

# The Renovator

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A short story by Bill Riddell – 12/7/2009. Visit <http://billriddell.com> for more.

Life, strangely enough, begins at birth, typically in a hospital. Yet for Stuart his awakening occurred at the age of 7, when his parents dragged him along to a weekend market. A strange sensation took hold of his body as he heard a book case cry out, desperate to be released from its state of gloom. Years of neglect had taken their toll, however he could see the beauty it once possessed and the potential that remained. Its once gleaming varnish had been battered by decades of faithful service, only to be cast aside.

A coffee table was discovered next. It no longer matched the decor of the owner's new home. "How could they just leave it outside?" he asked his parents. The table's once lacquered timber was now scarred by rain and bird shit.

Upon restoring a piece to its former glory Stuart felt like a hero healing the wounds of time by sanding and polishing.

His parents encouraged him, glad to see their only child finding a hobby other than reading. Other kids his age learned life lessons from playing sport and having petty squabbles. Stuart got his lessons from his mother at the dinner table, his father in their little workshop under the house and the books he devoured.

Stuart's father was a handyman and gladly passed on the little he knew about sanding back and polishing or painting timber, re-upholstering seats, filling dents and scratches.

From his mother he inherited the ever present need for perfection. She was an avid interior decorator, changing their house's furnishings every year or two and ensuring it was meticulously clean when not undergoing the latest revolution.

While his mother sought to create and maintain perfection, Stuart's passion was to start with a broken canvas. It gave him greater satisfaction and he liked that the used furniture had a story and soul.

While toiling in his workshop he would often consider what horrors the furniture had endured at the hands of its previous owners. Anger would simmer inside him at times - nothing brutal, but it was there. Each tear in the upholstery revealed some sordid affair and those dents and scratches in a table top revealed a man

both angry and neglecting. He talked to the furniture as he tended to its wounds, reassuring it that all would be well again.

People are the problem he often told the furniture. He was right.

Stuart's school years were spent in isolation, quarantined from the world. He was polite but withdrawn. While his classmates roamed the school grounds between classes, he was ensconced in the library, locked away. However he was sure the key to his escape was hidden amongst the books it also held prisoner.

His reading began with adventure, fantasy and sci-fi. Slowly it matured, crossing to non-fiction – the biographies of heroes and adventurers, and then growing again to absorb the knowledge of self improvement. Despite reading them all, from conquering your fears to public speaking, he was still unable to make friends, let alone influence people. The material was all inside his head, he understood the social missteps he was taking each day, yet he failed to put it to use. He was unable to transform himself in the same way he could transform those forlorn pieces of furniture. Unwilling to peel back the layers, repair the damage and correct the inherent flaws in his makeup.

With his parent's encouragement, Stuart sold his mended goods at the same market where he had discovered his infatuation with furniture just a year earlier. The market fostered in him a passion for business and it wasn't long until he was devouring books on the subject and paying close attention to furniture stores and other successful stalls at the market.

School took a back seat. He was smart, but grew bored, preferring to toil in the workshop than do his homework. His growing business was of greater interest than history and trigonometry. Expansion continued, selling his pieces to furniture stores and even creating an all natural furniture polish with wax from a local bee keeper.

As his peers progressed from high school to college Stuart became a full time business man. He passed on his methods of renovating furniture to staff, bought out a business he previously supplied and then set about renovating it.

Love and romance eluded him – friends too. Stuart figured if he could build his great company, the rest would take care of itself. His only relationships were professional. Each interaction became a chess-like process to get the most out of his staff, customers and suppliers.

Success continued, however he grew tired of the day to day. Stuart took a break and eventually sold the company. The process was then repeated with another furniture store and then a garden centre.

He was alive once again, yet it was eerily similar to the forlorn furniture he started with. Other failing businesses came along, were purchased, polished and sold once more. His wealth grew while his social life remained absent. The people he dealt with were just employees and business opponents. Along with a lawyer, bank manager and accountant they were all just obstacles and tools to craft his vision.

It wasn't until his early-thirties that he saw the human in someone other than his parents. Sophie was like the pretty girls in high school who coasted along. For some reason they never asked Stuart to help with their homework, but Sophie did. Her small shoe store was haemorrhaging with just a few months left until it bled her dry. She shared the same passion as Stuart to turn the company around and in him she found the knowledge to achieve it.

To Stuart's immense frustration it was purely platonic and even worse, strictly business. He found himself longing for some small talk, perhaps for the first time in his life, but was rejected at every attempt. Sophie had a busy social life to juggle along with her business.

He had become a consultant where he had hoped to become a lover. Eventually accepting the role, but on his terms. Stuart didn't just want to turn around Sophie's store, but also her life. The personal changes he insisted were for the good of her business. A culling of her social life he hoped would make her open up to him. When that failed he began asking personal questions that would 'unlock the hidden reasons why her business was failing', when his only interest was for them to show the way into her heart.

Their relationship continued unchanged for several months. Sophie's business gradually improved as Stuart became resigned to his fate. To celebrate her business finally breaking even she invited Stuart to her house for a thankyou dinner. When they sat down to eat the chicken tangine Sophie had prepared, Stuart looked at her with shock.

"You have one of my tables," he said. "I can't believe you have this table that I fixed probably 12 years ago."

“I know. My mother gave it to me when I finished university, it made this house a home,” Sophie said. “She recommended I get you to help with my store, she had a stall at the market close to yours.”

“I’m glad she brought us together and got you to take care of this table,” said Stuart.

“You’re welcome,” she said sincerely. “I can appreciate how much you love furniture, I feel the same way about shoes.”

“My grandfather was a cobbler. When I was little I would sit on a stool in his workshop as he repaired the shoes that others had destroyed and neglected. I wish I had the chance to learn from him before he died, I’d rather his job than peddling those new shoes.”

They talked about polishing the table and how Sophie would sometimes sit on her grandfather’s lap and polish shoes, before they were returned to their neglectful owners. She often lectured her customers about caring for their purchases and it hurt her to know the spiel fell on deaf ears.

Stuart sat smiling, watching her face, more animated than he had ever seen it. He realised slowly that the table at which he sat and had previously repaired, was the key to unlocking the heart of the woman he was falling in love with.

It could have been the white wine or the recognition of their similarities, but they began to gaze into each other’s eyes across the table. As Stuart lent across to refill her glass Sophie seized his face in her hands and pulled it to her lips, rising from her seat to meet him.

They fell in love, eventually sharing Stuart’s house, with their table taking pride of place. As they slowly peeled back each other’s glossy veneers they saw the flaws and damage in one another. Sophie observed that Stuart was a one dimensional person with an unhealthy obsession and in her he recognised an ugly addiction to drugs and alcohol. Fierce arguments were a regular occurrence. She hit him often, slapping him about the face and pounding his chest with loosely closed fists. He retaliated once, returning her slap. It shocked him, seeing the damage that he had caused, tears streaming down her face and the shocked expression she wore.

He grew tired of her antics, the disappearances, hangovers and deteriorating health. Her business was struggling again and Stuart was convinced she was taking money from it to score drugs. Rather than push her away it only made him want her more.

His relentless pursuit to fix her drove Sophie mad. She resented his father-like lectures and routinely tearing the house apart searching for her stashes of vodka and scotch. In return she would push his buttons whenever possible, by being rough with furniture - not using coasters, putting her feet up with shoes on.

Sophie had cooked dinner, putting a pot of soup on the table straight from the hot plate.

“Put a god damn placemat down,” Stuart said. “I can’t believe it.”

“You’d better believe it,” she said, gripping the pots handles and grinding it into the surface. She then picked up an ornate wooden placemat and broke it over her thigh in triumph.

“That’s what I think of you and your precious furniture,” said Sophie, seething with rage.

“Get out,” yelled Stuart. “Get out NOW!”

Sophie spun on her heels, grinning as she lifted a slender chair above her head and swung it down on the polished floor boards, shattering the chair. As the splinters settled she made strides towards the hallway. Stuart chased after her. He grabbed her shoulder from behind and flung her body backwards, crashing into the table.

Sophie turned back to see Stuart thrust the steak knife he was clutching into her chest – puncturing her heart. His obsession with furniture had unlocked her heart to him again, this time would prove fatal.

After thoroughly cleaning the floor where Sophie had bled to death and the steak knife, Stuart felt the urge to continue renovating. He repaired the chair and then, as his thoughts turned to what to renovate next, he broke down and wept. He had never seen a coffin in need of some repair. His greatest passion had killed the woman he loved.

THE END