

## ***Queen of Hearts***

*Anne Richardson*

When it was done, and they were carving things up, there wasn't much that either of them wanted.

Sean would live in a modern flat nearby, something of a consolation prize, and they agreed it would be newly furnished, in a manner befitting a single man. Lucy would stay in the family home, so the kids could transition within the safety of their familiar things.

When she thought about all of the stuff they had accumulated over the years, there was only one thing she wanted, and even now, he would probably have agreed that she should have it.

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Gene ran into the kitchen. His excitement always arrived before he did, disturbing the atmosphere, and now he was tugging at her cardigan. "Mum! Mum! There's a truck!"

She lifted her hands from the sink, and, shaking off the sudsy water, looked down at his shining, upturned face. Steam-mottled light caught in his wispy hair, turning the ends gold. Her too-long fringe fell into her eyes, and the back of her hand went wearily to her forehead, brushing it out of the way.

Paul, a good head taller than Gene, stood at his brother's shoulder. He found it hard to get a look in as Gene bobbed up and down. She checked Paul's face; it was her barometer. It looked like this was no trick—there probably was a truck.

Gene grabbed her hand and dragged her through the dark hallway to the front of the house, and she felt its charge and energy as he pulled her across the lounge room floor, scattering Paul's carefully constructed dinosaur tableau as he went. Bella fretted in the sling, and Lucy let go of Gene's hand to soothe her. Freed, he danced up to the screen door as two muscled men in stobbies and work boots stepped onto the verandah and rang the doorbell.

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They deposited it on the rough, unstained floorboards in the centre of the lounge room. Everyone stood, looking; even Gene was momentarily subdued. A chair, nearly as tall as her.

Cherry red, leather softly bulging, backrest fanning out like a clamshell, armrests ample. A magnificent, wondrous object in this paltry space in her home. In the brief moment that she imagined herself taking a seat, the room's shabby furniture and tired, fading decor receded; for a fleeting second she was Botticelli's Venus, Renoir's Reclining Nude, Madonna with Child. She heard herself laugh, and her hand flew to her throat at the strange surprise of it, brushing the top of Bella's downy head.

Returning to herself, and amid the flurry of Gene and Paul's "Who's is it?", "Where did it come from?" and "Can I sit on it?", she was aware that Louis had emerged from his room and was standing in the doorway, watching. Forbidden from trying it out, and getting no answers to their questions, Gene and Paul vanished, the drama of the scene exhausted. But she continued to look at it, and Louis looked at her.

"Where did that come from?"

Reluctantly, she looked away from the chair. "Well, I'm guessing Dad's arranged to have it delivered. I'm not sure what it's about." Her voice business-like, striving to contain something.

Framed in the doorway, her eldest child's gaze was level with hers. It still took her by surprise, this version of her firstborn, his new body pushing out of his boy frame in a way that alarmed them both. He was misshapen, and to her always searching eyes, all out of proportion. She couldn't get used to it; here she was, still operating in the land of small children while he fumbled towards a future neither of them were ready for. Sometimes she just looked at him while he was sleeping; at his nose, his Adam's apple, his thickening brow and emerging jaw. She hadn't really noticed it happening, and wondered what it felt like to be so quickly and roughly transformed. Did it hurt? The Incredible Hulk came to mind, his monstrous, powerful body bursting out of him when he was angry; how painful it seemed, shameful even. Was that what it was like when boys became men? Poor Louis.

He smiled at her, tentatively. "It must be for you Mum. It's pretty cool."

She looked away, reddening. If it was for her it was quite a love letter, and she was shy and exposed because he was reading it too. "Well, we'll see," she said, too briskly, and ushered him before her as she returned through the doorway and back to the kitchen sink. Shut down, his face fell; she saw, and felt mean. But she didn't have time for it, not now. She had promised Paul and

Gene a trip to the park after lunch, and before she put Bella down for a sleep, and that window of time was fast diminishing.

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She didn't ring him, not all afternoon. She wanted to savour the possibility that the chair really was for her. That she could really have something so lovely. That he wanted her to have it. It was the most beautiful thing. Of course, it was also preposterous, but that was more than half of its hold on her. Just like his hold on her really. All the while she knew that there was probably a catch, a problem, a complication. But she let that sit under the surface while she dreamed her way through the late school holiday afternoon. Once, when Bella was asleep, and Paul and Gene were playing in the backyard, she looked up from the peeled vegetables on the bench, and, deserting her watching post at the kitchen window, she stole into the lounge room to look at the chair.

Sean often ribbed her about having Presbyterian sensibilities, but if you'd asked her, she'd have described herself as spartan. In any case, being with him had undone her in many ways, and while she knew that she would sit in the chair, that she would *allow* herself to sit in it, she didn't know that pleasure seeking woman at all well, and she felt a momentary unease before she turned and sat.

Slowly, the chair settled around her, letting out drifts of trapped air as she sank deep into its soft cushiony cool. She'd never had a brand new car, or any leather furniture for that matter, but she recognised the smell; it was the scent of *rich*, of *new*, of *substance*. Slipping off her shoes, she curled her legs up and poked her toes into the cavity between the cushion and the armrest, and succumbed to the chair's embrace.

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Bella whimpered in the pram next to the kitchen table. Lucy's engorged breasts trickled sticky milk into the sodden pads inside her bra while she distractedly poked at her dinner, rocking the pram and supervising the nightly feeding ritual. It was a delicate balancing act, melding everyone's schedules and needs into something that passed for a single family routine. Bella's evening feed was commonly delayed, and tonight she wasn't happy. Lucy looked at the clock and wondered, not for the first time that week, why Sean was so late. The chair hovered around the edges of her thoughts.

“Gene, please sit down and finish your dinner. I’d really like you to try and eat the rest of your veggies.” He was pacing at the other end of the table, struggling to summon his will in the service of his desire. And it was truly a struggle—if he didn’t eat the veggies there would be no apple crumble. But they were making him retch, and even at six years of age he had his standards.

Paul had separated everything on his plate into neat little piles and was methodically working his way through them, least to most favourite. Bella kept up her low grizzle until Paul got up from the table and went to the pram. “Little Bella in the bed,” he sang quietly, over and over as he smiled at her, gently patting her back until she was soothed. Lucy was always astonished at Paul’s quiet gifts, and a grateful lump swelled in her throat. His job done, Paul returned to the table and his meal. He looked out at her from under his thick golden fringe he said, “When’s Dad coming home?”

“Soon I reckon. Soon.”

Louis scraped his chair as he got up from the table. “Want me to serve the crumble Mum? You can go and feed Bella.”

“Finished!” Gene was following Louis with his empty plate, some veggies eaten and others accidentally dropped on the floor. She didn’t have the energy to argue.

Bella sucked lustily, spluttered some when the milk let down, and then settled into an easy, rhythmic feeding. Lucy kept this time just for her; it wasn’t much, but she tried to make it happen every day, to give Bella her undivided self, no matter the chaos outside the bedroom door. Truth was, she needed the rest. She’d breezed through Bella’s first two months, high on joy and adrenalin, but now she was rag-and-bone tired, sleepwalking through most of her days, and watching the clock every evening, waiting for the cavalry to arrive.

She heard the car pull up as she dozed on the bed in their front bedroom. She opened her eyes and looked at Bella who dozed too, flushed and sated, Lucy’s discarded nipple resting on her perfect rosebud lips. She could feed Bella in that chair, she thought. Yes, she could make a space for it in her bedroom and it could be their special place.

There was a disturbance outside her bedroom door. Gene and Paul thundered into the front hall, their father home at last, and she heard them mobbing him; a hero returned from long adventures. They clamoured for the lowdown on the chair.

“There was a truck, Dad.”

“Mum’s got a big red Queen’s chair, Dad!”

“She wouldn’t let us have a go at the chair, Dad. Can we sit in it now?”

Sean grinned, bent down and gathered them both up in a bear hug. “No way, Puddley-Pauley, Gene-ius Man,” said Sean. “That’s just for Mum. She’s the queen of our house, and that’s her throne.”

Wrestling his tie loose, he opened the bedroom door, and set about disgorging the contents of his pockets onto the dressing table, divesting himself of the day’s distasteful trappings. The boys bobbed around him, and Bella stirred.

Lucy turned her face to him. “It’s a beautiful, beautiful thing Sean,” she said, holding his eyes as he bent towards her. He stroked Bella’s cheek and then Lucy’s breast with his soft pink fingers, and kissed her lightly on the lips.

“You like it?”

Gene fled, Paul lingered a moment taking it in, and then followed Gene back out to the kitchen.

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Louis had served desert and started the dishes, and now wanted to get back to his room. He thought he’d done enough, and Gene and Paul were niggling each other and starting to get on his nerves. And wasn’t Dad home anyway? He set the boys up in front of a video in the back rumpus room, and ventured to the front of the house. There was the red chair, sitting proud in the middle of the lounge room, and he stopped to regard it for a moment while he strained to hear what was going on in the front bedroom. The chair made him uncomfortable. He felt that it was too much, that it didn’t fit, and he reached around in his boy mind but couldn’t exactly understand the wrongness of it. He wished it hadn’t arrived, that Dad had never sent it to their crappy little house.

And he was afraid hearing Mum and Dad talking behind the bedroom door. They weren’t fighting; that would have been better. They were just talking, but serious, and not letting up. Mum’s

voice was a bit louder than Dad's, and he could hear that she would say something hard, and Dad would come back at her, coaxing and wheedling like he sometimes did. Louis was scared but he wanted to know what it was about. He moved closer to the door.

For a time, it was all just muffled noise, broken rhythms and the tight, urgent tones of serious grown up talk. He wanted to hear, and then, he didn't want to hear. He started to move off.

Then he heard Mum, loud and strangled, "We're not spending \$1000 on a bloody chair, Sean! What planet are you on?"

Bella wailed.

"Just take it back, Sean. Take the bloody thing back."

Louis reddened and balled his fists. He knew it was all wrong. And now he wanted to cover his ears. He wanted to punch. Mum. Dad. Someone.

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"The truck's here again, Mum." Gene burst into the laundry where Lucy was rinsing nappies.

"Well, let's go and see what that's about," she said, shaking the water from her hands and sniffing back ammonia-laced snot. "Where's Paul?"

"He's patting Bella. She's always crying today."

Lucy walked heavily to the front door, greeted the same fellows from yesterday, and led them wordlessly to the chair in the lounge room. She could barely look at it. They could barely look at her, and were embarrassed to be caught up in her drama. God knows what Sean had said about her to explain why the chair had to go back. Who cared? She would play the harridan. She led them to the front of the house, and held open the screen door.

She stood on the porch and watched the chair recede from her field of vision. She felt like someone, something had died.

Turning to walk back into the house, she heard Bella crying in the kitchen and underneath her distress, an undertone. Paul, gently singing, coaxing; "Little Bella in the bed." She stepped into the lounge room and stopped for a moment before the big nothing where the chair used to be. Louis, always watchful, was in the doorway again. She closed her eyes and waited while the chair recreated itself in her head, whole and perfect; her rich, cherry red love letter.