

Leah Browning

NOBODY WANTS YOUR HEIRLOOMS

After Shelby's parents lost the farm, they decided to sell everything they owned and move to Florida to stay with her older brother. He lived with his wife and two little kids in a waterfront condo with an extra bedroom and a screened-in pool.

Two days before her parents were supposed to head south, they rented a U-Haul and brought all of their furniture to Shelby's little house. Her boyfriend stood at the kitchen window watching her father open the back of the truck, hoist an end table, and carry it up the walkway toward the front door.

Her parents had sold a lot of things at their garage sale—some of Shelby's old toys, a few of her mother's cookbooks, other odds and ends—but they still had the good dishes and almost all of the furniture. Not to mention everything they couldn't take with them but didn't want to go to waste. Your half-full mustards, your toilet gels.

"Mother," Shelby said weakly, but she didn't know how to stop the train.

"We can't take more than we can fit in the car," her mother said, and there was no arguing with that, was there?

Shelby couldn't look at her boyfriend.

"Just kill me now," he'd said at the window as he watched her mother clamber down from the passenger side of the truck with a fringed lampshade in her hand.

Now her boyfriend was on the front lawn holding one end of an enormous bedframe while her father shouted directives. "We don't have room for that," Shelby said, but no one seemed to hear her.

After they left that night—her mother waving jauntily from the passenger-side window of the U-Haul—Shelby's boyfriend took the empty sandwich wrappers to the trash and swept the kitchen floor. There was barely any room to maneuver with her parents' dining set shoved in next to their table.

"Whatever you don't want, you can sell," her mother had said, in a tone that told Shelby two things. Her mother didn't understand why anyone would want so-called modern furniture when family treasures were available instead. And since they were so valuable, if one were inclined (for whatever reason!) to let go of them, finding a new home for said treasures would be a snap.

She had added, "We can split the profits 50/50."



Every weekend, Shelby's brother called to complain. They had both assumed that their parents—two of the hardest-working people they knew, the same people who had gotten up before dawn every day of their childhood—would get their own place as soon as they found jobs and got back on their feet.

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Instead, they stayed at home every day, driving his wife up the wall. They had set up camp at the kitchen table. They liked to stay up until all hours of the night playing cards and drinking whiskey.

Shelby's brother went to work all day, but his wife was a stay-at-home mom. If the weather wasn't nice enough to go to the park, she had to keep the kids quiet while their grandparents slept past noon. The older boy had started making play cigars out of construction paper. The baby knew half the names of the characters on *Scandal*.

Standing in her own living room, surrounded by a sea of furniture from their childhood home, Shelby found it hard to sympathize. "Look," she said, "I'm having my own problems."

Her boyfriend had given her an ultimatum. He could accept the cabinets overflowing with her parents' wedding china, but he was tired of squeezing past one couch to get to another. It had been months already. Either the furniture went, or he did.

"Dammit, Shelby," her brother said. "You're so self-absorbed."

"That's not true," Shelby said, but then she couldn't think of any evidence to back up this claim.

When she didn't continue, her brother huffed and said he had to go.



She couldn't think of a way to transport all the furniture, so Shelby bought a Polaroid camera and carried an envelope of photos from one used/vintage/consignment shop to the next.

Most of the employees were polite but disinterested. They already had stores full of nondescript not-really-antique furniture that wasn't selling.

At the last store on her list, she took a deep breath before pushing through the door. The bell rang.

"Listen," she said, "I've got a house full of furniture and I'm not taking no for an answer."

She had picked up this lingo from her boyfriend, who liked to say it to his friends when he was offering to buy them a drink.

The man inside was on the phone, though, and hadn't heard her; once he hung up, she found that she couldn't summon the same bravado.

"Can I help you?" he asked, already sounding bored, and he seemed so sure that she was there to waste his time that she shoved the envelope of photos in her bag and asked what he had in the way of rings.

In an ideal world, the rings would have been junk and she could have slapped them back in his face and accused him of wasting *her* time and stormed out of the store, but of course she ended up liking one of the rings, and when she tried it on, it fit perfectly, and then she found herself out on the sidewalk with a \$60 vintage ring on her finger and, waiting for her at home, a complete set of furniture that she couldn't get rid of if she tried.

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Dammit, Shelby, she thought. Maybe she was self-absorbed after all.

She turned around and pushed back through the door. The bell rang. The man was scrolling through something on his cell phone; he looked up and raised his eyebrows at her.

"I have all this antique furniture, and I want you to take it."

"You do, do you?"

She took this as an invitation to dig out the envelope of photos and slap it down on the counter.

He glanced inside, then closed the flap again and pushed the envelope back across the counter toward Shelby. "No, thanks."

"These things are valuable!" she said. "You haven't even seen them."

"Look, lady—nobody wants your heirlooms."

Shelby blinked. At that moment, it seemed like the truest thing anyone had ever said in her entire life.

He tapped once on the envelope and shrugged. "Sorry."

Then he walked to the other side of the store, unlocked a door with a big sign saying EMPLOYEES ONLY, and disappeared.

Shelby wanted to take a tall white bud vase with a delicate pink rose painted on it and smash this guy's fancy glass cases. Instead, she went home and cried on her boyfriend's shoulder. She was trying to learn whatever lesson the universe wanted to teach her, really she was, but she just couldn't figure out what that lesson was.

She interpreted her boyfriend's silence as sympathy, but a few days later, he packed up and went to his mother's house.

"Oh, she'll love that," Shelby said, trying to be mean, but her boyfriend somehow took it as a compliment and said, "Yeah, I think she will," in a voice of boyish wonder, and Shelby ended up helping him carry the Xbox out to his car.



That weekend, Shelby's brother called from Florida. "Dad won't stop smoking," he said. "He's doing it outside, but everything stinks. His clothes reek. We can't do the laundry anymore. And I'm not even going into the toaster fires. It's ridiculous."

The wife was at the end of her rope. "She's threatening to take the kids and leave," Shelby's brother said. "I'm sending them back."

"Wait. Our parents?" Shelby said. Somehow she had missed an important turn in the conversation.

"You have more space," her brother said.

She turned and looked around the room. "Not anymore! I still have all their stuff!"

"If they leave here tomorrow, they should be there by Monday."

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"They're going to be very upset about this," she said helplessly, but she knew it was no use.



Her boyfriend called late one night. (Her ex now, she supposed, but she wasn't used to thinking of him that way.) Shelby tried to answer the phone on the first ring, before her parents heard. They'd only been in her house for a week, but they had something to say about everything.

"Why are you whispering?" her boyfriend asked. "Do you have someone over?"

"It's not what you think," Shelby muttered.

They met at a park near the house.

"I had to sneak out," Shelby said.

Her boyfriend nodded glumly; he had snuck out, too. They'd had years of grief about living together, unmarried and childless, before the breakup. Now look what had happened.

"Why did you want to meet?" Shelby asked.

He shrugged. They ended up making out in the back seat of his car. The windows got so steamed over that when they heard a knock, they almost couldn't see the outline of a police officer on the other side. "Move it along," he said loudly.

His shadow receded from their view. The window was marbled by flashing red and blue lights. "It's just some high schoolers," they heard him call to someone else.

Shelby, in her bra, rested her face against her boyfriend's bare arm.

He dropped her off at the corner so that she could slink home unnoticed. The windows of the house were open, and from outside, she could hear her parents at the kitchen table. (Correction: *one* of the kitchen tables.)

Her parents were already half in the bag, she could tell. They were laughing raucously as the playing cards slapped against the table.

Before Shelby got out of the car, her boyfriend had said, "Do you think I might be able to see you again tomorrow?"

"I don't know," she had said doubtfully, thinking of all the hurdles that lay ahead. They had gone back in time somehow.

But her boyfriend was tired of waking up in his childhood bedroom and playing video games after work. He missed her.

"Maybe we could run away together," Shelby had said, only half joking.

Now, standing outside in the dark, she had one foot in the past and one in the present. She took out her house key and squared her shoulders before she unlocked the front door and walked inside. Her parents turned in unison, their faces as bright as sunflowers, and waved her over.