An Old Buffet And A China Cup

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ANNA Garner took one of her china plates from the buffet and stood gazing at it for a second. She could see her reflected image on its shiny surface. It always startled her for a second whenever she caught a glimpse of herself unexpectedly. She could never quite associate that plump face creased with numerous wrinkles and wreathed with white hair with herself...
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"Face it, Anna, you're eighty-five and an old woman."
She sighed slowly and then wrapped the plate in several layers of newspaper before placing it in the box in front of her. She'd better hurry up or Marge would be in here wanting to know what was taking her so long. Somehow Anna had never developed a good relationship with her daughter-in-law. It had been bad enough when she had only had to see her once a week or so. But in the fifteen years since Carl had died and Frank and his family had moved in with her, things had grown steadily worse.

Anna went on slowly wrapping the dishes. She hoped the movers would be careful with the china. She'd had the set for fifty years and hadn't broken a piece. And she'd have to ask them to watch out for the buffet, too. She didn't think she could stand moving from her beloved house if it wasn't for the few mementos she was taking along.

"Mother, do you want to sell the buffet or is there someone you'd like to give it to?" Frank Garner entered the dining room, closely followed by his wife.

"Sell it? Give it away?" Anna looked at her son incredulously. "Whatever are you talking about, Frank? I'll never part with that buffet. Your father gave it to me on our first anniversary."

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“I know that, Mother.” Frank ran his hand through his thinning hair. He spoke slowly as if addressing a dull child. “But Marge says there isn’t any place for it in the new house. She says it will look out-of-place and old-fashioned with our new furniture.”

“But, Frank—”

“Oh, if she’s going to be difficult about it, Frank, I suppose we can store it in the basement.” Anna could never decide which she hated most—Marge’s habit of interrupting people or her way of talking in front of her mother-in-law as if she wasn’t there.

But now she addressed Marge herself, “Marge, that’s fine wood. It has to be taken care of. You can’t store it in a damp basement.”

“Well, if you won’t store it, then we’re going to have to get rid of it some way.” Marge stood with her hands planted determinedly on her ample hips. She was going to get this settled one way or the other. “Make up your mind, Mother. What’s it going to be?”

Anna knew that it was useless to argue. Suddenly a wave of tiredness swept over her. “Charlotte’s always admired it. I’ll let her have it.”

“Fine. I’ll call her and tell her to come get it.” Having won their point, the couple left the room.

Anna ran her gnarled hand over the shiny maple surface. It was satiny smooth from many years of loving care. She remembered the day Carl had given it to her more than sixty-five years ago. “It reminds me of you, Annie.” Carl had been the only person who had ever called her that. “It’s beautiful but strong, too.”

“Oh, Carl, forgive me.” Anna spoke to the husband she had lost so long ago. “But what could I do? At least Charlotte will take good care of it.”

“Boy, will I be glad to get out of this dump!” Anna’s reflective thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of her granddaughter. At age sixteen, Paula was at the prima donna stage. Much of what her family did these days, she either found beneath her dignity or insufferably out-moded. Anna knew she wavered between regarding her grandmother as an amusing antique or an annoying meddler.

“For your information, young lady, this ‘dump’ was the finest farm in the country when your grandfather was alive.”
Anna supposed she should be more tolerant of the child’s moods, but she couldn’t bear to have the house she and Carl had lived in all their married life criticized.

Paula tossed her long blonde hair defiantly. “Honestly, Grandmother.” That was one of the affectations she had adopted recently. Suddenly “grandma” had become much too childish a term to use. “I’m sick of hearing how great this place used to be. That was ages ago. You can’t even compare this house to the new one.” Her blue eyes sparkled in anticipation. “Wait until you see it. Even you’ll agree there’s no comparison.”

Anna doubted that. But how could you explain to one so young that as you grew older, you came to value things not for their newness or monetary value, but for the memories they invoked. Paula would never understand. But maybe she would. After all she was an intelligent girl. Maybe the lack of communication between them was partly Anna’s fault. Maybe if she tried to explain—“Paula, when you’re my age—”

“Grandmother, I don’t have time for a sermon now. I’ve got a thousand things to do before the movers come.” Paula’s peevish voice trailed back over her shoulder as she glided from the room in imitation of her favorite actress.

Anna stood for a second looking after her and then dropped the hand she had impulsively extended. It was probably just as well. Even if she had listened, Paula would have just labeled them a foolish old woman’s reminiscences.

“Is that what I am, Carl—a foolish old woman?” Anna could imagine what her family would think if they knew of the imaginary conversations she carried on with her dead husband. They’d cart her off to the loony bin, to use ten-year-old Ricky’s terminology, or else dump her in an old folks’ home.

But they really weren’t the ravings of a senile mind. It was just that she and Carl had been so close during their life together that she could predict how he would react to almost any situation. For instance now, she could hear his bass voice as plainly as if he stood before her. “You, Annie—
foolish? Of course not. Why, you're one of the most sensible women I know."

Carl and Anna's marriage had been a partnership in the truest sense of the word. Carl had had a great respect for his wife's opinion and had consulted her frequently. Every problem had been carefully talked out between them and the final decision had always been a joint one. Carl had been proud of his wife's intelligence and had frequently told her, "You're getting smarter every year, Annie—if you live long enough you'll be a genius."

Anna smiled wryly as she remembered this. "I'm afraid your son wouldn't agree with you, Carl. He seems to think I'm in my second childhood."

The front door slammed and the voices of Marge and Ricky quickly chased Anna's memories from the room. "No, you cannot walk over to Mike's now. I need you to help me."

"But I'll only be gone a little while. Mike's got a new fishing rod he wants to show me." Ricky wheedled.

"I said no and I meant it." Marge stalked into the room followed by a reluctant Ricky. "Mother, are you still packing those dishes? For heaven's sake, what have you been doing all this time? Rick, get busy and help your grandmother."

"Aw, Mom." The little boy scowled and scuffed his foot across the linoleum.

"That's all right, Marge. I'm almost done." Anna broke in hastily. She didn't want to trust her precious dishes in a ten-year-old's hands.

As usual Marge paid no attention to her protest. "You heard me, Ricky. I want everything packed when the movers get here." Not waiting to see if she was obeyed, Marge left the two together and went on into the bedroom.

"I never get to do anything," Ricky muttered under his breath. He grabbed a cup from the buffet—bumping it against the door as he did so.

"Please, Ricky, be careful," Anna pleaded.

"I'm not gonna hurt your old dishes, Grandma." Rick
had long ago adopted the attitude of his elders toward his grandmother. "I don't see what's so special about them anyway. They aren't even pretty."

"Well, I suppose they aren't to a little boy." Anna reluctantly tore her gaze from her grandson's movements and picked up a plate. She rubbed her finger softly over the single red rose that was painted on the white surface. Carl had given her the china as a Christmas present. He had picked this pattern because he had known how much she loved flowers. "But if you were a girl, you'd appreciate them more," she added.

"Mom's a girl and she don't like 'em either." Rick didn't intend to be cajoled into a good mood. "She says she doesn't know why you don't at least have a decent set of dishes to leave behind."

"Rick, you be quiet and work for a change." Marge's angry voice floated out from the bedroom. Ricky lapsed into a sullen silence.

Anna was quiet, too—although inwardly she was fuming and her hands shook even more than usual as she went on wrapping the dishes. Well, Marge could stop worrying. She'd never get her hands on these dishes. Anna would break every one of them herself before she'd "leave them behind" for her.

A truck could be heard rumbling into the driveway. "Hey, the movers are here!" In his excitement Ricky started to dash for the window. He tripped over the corner of a throw rug and fell—crashing the cup he carried in his hand against the floor.

There was a brief silence and then Rick jumped up from the floor. "I didn't mean to. It was an accident!"

Anna stood looking at the shattered cup. Tears rose to film her eyes. "Oh, no," an anguished cry escaped her lips before she could stop it.

"What happened?" The noise had brought Marge in from the bedroom.

"It wasn't my fault, Mom!" Rick put in excitedly.

"I know you didn't mean to, Ricky." Anna brushed vaguely at her eyes. There was no sense scolding the child. "It's all right."

"Well, what broke, for heaven's sake? Ricky, you didn't
break that vase Aunt Ruth gave me, did you?” Marge hastily searched the top of the buffet.

“I dropped one of Grandma’s cups.”

“Oh, is that all? Well, what’s all the fuss about then? Hand me that broom, Ricky.” As usual Marge assumed control of the situation. “Here come the movers and look at this place. Mother, will you please get back out of the way.”

Anna had been bending over—her arthritic limbs complaining at the awkward position—trying to pick up the pieces of scattered china. She slowly straightened and faced her daughter-in-law. “Nothing would make you happier than to have me out of the way permanently, would it, Marge?” Leaving Marge in startled silence, Anna turned and painfully hobbled toward her bedroom.

As she entered and started to close the door behind her, she heard Frank come charging into the house. “Marge, what the hell’s going on? How come you’re not ready yet? I’m not paying those movers to stand around.”

Marge turned excitedly to her husband. “Frank, your mother is getting impossible to live with. She gets upset at the silliest things. I don’t know if I can stand much more of it.”

“I know, Marge, but I can’t do anything with her either.”

Anna shut the door to block out the rest of the conversation. She walked to the rocker by the window and lowered her aged body slowly into it. She began to rock gently back and forth, the soft creaking making an accompaniment to her thought. The vague fear that had been plaguing her since she had first heard of the move into town had finally surfaced.

“There isn’t a place in this family for me any more. At least I belonged when I lived here in my own home.” Tears began to flow down her lined face. “But in this new house I’ll be as much in the way as that old buffet would have been. Oh, Carl, what am I going to do? I know Marge would love to be able to sweep me away as easily as she did that cup.”

Deep sobs shook Anna’s shoulders and she lowered her face into her hands. For the first time in her life, Anna Garner felt like an old woman.