

DECORATING DNA

By Mameve Medwed

My grandmother believed that more was more. In addition to the rings on her fingers and bells on her toes, she sported jeweled pins in her hair, cherries on her hat, earrings, necklaces, glittering buckles, bits of lace and embroidery, scarves, and bracelets both over and under her gloves. She carried the art of self-adornment to such extremes, no one dared complain when she cut up an antique Bokara rug; she needed a belt for a velvet dress, a band for a felt cloche, and evening bags for my sister and me, never mind that our early bedtimes made any evening activity dubious.

Though my mother was no slouch in the dress-up department, her gene for ornamentation showed itself most profoundly in our house in Maine, where the victor in the war between the practical and decorative was never in doubt. Our kitchen linoleum was layered with tattered oriental rugs, overlapping like shingles on a roof and so full of bumps and holes that any second you could catch your heels and fall headlong in the direction of the early-model Kelvinator; but not before you first toppled what shielded it: a black-lacquered screen stenciled with rice paddies and Chinese peasants scrubbing clothes on the banks of the Yangtze. It was such a movie star set it wasn't hard to imagine the refrigerator sailing out, like a quick-change ingenue, all dolled up in an Edith Head ensemble and ready for her curtain call.

The rest of the appliances formed a motley crew of spear carriers arranged with no particular logic; if you opened the freezer door, you blocked the stove. The washing machine sashayed halfway across the floor on spin; the matchbook-leveled table served as sole countertop for the toaster, percolator, and electric can opener all in extension cord range of the one outlet; if you wanted to plug something in, everything else had to be unplugged. (Needless to say, we went to the beauty parlor; a guest with a blowdryer could cause a major meltdown.)

Those 7-foot panels of Chinese peasants blocked any illumination from the ceiling fixture. A gooseneck lamp gracing the table was a lamp in name only: making coffee meant no light to cut an onion by. Besides, the bulbs were pink and low wattage, the better to bathe you in a glamorous glow. Her mother’s daughter, my mother insisted that how people looked mattered more than culinary presentation. You could tell what was important by the amount of space allotted to it. Kitchen functions took up less than a quarter of the kitchen--an area suitable for only one very thin person who kept her elbows close to her ribs. All the other walls boasted glass-fronted mahogany bookcases left over from my father’s law office; stuffed on their shelves were assorted dictionaries, old Antiques magazines, Bangor street registers going back to the 19th century, children’s books kept long after the children had grown, and a set of Martindale-Hubbell legal directories, decades out of date.

On the kitchen table’s Lazy Susan towered a collection of wind-up toys. You could set into immediate action somersaulting frogs, jumping hamburgers, chattering teeth, a sushi chef hacking a tuna, or a gorilla banging a drum. Though you might have to search long and hard for a cracker, you always had a plaything close at hand. And the makings

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of a cocktail. Decanters slung with little silver necklaces labeled vodka were filled from the mother-lode of Don Popov, its half-gallons hidden behind brand name bottles of never-opened hostess gifts. Years after my sister and I had married and left home, a doll’s house mysteriously appeared next to the “bar.” Eccentrically overfurnished, this architectural treasure mirrored its surroundings in miniature.

In my mother’s house, form triumphed over function everywhere. Dented brass doorknobs fell off in your hands. Closets were boarded over for exhibition purposes. Hardly a curlicue of ornate wallpaper showed among the picture frames. The bathroom contained a bureau whose drawer opened only a sliver before it hit the tub. And no convenience of shelves or medicine cabinet threatened to bisect the bucolic mural I painted the day of my engagement party. I used tubes of artist’s oils which, in that steamy, unvented room, took months to dry. In fact, a tree here, a flower there departed like party favors on the backs of guests unfortunate enough to need to powder a nose. Throughout, the chairs were antique and uncomfortable; the tables had rickety legs and delicate veneers. The horsehair mattresses, which built character we told each other, were original to beds requiring a footstool to climb into. The sofas, designated as loveseats or settees, were too short for anyone but a toddler to snatch a nap. This is so impractical, we’d complain. This is so beautiful, my mother would gloat.

Moving to Cambridge felt like a liberation. Here I live in blue jeans, a more universal uniform in this city than in the Maine of my youth. (Though in the interest of full disclosure I must confess to an extensive collection of very large earrings). Gone was the matrilineal dictum that shoes and pocketbook have to match. No longer was I limited to re-runs at the Opera and Bijoux, restaurants open for “suppah” at 3:30 p.m., the

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bookstore more than half-filled with every variety of gift in the shape of a lobster claw.

What’s more, I could dry my hair, step out of the shower to a waiting towel rack, turn on

a faucet that mixed hot and cold equally. My husband and I bought a remodeled

Victorian house with high ceilings and big windows and state-of-the-art wiring. I

envisioned white walls, an expanse of maple floors, bare counters and appliances

arranged sensibly

Now, 25 years later, I survey my rooms and see that, indeed, the appliances are arranged sensibly. The beds are comfortable; the sofa can accommodate two 6-foot-1 horizontal sons. But if you can escape your small town roots, the gene for decor seems to be locked too deep in the double helix of its DNA. My kitchen counters support a collection of fake food(no calories, doesn’t rot, needs just a little dusting.) There are coasters of Swiss and American cheeses, baloney and liverwurst all of a rubber so realistic a guest once put a pimento-studded slice on his turkey at a post Thanksgiving buffet. A dozen ceramic pears are always on the verge of ripening. Beside them sit a china plate of sunny sides up, the yolks at the stage of perfect permanent runniness, a stack of porcelain pancakes shiny with maple syrup and a half-melted slab of butter, and wooden and papier mache breads. A collection of Japanese window-display food that one of my sons was assigned to bring back from a restaurant-supply district in Tokyo has yielded a treasure trove of faux: a giant fried egg, fat Japanese toast, a whole salted fish, teriyaki glistening in sauce, and a tray of sushi, their pinks and yellows fading gently under a slant of sun. The high shelf that rings the kitchen, built for roasting pans and soup pots, supports a folk collection of wooden animals. Plates and tiles line the walls; you have to unhook a still life pastel of mangos and cantaloupes to get to the circuit breaker

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box. A small toaster pulls out from under a counter. In a closet at the back of the house are stashed corn popper, blender, pasta maker, Cuisinart. We need a microwave, my husband says. And move my faux food! I cry. We have no microwave.

Throughout the house, the walls are white, though you’d hardly notice since they’re covered with paintings and prints. A stack of wooden books form a coffee table whose top slides off with the slightest push of your knee. A metal box in the shape of more books holds an azalea that needs watering. Rugs of all sizes and countries of origin cover the floors; though they’re not layered yet, their fringes are starting to intertwine lasciviously. An old stone lion guards the bathtub; a Plaster-of-Paris ice cream cone the size of a small child leans against the bedroom door. And since I found the tools to hang things at an angle, the walls of my attic study are filling up with cartoons, letters, photographs.

I told you so, I can hear my mother exult. Ahh, my grandmother will sigh. How did this happen, I wonder? How did I recreate something nearly identical to where I grew up when I intended just the opposite? Yet in every direction, I see an object to delight my eye or make me laugh. When I move three glass bagels to the side to tear the lettuce, when I clear away a wooden pumpkin and a bowl of soba noodles in their plastic soup to make room for the lasagna pan, I am pleased. No surprise, I tell myself. This is home.

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