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Thirty-Six Rockers

Rick Neumayer

FICTION

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The windshield is steamed up. Droplets are splattering and spreading out slowly, leaving snail trails. Road signs seem to say one thing, but when we get closer they're saying something else. Pinpricks of light turn into cars and then vanish again. Ten feet off the highway, the landscape is so murky it could be the edge of the earth.

By the time my husband and I crunch into my parents' driveway, the fog has cleared. In the middle of the gravel stands a tall sugar maple. The tree is growing older and some of its branches have fallen off, but I remember how it always turned such glorious shades of red in the fall. My family has owned this two-story yellow frame house and acreage for over 40 years now, but soon it will all belong to someone else. Customers are already out in the front yard and "Auction" signs are posted, white letters on a red and white background. For an instant, I can see Dad bending over his roses.

Before he died, arthritis made it progressively harder for Dad to get around. I've always thought of him as tall and strong, but as he declined he became gaunt, his clothes a couple of sizes too big. If they didn't have too many holes, he didn't see any reason to get new ones. His favorite shirts were leftovers from before he retired. He liked having shirt pockets to keep the case for his glasses, which were usually dirty and scratched, along with pens, and the tiny notebooks where he wrote down everything he no longer trusted to his memory.

He wore his ragged jeans, which were always gathered around the waist with a worn belt, until Mom could sneak them out to the garbage. When the county started picking up the trash, they must have wondered why my family never generated any. Every empty jar could hold nails. Every milk jug could go over a plant in early spring.

As he weakened physically, Dad grew increasingly paranoid. Mom would plan a family get-together and he'd say, "Oh, they're not going to come." He was always surprised when we showed up. He'd get ambitious in the spring, but then forget to tie up the tomato plants or keep the weeds down. Finally, he stopped putting them out.

The swing where he sat is still on the front porch. So are those concrete boxes of red petunias I've been watering while getting the place ready for this auction. Dad wanted red flowers out front. But now the slab is jammed

with antiques brought out for bidding, and bargain-hunters are swarming over a dozen corner cupboards and twice as many tables. Other things, too—more than I can count. Chairs, spice racks, a box of axe handles, bundles of paint brushes, crates of old bottles, mirrors, bushel baskets full of goblets and glassware and milk-glass vases, a dozen Barlow pocket knives, a carton of plumber’s helpers, coiled strands of Christmas tree lights, framed pictures.

With my husband Brian and daughter Andrea, I walk back to the old barn. The roof is near collapse on the south side, but for once it’s not bursting with chairs, stools, cabinets and church bells. Now they’re all stacked up on the lawn beside Dad’s tools, which are still being brought out of his workshop. At some point, part of the roof gave, and all the saw blades and drill bits are rusty. The auctioneer’s helpers keep bringing them out, load after load, and there are so many clamps and planes and wrenches and files and tinning shears that I don’t see how they could all have fit in there.

“Didn’t the family keep anything?” one woman asks, while looking over the furniture piled on the front porch.

I have to smile. All three of our houses and Mom’s new assisted living apartment are stuffed with Dad’s finest. Now his things are sitting outside and I hardly recognize them. They look different, with all these strangers pawing them. I’m proud of his beautiful antique collection, but, at the same time, sad I can’t have it all. I know everyone in the family feels this way.

“Why do we have to auction Dad’s things?” I ask Mom, but she doesn’t seem to hear, sitting there in a rocker like queen for a day, smiling as people come up and talk to her. She’s short, with dark hair that never gets gray, and has been slightly on the plump side until recently. Before Dad died, she was about as disheveled as he was. I guess she’d been too busy taking care of him to worry about herself. Around the house, she’d worn old shirts and pants cut off at the knees. No wonder she’d been depressed. How could we not have noticed?

I climb out of bed at 5:35 a.m., put on a robe, and bend to pick up our dog Gypsy, a small wheat-colored mutt, part terrier and part dachshund, who’s been with us since she was a pup, the runt of the litter. We got her for our 6-year-old daughter, an only child who’s now 23 and welding sculptures for a successful local artist while she

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figures out what she really wants to do. Meanwhile, her father and I have been Gypsy's guardians since our daughter left for college. Can it really have been five years ago?

The dog is old, 17. She's deaf, mostly blind, arthritic and incontinent. Still, I see her puppy-like joy expressed so vividly with body language when it's time to eat, which is whenever we're near the kitchen.

Every time Gypsy pees on the floor, I can tell she's ashamed. It's a big mess, but I know she can't help it. She's trying her best. Until last year, Gypsy was perfectly housebroken. She's always been an indoor dog. She slept in a dog bed in our bedroom and ventured outdoors only to take a walk and do her business until her health began to fail. She'd walk and sniff, leaving her calling card all around the neighborhood. Over the course of time, she couldn't even keep up with our slow pace. These grew in frequency and duration as her yellow coat and dark muzzle whitened. Eventually, she couldn't make it more than two blocks, then one, and soon I was carrying her home in my arms.

Despite her arthritis medicine, Gypsy is wobbly upon awakening. Last time she fell down the steps, she was sore for five days. I prepare to lift her gently out of her bed, where she lies half-in and half-out. She's never been a lap dog, and now she jerks awake, squirming and resisting. Who knows from what dream I've awakened her. In a moment, her panic subsides and she allows me to pick her up.

During the day, we pen her in the small hallway between kitchen and bathroom with a yard sale lattice baby-gate. Every afternoon when I return from work, I find puddles. Sometimes as I get out a mop, I'm so aggravated I bark at the dog. Once, while I hosed down the bathmat Gypsy sleeps on all day, my daughter overheard me saying, "When are you going to go on and die and get it over with?"

"Mom!" she scolded. "How can you say that? Poor Gyp!" Gypsy looked up at me as if to say, *See where that gets you, Missy.*

She's always been such a sweet-natured dog, loyal and affectionate and playful, but as I open the door to put her out, I note her pathetic thinning tail, bony rib cage and dark trusting eyes. The fog hovers outside our back door, a dark mist so thick I can't see beyond the screened porch to the deck I know is out there.

Mike, Dad's favorite auctioneer, is working the early-comers. He was certain from the first time we talked there was going to be a big crowd for this auction. I see license plates from Ohio to Mississippi.

"I've got some roughnecks helping to sort out all the furniture," Mike says.

With long hair and scraggly beards and missing teeth, all six of Mike's roughnecks look like drunks off the street. But they're hard workers. Wagons have been set up by the gray outbuilding Dad called his trapping lodge, a falling-down shed used to store extra lumber. But the sweet mock-orange tree is gone.

"Remember Dad always talking about how he worked his way through college?" says my sister. "How he saved on expenses in Berea by sleeping in the Guinea Barn?"

We smile.

"Dad on how to succeed in life," quotes my brother. "Grow your own food, do your own work, make your own way, don't spend a nickel unless you get a dime in return, and love your family and God."

Dad's orchard is still nearby, beyond the derelict garage. But the once-bountiful fruit trees—apple, peach, pear, pecan, plum, paw-paws—haven't been sprayed for years. They're all barren. And the garage leans drunkenly. It's always been jammed full of

Dad's refinished pieces. I see they're bringing out some—a cider mill, wood cabinets—but when I look closer, mice have chewed off the legs.

A thick gray-white vapor slowly rolls across the lawn. It blots out my garage and the flowers we planted in the narrow bed beside the garage. It erases my driveway and obscures the flower garden we share with our next-door neighbors. The temperature must be in the 50s. But standing on my door step, with my old dog cradled in my arms, I feel a chill.

Gypsy looks up at me. *What's the matter, Missy? It's only a little mist. It'll probably be gone in an hour or two.*

Down the steps I carry her, set her on the grass, propping her up so she can do her business. I'm remembering what a fine rabbit-hunter this dog used to be. Many are the fat bunnies she has stalked and devoured in our tiny backyard, leaving only the gutted remains on our doorstep and later puking up the rest. Now I come home to find her wedged between the toilet and the wall, apparently unable to remember how she got there or how to get back out.

"Dementia," my husband says.

Not the first time I've seen Gypsy tangled up and trapped. She gets lost among the legs of a kitchen stool. She peers into corners until we can't stand it anymore and turn her around.

She's finished now. She starts to wander off, and I scoop her up, light as a stuffed toy, but with hard little bones. Her eyes, clouded by cataracts, never leave me. Back in the house, I offer her a soft treat because she can't chew Milk Bones anymore. She sniffs, rejects, yelps. *Can't you do any better?*

I search the shelf where I keep the dog food, hoping to find something more to her liking. When I tell her I'm sorry, she circles, totters and flops on her belly.

"We've got to put this dog down," my husband says.

"Not yet."

F lat-bed trailers and tables have been set up on the front lawn. The tables are full of things that have always been in our house. Dad could spot the good stuff. Nobody else recognized these broken-down pieces as antiques. He'd drag home a cabinet or an old table someone had been using in their barn to hold chicken feed. Then he'd remove dirt, paint and rusty nails. Replace, sand, oil, glue and finish until he had an object that would never be anywhere near a barn again.

"Let me tell you a story about a guy with 36 rockers." Mike waves at row after row of bleached-out chairs. "If you can't find one here, you never will."

People keep looking at all these rockers, pull them forward and examine the cane bottoms. Two women crowd around one with a red leather back, and I remember the red roses Dad grew here in front of this rail fence. All his roses have been mown to stubble, and the fence is falling down. The women run their hands along the rungs and across the seat, calculating the rocker's value.

"I didn't know they had so much," Mike says, adding that this is his seven-thousandth and something sale. "There's a lot more here than I thought, and my assistant is auctioning lots more in back. I've never seen so many quality antiques."

They're everywhere. Spool boxes, hat racks, canes, bed frames with elaborately scalloped wooden headboards, ornate living room mantels. As Mike begins auctioning off the items on the wagons, it feels like we're putting our family history out there for

everyone to defile. Besides Dad's collection, there are items I've grown up with: our old kitchen table, the roll-top where Dad paid the bills, the china cabinet holding the mustache cup collection.

Back outside, all these strangers wander through our property, handling Dad's things. In a few short hours, it will all be gone. I remember Dad saying, "Sell? Why would I want to sell? Then your things are gone. You spend the money on food or something, then that's gone, too. And you have nothing left."

I come home from work to find Gypsy hasn't moved from where we left her this mornmg. She hasn't eaten, can barely lift her head. "What are we going to do with you, Gypsy?"

I know the answer, of course. I don't like it.

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I overhear a guy talking on a cell phone. He's holding Dad's hand-painted leather bellows.

"You're not missing anything here," he says, and instantly I'm boiling. "What gives you the right to disrespect my father's antiques?" I scream in his face.

His jaw drops. "Hey, I didn't mean—"

I wrest the bellows away from him and, grasping it with both hands, whack him in the chest. There's a look of disbelief on his fat face, but he's not really hurt. I wish he was. As I cock my arms to hit him again, he backs away. Brian and Andrea emerge from the crowd and grab me.

"I feel as if I'm watching Dad's collection die, Brian. And he's dying with it, all over again, one piece at a time."

Brian says something in a low soothing voice. Realizing I'm making a fool out of myself, I let them lead me away. I lean against the sugar maple in the driveway. Mike resumes the auction.

"Are you okay, Mom?"

No!

"This collection began as separate objects," I say. "But they've been together so long now that they belong that way, like a

family. After today, they'll never be together again."

Andrea hugs me.

I remind her she can bid on one item for herself, but my daughter doesn't want any attention now.

"Then I'll buy something for you."

“Mom, no!”

I hold up my number. I’ve never even seen the piece I’ve chosen for her, a big moss-green, glass-front cupboard with fancy trim and glass doors that Dad never got around to refinishing. At first, three of us bid. As the price goes up, the other two keep looking at me in wonderment, sensing something’s wrong here, but they don’t know what. Finally, after I’ve bid twice as much as the thing is worth, they shake their heads and drop out.

So that’s it. It’s mine. But no, now another woman jumps in and the bidding continues. Back and forth, we offer and counter-offer. We’re bidding so fast that Mike can hardly keep up. Of course, as the price climbs, my frugal nature asserts itself, and I hear Dad thinking, *Oh no, that’s way too much. No, no. Don’t go any further. That’s far enough.*

I know he’d never pay so much. But I’ll have this antique if it costs every cent I own.

Not until we’ve reached three times what it’s probably worth does my rival give up.

Got it!

Andrea clutches my arm. “Mom, what am I going to do with this piece of furniture I don’t want and have no place to put in my tiny apartment?”

“I don’t care.”

I’m already bidding on a pair of World War I spectacles, Kellogg’s chuckwagon charms, a pistol with a homemade wood handle.

With the auction almost over, Mike is delighted. “You can’t take it with you,” he says, laughing. “I had one guy tell me he was going to but . . . ”

The flatbeds are finally empty, the last of Dad’s furniture is being loaded into pickup trucks, and the ground is littered with paper cups.

“It can’t be all gone,” I say.

I hurry back inside and go through the house, searching room by room. Nothing.

They’re all empty, except for scraps of plastic wrap. I jerk open the walk-in closets, bang the doors against the walls. All stripped bare.

“Oh, this can’t be it.”

At last, in the back bedroom I find a framed picture of a dog from a calendar, a close-up illustration on a sky blue background. The brown-eyed, long-eared beagle appears to be looking off into the distance. The glass is cracked, an elliptical piece missing.

I snatch it off the wall and clutch it to my chest.

**Editor’s Note: This story received an honorable mention in The 2008 New Southerner Literary Contest.*