

Pages 3 through 9 of *Having and Being Had*:

Isn't It Good?

We're on our way home from a furniture store, again. What does it say about capitalism, John asks, that we have money and want to spend it but we can't find anything worth buying? We almost bought something called a credenza, but then John opened the drawers and discovered that it wasn't made to last.

I think there are limits, I say, to what mass production can produce.

We just bought a house but we don't have furniture yet. We've been eating on our back stoop for three months. Last week a Mexican woman with four children rang our doorbell and asked if our front room was for rent. I'm sorry, I said awkwardly, we live here. She was confused. But, she said, it's empty.

It is empty. I hang curtains to hide the emptiness, but it remains empty. There wasn't any furniture in the house where I grew up until a German cabinet maker moved in with us. He arrived in a truck so heavy that it made a dent in the driveway. He filled our dining room with his furniture and then he made tiny replicas of that furniture with the machines he brought in the truck. I still have the tiny corner cabinet with lattice doors, the tiny hutch with brass knobs, and the tiny dining room table with expertly turned legs. They're in the basement, wrapped in newspaper. The tiny dresser sits atop my dresser, which is from IKEA.

The apartment we just left was furnished with shelves that John made out of cheap pine. They're in the basement now, reduced to lumber. The ammunition box that I found on the curb and made into a coffee table is in the backyard, planted full of marigolds. I hate furniture, my father once murmured. He had just visited a warehouse full of furniture made out of unfinished pine. This was after the cabinet maker went to a nursing home

and his furniture went away too. As a child, I burned a hole in the dining room table. The cabinet maker, who smoked a pipe, supplied me with matches. I loved to burn things, but I felt remorse over the table, which I also loved.

The lyric *I burned a hole in the dining room table* is tethered, in my mind, to the liner notes of a Billie Holiday album that I borrowed from the library in college. She was singing songs written by someone else, the notes explained, but she rewrote them with the way she sang. Her delivery transformed a banal portrait of moneyed life into a wry critique of that moneyed life.

In the furniture stores we visit, I'm filled with a strange unspecific desire. I want everything and nothing. The soft colors of the rugs, the warm wood grains, the brass and glass of the lamps all seem to suggest that the stores are filled with beautiful things, but when I look at any one thing I don't find it beautiful. "The desire to consume is a kind of lust," Lewis Hyde writes. "But consumer goods merely bait this lust, they do not satisfy it. The consumer of commodities is invited to a meal without passion, a consumption that leads to neither satiation nor fire."

In the end, all the furniture we buy will feel like lyrics written for someone else's song, except the dining room table made by the Amish. This table will be solid cherry, a beautiful wood. It will be well made, but not quite as well made as the table I grew up with, the table I burned. To get a table like that, we would need to spend much more money. Or we would need a German cabinet maker to move in with us.

I once had a girl / Or I should say, she once had me, the car radio sings. John and I both fall silent. It's been a long time since I've heard this song. And I don't know if I've ever really listened to the ending. What happened there, I wonder. Did he make a fire in the fireplace while the girl was at work? No, John tells me, he burned her place down. He is sure of this, but I am not so sure.

I can't stop thinking about it. Norwegian wood. It bothers me. Soon I'm reading interviews with the Beatles. "It was pine really, cheap pine," McCartney said about the

wood paneling that inspired the title. About the ending, he said, “It could have meant I lit a fire to keep myself warm, and wasn’t the décor of her house wonderful? But it didn’t, it meant I burned the fucking place down.”

Slumming

I return to my old apartment building to get the bike lock I left in the basement. What are you doing here, my downstairs neighbor asks, slumming? She never liked me. She worked until 2 a.m. and always went to sleep around the time my toddler woke up in the morning. In revenge for the sound of his feet she vacuumed at night. She owned a house before she moved to this building, but she got out of that game she said and now she owns a bar.

Slumming was a pastime for women of the owning class in Victorian England. They visited the poor, wrote reports, and put girls to work doing laundry, boiling and scrubbing and ironing the linens of the rich to make the girls clean, redeemed by work, while the women read them poetry. The women imagined themselves in service to the poor, but the poor served them. A woman went slumming, Alison Light writes, to find herself “beyond the narrow confines of her well-upholstered world.” Slumming sometimes became a profession for women who had no other access to work. They ran homes where orphans and poor girls were raised to be good servants. Among those girls was the foundling Lottie Hope, who grew up to become Virginia Woolf’s maid.

The second of the two bedrooms in our apartment was intended to be the maid’s room. This building was once a lakeside retreat, a vacation home far from downtown Chicago. But the tenants now are not on vacation. When we moved in, kids with cigarette burns were crawling in and out of their mother’s apartment through the broken screen of a window in the building next door, and a man who had lost his mind was screaming from his window onto the alley. Our windows faced the lake, which made me feel rich. Bums fished for steelhead on the rocks by the lake and waves sent huge plumes of spray over the pier. Dogs ranged over the sand, their leavings drying in the sun. An old woman who sometimes yelled at me sat on a bench facing the lake. I live farther from all this now. And farther from the lake, with its post-industrial water reflecting the storm clouds blowing in from the horizon.

That's it? my landlord asks when he sees me. I used to talk with him nearly every day on my way out of the building. And for years, I rode a bike that he gave me, a bike that a former tenant left behind.

I linger in the concrete courtyard, talking with the hairdresser who used to cut my hair in her kitchen. Above the hairdresser lives a chef who used to bring me bags of arugula when it was in season, and above her is a sculptor who used to drink wine with me. The widow of a postal worker lives above the apartment that was ours. In one of our few exchanges, she told me that she loved Toni Morrison and I gave her my signed copy of *Sula*. Across the courtyard is a rug salesman, an actor, and a woman who wrote the screenplay for a movie I've never seen. There is also a girl who owns a flock of lacy underwear that roosts on the clothesline in the basement. I'm suddenly feeling the loss of all this. The man with a drinking problem who gave my son a see-through frog lives here, and the man with a meth problem who gave him an Easter basket full of plastic cockroaches. My son won't remember those men, but the cockroaches will continue to crawl through my life, even in the new house.