

A TENDENCY TO STICK IN WET WEATHER

When Toby was fifteen, he asked if he could paint his room brown. When he'd finished, frankly the walls resembled the colour of dung. Not wanting to discourage, I merely told him to make sure he cleaned his brushes properly.

That's probably the main difference between Helena and me. She never holds back from expressing her opinions. When she first saw my staircase, she said it would have to go. But I liked its airy, open-tread effect and the banister rail was handy for drying the washing. Another thing was the front door. I had become accustomed to its tendency to stick in wet weather. It pleased me hearing its perky slam as I left in the morning, and I welcomed the secure thud as it closed behind me at night. But to Helena, these objects were architecturally incorrect. When I ventured that this was a matter of taste and convention, she dismissed the suggestion saying that post-modern Scandinavian, and a faux Georgian front door just didn't work in a nineteenth-century worker's cottage. She'd written a paper on it. It was not a personal issue, it was simply wrong, and should be changed. She even offered her brother-in-law's carpentry skills for the transformation.

I valued her friendship in many ways. When Toby went into depression in his first term at Uni, she came over at once and recommended a Therapist. A Mr. Borodino. Toby came home for Christmas, but spent most of his time in his room. (I'd redecorated it by then, off-white with an eau de nil border, and some nice pictures of dolphins.) But despite his sessions with Mr. Borodino, I became very worried when Toby announced he wasn't going back for the start of the new term.

Helena had the answer. She believed the furniture was interfering with our creative energy. She could feel a particularly hostile element coming from one piece (I believe it was the sideboard) and she knew just the person to advise. One weekend in January, Sasha came. We heaved everything out onto the front lawn and swept the empty rooms with a sage-brush while chanting. Actually the supermarket had run out of sage, so we had to use parsley instead. Sasha wanted to go into Toby's room, but I persuaded her otherwise. Just as well, because I found out later he'd started painting his walls again that day. It began to rain before we finished, so a lot of the cushions got wet, and the lacquer on one chair started to bubble up. Sasha didn't think it would matter, as she could feel positive energy starting to flow through the room again. She lit a lot of candles, and put everything back differently. It looked alright, but I found I could only get into the kitchen by going out of the front door and through the garden, and the smell of parsley lingered, upsetting the cat.

Mr. Borodino telephoned one morning to speak to Toby. I called up to him but he said he was asleep (he seldom left his room), so I went back to the phone and Mr. Borodino and I had quite a long chat. I told him I had enjoyed talking to him and he asked me if I'd like to make an appointment to see him in his down-town office. He said he wouldn't charge me the

full rate, as Toby was already a client. As an afterthought, he asked me if I'd seen Helena lately. I hadn't realised she was his cousin.

That night, Toby came downstairs saying he felt hungry. Instead of going straight back upstairs with a plate, he lingered while I scrambled some eggs. It was the first time we had sat down together at the table in a long time. He said he quite liked the new arrangement of the furniture, apart from the obvious difficulty of accessing the kitchen, especially on a frosty day, so he helped me move things around a bit, until we realised it was more or less back to where it was before. He told me he'd caught a glimpse of Sasha in the garden dancing round the sideboard and surprised me by saying he wished she would come back and re-adjust his energy flow. I got straight onto Helena the following morning

Mr. Borodino had a very smart office in a new block down by the railway station. He offered me a cup of coffee, which he made himself in a rather impressive machine, then he lay down on the couch. I complimented him on the attractiveness of his surroundings, but he told me the rent was very high, and he was worried he may not be able to keep up the payments due to unsound investments. Worse than this, he told me, he was in despair because his wife had left him for another woman and was writing a novel about it. He was so easy to talk to. In fact, I found I had to say very little. After fifty minutes, he got up from the couch and suggested another session next week.

Sasha came back on her own to purify Toby's room. They were closeted up there for several hours. I think they must have skipped the bit with the sage-brushes, although they did ask me for a bottle opener. Later, towards evening, the house became filled with the sweet scent of vanilla candles, and I heard them both singing softly along to one of Toby's favourite CDs.

Mr. Borodino and I meet regularly now and he is gradually getting over his difficulties, but I don't see so much of Helena. Not since she took a course on Wedding Planning. Toby and Sasha were her first clients and now she helps them out in their Design Consultancy. It has become so successful they have started mixing their own colours and selling them on the Internet. Toby tells me the most popular shade this season is Rustic Brown.

---