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## Interior Decorating

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# INTERIOR DECORATING

After her second divorce, my mother began a crusade to redecorate our home. She cooed over designer rooms in catalogues, IKEA and Crate and Barrel, perfect rooms that no one lived in. Danish Modern, Contemporary Chic, Sophisticated Casual—she tore out pages with these titles and organized them in an accordion folder, the glossy photos rarely materializing in our home. But she still visualized our tiny 50's ranch with its cheap carpet and yellow pine cabinets transformed into something modern and elegant—low set furniture, vintage accessories, a new deck outside with French doors leading to it, an airy glass-topped dining table. She wanted to switch out the chubby upholstery for something hard and beige, the end tables that had been painted and repainted for sleek cherry ones. I was fifteen and angsty, unaware that maybe her reason was about more than having nice things, that maybe the paint swatches and carpet samples were a sign of something else.

It's a cold January day. The sky spits sleet and the wind cuts rivulets and cliffs in the snow, but inside the stereo belts a blues tune, my mother's deep, mellow voice fumbling along. She wears paint-splattered jeans, dirt ground into the knees, a baggy t-shirt, her hair pulled back, and she tips her head and hips together, cranes her body to reach that note, swings almost in rhythm to the music, closes her eyes. The stew in the Crockpot fills the house with savory fumes that mingle with those of paint and wood shavings. She breaks and offers me a beer, pouring it into a tall, fluted glass, and I sip it, cool and rich and bitter.

This is our routine on Saturdays—she paints the bathroom or saws shapelier legs on the coffee table, all the while swaying to her sad music with the sad weather swirling around the house, and I'm sunk into the couch reading some novel I don't remember anymore, sinking deeper, embarrassed by her awkward dancing even though we're alone. She smiles, then purses her lips and narrows her eyes on me, and asks me to slow dance with her. I say no, but she seizes me and leads me around the room anyway; my feet clunk along the wood floor, our silhouette a lanky, crook-armed animal.

It's a school night. She and I recline on opposite ends of the couch. The TV flickers in the dim room. She scoots over and lays her head on my shoulder, wraps her arms around me.

“Mom,” I whine, “I don’t like to be touched.”

Her voice cracks and tears form in her eyes.

“Why can’t we be friends?” she asks. “I want us to be like my mom and me. I liked my mom. Why?”

“Because I’m not you,” I reply. “And you’re not her.”

When I was sixteen, she looked old to me for the first time. Her skin seemed pale and lax behind her smooth, tan complexion, her eyes weary, her smile only a tight smirk. She began dating a man I didn’t like. I became her confidant. We sat up until the early morning hours, and she talked about everything. About her father and his alcoholism, his abuse. About my father—how he acted distant, failed to appreciate her, never told her he loved her. About our small town—how it suffocated her; how it offered a boring job, and no true friends. About how she wasn’t cut out to be a mother. About my grandmother—the only person who ever helped or cared. The more she confessed, the more I began to see it as more plea than catharsis—don’t blame me; it’s not my fault; I’m broken. I, in turn, would comfort her, agree with her. I couldn’t do anything else. My young, beautiful, independent mother was disintegrating before my eyes, the awkward grace of her dancing, the mellow pitch of her voice, turned to slumped shoulders and strained words.

The fight happened on a Saturday. It was night, late. I had gotten home from a friend’s house and was relaxing in front of the TV with a bowl of cereal. She traipsed in, bubbly from too many beers and tried to hug me. I tensed, and she moved from me slowly, lightly placing herself in the armchair, her shoulders held higher than usual. She said, her voice accusatory, sad but not tearful, “I’m a bad mother. You think I’m a bad mother.” I’d heard this before. She drank frequently, tripping in the door in the early morning hours, and would cry to me, sometimes to my brother too, her mood morphing from cheery to weepy to angry. The questions were all a version of the same one—why did we hate her? she asked. We didn’t, we replied. But her eyes would still glaze over with tears and she stumbled to her room where we heard her weeping.

At first I didn’t think it was serious. She was an adult. She was just having some fun. I told my brother this after she came home slurring and stumbling the first few times. He was only fourteen, he didn’t understand why adults drink. He was being too judgmental, too worried, I said. She wouldn’t keep doing this.

But she did, and so I found myself that Saturday night pinned to the

floor, her eyes bleary and red and narrowed. She slapped me.

“You spoiled brat,” she said. “you don’t know how good you have it.”

The next morning she apologized. I said I forgave her. And in a way that was true. I didn’t feel hate or resentment or fear, but I distanced myself from her, barely speaking to her over the next year. When she sang I heard a different note. She would refurbish our chairs and comment that they still weren’t good enough. Someday, she said, she’d get rid of all this old junk and get something nice. She’d get something for herself and have it the way she wanted it.

Two weeks after the funeral I went home to pack my mother’s things into boxes and set up the rest for the garage sale. I went through her clothes first, tried on jackets too mature for me and high heels I knew I wouldn’t wear. I tottered around in a pair made of grey patent leather, my ankles weak, and collapsed on her satin bedspread, my tears clotting dark in the stitches.

Eager garage-salers circled the house like sharks the next morning, waiting for eight o’clock, ready to strike. They swarmed the house, bodies everywhere, money shoved at me, and within an hour her lamps, candles, dishes, rugs, most of the furniture were loaded in cars, off to new homes, my house barren and echoey, and not my home any longer. The only things left were some family pieces and the new couch and shag rug she bought only months before. She called me when she got them, saying how nice they looked, how they were exactly what the room needed, exactly what she wanted.

I’m home from college a month before she died, summer’s beginning. She and I spend the whole week together taking walks by Spring Creek, talking, watching movies, cooking and drinking wine. I don’t even visit my high school friends. Mom smiles now. She’s taking a jewelry making class. She has new girlfriends. She takes long bike rides out of town and goes on road trips alone. She has the new furniture, the French doors. She has me, whom she talks to every week, sometimes for hours. And I miss her. Maybe because she figured her life out. Maybe because I’ve grown up, but I’m happy. I’m home.

Now the couch and rug sit in my rented apartment. The couch is supple, brown and curvy and looks out of place against the yellowing walls and splitting wood floors. But it’s perfect. When the day is right, some grey, sleet-soaked day, I’ll curl up there. I’ll rest my head and sing along softly to the blues.