

Style Wise
Expressing Your Unique Self

Dividing the Spoils

Parsing the family loot among the emotionally bereaved, or relieved, can generate chasms of bitterness.

by Skye Moody

Novelist, essayist, photographer and world traveler

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Is that thunder I hear, or me pounding my head against a doorframe?

Crack. Crack. Crack. Until my niece pulls me away, and by then I’ve bequeathed myself a football player’s concussion.

I don’t remember driving home. Later that evening, my younger sister phones to apologize for what she said, cruel words that triggered the head-banging, sparking such emotional trauma I need to injure myself physically in order to divert the source, and nature, of the pain itself.

I cannot speak, let alone think. I want to take the phone, tell her I forgive her, that I love her, and understand we’re all grieving, none of us are thinking clearly. But the concussion has rendered me as vocal and animated as a piece of the furniture.

Did I mention furniture?

Of course, that’s why I have a concussion. Our mother has recently passed away, and the three daughters, per Mother’s explicit directive, have swooped down on the sprawling ancestral home to arrive before the stepdaughters, lest non-blood relations grab the haul and abscond. As if. Her two sons are welcome to also join in this morbid rite — colloquially dubbed “dividing the spoils” — but wisely choose to absent themselves; there’s plenty to go around, even in the trickle down.

Her possessions seem to sough as we enter the vacated house. Ancestral booty, furniture and important paintings already antiques by the mid-19th century, heaps of sterling silver and ornate *objets* imbue our mother’s personally designed chambers with her brilliant eclectic style, punctuated by occasional fillips of droll humor: In a kitchen window bay, a bright yellow bowl of Italian porcelain shaped and painted to resemble a spray of bananas, two white monkeys seated atop, one peeling a banana while the other looks on in envy. A controversial piece only I will covet.

In her bedroom suite, jewelry boxes overflow with gold, diamonds, sapphires, pearls (she always wore pearls), and throughout this wing of the house, five huge closets are packed to the rafters with couture clothing, many garments still unworn, their designer tags attached.

Not merely a mother of five grown children, stepmother to six more, this stately doyenne was publicly acclaimed for her tireless charitable works and generous philanthropy. She gave her tithe and more, including once a week for decades, stepping off her wingback throne to roll up her St. John cardigan sleeves at the local Catholic seafarers’ charity, risking calloused hands and chipped manicures to serve hot meals and kindly words to homesick sailors from around the world, along with glimpses of her great beauty. I suspect that, like my father, many of the salty lads fell for her; those fabulous legs.

Widowed for a short time — every rich widower in town tries wooing her — she falls madly in love with a prosperous seafood merchant who elevates her financials even higher. More important, the second husband teaches her to relax, to laugh unguardedly, to tip more than one glass of Canadian and 7 of an evening. Unburdened of her scattered chicks, she freely kicks up her shapely ankles, traveling widely and painting the town turquoise (her favorite color).

The sorting and division of the departed lady’s possessions might’ve proved peaceable, reminiscently serene, if she’d owned, say, only a few dresses, a coat or two, a handful of costume jewelry, and a favorite couch. Yet I’ve heard nightmarish accounts of relatives dividing up such minor payloads. Never mind how trivial the spoils, dividing family loot among emotionally bereaved, relieved or simply greedy relations can generate chasms of bitterness, destroy lifelong mutual sibling affection, even result in murder.

While the matriarch is still living, I brag that I have no interest in inheriting family treasures; I care only that

the important art work and ancestral memorabilia remain in the family for the next generation to inherit, and pass down. Read: Squabble over. Yet, once inside the family home that day, the scent of burning incense across her casket still fresh, every object acquires a critical sentimental value. My siblings, too, possess vivid childhood memories attached to these same objects. For us, the monetary value of an inherited object means little; its sentimental stock is what skyrockets in the wake of our mother’s death.

We invent a dozen formulae for divvying up the spoils, an act that must constitute the ugliest aspect of a loved one’s departure and sickens my soul. The death triggers such bittersweet longing, such banal possessiveness that we fail to recognize ourselves, either as individuals or as the loving siblings we have been, until now. Thus, the first ugly words ever spoken to me by my equally grieving and possibly more distraught sister.

Why do we lash out during the division of the spoils?

I believe the dilemma lies in the freshness of a loved one’s passing. We’re still in shock, after all, awash in pain, each grieving in our own style, including swallowing a hefty dollop of anger that she deserted us, in my case, before I’ve made my peace with her. I am sensing that the family circle will rupture in the wake of her desertion. I sense that only she has kept us truly corralled as siblings who share a mother yet perhaps little else — except, of course, the spoils.

The words blurted by my sister’s grief-stricken persona in the wake of our mother’s passing remain the most vivid memory of that awful day, and I have only one question, but it’s for my mother, who cannot answer: Why the heck didn’t you leave behind a list detailing which child was to receive which item? Then again, perhaps the grand dame was getting in her last laugh, bequeathing us a test of our individual integrity. ♦