

## Green Velvet

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“The things people throw out,” my father exclaimed.

It was a green velvet sofa. We stood at the corner of our street, a spot where neighbours occasionally put out broken chairs or soiled mattresses. We contemplated it as if it belonged to a foreign species. But who were we kidding. We were the foreigners, whereas that sofa wouldn't have been out of place  
5 in the new café down the street which we walked by every day and never went into. Neither of my parents saw the point.

The sofa must have appeared on the curb in the last hours, being clear of any autumn leaves, which otherwise littered the street. We were on our way to the grocery store to bring back soda bottles for deposit, each of us carrying a case of empties. [...] My younger brother Reza, shouting with joy at the irreverence of furniture out on the street, threw himself onto it. The sofa took him in softly, without a  
10 squeak.

It seemed clean enough, with no visible stains, and just the faintest tarnish of elbow wear on the armrests. My father had already walked on, shaking his head at what I knew was Western profligacy, at the buying and the throwing out just to buy more. But Reza's shouts of joy made him look back. He  
15 considered the sofa the way a farmer considers a neighbour's cow. Finally, he took some hesitant steps back and sat on one end of it himself, with greater caution than my brother, and we cheered. It was a grand morning.

My father never was a risk taker. In fact, over his lifetime he took a big risk exactly twice. The first was leaving his country with my mother, both in their late 20s, barely out of university, with a newborn in tow and no clear prospect but that of fleeing the certainty of persecution. Reza was born later, a  
20 native citizen. The passports of that whole generation of Iranian émigrés said “mathematician,” or else “dentist.” My father was the first. He had left behind his mother, his mother tongue, and a land of sour cherries that grow nowhere else in the world.

The second risk my father ever took was to bring up that green velvet sofa into our home. Our small  
25 third-storey rental, which tried its best to dissuade him. The three of us barely wrestled it up the metal staircase. Its weight, my father assured us to keep us motivated, was testament to the quality of the craftsmanship. He needn't have: I thought taking in that sofa was the greatest thing my father had ever done. Up to that point I'd never suspected him capable of such an impulse. Even today, it makes it easier to imagine him, almost two decades younger than he was then, picking up and leaving his  
30 only country with a young wife and child.

As we were lugging it up, I was already thinking how a green velvet sofa such as this would change our lives. The strength of its gravitational pull, I thought, was so great that we would be forced to adapt to it. The music we would listen to as we sat on it would be different from the music we listened to now, which was all plucky<sup>1</sup> Persian strings. The books I would read on it would necessarily be different, too.  
35 They would be books written by those authors the Grade 10 girls discussed while puffing on cigarettes outside school premises, whom I'd heard nothing of, but longed to know. I would invite friends home to see the sofa, and sit on it. I would pretend it was a natural reflection of our family's *joie de vivre*, rather than a dumpster find offered to us by chance. I thought of how I should best dress to match it. I

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<sup>1</sup> (here) determined

40 might need entirely new clothes. The sofa offered the promise of Western glamour, of a whole other existence.

My mother shouted at us from the top of the stairs. She was right, of course. There was no space for it in our small living room. To soothe her, my father called the sofa a “chesterfield,” which did sound more dignified, British almost. It didn’t work. “Who knows who’s lied down on that thing,” my mother said from the top. “Or worse,” she added, and looked meaningfully at my father.

45 The third-storey apartment also balked at the green velvet, like a body rejecting an organ not of its making. The angles of the front door proved unworkable. The thing was lodged halfway in, flipped on its back, its innards showing. The ugly dark springs, oily and coated in black dust, had taken us aback. While it had sat elegantly on the sunny curb, who would have suspected the stained wooden skeleton and intricate coiling within.

50 My brother and I were barricaded inside the apartment, and my father was blocked outside, standing helplessly at the top of the stairs, the toppled sofa wedged in between us. My father asked for a tape measure, a piece of paper and a pencil. Then, sitting on the steps, the sofa’s howling springs overhanging his head, bent over in a pose I’d often seen him in, he drew the door, the stairs, calculated the angles and all the possible rotations. Finally, after some minutes, defeated, he stood up  
55 and proclaimed, “It won’t go in.”

My mother drew air through her teeth, in a way we were all familiar with. Her eagerness to prove my father wrong won over her disapproval of the alien object on which strangers had laid down or worse. She called our downstairs neighbour. A young man who worked in a bicycle store, whom she fed Iranian pastries because she thought he was too thin. He came out of his apartment looking sleepy  
60 and stood on the stairs considering the sofa.

“It’s amazing,” he said.

My father took in the compliment gratefully, but showed him the piece of paper and its scribblings. He pointed out the angles, the impossible rotations. Our neighbour barely glanced at it. Coming closer, he seized one of the four round pegs that served as the sofa’s feet and quickly unscrewed it. Relieved of  
65 its three remaining feet, the sofa narrowly passed through the door. Many years later, over noisy family dinners where my own kids stumbled over their second-generation Farsi with their grandfather, we would refer to this overturned proof as the Sofa Impossibility Theorem. That day, my parents’ faces betrayed each one’s allotted triumph.

My mother had the victory of practice over theory, while my father had his green velvet sofa.

70 Our new find stayed in the hallway while the living room was readied for it, and Reza spent the afternoon slumped across its length, reading comic books by the mound of wet sneakers in the entrance way. It jarred<sup>2</sup> with everything else in the apartment, to my delight. I knew our own furniture had come over in a half container, sailing on a large ship for two months. Small rosewood tables and chairs with arabesque shapes inlaid in nacre, and chests that remained empty, done up in a similar  
75 fashion. Countless antediluvian<sup>3</sup> rugs, which had belonged to a grand uncle who’d grown pomegranates for export. I considered it all embarrassing and out of touch, like something out of *One Thousand and One Nights*<sup>4</sup>. It instantly betrayed our exact origins to anyone who walked in. All of it

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<sup>2</sup> clashed

<sup>3</sup> old-fashioned

<sup>4</sup> *One Thousand and One Nights*: a collection of folk tales from the Middle East

now rattled against the new arrival. My father tried to fend off the contrast by shifting the existing furniture to one side of the room, which made it seem even smaller, and letting the green sofa have the other side.

During the first days, we took turns sitting or lying on it. Reza attempted to have breakfast on it before being called back to the table. The overturning of the Sofa Impossibility Theorem helping, even my mother seemed to come around to it.

It had been ours for less than a week when our mamani came, as she did every Sunday for lunch. My father had extricated his mother from the motherland a decade earlier through much bureaucratic maneuvering. She was a short compact woman of the likes you didn't see around, dressed always in black. It was not clear whether she considered her arrival to the land of *Mini-Wheats*<sup>5</sup> and low waist jeans a blessing or a curse. She criticized our Farsi, and fearing her remarks, we hesitated to speak during her visits. At her insistence, my father sent us to Iranian school on Saturday mornings, while all the other boys played ball or slept in. Also on her account, we were made to read a weekly 10 pages of old Persian poetry and memorize a passage to recite. For these torments, we blamed our mamani. [...]

"Where did you get this?" mamani asked, as if addressing a cat holding a bird between its teeth.

My father tried to put it delicately, he called it a "chesterfield" again. It didn't work this time either. Mamani interrupted him.

"Off the street?" she said with distaste.

"People will throw out anything," he said defensively.

Our mamani said only one more thing before walking out of the living room that day.

"It could have termites."

The judgment of parents is impossible to avoid. And that of parents from the old country, I have learned, is inescapable. Dreams of becoming a poet or a journalist, progressively shift towards mathematics, or dentistry. Love at first sight is questioned and grows elsewhere, as love on second thought. Resistance is futile.

There was no further talk of the sofa as we ate our eggplant and tomato stew. Mamani had said her bit. But the next day, I caught my father bent down on all fours, peering underneath the green sofa as if looking for lost change.

Sensing my presence, he rose up, looking flustered.

"Do you see anything?" I asked.

He knew there was no use pretending.

"No, although I'm not sure what I'm looking for. They could be inside the wood. The only way to know would be to saw through it, and see if they've burrowed in."

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<sup>5</sup> breakfast cereal

I had never heard of termites in Canada. It seemed like one of those diseases of the past that must once have been very bad, but that they now had vaccines for. My father dealt with it the only way he knew how. He engaged in a fit of reading.

115 Over family meals, he would now glumly mention, “Can you imagine that the total weight of termites  
on earth is five times the combined weight of all humans? And that termite mounds can grow to be 30  
feet high? The termites don’t even live inside them. The mounds are just ventilation systems for their  
underground tunnels, like having skyscrapers for lungs. And they can turn a house to rubble in two  
weeks. Once they’re in, you can’t fight them. All you can do is give up the lease and move out. They  
eat money also. I read a story of a bank in Tehran that lost 100 billion rial in banknotes to termites in  
120 its vaults.”

I thought of how, having little money, and no spare banknotes lying around to be eaten, we were in  
the clear. But I said nothing. As a family, we tried hard to look down on money. Though we loved to  
talk about it. A favourite dinner game was to discuss what we would do if we ever won the lottery.  
125 Reza had the most fanciful dreams, listing off cars, jet planes, submarines. While my father always  
insisted he would not change a thing. He would keep his job as an overqualified administrator, his  
colleagues wouldn’t suspect anything. But soon he would begin contradicting himself, and concede<sup>6</sup>  
certain large purchases. A grand piano, for starters. And a swimming pool. Much thought was given to  
the type of swimming pool, its optimal shape. To my father, a swimming pool of one’s own was the  
most Western thing imaginable. Of course, we never did play the lottery, my father being  
130 professionally informed of the odds. But it didn’t stop us from talking.

I caught him once more in the living room, arms crossed, staring at the sofa.

We both stood in silence, until he said, “Why else would anyone throw out a perfectly good couch?”

That Sunday it rained. I had spent the day at a friend’s, and I came back home after dusk. As I got  
closer to our corner, I saw two familiar figures leaning into the dumpster, a few feet away from where  
135 we’d first seen the velvet green sofa.

I could now see one half of it sticking out of the dumpster, its insides showing. That stained wooden  
skeleton. My father stood on a chair, bent over our toppled sofa, and I heard him panting with effort.  
Next to him, our mamani stood on a chair of her own. She held up an umbrella over them both as the  
rain came down, her arm stretched straight up to cover her only son. Both of them had their backs to  
140 me. My father was furiously sawing at the sofa.

Immigrants own no tools. I imagine he must have borrowed the wood saw from the downstairs  
neighbour, though I never asked. Today, I also imagine how his suspicion grew, how that one  
sentence from our mamani took root within him over an entire week, how a single look from her  
had been enough to shift the balance. I imagine his sudden change of heart. How he’d had to  
145 unscrew the sofa’s feet once again to push the thing out, this time by himself. To defend his family,  
to keep his home from being turned to rubble in two weeks. And how, after it was all done, he’d  
had to get to the bottom of it. To know for certain whether there’d been termites after all. But that  
day, I hurried past, up our steps and into our home, the dream of a new glamorous existence  
irreversibly deferred.

(2019)

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<sup>6</sup> (here) allow himself