How did the rocking horse come into it?” He leans down to whisper to Bog “I think they’re going a little senile in their old age.” Bog barks.

Gordon comes back in with three mugs and the tea pot swathed in a cosy. He puts them down and hugs Aiden. “Hey, you’re the one who’s talking to the dog.”

“Fair point.” He smiles at them, “it is really good to see you both.”

Anabel holds out her mug for Gordon to fill. “Thanks love,” she smiles at her son, “it’s lovely to have you here, but why are you here?”

Gordon settles down next to her on the couch again, “yes, you said you had news?”

Aiden’s smile could have powered the room. “Yes.” He turns to Gordon. “Dad I can take those boxes off your hands. Flic and I have bought a house.”

There is astonished, delighted silence and Gordon stands, “well I think this deserves a toast.” He raises his tea cup, “to Aiden and his future.”

Aiden raises his own cup, “thanks Dad, it means a lot. I’ve got pictures too, just let me grab my phone.”

When Gordon sits back down Anabel looks at him over her own cup and says “I reckon a conceptual chair would be a good start to building a life together?”

Gordon laughs softly, “indeed it would.”

Aiden comes back into the room, holding his phone with the brightest smile on his face, Anabel beams at him, “Aiden we’d like to give you a present for your new house...”