

Family Portrait

It is done.....the precious portrait [has been] placed
in the hands of the gentlemen for safe keeping.

- Dolley Madison

We met by chance in 1987 and, like a butterfly going through its stages of egg, caterpillar, and pupa, our relationship slowly evolved, and we fell in love. We were getting married in 1989 by choice, despite being an unlikely couple. Bill was the highly introverted, lifelong bachelor in his mid-30s from the East Coast. I was also in my mid-30s, a divorcée recovering from an unhappy marriage, dead set against ever remarrying. I had moved East in 1985 from the Midwest with my two year old daughter, Mia, and four year old son, Alex. Despite our different backgrounds and my negative mindset, my relationship with Bill had somehow prevailed, and we gradually became a couple, then a family of four.

So here we were in 1989, making plans to get married, and one of the challenges we faced was combining two established households. The goal was to do this efficiently, dispassionately, and equitably. Bill lived alone in a small, 1970s single-family split-level home he had bought in 1984 in Gambrills, Maryland. Since 1987 Alex, Mia and I had lived in a modern townhouse in Columbia, Maryland, twenty miles away. Fortunately, Bill had bought his home strictly as an investment and was eager to unload it, and he planned to sell it after the wedding. In the meantime, we would live in my townhouse.

Although he had never been married, Bill inherited many family antiques when — unsolicited — he had become the primary repository for furniture from his paternal family, the Marshalls, and his maternal family, the DeLaMaters. He is a direct descendant of Chief Justice John Marshall, and one byproduct of that legacy was furniture raining down like acorns from said family tree, and a few pieces were older, from the 1700s. Some of it was heirlooms, some of it run-of-the-

mill castoffs, but all of it had made its way into his life from relatives who had passed away or moved into smaller homes, or possibly just tired of the items. “Let’s give the table to Bill,” they might have said. “He’s by himself; he’s got the room. Besides, he loves genealogy so he’ll love all this old stuff; it’s packed with history.” #

In deciding what to do with all these heirlooms, we devised three designations for the items in his now crowded bachelor home: storage, trash (or charity), or my townhouse. If I’d had my way, none of it would have made the cut; clutter made me feel claustrophobic, I had little interest in heirlooms, and my townhouse was finally just the way I wanted. Consequently, I was uninterested in the majority of these pieces, and had been vocal about my feelings once we were in the midst of wedding plans, despite the illustrious provenance and supposed value of these items. Adding to my negative attitude was the fact that many were in poor condition, nicked, scuffed, scratched and warped; time had taken its toll.

Many of the odds and ends he’d accumulated as a bachelor were easily relegated to the trash heap (or Goodwill) with no objections on his part: cracked or rusted kitchen utensils and appliances, an ancient bed, dresser, couch and chair; college memorabilia, beer mugs, faded flannel shirts. When it came to family heirlooms, however — a number of them priceless antiques — decisions were more difficult.

Pen and paper in hand, we walked through his home several months before the wedding to decide the fate of this trove of family belongings. We needed to figure out what — if anything — we were going to somehow cram into my small townhouse.

“This is an Empire-style couch from my Great Aunt Jo’s family estate in Old Town Alexandria,” he commented, lovingly stroking the surface of a massive car-sized couch. He explained that this particular great aunt had kept it in her “drawing room,” where guests had traditionally been entertained. I frankly didn’t care if it had come straight from Windsor Castle.

As Bill and I had initially made our way to this behemoth of a couch through the obstacle course of eclectic furniture in his modest home, I felt like I was walking through the cluttered and dusty basement of a furniture dealer, not the main floor of a home. *How did all of this “stuff” escape my attention while we were dating? I should have come over more often and would then have anticipated this problem, and dealt with it earlier.*

“My dad used to sleep on this couch when he visited Aunt Jo on leave from the Army during World War II,” he continued, still talking about the couch, wistfully calling forth memories of times his dad and great aunt had spent together, sitting (and sleeping) on a couch that could easily accommodate four adults. “And the pillows are original, stuffed with horse hair,” he proudly pointed out to me, thinking he could coax me with historical trivia. “Yes,” I replied, briefly sitting on it, not even trying to conjure up empathy for this block of wood, “I’m sure there are many happy memories wrapped up in it, but it’s all beat up, and I’m not a fan of the moss-green

cushions which, by the way, are uncomfortable and scratchy. Besides, where would we even put it,” I added, having ripped off any remaining veneer of nostalgia. *If I had my way*, I thought, *we would pile it all outside into a huge bonfire and watch it burn down to ashes, thereby solving the space problem*, but I withheld this fantasy from him.

He sighed in response, seeming to read my mind, knowing how much I disliked all the old furniture, yet probably still feeling himself pulled by the memories it evoked. He also felt a deep sense of responsibility for the family antiques and heirlooms that had been placed in his hands for safekeeping; he had been entrusted with taking care of everything so future generations could inherit it, and he took this responsibility seriously. It went without saying, that selling it would never be an option. Nonetheless, he was also conflicted; the practical reality of where everything would fit — coupled with my antipathy towards it — butted up against his sense of obligation.

Years later, when we could afford it, we would pull the couch out of storage have it reupholstered, refinished and brought back to its original glory days. But for the time being it was a massive, unattractive, and uncomfortable eyesore, and was going to the storage facility.

Other pieces in his home came from that same Great Aunt Jo’s estate. One was an enormous, gilded mirror — four feet tall by two and a half feet wide - also from the late 1800s with two small holes on either side of its frame where sconces had once held candles. There were also two large maroon velvet fireside stools from the late 1800s, an elegant Victorian chaise longue upholstered in a heavy, gaudy silver and gold paisley pattern; and a small Windsor Chair.

In the case of the couch, the mirror, and the chaise longue— and many other antiques — the default category became the storage facility. This option was becoming increasingly attractive with each passing day as we waded through the seemingly endless supply of orphan furniture Bill had given a home to.

The priceless antiques included a round tilt top Chippendale tea table from the late 1700s, warped from age, and a small Hepplewhite Pembroke drop-leaf table from the early 1800s, with intricate contrasting veneers and inlays. There was also a Revolutionary War-era Chippendale mahogany drop-leaf card table that George Washington himself had purportedly played whist on, with four hand carved rounded indentations to hold drinks, and four squared, shallow troughs to hold cards. This piece also featured the classic Chippendale ball-and-claw feet.

Another favorite of Bill's was a massive cabinet over six feet tall and five feet wide constructed from "old" wood in the 1940s. The cabinet doors contained more than 100 small diamond-shaped, handblown, wavy "French" glass panes held in place with thin strips of wood.

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Complicating matters in our disposition of Bill's things was the fact that I had also become a repository of sorts for orphaned furniture. There was the round pool table neighbors in Maryland had foisted on me and felt sure I would want. "But you have two children; surely you can use

this when they're teenagers [in ten years] and have parties. This will be perfect!" I did not want it, but was unable to formulate an adequate excuse.

My parents had also taken advantage of my move (and a fairly empty moving van) from Missouri to Maryland in 1985 to have a number of items removed from their spacious attic and loaded onto the truck after a short detour to their nearby home: my maternal grandmother's mahogany sewing table, my paternal grandfather's cherry wood Capehart record player cabinet (the size of a large dresser); an upright piano I played on as a child, a breakfront china cabinet, and a bright green faux leather easy chair my father disliked because it was low to the ground. It was difficult to get out of, so he was anxious to get rid of it.

Consequently, my townhouse was already fairly full, although not with valuable antiques or priceless heirlooms. I had made the decision when I moved from Missouri to Maryland that my home would be family-oriented, specifically, child-oriented. I wasn't interested in recreating the homes of elderly great aunts I'd visited as a child, ancient, mausoleum-like dwellings where plush, dark velvet was the material of choice, where shades were drawn against the light to avoid the fading of fabric, where delicate handblown glass lamps tinkled with priceless crystals, where the overpowering smell of ancient perfume permeated every inch of the home as though a bug bomb had been released, and where most everything was breakable and not to be touched, much less sat on. These homes were like something out of *The Glass Menagerie* and not what I envisioned for my children and myself as we started out in Maryland .

I wanted Alex and Mia to have a home where they felt comfortable, and this meant a livable, touchable home. If it was a choice between a Chippendale table and a place for the wooden Brio train set, the train set would win. If it was a question of having a playroom dedicated to their coloring, game-playing, and projects, versus a formal living room, the answer was clear: a playroom. I referred to my dining room table (another item my parents bequeathed to me when I moved) as a “celebration table,” a place to display seasonal decorations, greeting cards, but mainly my children’s art projects. It was rarely used for meals.

The dining room in which I had grown up in Kirkwood, Missouri was the antithesis of this, more like a life-sized diorama than a functional room, with its long, formal mahogany table perpetually shrouded with a heavy lace tablecloth; its crystal chandeliers, its elaborate glass centerpiece, its formal sterling silver tea service, wine goblets and candlesticks, its sterling silver flatware, its silk-upholstered chairs, and its French doors. It was a room to look at, to pass through, to impress people, to eat in two or three times a year, but it was not a place in which to live one’s life. I wasn’t interested in replicating that in my own home.

Nonetheless, with my new life about to begin, decisions still had to be made about the disposition of so many of his heirlooms, valuable heirlooms, when space was limited. I continued to let my objections be known but, regardless, the furniture had to be dealt with. Fortunately, as we completed our walk-through and examined the cabinets, chairs, tables, bookshelves, and couches, Bill agreed that, for the time being, most would have to go into storage. That just left the family portraits he had inherited, three to be exact.

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All three were painted in 1844 by a well known portrait artist from New York, Frederick R. Spencer (1806-1875), whose work still hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Washington D.C.'s National Gallery, and includes a portrait of President Andrew Jackson. The subjects in the portraits Bill inherited are two young women in their early 30s, Evelina Sandford, an ancestor of Bill's, and her close friend, Sarah Ricaud. There is also a third portrait of an older woman, Elizabeth Van Alstyne Sandford, Evelina's grandmother, another relative. The grandmother's portrait is nearly four feet high and over three feet wide. The two younger women's portraits each measure about three feet high and two feet wide.

One of the young women, Evelina, is wearing an off-the-shoulder, low cut plum-colored velvet dress with three-quarter sleeves revealing white silk lining underneath. Her jewelry consists of two bracelets and a simple, long double-stranded chain necklace. Her fingers are unadorned. Her brown hair is worn in a series of tight ringlets and she is seated in an ornately carved wooden chair with plush, maroon brocade upholstery, her hands resting in her lap. Her smile is barely visible, reminiscent of Mona Lisa's.

Sarah is more serious in her portrait, although there is still the slight trace of a smile visible in her lips and eyes. Her dress and appearance are identical to her friend's — she could pass for her sister — but her dress is a deep blue velvet. She also wears a long necklace and is holding an open locket, hanging from the chain. Her hair is in similar — but longer — ringlets as her friend's.

The portrait of Evelina's grandmother, Elizabeth, reveals a stern Dutch woman in her 80s. A translucent whitish-gray lace bonnet covers her head and most of her hair, except for a brunette fringe around her face. She is wearing a conservative, voluminous black dress, and a white lace scarf that goes up to her chin, matching the bonnet. Her only jewelry is a thin gold wedding band.

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On that walk-through day, Bill and I stood silently side-by-side, staring at the three life-sized portraits hanging on the wall across from us. They looked like they were facing off with us, they were so formidable, like giants who had come to live with him and had taken over the house. Bill broke the silence. "I know you don't want to hear this, Linda, but we can't put these portraits in storage with everything else," he reasoned. "They're too fragile to be put in a storage shed; the fluctuations in temperature alone would destroy the paint. I just can't risk it. The furniture's one thing; these are not in the same category."

I knew he was right, but had no desire to hang these giant paintings in my home. Nor did I have any idea where we would put them. Besides, I had already unintentionally brainwashed my daughter against them; once Mia saw the portraits in Bill's home, she said was uncomfortable with three sets of eyes following her wherever she went, eyes that belonged to people twice her four-year-old size; she referred to them as the "staring ladies." Ultimately, when I realized Bill was right about not storing them, we solved that problem — and the problem of space — by

hanging the paintings up high in a room with cathedral ceilings. Even the bottom of the frames was out of reach, with the paintings at least seven feet off the floor.

Initially, though, I had had an alternative proposal. “Maybe we don’t need to hang all three,” I wondered out loud. “Maybe we could put two in storage or break them up, give other relatives each a single painting?” Especially when it came to the two young women; it was like having mirror images of the same painting: the same hair, the same dress (except for the color); they were even seated at the same angle, in the same position, with one hand resting on the chair and the other in their lap. It was as though the painter had painted one and then, while the first painting was still wet, had pressed another canvas on top of it, producing a mirror image when he separated the two. Why would I want two large, nearly-identical paintings? My townhouse was already starting to feel like a museum.

Like unwanted relatives who have overstayed their welcome, they needed to be shown the door. What did I owe them? Nothing. But then Bill shared a story with me that his mother (who had died of cancer just a month before we met in 1987) had told him years before, passed on to her by Bill’s uncle, the unofficial family historian. She had confided in him that neither Sarah nor Evelina — the young women in the portraits — had ever married, and that they had been inseparable friends their whole lives. His mother had also told him that their friendship was so strong that they had made a pledge to each other to have their portraits always hang side by side, even after their deaths. In Bill’s eyes, separating them was unthinkable, and would break a promise he’d made to his mother and uncle, and that others had made before him. I had been unfamiliar

with this story and, although I hated admitting it, it was compelling. I had to agree with him; the friends had to be kept together.

I looked at them in a new light now, wondering if Evelina's stern grandmother had been a factor in the young women's friendship. I realized for the first time the probable significance of having been painted in nearly identical dresses, remembering times when a close friend and I had enjoyed dressing up like twins, and when my sister and I had dressed identically. Sarah and Evelina had been like sisters.

I also wondered if their relationship had faced stumbling blocks along the way, like Bill's and mine had. How had Sarah's family factored into the situation? Were there portraits of them floating around somewhere? My perspective was gradually shifting, and these two women were no longer anonymous portraits depicting privileged 19th century aristocracy. They were no longer objects #49 and #50 in lot #17 of an estate; they were flesh and blood people with a mysterious and poignant back story.

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After months of give and take, to and fro, concerning the disposition of Bill's heirlooms, almost everything went into storage, with the exception of the portraits. Following our wedding and eventual move to a bigger home, we pulled the antiques out of storage in phases, and had them spruced up with a new coat of varnish, new upholstery and repairs. We had to have a few rebuilt, like the massive cabinet with the tiny panes of glass. The change was dramatic. Pieces I'd want-

ed to throw out at first glance had now become stunning showpieces, worthy of being displayed in the finest of homes. I realized — years after first seeing them — that I had been too quick to judge them by their initial appearance. With the love and care and expertise of furniture restorers, they had been returned to their glory days.

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Creating a new family of four with Bill back in 1989 entailed combining the physical belongings of two adults and two children. Together we had clothes, furniture, appliances, toys, cleaning supplies, cosmetics, books, art work, etc. — the stuff of life — and it was all being shape-shifted into a newly-configured space.

One example of this cornucopia of items being melded into a single home was my children's artwork. When Alex and Mia started school, I began to have their artwork framed, so there were dozens of their drawings and paintings on the walls throughout my home. As a result, after Bill and I got married and combined our possessions, that artwork was now in the same room and in sharp contrast to the stately portraits of Evelina, Sarah and Elizabeth that Bill had inherited; it was a very eclectic home.

Also added to the mix, though, was the spirit of ancestors stretching back a century and more, distant relatives who had sipped tea and eaten meals at these same tables, sat in these same chairs and couches, played cards on this same game table, placed books in this same glass-paneled cabinet, rested on this same chaise longue, looked at themselves in this same mirror, lived their lives amidst the same furniture, even though our lives were separated by so many years.

Beyond that, though, our marriage signaled the start of something that extended beyond the influence of these physical objects, and beyond the spirit of those long ago people who had used them before they made their way into our lives. It signaled the beginning of our personal journey together as a family, of creating new memories, new bonds, a new story. And that process transcended all the physical “stuff” we each brought with us to our shared lives. It was the feelings, the loyalties, the activities we shared that made us a family.

From my current perspective twenty years after our wedding, I think the turning point that signaled this awareness for me occurred that day in 1989 when Bill and I walked around his home with our checklist, mechanically deciding what would stay, what would be thrown out, and what would go to a holding zone for the near term. I had initially approached this task like the captain of a sinking ship, up to my waist in excess weight that threatened to capsize my little boat; I was determined to throw out anything and everything, or at least relegating it to the oblivion of the storage shed. But when I saw the portraits of the two young women and heard the story behind their friendship, their promise to stay together beyond the grave, a promise that was still being honored more than a century and a half after their portraits were painted, something inside me shifted. It reminded me of a saying I had once read years before: “family by chance; friends by choice.” Their friendship had trumped bloodlines and protocol; they had chosen each other.

The pledge they made nearly two centuries ago broke down my wall. Tables and chairs and couches and cabinets might be somehow imbued with the essence of the people who came before

us, most of them related by blood. And these things might possess some intangible, invisible reality, but these two paintings symbolized something much more important. They symbolized the unbreakable bond that had been created between two people *not* connected by blood, a bond that also transcended wood and nails and glue and glass and paint and upholstery. I realized that that same impenetrable bond with my husband was what I wanted in our new life together, and what I would work toward, despite my initial intransigence about Bill's inheritance.

Like the two friends, who went against convention by remaining single and making their friendship their lifelong focus, we were an unlikely pair embarking on a new life, brought together under less than ideal circumstances, but now we were family, just like Evelina and Sarah, and, all these years later, nothing has broken us apart. And so now, when I pass by the two portraits, I am reminded of the difference between relationships of chance and those of choice. I am grateful that, like the friendship of Sarah and Evelina, my husband and I chose our own story, our own path, one that will also endure as we continue to create our own family portrait.