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MEDITATIONS ON “HOME”



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TRANSIT

Eighteen years ago, my father retired from the State Department. Pretty much his entire career, he had been posted overseas, more often than not dragging his family—my mother, older sister, and me—along with him to live in and on embassy compounds, Army bases, rental apartments, military transit billets, and hotels. At intermittent times we had a house in the States, but the only one in which I lived with any sense of ownership was in Falls Church, Virginia, when I was thirteen years old.

It was a three-bedroom brick ranch house on a half-acre lot, and we moved into it in the thick of an unbearably humid summer. We had virtually no furniture. Heretofore, everywhere we'd resided came pre-furnished with government-issue appurtenances. So we went to stores and bought sofas, beds, tables, and dressers. We thought this would be our home for at least five years, when my sister would graduate from high school. Almost immediately, though, my father was assigned TDY—temporary duty—to various places overseas. He was away for a total of nine months that year, and then one night he told us we had been given ninety days' notice to move to Tokyo, back to an embassy compound, back to government furniture.

To be honest, I was happy, and relieved. I had hated the banality of going to the middle school in Falls Church, the ordinariness of bourgeois life in America, and I looked forward to the adventure and distinction of being a diplomat's kid again. We were supposed to be in Tokyo for only a year, then go to Paris—our dream posting. That never happened, and I ended up attending the American School in Japan until I went to UCLA.

Fourteen years later, my father, upon his retirement, stood in a warehouse in California, opening up crates that had been hermetically sealed and kept in climate-controlled storage on the East Coast for almost two decades. Inside the wooden crates was the furniture we'd bought for the Falls Church house, used for less than a year and then never put into service again. Chief among the accouterments were a couch and a matching love seat—conspicuous because of their lime-green color. They were acutely of a piece with the era in which they had been purchased, the seventies. Curved, upholstered with some sort of luminous faux suede, the couch and love seat were hopelessly, laughably outdated, unimaginable in a modern house, useless. My father decided to donate the sofas, along with most of the other furniture, to Goodwill (although it was questionable whether they would be willing to take them), and to start over.

I was living in Cambridge at the time, my sister in Seattle, and my father would soon move to Honolulu, into his new wife's house. My mother was dead.

For some reason, I wish I had been at the warehouse to see the lime-green sofas as they were being tugged out of the crates, freed from the plastic that had encased them for so long, finally seeing the light of day—if only for a few minutes, before they were abandoned for good.



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