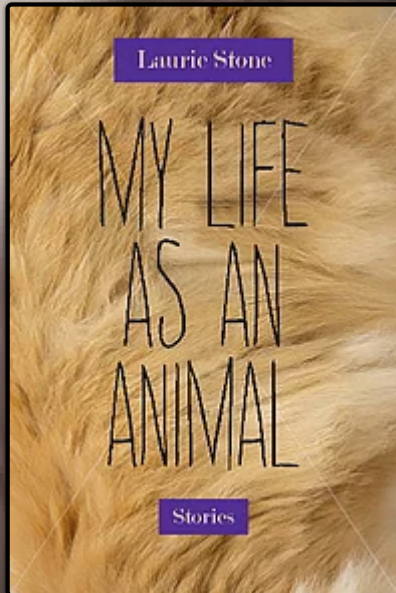


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Yard Sale

by Laurie Stone

For a while Richard and I lived in a small condo apartment in Scottsdale, unsure if we were staying in Arizona. Ikea furniture fit. Lobby furniture: stylish and impersonal. Among the pieces we bought was a glass-topped table on a metal scaffold, meant for dining. When it turned out we didn't like sitting down to meals, I commandeered it for my desk.

I see an identical table on Craigslist. Ikea no longer sells them, and now that Richard has landed his dream job, teaching at the university, I have formed an image of us at separate glass tables, like dueling pianists, but on opposite sides of the big house we have rented. On the phone the seller sounds blurry, but he lives nearby and is willing to deliver. His name is Jeff. Richard and I drive to Jeff's careworn street and pull up to a dusty yard, dotted with cacti left stunned in death poses. Jeff is outside, a tall, burly man, and the table is beside him, coated with dust. I don't inspect it carefully before offering him \$75. He says, "Okay." Afterward, Richard will say, "You could have gotten it for less," and I think he is right and feel a little bad, but I let it go because I was in the moment with Jeff, whose face looks like beef jerky.

The table has not seen the inside of the house. Maybe Jeff won it in a poker game the night before. He pockets the cash and goes to work wrapping the table in blankets and gently positioning it in the center of his pickup. Later, Richard will say, "He was high as a kite, didn't you notice?" I will say, "No." I don't see what Richard sees. It is one of the reasons I like floating along beside him. He teaches museum studies, and being with him is like being with a tour guide, and it makes me feel we are permanent tourists, even in the place where we live.

Jeff has chairs to sell, and we enter his house. A plastic curtain separates the front from the back, and the floors are dirt. There is no floor. It's like a construction site, with beer cans and pizza boxes strewn around. I don't see any furniture. The scene is desperate, but I am attracted to the whittled down look. At yard sales, I feel an impulse to dive into other people's stuff and then go home and sell everything we have.

Jeff slips into a back room and returns with a rattan chair. It is not our thing, and we pass outside. The air is filmy and pink. Distant outcroppings cast jagged shadows on mountains that ring the valley. Richard climbs into Jeff's truck, and I drive my car. Back at our place, Jeff settles the table in our garage and lingers a little before taking off. After he leaves, Richard says, "He talked the whole time about missing his wife. She left him. He told me about a hunting trip he went on with his son. It was sad." Richard sighs, looking for a bush to dump Jeff's troubles on, and we are reminded of the difference between shopping at a yard sale and buying something in a store. In a store, you imagine you are witnessing the birth of an object. At yard sales, you carry away a little of the person, and they are left with your expression as you gazed with admiration at something that was theirs.

What am I looking for? Why can some people attach themselves to houses, communities, families? Or is that a myth? Does everyone enter such entanglements with secret dread?

If Richard and I were in Paris, we would repair to our favorite grand café, sipping café crème and catching the passing chic. We would live in a country where philosophers are rock stars. If we were in Berlin, we would haunt a graffitied outpost of punk and watch redheaded blade runners race for trams. We would smell history in shards of the wall, see imprints of tanks, picture machine guns and hoods of terror. If we were in London, we would visit our neighborhood pub and contemplate the multi-culti collage. If we were in New York, we would know every gallery, bar, and vest pocket patch of green. We would cross the Brooklyn Bridge, peering down at the river with its artist-made waterfalls. We would slither through China Town, lurk in DUMBO shadows, discover streets where we were strangers.

People say, "You have to find something to love beside Richard in the place where you have come. You have to find the desert in you." My friend Angeles says, "People are more creative in exile from their physical home. You discover unknown places in yourself."

Before Richard and I moved out of the condo apartment, we threw a yard sale of our own, and as Richard was rummaging in the garage, he found the garment bag I had carried to Arizona from New York. It was an expensive Le Sportsac, and now it was a crumpled black thing you couldn't identify, and Richard was crinkling his nose and saying, "It smells like old cheese." The bag was stinking from the heat and couldn't be used anymore. I threw it in the trash, remembering the spring of 2007, the way I had walked from the plane and spotted Richard at the end of the ramp, looking like an arrow with his slim body and silver hair, and the hard little spike that holds me up just melted.

Next to the garment bag was a box Richard had packed when he left his wife. Inside the box were snapshots from the 1980s, when he lived in Leeds with a woman named Kim. In the photographs he is 30, and he stares out, unsmiling. His hair is brown and thick, and it flops over

his forehead, and he wears large glasses and seems wary. He looks like someone an anthropologist would discover behind a tree. That is how Richard always looks in photographs, like he's been seized by authorities and is awaiting deportation back to England.

As we were setting up our sale, a large woman got out of her car and began looking at our stuff. Her hair was blond and thinning, and she wore it pulled back in a clasp. I could see her scalp glistening with sweat as she stood in the sun, and my heart went out to her, and I wondered if my hair looked thin. I wondered if I was too old to attract someone other than Richard. It was early in the morning but already the kind of hot that rubs you like a rusty gate. The woman asked if we had jewelry, and I showed her a silver pin in the shape of a fleur-de-lis Richard had squirreled away in a drawer. She held it up and said, "How much?" I said, "Two dollars." She said, "I'll take it." We exchanged smiles.

She fanned her face, saying she was caring for her mother, who was sick and had come to live with her. She was looking for conversation. It was the reason I went anywhere, and I remembered my mother when we lived in Washington Heights in the 1950s, the way she would dress to leave the apartment, a girdle and makeup to meet strangers. Not exactly strangers. The butcher, let's say. She would wait for her turn to face him across the counter, a man with a bloody apron stretched tight across his paunch, and they would consult about brisket, Jew to Jew in the sawdust, and you could sense the despair of the carcasses hanging in the back, and it would make the occasion tender, all of us feeling closer to the chopping block. After my mother left the butcher, she would visit the dry cleaners and the post office, and St. Nicholas Avenue would vibrate to the rhythm of her high-heels clip clopping on the pavement.

The blond woman said her mother had emphysema. On weekends, to give herself a break, she drove to yard sales. The more she talked, the more she gathered, including a beaded belt buckle and a leather bomber jacket with a mouton lining. When would she wear a coat like this in Arizona? A place where temperatures soar past 120 degrees in summer and baby desert squirrels cook in their holes or dry to crisps along trails. Maybe the coat would remind her of our meeting.

I told her my mother had had a stroke some years earlier and for a long time my sister and I had circled her in a tight little orbit. It was a period when I wanted to live anywhere but New York, and then I met Richard and felt I had nothing to lose. Really, I had nothing to lose. After Richard left his wife, he rented a tiny flat with two red leather couches and two enormous TVs. We would stretch out on the couches, listening to Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen. They sounded like Jewish uncles, dispensing advice on love and sex. When I hooked up with Richard, I did not think about my mother's exit from Manhattan in the 1950s, when we moved to Long Beach full time. Parted from her streets and plunked into a world of mahjong games and beach clubs, she looked like she had fallen under a spell.

My mother said she did not like games, but there she was at the Malibu Beach Club, shifting mahjong tiles that made a clicking sound like hard candy hitting your teeth. Before I moved to Arizona, she said, "Don't go," and I thought she was saying, "You can't have love." I thought she was saying, "The love you have found is empty as a desert." As she neared death, she would ask, "What's it all about?" And I would wonder how, if you hated games, you could master something as intricate as mahjong, and I would think: If you could accomplish something like that, what else might you have made of your life?

Laurie Stone's most recent book, *My Life as an Animal, Stories* will be published on October 15 by Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press. Her stories have appeared in the journals *Open City*, *Fence*,

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