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Furniture

by Gail Louise Siegel

It hadn't been a great job, but I sometimes miss the dreamy languor of the waterbed store. It had taken time to realize I was a decoy, that the business was a front for Doty's drug operation.

My Japanese friend Kuniko's lover, Doty, needed someone he trusted to mind the store. When he first called—at Kuni's prompting—I was uneasy. I had only met Doty once before, skinny-dipping in the Huron River. I wished I hadn't seen his naked body, though I didn't mind that he'd seen mine. His limbs were as thin, and his hair as long and straight as frail Kuni's--trailing down his back in a ponytail.

He was persuasive. As the daughter of a furniture salesman, I took his pitch about waterbeds to heart. A heated bed was good for arthritis. It didn't put much stress on the floor because the weight was distributed along the planks, rather than concentrated on four small wheels. Waterbeds were used in hospital burn and preemie units because they put no pressure on the skin.

But the prices were exorbitant. A thousand dollars or more for some wood and an overgrown vinyl bladder, more if you bought matching nightstands or a dresser.

I felt guilty writing up \$1500 orders, like a thief. But I felt equally bad when there were no customers, when there was nothing at all to do but straighten sheets and polish up the maple veneer headboards.

Sometimes, Doty's friend Rick would appear. Overweight in his 20's, with dirty blond curls and a mustache, he'd flop back on a bed and let the rippling mattress rock his flesh. If an actual customer wandered in, he would browse. More than once, we lay on the same mattress, facing the ceiling and gossiping about Rick's pregnant wife or my boyfriend Michael and his softball exploits. Rick's wife was expecting twins any minute and he was worried about supporting them.

While he talked, I tried to imagine sex with Rick, but could not. I allowed myself to feel the mild charge of his desire, but failed to return it. It was relief, and disappointment, both, to find that Michael had a monopoly on my heart.

Lying there I recalled long afternoons my brother Billy and I spent flopping across bedroom displays at our father's furniture store as children. We knew better than to jump on the beds, but nothing kept us from pretending that the fanciest bedroom sets, with the most elegant spreads—fake fur or purple satin—were their own.

Unlike my father, Doty would show up and call me and Rick into the back room: a small area warehousing sheets, mattress liners, patch kits and heaters. Doty would cut lines of coke on the pledge-shined top of an extra dresser and we all took turns snorting it through a tightly-rolled fifty.

"Great stuff," Doty would say, and I believed him, even if I couldn't feel anything

myself. Coke was unlike pot, which turned Keith Jarrett's improvisations into erotic dreamscapes. And unlike speed, which had prompted me to up and quit my job at Bell's pizza parlor in a huff. Coke had less effect on me than a cup of decaf, though I kept snorting it up and giving it a chance.

The waterbed store was two jobs before my indoor plant maintenance gig, and before a temporary agency sent me to type letters and answer phones all over Ann Arbor. It was before Michael and I moved into a crumbling west side rental while he finished graduate school. It was a shoddy house, with a lawn of sprawling tree roots instead of grass. We did their best with *ageratum* and *alyssum*, impressing neighbors who said nobody had gardened that yard in human memory.

Across the street was the Washtenaw Dairy, where seniors lined up each morning for lottery tickets and coffee. Michael and I ventured in for ice cream or the *Ann Arbor News* – we'd outgrown the insular campus stories of the *Michigan Daily*.

I was still working for Sarns, the heart-lung manufacturer that kept me on past my Manpower assignment. Michael still spent his days in class or doing homework at a desk with our cat Eartha pawing at his papers. I came home at 5:30, always sorry there wasn't a steaming pot roast or corn flake chicken on the table, as if my mother were in the kitchen, absently cooking and listening to NPR. Instead, Michael and I would pull together a meal to please our tastes and appease our vegetarian roommates: bulghar sautéed with veggies, or potato-zucchini pancakes.

It was a fall night when I couldn't quite bring myself to start chopping peppers. I collapsed on the beige couch that Michael and I had just pooled our money to buy. It was our second attempt at a couch. The first time, when we shared a basement apartment on the edge of a wood, it sent me straight into a commitment crisis, and I canceled the order. But this couch wasn't as threatening. It was a place to sit in an almost-adult living room, with my stereo perched on a china top that had been divorced from its bottom long ago.

I kicked off my shoes and unfolded the newspaper. I would forget the front page headlines once I read "Suicide at Ann Arbor Jail." Arrested on drug charges. Hanged himself. Leaves behind wife, twin girls.

Rick. The realization washed over me like nausea. I re-read the story for clues. I didn't register Michael's insistent question, "What should we make for dinner?"

I shook my head. "In the paper, did you read that story about the suicide at the jail?"

"No. What do you want to eat?"


"He was Doty's friend. The guy who would come to the waterbed store."

"What guy? Was he some kind of dealer?"

Michael rummaged in the fridge, pulled out yellow squash and onions, kale.

"No, just this guy with twin babies. He used to come in and we'd talk."

Michael pushed mugs around in the dish drainer to reach our one sharp knife.



"You never told me about any guy." His words were laced with anger.

I hadn't. I never told him about any guys. "He hung himself." I tried to remember something about his wife. Anything. Red hair; twins; daughters.

Gail Louise Siegel's work can be found in *The Mississippi Review*, *Post Road*, *Wigleaf*, *Juked*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *FRIgg*, *Quay*, *Juicebox*, *Brevity*, and elsewhere on the web, and in print. She lives just barely outside of Chicago, and has an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars.

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