

Danish Modern

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Isabelle wondered how long it would take for the police to arrive.

Five minutes?

Fifteen?

It depended on the store's security system, she supposed. A silent alarm would be nice because then the racket wouldn't disturb her (although she'd become quite adept at tuning out noise: conversation, TV, crying.)

What she wanted was right there in the window, a mere six feet away. She could scramble through the wreckage and have a few quiet moments before the cops shuffled her off in handcuffs. She would get caught, of that she was certain, but at least there would be no eyewitness to testify against her. This town shut down on weeknights, making it easy to stand here, undisturbed, at 11 p.m. on a Tuesday, with a cinder block cradled in her arms and a diaper bag spilling its contents on the ground a few feet away. She'd abandoned the bag—an oversized Vera Bradley with kitschy flowers and quilted material—after discovering the cinderblocks next to the warehouse. All that stuffing puckered between thick stitches reminded her of cellulite. When her mother-in-law gave her the bag, it had overflowed with poop-related paraphernalia including a bottle of something called Jr. Lil' Stinker Spray Poo-Pourri.

“You spritz it on the diaper before it goes in the trash so it doesn't smell as much!” her mother-in-law had said.

“Wow,” Isabelle had replied. “Who knew crap required so much crap?” and her mother-in-law had cocked her head and blinked the way she does when Isabelle mentions politics.

Isabelle had meant to transfer her wallet and keys to a real purse before going to book club earlier that night, but Jim had been late and she couldn't remember where a “real” purse was. Or real pants. Or real shirts. Seven months out and she still wore maternity jeans. The other women at book club had bemoaned their pillaged bodies as

they scooped guacamole and gulped margaritas to the chant of “Pump and dump!” Isabelle wanted to discuss the book—it was her pick tonight—but it became clear no one had read it. Except Margot, of course, and she immediately pulled Isabelle in close, so close that Isabelle could smell the garlic and see a piece of tortilla chip stuck in her lip gloss. “I just didn’t get it, Issy,” she slurred, “I mean it’s so *dark!*” It wasn’t dark, Isabelle wanted to say, it was Philip Roth. It was *literature* for Christ’s sake. Just because a romantically slighted woman didn’t toss off her life to travel the globe (funded by what?) in search of cannolis, Capoeira, and cunnilingus didn’t mean the novel was *dark*.

Cameras. Isabelle hadn’t thought of that. She was safe from the police-issued ones mounted to poles, the ones with the blinking blue lights. This neighborhood had too many white people now with warehouses metamorphosing into loft apartments and gluten-free bakeries and day spas. Blue lights would be bad for business. But maybe the store had its own camera looking at her, recording everything. Maybe she was busted before she even began.

She pressed her nose and forehead against the cold of the window and squinted inside. Her eyelashes swished the glass. The warehouse had been disemboweled, its skeleton exposed and painted a glossy white. HVAC pipes, vents, concrete pillars, the floor, everything. All white. How many coats of paint did it take to cover up 150 years? That was a feat. Keeping a white room clean, now that was really a feat. Not so much as a scuffmark on the floor.

The first and only time Isabelle had lived alone, her apartment had been immaculate. Wood floors gleaming from Murphy’s Oil, dust-free ledges, Windex-ed windows. A slim Parsons table for a desk; impractical, really, with no drawers for pens or papers, so she stashed bills and stationary and stamps in a bag in the coat closet. The only other furniture included a bed, two knock-off Eames chairs, a steel and glass coffee table, and a walnut dresser that a woman in a flea market said was an original Paul McCobb. Isabelle had no idea who Paul McCobb was, but the woman extolled his importance to the modernist movement and the dresser was an apparent steal at \$300. The man-before-Jim had complained of a lack of comfortable places to sit and she had explained her search for the perfect sofa and wouldn’t it be fun if they went together to scour thrift stores for an affordable piece of Danish modern, something clean-lined and simple and

with no fabric duster sweeping the floor? The man-before-Jim demurred. He had called her apartment “Spartan” and apparently meant that as a critique.

“Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.” So said William Morris, according to a quote cross-stitched onto a hideous and uncomfortable throw pillow in her mother’s living room, the irony obvious to Isabelle even at the age of 10. Nothing was as useless as a throw pillow and her mother had scores lining a down-filled sofa so deep that you couldn’t sit up straight no matter how hard you tried. The cushions sank under your weight and pulled your butt backwards and your legs upward so that you looked like a mollusk trying to escape its shell. Perplexed houseguests attempted not to spill afternoon tea while being swallowed by furniture, having found no place to set their cup. Her mother’s *tshotske* assaulted every flat surface. A menagerie of ceramic animals marched across the sideboard; end tables teemed with chinoiserie jars and crystal candlestick holders (devoid of candles) and replica Yellow Ware vases. Plastic maidenhair ferns filled brass buckets atop full-to-bursting cupboards. Every little box, jar, vase, and drawer, held something more, something smaller—coins, matchsticks, marbles, pebbles, beach shells. The house was a Russian Doll opening, opening, opening, until you felt like a tiny speck of plasma trapped inside all those layers. Maybe her father hadn’t up and disappeared after all, maybe he’d simply opened the wrong closet.

Isabelle extricated herself after college and lived gloriously alone and clutter free until Jim came back to her apartment one night for a limoncello. A few months later he took her to a trendy Chinese restaurant near the theater district in D.C. on a surprise weekend getaway. She ordered dumplings in a shiso broth because the dish sounded simple and exotic. A glistening fist-sized lump arrived, leaden and white and drowning in a tasteless brown broth. Not at all what she had envisioned. She debated returning it for something else, but that would draw attention to herself or admit to Jim that she had flubbed the order. She extracted piece after piece of the doughy mass with her chopsticks, felt it expand in her stomach like insulation foam, while Jim shoveled Kung Pao chicken in his mouth with a fork and exclaimed over and over again, “Isn’t this fantastic?”

Later—after the musical, after the cordials, after the chocolate torte at the lobby bar—she rallied and made the most of the Westin’s signature “Heavenly Bed” (more furniture suffering an overdose of pillows and down. Like fucking in meringue.)

Several weeks later, with another white lump expanding inside her, she would remember that meal and go hurtling for the tiny toilet in Jim’s tiny rowhouse. When she finally emerged, there was Jim smiling like the Cheshire cat, hand reaching for her belly. “Isn’t this fantastic?”

Jim didn’t see the point in buying a couch, not when he had a perfectly good hand-me-down from his mother. Isabelle tried hiding the blue and gray gingham with a store-bought white slipcover, but the proportions were all wrong, too tight on the bloated armrests and too loose on the cushions. A custom-fit cover cost too much, half way to a new sofa, so why bother? Besides, Jim said, no use buying something just for it to become one giant burp cloth.

Piles of laundry now buried the Parsons table and the McCobb (a fake she later learned) sold for a loss on Ebay in favor of an armoire for Jim’s sweaters and socks. Isabelle aspired to knit organic rompers for the Dumpling, handmade and soft to the touch in muted colors like Wheat or Oatmeal, but instead she had baskets of second-hand clothes, garish made-in-China neon onesies emblazoned with cartoon animals captioned by “Mamma’s Little Monkey” or “Daddy’s Grrrrl.”

Was the Rainforest Jump-a-Roo beautiful?

Was the Tickle Me Elmo useful?

Each morning she vowed to vanquish the clutter, but let’s face it, babies come with infrastructure and the Dumpling was winning.

In the evening, after the Dumpling finally passed out, and before Jim got home from work, Isabelle poured a glass of wine and flipped through home magazines. Her architectural porn, Jim called it. She liked to imagine that she lived the kind of life that inspired the articles. “Tiles from Marrakech inform the color palette of the foyer, with the subtle blue and orange tones mimicked in the paint trim. The foyer affords a startling reveal to the mammoth living room beyond, which boasts floor-to-ceiling windows and original Hans Wegner Wishbone Chairs discovered at a vintage boutique in Montauk.”

Isabelle didn't have a foyer. There was no "reveal" in a rowhome, there was only the front door opening smack into the living room and, if swung too heartily, smack into the gingham couch.

She clipped images of rooms she loved and glued them into a Moleskine sketchbook. Bright, airy spaces with whitewashed walls and exposed beams and ceramic bowls filled with clementines. An Eva Zeisel tea service on a teak dining table or a Chemex coffee carafe next to Heath Ceramic mugs suggested the homeowners who lived just off camera, but the rooms she clipped were devoid of people. People were messy.

She always kept an eye out for her sofa. She'd seen many that she liked—B&B Italia, Blue Dot, vintage Arne Jacobsen Series 3300—but nothing quite like The One. She'd spotted it, years before, in a coffee table book on Scandinavian design and had she known she'd have such difficulty finding it again, she would have shelled out the outrageous cover price for the hardback. She had all but given up and then she saw it. IT. On a Tuesday night. Glowing bright white in a window as she drove home from book club half in the bag because pico di gallo did nothing to stave off the effects of tequila.

Unlike the boxy gingham at home, this sofa was long and lean, a marathon runner. A clean, rectilinear box perfectly sliced in half, clad in nubby cotton fabric and held aloft by elegant, tapered teak legs. Four tufted cushions lined the backrest. She guessed it wouldn't even fit in the rowhouse and with a price tag of \$9,500, it never would.

All she wanted was to crawl inside the store, lie down on that firm, clean couch, and pretend it was hers. Just for five minutes. Maybe take a nap.

The cinderblock dug into her palms. She could lob the thing from her chest as though shooting a basket, but she knew she wasn't strong enough. The most upper body exercise she'd had lately was pumping the air out of a pinot noir bottle with the VacuVin Wine Saver. Besides, the trajectory needed to be less arc and more direct force in order to break the window. Underhand would be best, like the way she bowled as a kid. Two hands down between her legs, knees bents, a few practice swings of the arm, aim and fire.

Crickets chirped inside her diaper bag, stopped, then chirped again. Jim wondering where she was. The cinderblock weighed more than the Dumpling. About 30 pounds she wagered. 97th percentile, this one. She laughed. On second thought, maybe a

witness would be beneficial to her defense. “There she was, teetered against the window, laughing and talking to herself, a concrete slab in her hands. Clearly insane.”

What would the police think when they arrived to find her prostrate in the display window of a furniture store? What would she say? “I’m sorry officer. Modernism made me do it.”

Oh shit, what if the glass crumbled into tiny bits like a windshield and got all over the sofa? She would have to clean up the mess first and that defeated the whole enterprise. If she wanted to ferret Cheerio-sized objects out of furniture she could do that at home and save herself the B&E charge. Or worse, what if it wasn't safety glass and it shattered? She'd need to hoist herself over the stalagmites careful not to gut herself. Goddamn logistics. Everything logistics.

Isabelle pulled back from the window. Her nose and forehead had left a greasy smear on the pristine glass. Now she'd ruined it. Her perfect view marred by sebum. The crickets were having a picnic in her bag, chirp, chirp, chirping away. She needed to get rid of that smear. That goddamn smear. The more she looked at it, though, the more it looked like a bullseye. She stepped back a few paces and got in position. She held onto both sides of the cinderblock and swung her arms through her knees. Just for laughs, she thought, just pretend. Just to see what it would feel like. She would come to her senses, put the cinderblock down, get in her car, apologize to her husband, tiptoe into the dark nursery and put a hand on the Dumpling's chest to feel it rise and fall. But at that split second when the cinderblock had upward momentum, at the precise moment when she should have stopped, she let it fly.