

A Gift to a Princess by Janet Arnold-Grych

I was riding shotgun, staring blankly at the grey winter sidewalks, darkening windows, leafless trees. We stopped for a red light—and that’s when I saw it, left close to the road as an offering to a good home. It was a princess dresser, bright white and scalloped, just like the one I’d had as a pigtailed girl. I don’t know if “princess dresser” is its official name, but that’s what I’d always called it because I thought it was beautifully fancy. And here was the sister to mine, its drawers piled high on its top like some tipsy Dr. Seuss hat. Just like that, I was back in my candy pink childhood bedroom with the entire set—dressers, nightstand, even a canopy bed with diaphanous pink and purple topper. My smile led me to Dad.

I was maybe 9 or 10, back when 9 or 10 still meant being entranced by asking questions to a Magic 8-ball or creating adventures with Barbie dolls. I remember that warm afternoon and Dad suggesting I go check out my room. I threw open the door and there it was: a room transformed. My sturdy brown dresser and headboard had been removed and in their place, far better than any tooth fairy exchange, was a royal set. The tiny nicks and scratches on the pieces whispered that they weren’t new but I didn’t care. I was suspended for a moment, as though I had entered someone else’s room, and then ran to each drawer, gleefully opening one and then another.

I had never considered asking my parents for *furniture*. Even as a young child, I knew money was tight, constricted by four kids and one income. My parents would sequester in the kitchen on Sundays to go over the bills and we kids weren’t to disturb them. We hung out in the living room, keeping the volume of our voices and the TV low, in line with the serious vibe that pervaded the house. My dad held a manufacturing job at the same company for decades. He was terrifically smart but held neither a college degree nor the bravado others used as proxy to move up.

I knew he had some good friends at the plant (the kind you visit over the holidays and sit in their not-really-finished basement with their also slightly bored children and watch their small TV set). But I never really knew, never really asked, how fulfilled he felt in that job. Our conversations, even into adulthood, rarely broke the surface of mundane waters, remaining tethered to the day-to-day or venturing out only to the next week’s activities. The constant needs of a growing family, expectations from in-laws who perhaps lived a little too close, and his own father’s oscillating health made giving time to interior exploration not just a luxury but wholly inconceivable.

And so, even if my 10-year old brain couldn’t wrap itself around everything that bedroom set held, I still knew it was something special. My dad never told me, and I never asked, but I imagined him seeing a notice for a used princess set on the bulletin board of the shop floor and somehow knowing, while an extravagance, it

was the perfect set for a girl who wore tutus and listened to Disney recordings for hours alone in her room.

Childhood is, in some respects, the easy part. The paths through adolescence and early adulthood are filled with potholes. During acts two and three, my dad and I didn't always get along, preferring respective corners—he, not understanding my complexities; me, not understanding his. But what he lacked in genuine curiosity, my dad made up for in presence. He was at every one of my dance recitals and high school theater productions, typically yelling my name in a voice that brought a mix of pride and mortification.

I remember the time my high school friend got too drunk to drive us home and I had to call Dad for a ride. Not a word was exchanged, during that ride or after, but he was there and I knew he would be again if I needed him (though I was in no hurry to sit through that icy silence again). When I prepared to go away to college, as a dance major no less--a choice that clearly befuddled if not mortified him--he offered neither questions nor counter strategy. But nearly every conversation, from my college days on through my adult years, ended with him saying, "If there's anything I can do, just let me know." And he meant it. Always.

Those white, slightly worn pieces of furniture remained at home through my college years. I outgrew them and retained a fondness for them. There was ease in simply knowing they were there, just like him. My dad's been gone a few years now. There are days, even weeks, when I don't think of him. And then there are times a door opens to a memory, like seeing a dresser on the side of the road, and I am pierced by feelings of tenderness and gratitude for the ways in which he showed up and supported his children—even when you fear your daughter is going to end up a dancer (which, my the way, I didn't).

All of that came back to me in the few moments of seeing that dresser—yes, the feelings of my glamorous 10-year old self in my glamorous princess room—but more so, the care that had put it there. I don't know the backstory of the dresser now waiting to be claimed, but I'd like to imagine it had a journey similar to mine—given to a twirling child who still finds it filled with love.