

Making Things Work:
Tales From a Cabinetmaker's Life

Nancy R. Hiller

For my husband, Mark Longacre,
who has tolerated the presence of this badly behaved,
stinking dog beneath the kitchen table
for our 10 years together.



And in memoriam for Kent Perelman,
one of the best and most modest
woodworkers I have known.

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A Note About the Title

Other Books by the Author

Cabinet. 1549. [Eng. Dim. of CABIN, influenced by Fr. *cabinet* – It. *gabinetto* ‘closet, press, chest of drawers’.] A little cabin, hut, soldier’s tent; a rustic cottage; a lodging, tabernacle; a den of a beast.... A case for the safe custody of jewels, letters, documents, etc.; and thus, a piece of furniture, often ornamental, fitted with drawers, shelves, etc., for the preservation and display of specimens.

Cabinetmaker. 1681. One whose business it is to make cabinets and fine joiner’s work.

—*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1975*

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A note about identities

These tales are mostly-true. Names and other identifying information have been changed in many cases. One character is a composite of people I have known. My point in writing these tales is emphatically not to insult or offend, but to bring a number of experiences and observations that some of my fellow cabinetmakers and I share into broader conversation. I hope you will find the stories entertaining.

1. The English Years

Living the Dream

“WHY, I CAN’T think of anything in the world better than making furniture in England,” said my mother’s old friend Bunny, taking a sip of her gin and tonic. It was January 1986 and Bunny was visiting from New Jersey. Knowing that she was going to be in Cambridge for a few days, she’d invited me out for dinner. I rode my bike over to meet her at a pub near her hotel, where I was describing the soul-crushing end of my week.

By this time I’d been working at Farmstead Furniture, a custom cabinetmaking shop, for several months. Earlier in the week my employers had assigned me an elaborate sideboard. I would be building the piece in solid mahogany with hand-cut joinery throughout, trimming the doors and drawer faces with cockbeading fashioned by my own hand, and polishing the piece to a warm luster. It was my most thrilling commission to date.

“Things were going swimmingly,” I told Bunny, “until I started gluing the vertical divider into the sideboard’s lower section.” The divider had a long dovetail at top and bottom that would slide into a matching slot. I brushed glue onto the dovetails and started easing them in. I was about halfway when the divider became too tight to move by hand. This is nothing out of the ordinary; with such a wide assembly there’s a lot of friction to overcome, especially as the wood fibers swell from the moisture in the glue. I grabbed my mallet and proceeded to hammer the divider farther into the slot. After a couple more inches it stopped moving. It was a cold day in January; the woodstove, several yards from my bench, was causing the glue to set more quickly than usual. With rising panic I ran over to Stan’s bench and grabbed the eight-pound sledgehammer he kept leaning against the wall. Protecting the divider’s front edge with a block of scrap, I slammed the sledgehammer against it. The thing wouldn’t budge. “Fuck!” I shouted, laying on another blow. Nothing.

“Take this, you fucker.” WHAM.

The divider stuck fast. “FUCK!!!” I shrieked at the top of my lungs, hysterical with rage. “*YOU FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT.*” Just then the front door of the workshop opened and one of my bosses, Mike, walked in with an unfamiliar man. “There seems to be a lot of fucking going on in here,” he said calmly, casting a distressed look in my direction. “Mind stopping while I show this prospective customer the fine work we do?”

Physically and emotionally drained, I slumped against my workbench and caught my breath. Then I went and got a jigsaw to cut the divider out before making a replacement.

Such misadventure did not go over well at Farmstead. The problem was not so much the cursing, but the waste of time and materials. The business owners kept track of each minute and every scrap of wood. Efficiency was the name of the game. That was the only way to finance what they referred to as their “real” workshop, a purpose-built structure they planned to add on to the former chicken coop that housed their operation. I was ashamed. I should have known better than to fit such a long sliding dovetail so snugly.

“But honey,” Bunny remarked, listening to my tale with wide eyes. “You get to do such beautiful work!”

She was right, of course. At Farmstead, each job was truly custom-made, even the kitchen cabinetry. Nothing was built according to standard dimensions; we built to fit the space. When we did a so-called “old-pine” kitchen – they were all the rage at the time – the material really was old pine, salvaged from demolished buildings; the first thing we did was remove the nails. We cut all our dovetails, even for kitchen cabinet drawers, by hand. And although we spray-finished our built-ins, as most shops did, we French polished our furniture. I knew of no other business where I would get paid to indulge my love of traditional techniques and learn more of them.

Of course I had frustrations, foremost among them my ever-present anxiety lest my work fall short of the Farmstead standard. Then there was the matter of my income, so low that a jar of name-brand mustard was a rare splurge. Topping all of this were the routine insults from Aidan, the foreman, a lumbering misanthrope who roamed the shop in baggy shirts and drooping trousers, a put-down for his fellow employees ever at the ready.

“But at the end of the day,” I continued as a waiter brought our first course, “I can’t deny it. Working at Farmstead is a dream come true.” The question remained whether it was the kind of dream that Bunny would

recognize.

“OK,” Bunny responded, deftly fishing a crouton out of her cream of lettuce soup. “I understand that you have frustrations at work. Who doesn’t have the occasional day from hell?! But tell me how you landed such a fabulous job in the first place.”

I launched into the back story. A year before, I had fallen hopelessly in love with Gregor Campbell, a classmate during our City & Guilds furniture training in 1979. Back then he’d been an awkward youth of 17. When we reconnected six years later over beer at a pub in Saffron Walden, I was awed by the beautiful man he had become. Six-foot-two, lanky and muscular, with shoulder-length red-blond hair and a beard to match, he literally glowed. Enhancing the allure was his freshly broken heart. I longed to take him in my arms and comfort him. My longing grew more insistent as the evening and beer wore on.

He seemed encouraged by my concern. “Come see our workshop,” he said, inviting me to visit Farmstead, where he had worked for several years. “I’ll pick you up and take you over,” he added, knowing that I still did not drive and that getting there by train would take hours.

The business was housed in a long wooden building surrounded by farm fields. A small addition served as an office, though Stan and Michael, the two partners who owned the place, spent most of their time working alongside their three employees. There was no bathroom; they were all men, the place was in the country, ’nuf said. A shed served as a spray room. Woefully under-insulated, it demanded various weather-related accommodations. Forget about finishing when spring humidity was high or the temperature outside too cold.

Gregor showed me to his bench. He was finishing a blanket chest in quartersawn oak with linenfold carvings in the panels, the whole thing made by hand. The day before he had applied the first few coats of amber shellac. “Looks like a toffee apple,” he said self-deprecatingly.

I had never seen such a beautiful object. Solidly built, the carving crisp and astonishingly convincing in its evocation of fabric, the chest, like its maker, radiated a golden glow. Gregor had put so much of himself into it. I realized viscerally for the first time that a handmade artifact is literally an expression of its maker. Lifting the lid, I inhaled the heady fragrance of English brown oak and alcohol, the solvent used with shellac. Gregor’s beauty and skill were intoxicating.

Never mind that I was married. My husband, Patrick, and I had been together since I was 17. But now I was falling in love for the first time. It

was like being hit by a train.

“Oh my God, that is *so* romantic!” Bunny swooned. “Like being hit by a train!”

I broke the news to my husband a few days later: I was at a fork in the road. Only one way led to life. “A psychic at an art fair last summer told me you’d be leaving,” he responded, surprisingly resigned to the turn of events.

Unfortunately Gregor soon concluded he did not feel the same way about me. “My mother says I’m not in love with you,” he notified me one evening. That night I tossed and turned. When I finally fell into a half sleep around 5 a.m., I dreamed I was a ghostly shade in the underworld. “This is what comes from reading too much Virgil in high school,” I quipped to Bunny, trying not to appear maudlin. She had long considered my focus on classics a rare example of worthwhile academic study; obviously this was one case in which my time reading Roman literature had served a practical application.

My mother and sister had moved back to the States a few years before. This was long before the Internet or Skype. Local calls cost a fortune; forget about calling another country. I had no one to turn to. In 10-page letters handwritten on onion-skin paper I poured out my heart to my mother, complete with detailed descriptions of Gregor’s chiseled, creamy-white body, so reminiscent of marble statuary. Two weeks later I would receive her reply, always urging me to see the experience as a learning opportunity. “You’re projecting your own best qualities onto Gregor,” she observed. “What you love in him – the dedication to craft, the long hours, the constant readiness to learn – is exactly what you already possess. You just can’t see it.”

I resolved to take her advice, tweaking it slightly. If I couldn’t be with him, I would do my best to become him – or at least become *like* him. I’d read enough Plato to appreciate the power of eros as a source of motivation. Gregor, at least insofar as he expressed the ideal of the excellent craftsman willing to sacrifice nearly everything for the sake of his work, would be my exemplar.

As it happened, Gregor was ready to expand his horizons. He’d been accepted to study antique restoration at a school whose name our favorite instructor during our City & Guilds training years before had been incapable of uttering without growing misty-eyed. “Stan and Mike need someone to replace me,” he said. “I suggested that you could be my replacement. They were dubious because you’re a woman. But I told them

you're the best female cabinetmaker I know. Obviously I didn't tell them you're the only female cabinetmaker I know!" He chuckled guiltily. I felt like a starving dog loitering around a campfire who'd just been tossed a hush-puppy.

He had called me a cabinetmaker. It was not a title I felt ready to apply to myself. Sure, I'd made my living for a few years in a custom furniture and cabinet shop immediately after my training, but I still didn't feel I could claim the identity implied by that term, *cabinetmaker*. It seemed to demand a depth of professional confidence and existential commitment that I lacked.

I was daunted by Gregor's suggestion that I could replace him. My skills were nowhere close to his. But reconnecting with him had ignited a fire. I arranged an interview with Stan and Mike. Gregor said he'd drive me over and told me to bring a piece of work to show what I could do.

My husband and I had been living in a skinny 19th-century row house in Saffron Walden, one room wide and two rooms deep. Beneath the kitchen was a dirt-floor cellar accessed by a short flight of steps. With scarcely 6' of headroom, the cramped space was illuminated by a single bare bulb. The previous homeowners had left a rickety old wardrobe made of quartersawn oak in a corner of the cellar. I broke the piece apart, set up my folding workbench on the uneven floor, and used my marking gauge, panel saw, and smoothing plane to cut the door panel into a uniform board 1/2" thick by about 6" wide. Squinting in the dim light, I used hardware-store tools – a tenon saw, chisels, and mallet I'd bought when I was 20 – to transform the board into a small dovetailed box with half-blind joints at the front, through tails at the back, and a hinged top. I applied a golden stain, then polished it with amber shellac: my own piece of Gregor.

I accepted the position when Stan and Mike offered. Gregor would be gone, but I would be working in his shadow.

Now I had to find a room somewhere closer to work. "Move in with Jenny," Gregor said during a phone call. "She'd love to have you." Jenny was one of his close friends. She and her boyfriend, Roderick, shared an old row house in Cambridge with three fellow renters. Now that Gregor would be leaving, they needed a new housemate. Jenny, Roderick, and Peter were all 22; the other tenant, Bernice, was a waif of just 18. At 26, I felt positively geriatric.

The place was skanky from the moment you stepped through the front door. The entry hall reeked of stale urine; a pay phone hung on the vio-

lent-pink Lincrusta. There was a single bathroom tacked onto the house behind the kitchen; like most old houses in the area, this one had been built without indoor facilities. “What do you do about laundry?” I asked. Jenny told me they washed their laundry by hand in the kitchen sink, threw the sopping mess in a portable spin dryer that Peter had brought with him from Yorkshire, hugged the spin dryer to keep it from jolting across the room, then hung the laundry on the backyard line.

I took the room immediately.

“OK, honey,” Bunny interjected, her expression more serious. “Here I draw the line. Skanky and reeking of urine? Why would you move into such a dump?”

“Are you kidding?” I replied. “I was lucky to find a room I could afford in Cambridge, and with friendly people to boot.” Of course there was a secret bonus: Here, too, I would be living in Gregor’s shadow. In my heartbreak I held fast to that connection.

Every morning I rode my bike to the station in Cambridge and put it in the luggage car on the train to a tiny burg in the countryside, where I got back on the bike to ride the rest of the way to work. Like everyone else, I brought my lunch. I was careful about what I ate and drank because there was no toilet, nor any woods for privacy; the place was surrounded by flat farmland. At the start of lunch break I got on my bike and rode to the village to use the public lavatory, then ate my sandwich in the last few minutes of the half hour. It was fine, though the worsening weather as late summer turned to fall made things harder. As I rode to and from the dank lavatories I tried to see the glowering skies over autumn foliage as dramatic expressions of a Vaughan Williams symphony, rather than the promise of frigid evenings on the railroad platform waiting for the train to take my bike and me back to town.

Although Stan and Mike had not considered a toilet essential¹, they had seen fit to invest in a hot-beverage dispensing machine. A cup of brown liquid labeled “Tea” or “Coffee” could be had at the press of a button for several pence. Every morning at 11 and again, at 4 in the afternoon, Aidan would drag himself through the shop muttering “tea toym,” as though with his dying breath. The one thing that cheered him up was seeing that some sexist joke or derogatory comment he’d made about my work got under my skin; then he grinned so wide that his gums showed.

¹ They did install one before I left their employ, when they built the shop addition.

It was a graphic display of inadequate dental care.

“She thinks the sun shines out of Gregor’s ass,” he’d mutter with a smirk if I mentioned his former coworker. Whenever he walked past my bench he’d growl “ROUGH,” sometimes yipping like a dog. His comment following news that the space shuttle Challenger had exploded was “Serves ’em right for thinking they could fly.” His antics were asinine, and for the most part I shrugged them off. But having his miserable outlook thrown over me daily like a stinking blanket did nothing to brighten my mood.

“Well of course you’re depressed,” added Bunny, whose glasses had by now entirely lost their rosy tint. “How can you stand to keep working there?”

It was simply the reality of working in a rural English woodworking shop in the mid-1980s. Farmstead had offered me an invaluable opportunity to hone my skills and broaden my horizons. At last I felt I’d grown into the identity connoted by the word “cabinetmaker.” For that I was grateful. But by the time the waiter brought our crumble and custard, Bunny understood there might be something better than earning one’s living by making furniture in England.

The Accidental Cabinetmaker, I

THE STORY of how I got that fabulous job at Farmstead Furniture has its own back story. It begins with my decision to swap the rarefied halls of Cambridge University for a job at a metal-casting factory in 1979.

I'd gone to Cambridge the year before, thanks to a government grant. I planned to pursue a degree in Hebrew and Aramaic, not because I wanted to go to college (in fact, I was completely burned out academically), but thanks to a sense of obligation instilled by the mother of my dear friend Edith. "Your parents will be so disappointed if you don't go," she'd said over mint tea brewed with leaves freshly picked from her garden. She was unaware that my parents strenuously avoided imposing such expectations, which had straitjacketed their own younger years.

So I dutifully vowed to apply to college, but just one: Cambridge¹. I'd visited the campus with a cousin when I was in high school and been smitten with the soaring Gothic architecture. I decided I would go if I got in; the odds of my being accepted were so slim that I felt confident I'd be off the hook. When I opened the envelope that brought news of my acceptance, along with an antiquated honor known as an exhibition, I figured there must be some Purpose I was Meant to Fulfill by going.

I approached my studies there with the devotion of a seminarian convinced that she would find God – or at least experience an epiphany regarding the point of college, beyond the basic acquisition of a bachelor's degree (a credential far less important in England at the time than it is in the States today). But there was no epiphany, other than the dishearten-

¹The word "college" is a little confusing here. In the States it is often used as a synonym for "university." In England, especially where Oxford and Cambridge are concerned, a university is the degree-granting institution, while the colleges within it provide room and board, along with personal and ancillary academic support.

ing realization that Cambridge was something of a party school for many of my fellow undergraduates. I had no interest in parties, and as a painfully shy American amid the prevailing atmosphere of entitlement and self-importance, I felt distinctly out of place. I reminded myself that I, at least, was there to immerse myself in *scholarship*. I kept a strict schedule and hewed to a quasi-monastic routine that the glorious architecture seemed to call for. But the whole thing felt appallingly self-indulgent. Why was I there, when I had no desire to teach biblical languages or go on to post-graduate study?

Keenly aware that I was blowing a once-in-a-lifetime shot at the kind of benefits that might accompany a degree from such a prestigious institution, I decided to drop out. I moved back to the flat that my boyfriend and I had called home in a part of London known as Newington Green. Look the place up today and you'll find it billed as a haven of cocktail lounges, European bakeries, and tree-lined streets: a hopping cosmopolitan base for stylish, creative types. But this center of comfort and sophistication was not *our* Newington Green. When we lived there, it was dirty and dodgy. In my memory, the sky, like the rest of the scene, is always gray. Naturally it was just this down-at-the-heels character that attracted us, a couple with near-minimum-wage jobs, simply because we could afford to live there.

Our flat was on the second floor of Congreve House, a hulking brick edifice constructed shortly after World War II in a cluster of government-subsidized residences called an "estate." Each of the buildings was named for a famous British writer. Although I didn't know it at the time, William Congreve was an 18th-century playwright known for his poetry and high-brow satire. But the urine-soaked stairwells, prison-worthy architecture, and minefield of dog turds that passed for a lawn belied any association with such refinement.

Whatever the case, by the time we arrived, Congreve House and its equally improbably named neighbors had been virtually abandoned. The utilities in the vacant flats had been disconnected and their toilets filled with cement to discourage squatters. The borough that owned the estate no longer rented the buildings out, because they were deemed substandard. Luckily for us, they had contracted with a local housing co-op to rent some of the flats to artists and erstwhile students of the humanities. Ecstatic at finding a place for a few pounds a month, we'd signed up immediately and arranged to move in as soon as the loo was operational.

Like any masonry building in the damp chill that is English weather for

much of the year (or was, back then), our flat was always cold. A small gas heater in the living room put out enough warmth to make a 5' semicircle in front of it just bearable, but beyond that you were on your own. We used a portable paraffin heater in our bedroom and went back and forth about whether the acrid smoke that permeated our bedding, clothes, and even the paint on the walls was better than shivering all night.²

Once this character-building habitation had again become my home, I returned to a clerical job I'd had during the year I took off between high school and university: a temporary position at the headquarters of the Automobile Association, near Leicester Square. My boyfriend, Patrick, was 13 years older than I. By day he delivered commercial floor mats for a national company, but his identity was completely bound up with his avocation as a Celtic artist. He spent his spare time hunched over a drafting table, pen in hand, laying out intricate knot-work borders and images of intertwined mythological beasts. Once he'd penned the outlines in black, he colored them in with paint. He sold these creations for the equivalent of pennies per hour at gatherings populated by latter-day druids and henna-haired vixens.

We had no plan beyond supporting ourselves from one week to the next. So when my mother mentioned that she and my stepfather could rent us the two-up, two-down cottage attached to the old house they'd bought in the village of Friday Bridge, we leapt at the chance to escape.

Patrick had enough contacts in London to keep himself marginally employed as a freelance artist, but I needed a job. Finding employment had never been a problem for me because my expectations were so low. From the age of 15 I'd had a succession of jobs – cleaning flats for widows and divorcées in Golders Green, prepping boiled eggs and tomatoes for the lunch line at the ABC Bakery, selling herbal supplements at Selfridge's,

²“Enough about the cold,” you may be thinking. Yes, the English cold features large in a few of these tales. Sorry about that. It was an inescapable reality in those days, when most buildings where I lived and worked lacked insulation. Did I mention that double-glazed windows were still a novelty? While actual temperatures were relatively mild (it didn't get much below 0° C all that often in the areas where I lived), the air was perennially damp. A friend's mother, who had moved to the U.K. from Manitoba, called England's a “penetrating cold” and swore it was far worse than the dry cold of her homeland, where the temperature could stay below -10° C for weeks. So just be glad you're reading about this kind of cold and not experiencing it.

even hawking personal security alarms door to door in London's garment district – until the culmination of my youthful employment, the job at the Automobile Association, where I sold maps, international driving permits, windscreen defrosters, and sunglasses that tinted themselves automatically on those rare occasions when the sun emerged from behind the clouds.

“You could probably get a job at HighQual,” said my mother, shortly after we arrived in Friday Bridge late that spring. HighQual was a metal-casting factory a few miles away; my mother knew about it because one of her friends had suggested she contact the owner regarding some hard-to-find sculpting material. I rode my bike over and was hired on the spot for an entry-level position.

HighQual specialized in cast metal parts for industrial and military equipment. The place was steamy, the air loud with the growl and hiss of motors and pneumatic lines. Other workers chatted as they soldered and polished, but I was too nervous to talk. This was before today's paternalistic safety technologies; a moment's inattention could mean a second-degree burn from molten wax or a hand lost to an automated platen. One afternoon a blood-curdling shriek tore through the din when a young woman, distracted by conversation, forgot to move her hand in time to keep two fingers from being crushed. Frantic activity surrounded her as she fainted and was carried off to the hospital. I thought I would never get the sound of her scream out of my head.

Nevertheless, I felt considerably more at home in the factory than I had at Cambridge. The just-get-on-with-it ethos of my new workplace was refreshing. I studied the blue-collar culture with special interest in the break room, where employees discussed the merits of new cars over piping mugs of tea and *The Sun*, with its daily topless model on page three. No doubt my sense of comfort owed much to a vague awareness that I had alternative options, at least potentially, which freed me from having to make any real commitment to my situation. Predictably, it didn't take long for me to start wondering how my fellow workers could bear the sameness of the days that stretched endlessly before them.

Meanwhile, Patrick and I had almost no furniture. We slept on a piece of bulk upholstery foam and used another as a couch. An empty crate made a coffee table and we rounded out our household with an old chair that Patrick had brought to our relationship. We dined at a small gate-leg table and wooden chairs that my mother had bought at a junk shop. What books and LPs we had were stacked on boards with brick supports.

Between his pay from commissions and mine from the factory, we had just enough to cover basic expenses. There was certainly nothing left over to buy furniture. So I decided to build some. Every field in the drained marshland around us was bordered by ditches that one or more neighbors found handy for disposing of soiled mattresses and other unwanted objects. While riding my bike to and from the factory I occasionally spotted a three-legged table or a chest of drawers that had fallen victim to someone's drunken rage. I would return on foot or ask my mother or boyfriend for a ride to pick these things up, drag them home, and break them down to use for raw material.

I had no woodworking experience to speak of. I'd watched the hippie carpenters who lived with my family when I was 10 and 11 as they built a variety of simple shelters in our backyard. I admired their ability to come up with a design and turn it into a real-life dwelling, however basic. But I hadn't actually learned any skills by watching them. A couple of years later I took woodworking classes at boarding school, but those projects were free-form – salad bowls and toys carved with a mallet and gouges – and did not require the use of a saw and square. I still had no idea how to cut a straight line. "So what?" I figured. "Who needs straight lines?" We just wanted some furniture. Using Patrick's old saw and hammer, and employing our small dining table as a bench, I put together a crude pine bookcase over the course of two weekends.

My stepfather stopped by regularly. No visit was complete without some insult directed at my efforts. "Cor, Nance, what are you?", went the usual refrain, a question he invariably answered, himself, with a spirited "Useless." Judging by how often he engaged in this routine, it seemed to give him considerable pleasure. One day he added "you should take a carpentry course" to the standard insult. To spite him, I decided to do just that.

I rode my bike over to the vocational college in Wisbech, a town about three miles away, and arranged to meet with the head of the woodworking department. Mr. Pearce was a kindly man in a white shop coat. "So you want to take a carpentry course, do you?" he asked, eyebrows raised. "What do you intend to do with that?"

"I want to make things for our house. You know, furniture," I answered.

"Oh, goodness," he replied with a smirk. "You mean furniture making, not carpentry." He showed me around the workshop.

The tuition was readily affordable. England still had a furniture industry in the late 1970s, so there was a healthy demand for training. I would

spend several hours each day in classes, then make simple pieces of furniture in my spare time to help pay the rent. I gave my notice at HighQual two weeks before the start of the autumn term.

As a 20-year-old woman in a class of 16- and 17-year-old boys I was something of a freak. Some of my fellow students were already employed by furniture factories, which covered the cost of their training; a foundation in traditional handcraft was thought to yield a better class of foreman or manager, even in a modern factory dominated by industrial machines.

Most of my classmates had a head start: They'd taken woodworking classes at school or grown up helping their fathers with carpentry projects in the evenings. My own father's idea of a good end to the day had been to smoke a bowl of Borkum Riff while nursing a glass of rum and perusing *The New Yorker*, a box of Triscuits at his side. Before he left his career in public relations and became a freelance consultant, he'd dutifully followed the path to success prescribed by his parents, who'd come to New York from Poland in search of a better life. After college and law school he did a stint in the U.S. Coast Guard, married my mother, and moved to Florida, where my mother's family lived. There he began his career.

My maternal grandparents were first-generation Americans born to immigrants from Lithuania and that long-contested region sometimes claimed by Austria, sometimes by Germany, who had settled near New York. They migrated to Miami Beach in 1937, a few years after my grandfather was summoned home from medical school in Glasgow due to the Great Depression. He went on to become a successful hotelier. They raised their daughter to achieve the female version of 1950s success: marriage to a man with a well-paid white-collar job. She'd wanted to study fine arts, but they forbade it; too bohemian. Instead, she studied English and history, met my father during her junior year of college, married him after graduation, and became a homemaker in suburban South Miami.

My mother's version of homemaking differed from that of her friends, most of whom spent their afternoons playing tennis at the country club and driving daughters to Girl Scouts, horseback riding lessons, or ballet. In addition to cooking, sewing clothes, and making butterscotch Jell-O, she turned her artistic vision to transforming her surroundings. "Mother gave me the electric drill for a birthday present when we moved into this house five years ago," she told a reporter for the lifestyle section of a local paper. The story's text was arranged around an eye-catching black-and-white photo of my youthful mother in a striped tank top, hair pulled

back, smiling as she used a wire-brush attachment in her drill to strip paint from a salvaged baluster spindle. “The kitchen cabinets had sliding doors, which we didn’t like. So I took off the doors, trimmed them down and put them on hinges.” Next she changed the kitchen faucet and built us a backyard playhouse. Although she was self-taught and didn’t make a point of including me in her projects, her example made an impression. We were in awe of her mechanical abilities. She was the tool user in our family.

This vision of the good life was blown out of the water by the 1960s. As we neared the decade’s end, my parents were spending several hours each weekend at a park overlooking Biscayne Bay, where my mother played volleyball while my father gazed into his friend Diane’s exposed navel, remarking that he wished he could crawl inside it. Shortly thereafter, my mother took off on a cross-country odyssey of self discovery. By the time she returned, it was clear that their marriage was over. She wanted my sister and me to experience something other than middle-class American culture. Her parents, ruing what they saw as her life’s implosion, offered help, exchanging their financial support for the deed to our parents’ house. They had good friends in London. My mother, sister, and I moved there in the summer of 1971, arriving just before my 12th birthday.

My sister and I were packed off to boarding school. Our mother enrolled in a fine arts program at Hammersmith College. There she met a much younger man, Joe, who later became our stepfather. A painter and sculptor, Joe had a variety of building skills that he utilized to make a living. After they graduated, he and my mother teamed up as self-employed remodelers. The flexible nature of the business gave them more time to pursue their artwork than they would have had in professional jobs. When I was in high school they commandeered me on weekends to help them transform a series of old row houses in Islington into studios where they could live while working on their etching, painting, and sculpture. But even then, my stepfather seemed to find it more rewarding to make fun of my ineptitude than to explain how I might produce the results he was after.

The glaring disparity between my skills and those of most of my fellow students in the vocational school’s furniture making classes just magnified my sense of incompetence. So I felt a certain *schadenfreude* when the bench room, normally quiet, rang with an angry reproach directed at

some unfortunate fellow: *“Pirtle! What are you doing to that plane iron?”* or *“Spratt! Stop! You’re about to cut off your finger!”* At least I wasn’t completely alone.

It was only my determination to make my stepfather eat his words that got me through the year-long training. During the first week I spent two whole days trying over and over to cut a simple lap joint with a saw, chisel, and mallet. Overwhelmed by frustration, I felt my face flush as tears filled my eyes. I hid behind my workbench, pretending to look for a tool on the lower shelf. I was clearly not cut out for this kind of work; I belonged in the world of writing and books. I should forget about learning to make furniture. But as I squatted behind my bench contemplating my options, it occurred to me that the prospect of admitting defeat to Joe was even worse than that of persevering in my effort to cut a straight line. By the end of that day I had made my first well-fitted lap joint.

The City & Guilds curriculum of the time focused heavily on traditional handwork skills. Even before the lap joint, we had learned to use hand tools to transform a rough plank into a workable piece of lumber with two flat faces and edges that were straight, square, and parallel, the kind of board commonly identified as “S4S” (square on four sides) that you might find shrink-wrapped at an indoor lumberyard today.

The main room was laid out with 10 or so workbenches, each long enough to accommodate two benchmates. A pair of doors separated the bench room from a larger room filled with industrial machinery, most of it manufactured in Great Britain. Only after we had learned to flatten and square up a board by hand were we allowed to use the machines to perform the equivalent labor. When the machine room was in use it was deafeningly loud, with a daunting atmosphere of purposeful activity. I made a point of visualizing my fingers running into the blade every time I prepared to press an on switch to remember to keep my hands away from those areas.

Each weekday I rode my bike to and from the college. Between November and May there was no escape from the cold. I wore two pairs of socks covered by plastic bags inside my work boots, imagining that the bags would provide insulation. Instead, I later learned, they hastened tissue damage by trapping moisture. Invariably when I got to school my toes were throbbing, and my fingers shot with pain as the flesh revived in the warmth of the workshop. Despite this daily revival, my toes turned purple and my fingers took on a reddish cast that lasted all year. I discovered that this precursor to frostbite had a name: chilblains. To this day,

my fingertips tingle at the first hint of fall's approach.

Following the basics we moved on to more challenging joints. After mastering each technique we practiced on projects that were part of the syllabus: a mirror frame, a coffee table, a dovetailed tool chest, a small box for papers. As we learned more refined techniques – veneering, marquetry, turning, reeding, fluting, and French polishing – we graduated to an elegant two-drawer tabletop chest for storing silverware, and ended the year with a late-1970s interpretation of a Regency-style coffee table. When my sister saw the final project she called it “magnificent,” and I realized how far I had come.

By this time I had turned 21 and was ready to start my own business. The fact that I knew nothing about running a business was irrelevant. I was determined. Besides, I needed a break from my live-in relationship. I put a classified ad in the local paper in search of a workshop with living space, imagining people flocking to my door with orders for custom work.

Things did not go quite according to plan.

The Accidental Cabinetmaker, II: On the Brink

DUNCAN DAVIS and Raymond Green had been friends for 20 years, ever since they'd met as students at the Slade School of Art in London. Duncan had moved to Wisbech, drawn by its tranquility and the faded elegance of its historic architecture. He purchased a Georgian house on the river and was restoring it in his spare time. Duncan made a living somewhere between the fine and decorative arts: applying decorative finishes to furniture, hand-lettering ornate business signs, and painting reproduction Canalettos for London patrons.

Raymond, too, had a fondness for old buildings and furniture; he had spent some time restoring and dealing antiques but had finally decided to veer off in another, he hoped more profitable, direction. Artistic country kitchens by Smallbone of Devizes had made a splash in the English press, and it was clear that custom kitchens represented a new area of creative enterprise offering a realistic prospect of making a living.

Raymond had started a kitchen design business, using a storefront in London as a salesroom. Because production would be more economical in a small town, he'd bought a house near Duncan's and converted the stables into a workshop. He furnished the ground floor of the main wing with used industrial equipment and old workbenches. In the center was a woodstove, the heat-source for the two-story building, which had drafty windows and, I'm pretty sure, no insulation. The upper floor would eventually become a bench room with space for cabinet assembly, but for now it functioned as a frigid atelier for Duncan, who spent his days working beside the north windows bundled in layers of overcoats and fingerless gloves.

One day at teatime in the damp basement kitchen of Raymond's house Duncan came across a classified ad in the local paper. "Look at this, Ray.

Someone wants a workshop.”

Raymond’s ears perked up. He had a workshop – one attached to his house, a mere two rooms of which he regularly occupied, and only while visiting from his home base in London.

The ad was mine. I had recently completed my City & Guilds training and determined that it was time to set myself up in business, preferably in a new living situation away from Patrick. Raymond called to get a better idea of what I was looking for, then followed up with a visit to view my portfolio. Immediately aware that he was dealing with someone whose dreams exceeded her grasp of reality, he proposed a slightly different arrangement from the one I had envisioned: I could use the workshop, but instead of renting it for my own business, which I hadn’t yet established, wouldn’t it make sense to build a commission for him, one he’d already lined up? The job was for a customer in London. Her base cabinets were made, but the part-time employee who had built them also worked as a milkman; he could only come to the workshop after delivering his last foil-topped bottle of the day. It would take him forever to complete the commission, and the customer was ready for her kitchen to be finished.

He showed me a drawing of a shallow upper cabinet called a “dresser,” after the 19th-century kitchen dressers that had inspired the design. Made from clear Baltic softwood, the piece would have a lovely mix of open display spaces and concealed storage. There would be little doors hung on traditional brass butt hinges, a row of spice drawers reminiscent of antique apothecary chests, custom-made bead board, scrollwork friezes, and Roman arches atop decorative split-turned posts. Crowning the ensemble would be a cornice. The proportions and details were beautiful. We scheduled an appointment for me to look at the house and workshop.

On my first visit I appraised the realities of what working there might actually mean. The place would be freezing in winter. I would arrive before Duncan each morning (he *was* an artist), so it would be up to me to empty the woodstove of ash and light it afresh. There was something earthy and poetic about this task, at least as I contemplated it in the abstract on a pleasant autumn day. I imagined myself in romantic terms, rather like a female version of Lady Chatterley’s gamekeeper. I could handle this.

Thanks to my year at the vocational college, I was familiar with the bicycle ride from Friday Bridge, four miles from Raymond’s workshop. In winter the narrow country roads were dark well before 5 p.m. The route wound through small villages with picturesque names such as Elm

and March, islands of human habitation floating in a sea of farmland. Summer meant strawberries; winter, Brussels sprouts. By February or so the air was thick with the sulfurous stench of the sprouts' rotting spires, picked clean of their tiny cabbages. For a few months each year this ride was heaven. But my time at the college taught me that winter was a season to be endured, at least for those of us on bikes; performance fabrics, had they even been invented, would have been well beyond my budget. It was one thing to grin and bear such discomfort for a limited period while I was in school. But now I would be in it for the long haul. High on the prospect of adventure, I decided that the satisfactions of working at Raymond's shop would easily outweigh any physical discomforts the job entailed. Besides, if I was renting a room at his house, I wouldn't have to bike to work each day; I would only need to make that trip on visits home.

I was eager to take Raymond's drawing from two-dimensional representation to real, working object – an object that would bring daily pleasure to Mrs. Rose Connor of Fulham, whose name was on the page. Even though I had never met Mrs. Connor or visited her house, I relished the feeling of personal connection that would be forged between us simply by virtue of her daily use of the cabinetry I was going to make. She would be the recipient of my first professional work, which would become an integral part of her home. I would give the piece my all, building it with loving care, incorporating the best craftsmanship I had cultivated during my training.

On Sunday evening, having installed myself onsite with a change of work clothes, a blanket, some kitchen things, and a few groceries, I made my customary vegetable stew for supper and engaged in a bit of awkward conversation with Raymond. Sharing a house with my new landlord and potential employer was discomfiting for its fusion of intimacy and distance. A native of London's East End, about 20 years my senior, Raymond was married to a respected designer of retro clothing. Blessed with an enviable freedom from self doubt, he quickly became an expert in every venture he embarked on. His cosmopolitanism highlighted my own idealism and naïveté. He indicated that he was skeptical of my desire to flee my domestic relationship. Not knowing how to respond, I filled my hot-water bottle and retired to bed after washing the dishes.

The damp house induced a chill bone-deep. That in itself was unremarkable; the temperature at home was nearly as low, but there, at least,

Patrick and I had a small gas heater in each room to provide a focused source of heat. There, too, I'd had Patrick, a handy source of warmth at night. No way would I be able to undress here; I needed every layer and was not about to sacrifice the fragile aura of heat beneath my clothes in exchange for a bath.

"In fact," I thought, "I'll put on my coat for extra insulation." I got into bed wearing it.

I found it to be no ordinary bed, at least, for the 1980s. Instead, it was a horsehair mattress on worn-out springs. Like old-fashioned British toilet tissue (a euphemism for a completely unabsorbent material resembling thin waxed paper), horsehair beds had long before been superseded by superior modern counterparts. But this room was rarely used, and I was fortunate to find a bed at all. The thin mattress sagged and poked me with bristles whenever a sleepless turn exposed a bit of skin. It had stood so long in this unheated room that it, too, seemed desperate for warmth.

Despite the coat, blankets, and hot-water bottle, I could not relax. I lay awake all night. As dawn broke I noticed a thin layer of fog rolling into the room through a gap between the window frame and the lower sash. So much for the romance of living in a Georgian house overlooking a river.

No matter how I tried to see my new life as an inspiring adventure, the inescapable cold left me emotionally drained. I didn't bathe the entire week; the thought of removing my clothes was unbearable. Nothing adjusts perspective as smartly as severe physical discomfort. On the seventh day I called Patrick and begged him to let me come home. Shaking uncontrollably, I sat in the living room chair by the gas flame. It took hours for the shivering to stop. The rigors of my bicycle commute were nothing compared to the misery of trying to sleep in that room on the North Brink. Not long after that, Patrick and I got married.

At the end of my first week Raymond drove up from London, where he worked on weekdays, to check on my progress. When he found me sanding one of the doors by hand, his face was gripped by anguish. "You can't sand this stuff by hand!" he cried. "That's why we've got an electric sander!" Taking in the rest of the situation – the pre-cut parts, the back-saw, the marking and cutting gauges – he announced that there would be no hand-cut dovetails, either. Nor any lovingly hand-rubbed finish. I was to get over what he called my honeymoon period and use the freestanding dovetail machine, an industrial relic that shook the floor, then spray the finished cabinets with lacquer after staining them. "If you're going

to work here, you're going to have to use modern techniques," Raymond declared.

"But you said you wanted my best work!" I blurted in disbelief, considering my best to be the work in which I invested myself most deeply: hands, heart, and mind.

"Look," he said. "It's not about you. It's about the customer. People don't care how things are made; they just want them to be *pretty*."

By the end of the project Raymond was pleased with my work and offered me a job with regular pay at a modest hourly rate.

And thus I became an employee, grateful to have been saved from my naïveté.

As a businessman, Raymond insisted that anything made in his workshop be not only attractive and well constructed, but profitable. He missed no opportunity to point out unnecessary movements or breaches in what he hoped would become a model of efficient production. Each step of the manufacturing process must be standardized – not only the dimensions of parts, such as case sides, tops, and bottoms, or face and door frames, but also the joinery methods. Casework would come in a basic range of sizes so that multiples could be prefabricated and kept ready to assemble when orders came in; any cabinets that deviated from these standards would command a custom charge. He taught me to repeat a given process until all the necessary parts for an order had been made before moving on to the next, because every time I switched from one activity to another I would have to think – and that would take time.

Shortly after he hired me, Raymond began to grow the business. Soon there were three employees, then more, along with a creeping division of labor. I was lucky to be given the job of making dressers, which I found rewarding because of the relative variety. But I soon learned that I could build only so many before I needed some form of mental diversion to keep from feeling suicidal due to the repetitive nature of the work.

Adding to my malaise was my growing appreciation that I was just one small part in the process whereby our customers redid their kitchens. Other people did the selling and design. Still others managed delivery and installation. Without any real say in where the business was headed or what kind of work I might be asked to do in a month, let alone a year, I felt little sense of agency.

It wasn't long before the sheer number of commissions we had to work through undermined that original connection I had felt with Mrs.

Connor. Now the names on shop drawings simply represented abstract customers who distinguished themselves by being pleasant or painful to deal with – and this at several removes. Those who wanted some customization of the basic design were the most appealing; they broke the monotony of my days. The worst were those who changed their mind after I had started their job; it was soul destroying to abandon pieces in which I had already invested so much care, only to redo the work.

On the other hand, one clear benefit of repetitive work is that it offers opportunities for reflection. I wondered why I had ever imagined a connection with Mrs. Connor. We'd never actually met. Raymond was the intermediary between us, so our relationship existed only in my head. Then again, she appeared to share my sense of connection; she had written me a thank-you note after her kitchen was finished. That felt like evidence of a relationship. And there was surely much of me in her cabinets. Several weeks after her kitchen was finished, Raymond took photographs and gave me an 8 x10 print. Now I knew the kinds of things she stored on the shelves, and I was certain that she got great pleasure from this object I had made. I pictured her removing a mug from the lower shelf each morning for tea, or shutting one of the little doors with a satisfying thunk after putting away her dishes. Sure, anyone with equivalent skills could in principle have made her dresser, but I was the one who had actually brought it into being. Beyond this knowledge of brute fact, there was a particularity involved, a craftsman's recognition that had the dresser been made by anyone else, it would have been different: the doors cruder or more refined in their fit, the dovetails (at least, those I'd made before I was forbidden to cut them by hand) looser or tighter. Someone else would have matched the grain differently. He or she might have paid less attention to removing machine marks from the tiny decorative beading worked into the front edges of the shelves. Even if such details might escape the notice of most customers, they are marks by which we, as craftspersons, distinguish ourselves not just from other artisans but individually, *to ourselves*. They are lasting evidence of our skills and care. More than this, they are proof that even if we have been laboring under the weight of routine, even if we are working on the hundredth version of some basic pattern, we have developed a degree of self-discipline that enables us still to care about the quality of the things we make.

I reminded myself daily that I should be grateful to have a job, and one that was far more interesting than those I'd had up to then. But I was deeply unhappy. My romantic vision of furniture making had collided

with the realities of doing business in a capitalist economy, or at least Raymond's version of it. In two years I had become despondent. I felt like part of a machine. As long as I had found the work rewarding for its intrinsic satisfactions and the sense of purpose I enjoyed as a craftsperson helping to furnish the kitchens of people with whom I felt some connection, I considered the low pay and often-challenging bicycle commute trivial. But once the work lost that meaning it became increasingly difficult to see myself continuing as a cabinetmaker. Finally I sought refuge in the sociability and sheer physical comfort of office work.