

Against the Grain

by Anita Goveas

Copyright 2023 © by Anita Goveas. All rights reserved

Against the Grain

The cabinet is beautiful: solid doors, highly polished hinges, definitely exudes an ‘I am an important, highly polished piece of furniture’ smell, and Sabita is unmistakably stuck in it. She’s spent a long time perfecting that smell, distilling it down to essence of beeswax with a soupcon of unsatisfied termite, and fitting it into a spray bottle to apply whenever what she’s faking needed a bit more...personality. But when she was creating this apparently 19th century walnut cabinet, she hadn’t expected to need air holes. She wishes she still carried her pocket knife.

Of course, the faked furniture sells better than anything else. People preen when they discover a genuine Art Deco bedside table with minimal damage, their eyes widen, the corners of their mouths tuck up. They’ve done something clever that no one else could, they’ve triumphed. She keeps the prices low enough that they’d be cheating her if the pieces were real, but no one ever mentions that.

Her cheetah family sits on a shelf, a reminder of what the furniture-craving public do not want. And her father needs money for his medical bills and her brother wants to study to be an architect, and she’s got used to being warm enough to not wear a coat to bed and when someone challenges her, she’ll stop.

The shop doesn't lose money straight away, it creeps up in missed electricity payments and pleading phone calls to extend credit. She's still trying to impress her dependability on the world. Her carving gouge and pocket knife stay in the drawer.

Her parents moved back to Mangalore after her father's second stroke, after he lost the movement in his right arm and the ability to talk in sentences. He never finds out that she quit the law firm, although her mother probably suspects, locking the secret away with all their others. Her father writes letters to Sabita again, missives about the mongoose in the garden and expected rainfall and she puts them in the drawer with her old tools.

When someone requests a regency style mahogany cabinet, she spends a sleepless night searching through auction house catalogues, before she wonders if it wouldn't be quicker to make it herself. A challenge, not to be repeated. She's made copies before, of pieces she'd missed out at auction, or something she'd admired to try and recapture that joy of creation, when she thought she would bottle the smell of sawdust to dab on her wrists. She could always pretend to be fooled too if anyone suspects a fake. The £6000 in the shop bank account and the heating being turned back on feel like a dream.

After his first stroke, her father stops asking if she has any interesting clients. She tells her mother that it's fine for her to help out more in the shop, she's got time and she can practice her woodwork by pointing out all the details customers might miss. Let her brother concentrate on his art.

Some of their regular suppliers increase their prices, and without her father's talent for searching out bargains she finds it harder to source pieces from auctions. She leans anyway towards the pieces that need more restoration, that other people ignore. She carves out missing parts herself, a new leg on a Victorian beechwood chair, a new door on an inlaid walnut side cabinet. At first, she reduces the prices, points out her work but when she mixes up two chairs and no one notices she waits to see how long it will be before it's mentioned and she has to admit her mistake. Every day, she expects to be caught.

Sabita usually closes her tiny office a couple of hours after lunch, and so far no one has noticed. It's not the biggest law firm in Stevenage, but it's well established and attracts a range of eager graduates who never seem to stay long. Maybe it's the cases, heavy on land sales and divorces, most of which are hoarded by the partners *Handley, Handley and Bow*, and which Bow mainly phones in from

his yacht. Maybe it's that the office manager identifies them by the University they attended and Cambridge seems to get more cups of tea offered than Reading or Exeter. She keeps a hook knife and gouge in her oak-veneered desk, and the dolphins and cheetahs are no longer enough. When she slips away, she usually ends up in the furniture shop, helping polish the chairs and stools her uncle sends, and ignoring the small display of her unsold figures. The cheetah family sits bathed in light and speckled with dust and her father has hung her LLB on the wall behind, pinned in a marquetry frame.

Law school is a tornado of legal memos, torts, property divisions and not enough sleep. In between reading fifty pages of case law a day, Sabita whittles small figures of animals, dolphins and cheetahs, with her pocket knife. Animals that have oceans and savannahs to freely explore. She wakes up at least four mornings a week draped across *An Introduction to Tort Law* with a carving clutched so hard that wood grain has etched itself into her palm. She constantly writes notes to herself, go to Exeter library, buy milk, replace carving gouge, breathe. She wonders if she could ever sustain herself with these pieces that flow from her fingers, whether she could be more like her uncle who thrived in a space that he carved out for himself.

She phones her mother every day, but her father writes to her anyway,

missives about duty and setting examples and how her younger brother still spends every day drawing and hasn't settled his mind to be useful. Sometimes when she phones, she can hear them in the background, her brother's silences and her father's convictions. Her fingers carve a family of cheetahs, a small one with haunches girded, muscles poised to run, a larger one with a raised paw as if ready to pin it down and two medium-sized figures lying in long grass with their paws covering their eyes.

Woodwork is compulsory only for the boys of Year 9 so she needs a letter signed by her parents to explain the special circumstances. It's family tradition, she told her form tutor, I started working with wood as soon as I could hold a chisel. That wasn't enough.

It took planning and determination:

Step 1, pretend her after-school debate club was cancelled.

Step 2, sneak home to get her mum to sign it while her dad is still at the furniture shop.

Step 3, wash her hands thoroughly on Thursday so she doesn't smell of sawdust, a scent that her father avoids even though he sells furniture for 60 hours a week, even though it's a smell that she would gladly dab on her wrists and wear as

perfume.

She expects to get caught and almost confesses every Friday. But if there's anything her father talks about, it's tradition and family and maybe the way he sustains that is by only looking at what he wants to see.

The first thing Sabita ever makes is a whistle, sat on the floor of her Uncle Mingel's workshop in Mangalore, while he polishes something curved until it shines. She ran in here by mistake, escaping from her younger brother's relentless pursuit clutching a dead viper. The workshop is so quiet her breathing rasps in time with the scrape of her borrowed pocketknife and her uncle humming 'O saathi re'. She can smell beeswax and tobacco and the cardamon in her uncle's tea and pinewood on her fingers.

"I'm going to be a lawyer, Uncle, Papa says so."

"Acha, beta, but now just think about where you put that knife."

The bang of the door when Father bursts in echoes like a bucket accidentally knocked into a well. She drops the knife when he pulls her out by the elbow, and never finds it again.



Anita Goveas is British-Asian, London-based, and fuelled by strong coffee and paneer jalfrezi. She was first published in the 2016 London Short Story Prize anthology, most recently by the Cincinnati review. She's on the editorial team at Flashback Fiction, and is a submissions reader for The Selkie. She tweets erratically @coffeeandpaneer. Her debut flash collection, 'Families and other natural disasters', is available from Reflex Press, and links to her stories are at <https://coffeeandpaneer.wordpress.com>