

What Next?

A long time ago a friend told me she feared the day I would marry a blind man. You see, I had – and still have – a habit of moving furniture around. I do this nauseatingly often when I can't travel. I methodically tear through every room of the house, almost in a panic to get it right – the balance, the color scheme, the functionality. I blame it on my parents who changed everything from floor to ceiling about every five years – mom, an artist, and dad, a decorator who also designed the house I grew up in. They had exquisite taste and the money to express it.

The stuff to create my new indoor landscapes has never been a problem for me – fortunately, and not. Until they died, I inherited my parents discards – when they remodeled, sold one of our beach houses and bought a new one to decorate or purchased a new “fixer upper” to furnish.

I always got stuck helping them with their moves. When I'd try to throw something away or put it in a box for the Goodwill, mom would say, “No, you can't get rid of that. It's special. Take it with you sweetheart. It'll remind you of.....” blah, blah, blah. “But mom, I don't have room for it in my little place!” “Make room!” she'd insist.

You couldn't say no to her. Even at the dinner table, when you were stuffed she'd say, “Have some more?” Though you'd politely replied “No, thank you.”, she'd dish it up anyway, saying “It's so good for you. We can't just throw it away. Think of all those starving people out in the world who would be so comforted with this food.” Then, she'd complain we kids were too chubby!

I always left the garage during one of their moves or remodels with a car full of more things – nice, but not necessarily to “my taste”, such as all the white wicker furniture from one of our beach houses. I HAD to take it. I like wicker, just not white – white anything. Anyway, I suppose I could have painted it, although everyone said the new color would chip off then it would look tacky. So I just left it, bugging me for years, until they had another replacement load to dump on me – then I had an “excuse” to get rid of it.

The opposite was true when, just after Gumma Bessie (my dad’s mom) passed away. I was asked to watch over her house on Halloween to make sure it didn’t get egged. At the same time, I was asked to look through the house to see if I wanted anything. I knew the fancy crystal and china went to my cousins – which was too elegant for my tastes anyway. When I started looking through the kitchen cupboards, I swear Gumma was there with me saying over and over, “Now Jill, what would you want with that old thing?” as I pulled out all the hand crocheted pot holders, wooden bowls, vintage kitchen utensils with hand carved wood handles, and enamelware. These were the things I cherished. And, the souvenir spoon collection. I started my own as a teenager I liked Gumma’s so well.

Then I went into the hall closets. That was really creepy. She had almost everything labeled to whom it should go. She was only ill a few weeks before she passed, so she must have been working on that for years. I was to get her hat collection and the vintage clothing made by my great grand-mother, Gramma Struebel, a Norwegian who migrated to South Dakota -- one of the only seamstresses who imported the finest fabrics from Europe. Of course, I would never fit into the tiny-waisted

dresses, but Gumma knew I would cherish them as fine examples of period dress. So she labeled each one with my name, sometimes with a little story or newspaper clipping attached with a straight pin. She had already given me Gramma's civil war cedar chest and the crazy quilt that took her ten years to make – mostly due to the extensive embroidering.

When mom and dad split up, you'd think they would have used everything to divide it into two houses. Of course not! I still went home with a ton of stuff I didn't need. Mom's new place got furnished with things from the old house, much of which I didn't care for before. But now it stood out even more without all the other more subtle surrounding objects. Especially all the primary colors, which I hate. They're too cheerful and childlike and I hated sleeping in her guest room for that reason. All the bright reds, lime green, lemony yellows and royal blues made me wide-eyed just walking in the room making it harder to fall asleep. Then her dining room had those perfectly elegant French chairs sadly upholstered in an orange/rust and lime green plaid – yuck, as well.

Maybe my big problem wasn't so much the bright colors, but lime green specifically. I've hated it ever since I went to the movie theater on the Champs-Élysées in Paris to see the Exorcist – with the possessed little girl's projectile lime green vomit. Shortly after that, Citroën had the audacity to come out with a lime green deux-chevaux which I couldn't bare to look at.

Anyway, mom's new bedroom was a bit more subdued than the guest room. It was extra large on the second floor with an enormous redwood tree just off the deck outside the sliding doors, that made her feel like she lived in a treehouse. When the complex decided to cut it down, she went ballistic, called it a "landmark tree" and wrote

letters to the editor, called the police and talked to anyone who would listen – to no avail. She never forgot and complained about it to her dying day even years after she'd moved out of the complex!

Her living room had an oriental flavor with Gumma Bessie's large Japanese screen on the wall above the couch. Mom had some of her own family treasures– an antique desk from her Aunt Peddy and a china cup collection from her grandmother, Nanny's tea room – the two women who raised her while her mom, a Hollywood agent, was out galavanting around. She had art nouveau lamps and statues she'd dragged back from France, a large oval antique inlaid coffee table, and a chandelier she and dad picked up in an old saloon in Virginia City.

The walls throughout the townhouse were covered from floor to ceiling with her own art. She was an incredibly prolific painter, equally talented in any medium: water color, oil, pastel or pen and ink. She painted portraits, did plein air landscapes, and community scenes which she called "Paintings from Life". But her favorite was doing nudes. She was devastated when the annual Valley of the Moon Vintage Festival in Sonoma stopped letting her show them. Heaven forbid we wouldn't want our little American children to see paintings of naked men and women here, but it's fashionable to drag them to famous galleries and museums around the globe where public funding doesn't discourage nudity in art.

Once dad had come out of the closet – the reason for their split – and gotten his own place, design ideas from all those treks to gay-friendly Palm Springs came to life in his decor. He got some new furniture instead of using stuff from their house like Danish Drehsessel-styled leather easy chairs. For his office, he found a large mid-century

modern metal wall cabinet with a fold-out desk. I wasn't surprised his place was more modern. He didn't paint often, but when he did, it was abstract.

He used softer earthier tones throughout with a wildlife theme: a zebra skin on the terra cotta colored wall above the couch, a large wood blocked print of a bison above his baby grand piano, a large photo of him riding a camel above his pipe organ, and an almost life size stuffed lion on the floor by the window. And oh, he got cats – one that looked like a tiger, and the other, a lion. He took more pictures of those dam cats. I found packet after packet when I was sorting pictures after he passed away. The cats favorite place was to lay around was on dad's bed with the big furry bear.

Mom and dad created many fabulous houses together to the envy of all, but it wasn't until they separated that I really identified their own individual styles.

It's strange how I found out dad was gay. I had a bisexual boyfriend, whom I adored and of course wished he wasn't bi, but he was. He assured me I shouldn't be jealous, as his relationships were different with men – more recreational and sports-like, whereas with me, it was the soft sweet long lasting kind of love. Craig always said he was going to settle down by thirty, after he'd gotten it (his gay side, I guess) out of his system. Once I gave him an ultimatum, he went his own way and sadly, years later died of aids.

Anyway, we had gone to visit my folks before they'd split up. They had a great house in Santa Rosa on a hillside looking west across Sonoma and toward the coast. It was one of the houses that just "called out to them" to buy and remodel. It was originally really dark and drab inside, but when they got done it was light and airy and definitely

brought the outdoors in. They had awesome sunsets from inside, the large deck, guest quarters, and the pool below. It was perfect for entertaining.

The little one bedroom apartment below had its own kitchen, living room with its own entrance, though you could reach it from the house too. I always stayed there and this time, I was there with Craig. He said he was surprised my dad wasn't gay. I laughed. Later that afternoon, I was chatting with mom downstairs. Craig was still in the pool. I said "Mom, Craig is surprised dad isn't gay." And mom replied, "But, he is!"

Well, the train load of isolated memories from my past started chugging along. Oh, that's why...., of that's why...., oh, that's why... Oh my god! That's why I've fallen for so many men who turned out to be gay. I had no clue. Dad was my male role model so I couldn't easily recognize gayness in men, and still can't. Well, sometimes, if it's flaunted. And when I told my best friend later she said, "Oh, you didn't know?" which of course stabbed me through the heart making me feel like an idiot. Seems everyone knew or suspected except dad's immediate family. Is that why I was having this relationship with Craig? To find out, and understand? Or, get hurt, like mom?

I think men and women should use little artificial black taffeta beauty marks like women (and some men) used in the 17th century French courts. They placed them in different spots on their face designating whether they were "passionate", "generous", or available for romps etc. Now, we could use to designate sexuality and availability. It would make life a lot easier!

Mom found out dad was gay from reading a letter, by mistake, from one of his friends. She reminded me of the night she'd showed up to stay at my house unannounced saying she and dad had had a "little spat". I left for France a few weeks

later and was glad to get away as she had seemed quite needy during that time. “Jill, I came to your house that night as dad had left, and I’d never spent a night alone in a house – my entire life!” Now I understood why she seemed so needy and I felt so guilty having left her during that difficult time.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”, I asked. “Because I was so confused and shocked. I’d suspected he might be having an affair, but never with a man! It took a lot of therapy before I could tell anyone – even my best friend.”

They never divorced, though each had a boyfriend and mom lived with hers for nineteen years, until her companion passed away. Dad always spent holidays together with them and us (adult) kids. They managed to preserve an incredible friendship, celebrated their anniversaries together up to year 69 (when mom passed away). After being separated for 25 years, they spent the last five years of their life together again!

I picked up some of their decorating talent. And, of course, after their passing, I had even more stuff to decorate with. I always make my home look “lived in” quickly, but somehow I never get it right. It works for a day or week, then I have to start over. It starts with a picture on the wall hanging an inch off, or a color not being quite the right shade to the object next to it, not liking the view from a chair. Or my vintage decor doesn’t work on the stark new white sheetrock wall.

After I’ve depleted all my ideas for room arrangement, I move. I start by moving to a bigger or smaller, newer or older place in a new neighbor, or even a new town. Then I move back and forth to France. Only once, though, did I drag “stuff” with me. It was shipped to France in a large container, while the dog and I flew. I think in all, I am

really happier living out of a suitcase. I don't have that fidgetiness of no more space, a ton of boxes still to unpack, and not being able to find anything.

Another friend told me I changed loves like linens. She was exaggerating, of course, but she – one of those lucky few who found her soul mate early on and latched him in – couldn't understand someone like me, who, every time she talked to, had a new "interest" in someone.

First of all, my timing is always off. Either they like me or I like them – never at the same time, it seems. Or they're gay. Then, I have this long list of stupid criteria before I even let them in the door. Though it changes slightly through the decades, for example, in the sixties he had to smoke pot, since I was a hippie – it does tend to make me intolerant of others' differences or weaknesses. But, goodness knows, I wouldn't want to end up with a male version of my dysfunctional self!

Anyway, it was now 1978 and my friend was referring to the year I'd just spent back in France, while mom and dad were figuring out how to proceed with their lives, friendship and sexuality. I lived in a friend's apartment near the Sacré Coeur in Paris – with my "stuff" and dog. Jean-Marc worked most the year in Chad, so I had the place to myself. We weren't boyfriend/girlfriend, just occasional lovers. I will say he was quite charming and I loved going off on little jaunts through France with him when he was in France.

One time, we went to his home region, Alsace-Lorraine. I loved all the white medieval half-timbered houses with planter boxes filled with red geraniums, and especially in the Petite-France neighborhood of Strasbourg – not named after France,

but after the Hospice of the Syphilitic which was built on that island in the fifteenth century to cure Syphilis (at that time called the “French disease” in German!)

During that year, I went to the Rouergue for a ten day Bioenergy workshop in an eleventh century castle. It’s a region I hadn’t visited yet, reknown for it’s pink brick architecture. I wasn’t sure what Bioenergy was, but I liked the subtitle of the workshop “Sentir et Comprendre” (feel and understand). I thought that would be worthy of exploration. I was the only foreigner of the eight participants. There was a professional symphony violinist from Brittany, a high-ranking politician’s wife from la Rochelle, a respiratory therapist from Paris, a couple of teachers – one from the Pyrénées and the other from Normandy, a realtor from Saint-Nazaire, and a few others. The moderator was a world reknown Tai Chi teacher, who was also a therapist using Bioenergie as one of his many methods.

I’d spent years in France, but had never been in a situation where the normally quite reserved French opened up so openly about their deep-routed angsts. Jean-Pierre, one of the participants and I hit it off, and I took a trip with him after the workshop to his region, the Pyrénées. I fell in love with his grandmother’s place with all the carefully hand laid stones, in criss-cross designs, of the fences, in the courtyard and of the house itself. They made me totally appreciate the French fetish for “les vieilles pierres” (the old stones).

The Bioenergy group liked working together so well, we decided to reunite one weekend per month at the leader’s house in the Paris suburbs. We brought our sleeping bags and made his Tai Chi room into a dormitory. Jean-Pierre stayed a couple extra days in Paris to visit me each time he came, but I slowly grew more and more irritated

with his idiosyncrasies. Picky, picky me, I know. Then I started dating a different guy from the group, whom I became extremely fond of, and he me, but he wasn't available.

When I returned to the States, I met Craig. So I could see how my friend might think I changed loves like linen.