

Recliner

IT CAME OVER LEON ONE AFTERNOON that he ought to buy a chair, something new to sit in while he read and took notes. He already had one, a serviceable chair made of oak with a red corduroy seat. But Leon had recently retired from teaching and was enamored with the idea of finding something new in which to sit out the later years of his bookish life. After consulting with his wife, it was resolved that the old chair would go to the basement until it ended up with his daughter in Vermont. She was the collector in the family. She had a barn.

Leon set out the next morning to search for something new. He went alone, having told his wife he'd been looking forward to a leisurely prowl through the various stores and shops. At first she resisted, fearing that, without her, he was sure to return with something that did not fit the general scheme of things. What saved him from her supervision was that the chair would reside in Leon's study, a room truly his and not, therefore, subject to her decorator's eye.

His first stop was a place that seemed to feature recliners. "Is there anything I can show you?" asked a young woman in a blazer and plaid skirt. Overwhelmed by the odor of fresh upholstery, Leon did not actually hear her. Vertigo set in as he scanned the vast floor of loungers. Lines of them rolled away like ocean waves. He reeled, trying to locate himself and then fixed his eye on a leather model behind which a man of glossy cardboard stood, pointing to the chair.

"Who's that?" he inquired.

"Who's who?" she replied.

"The man behind the chair." He pointed to a life-size mockup.

"Oh . . . him?" By now, Leon had regained his bearings and was amused that she didn't know. Neither did he, but then he'd left his glasses in the car. She called to a young man in a white shirt and tie standing far away. "Jerry..." He squinted in their direction. "Who's this cardboard guy that you put behind the black Swivel-Glide?"

"What?"

"The cardboard guy. Who is he?"

"Perry Como . . . I think," he said.

Leon moved closer. The saleswoman followed. "No, this isn't Perry Como," he said.

"It isn't?"

"Absolutely not."

She was growing impatient. "Well, is there something else? Perhaps a chair I could show you?" She gestured with a graceful wave.

"Yes . . . a chair," he said, still fixed on the cardboard man endorsing the black Swivel-Glide. "You know, I don't know who this is either, but it isn't Perry Como, that's for sure."

"Doesn't matter," she said. "Want to try it out?"

"This one?" Leon asked. She'd taken him by surprise. Until then, he'd never even considered such a chair.

"It's our top-of-the-line lounge," she began. "It's real leather but treated so that all you have to do is wipe it with a moist cloth no matter what gets spilled on it." Leon considered the chair, tried to imagine it in his little room. He knew his wife would object at first.

"I wasn't really thinking of one like this."

"Go ahead," she said softly. Something in her manner, perhaps the way she encouraged him, caused Leon to think of his daughter.

"I didn't get your name," he said gently.

"Jill," she replied, putting a finger to the tag pinned on the lapel of her blazer.

"Of course . . . Jill . . ." He smiled and settled into the sumptuous lounge. "Oh my . . . this is elegant, isn't it?"

"Now just reach down there . . . on your right . . ."

Leon found the handle she was referring to, pulled it back, and watched his feet come up. Sudden embarrassment overtook him as he realized how scuffed the toes of his shoes were. Shopping for a lounge requires a shine, he observed as the back and seat began to vibrate. "This switch controls the massage," she said, holding a small control box. She offered it to him. "Just dial the amount you want." Leon took it with nervous interest but did not alter the setting.

"I imagine this could be quite relaxing."

"Depends on the customer," she said. "Some people prefer the basic chair. It can save you about two hundred dollars if you buy the chair without it. But either way you're getting a lot of chair." Leon passed the control box back to her. She turned it off.

"Either way . . ." he repeated. Behind him, he could feel the flat man looming. Just who was he? It vexed Leon that he didn't know, that nobody seemed to know. He let his feet down and got up. "A very

nice chair, but the problem is I tend to work at my desk. I guess, in the back of my mind, I was looking for a chair I could use at my desk.”

“Ah . . .” she said. “I’m sorry to say we only stock loungers. That’s what we’re about . . . loungers . . . recliners.”

“So I see.” Leon surveyed the floor as if to confirm it.

“I wonder if an office-supply store would be more what you’re looking for.” She spoke helpfully, but to his surprise Leon found that he did not like the sound of that. Maybe it wasn’t a new chair that he wanted after all. Maybe it was a second chair that he’d come looking for, a second one that, unconsciously, he’d been wanting all along?

“What’s the price of this leather one minus the vibrating feature?” he asked.

“Let’s see . . .” she said mirroring his reversal perfectly. “Minus the massage it’s . . . I’ll have to check to be sure.” She went over to the desk where she consulted a notebook and then came back with it open, studying the figures as she did. “The Swivel-Glide in black, no massage . . . thirteen-ninety-nine . . . but I can let it go for . . . nine-ninety-nine. So you’re saving four hundred dollars.”

“And you have one in stock?”

“The book says we’ve got four, two without the massage, two with.”

“I do like it,” he said. She made no reply, preferring to let silence force the moment. “You’ve got a deal,” he said. “But only if you throw the display in with it.”

“The display?”

“Him,” Leon said, pointing to the cardboard man smiling beside the recliner.

“You want Perry Como thrown in?”

“That isn’t Perry Como,” Leon reminded her.

“Well, whoever it is . . .” she said, struggling to preserve her *sangfroid*. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll have to run this by Jerry.” Leon nodded and watched her go. Jerry lowered his head and listened. When she came back smiling, Leon knew they had a deal.

LEON’S WIFE WAS WORKING IN A FLOWER BED when he pulled into the driveway. When she heard the mini-van’s door close, she planted her trowel in the earth and turned to wave. There was her husband walking toward the house with a life-size silhouette tucked under his arm.

“Leon!”

“Yes dear?”

“What are you doing?”

“Going into the house?”

“I mean with that . . . thing.” She moved quickly. “What is it, for heaven’s sake?”

"Who is the question," he said and kept going.

The side facing her was nothing but blank cardboard. She went around to see what he might be getting at. "Did you find a chair?"

"Sure did. A real beauty," he told her.

She was torn between holding back the cardboard man who was about to enter her home and going over to the van to see what her husband had bought.

"I didn't expect you to find something so quickly," she said.

"Neither did I, but I fell in love with the first one I tried."

"Sounds like us," she quipped. Leon would have smiled, but he was positioning himself just then to angle the man in head first. "Would you hold the screen, Dear?"

"Where do you think you're going with that?"

"My room," he said confidently.

"For how long?" she inquired.

"I don't know . . . until I figure out who he is, I guess."

"I hope you do, Leon. We can't have that thing in the house."

"Then I'll put it the garage."

"We can't have it in the garage, either."

"Why not?"

"People will see it when the door goes up."

"So what?"

"Leon!" She followed him down the hall to his study where he dragged the cardboard man to a far corner and set him up. "I want you to keep the door to this room closed until you're finished with him. Is that clear, Leon?"

"Does he bother you that much?"

"He'd . . . bother anyone . . . with that smile and . . . cheap suit."

"Come on, Rose. I admit the suit's a little shiny, but he's got a pleasant face." She considered his observation. It was always like this. After the initial shock, she'd catch a little of Leon's fire and grow interested herself.

"He does look familiar, doesn't he?" she said.

"The kids at the furniture store didn't know who he was either. One of them thought he was Perry Como!"

"No!"

"And then the other one, the young lady who actually sold me the chair? I don't think she even knows who Perry Como was."

"Well . . ." Rose considered it in her usual, balanced way. "How old was she?"

"About the same age as Elizabeth."

"I guess that's no surprise then."

Opposite:
Baby in Red Chair.
Oil on canvas,
ca. 1810–1830.
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller
Folk Art Museum,
The Colonial
Williamsburg Foundation,
Williamsburg, Virginia.

"No surprise? When you and I were in our twenties, we certainly knew our parents' music. We knew about Glen Miller and Frank Sinatra and . . ."

"Times have changed, Dear," she said evenly.

"They certainly have," he agreed. "And that's why I had to get out of it. Kids today are no longer educable, not in the way . . ."

"Leon," she said, interrupting his favorite diatribe. "Aren't we going to see your new chair?"

"The chair! I forgot all about it. Is Ralph home?"

"Yes, I just finished talking with him and Loraine."

"Good, I'll call him right up."

"His back's out again."

"Then maybe you and I can get it in," Leon suggested.

"I don't see why not," she said. "It's not that heavy, is it?"

"No. In fact it's the lighter of the two models because I got it without the vibrator. You know, a sort of massage feature? The cardboard man was standing right behind it," he added proudly.

"I see . . ."

Leon opened the van's sliding door. "So how do you like it?" Rose blinked thoughtfully. She hadn't expected a handsome recliner.

"It's rather . . . elegant," she replied.

"The very same word I used!" he said, savoring his small triumph.

"Are you going to put the cardboard man behind it? I mean the way he was . . . at the furniture store?" she asked.

"Maybe . . . for a little while. Until I figure out who he is, anyway. And then . . ." Leon began to realize that he didn't actually know what he was going to do with the cardboard man or if he was even willing to share his room with him. "I am curious about him, though . . ." Rose knew instantly what he was thinking.

"Elizabeth and Andy are coming for dinner tonight, maybe they'll know."

"Terrific!" he said. "And they'll get to see my new chair, too." Now he found himself wishing he'd bought the vibrating model, but it was too late for that. "All set?" he asked, leaning into the van.

Rose did not hear him. An image of her daughter's barn was growing clear in her mind. There, in a loft of castaway furniture, stood the cardboard man smiling in his shiny suit. Sunlight warmed the beams as swallows circled above his head. Yes, she thought, in Elizabeth's barn. It was simply a matter of finding out who he was.

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