Bedroom set furnishes family with a lifetime of memories

My grandmother Gussie saw it for the first time in a store window on Grand Street, on the Lower East Side in New York City. From the outside looking in, the English marquetry that defined the bedroom set was the epitome of beauty - one she hoped to be able to afford when she married Isaac, her longtime love. It would be a retreat to shut out the world, where handmade feather pillows would be piled high, and a cotton duvet of her own making beckoned at the end of the day.

Isaac and Gussie came to this country as teenagers, full of hopes and dreams of a new life in America. Isaac, a man with golden hands, was an inventor. To make ends meet, he bought old furniture and refinished it for resale - eventually making enough to buy the set his fiancée had so long admired. He told her that to spend the money on a couch would be pointless, because it would only wear with age and have to be replaced. But to spend it on a bedroom set - that was an investment that would last a lifetime.

In their apartment, the bedroom set served as a sanctuary in sickness and in health - witnessing the birth of two children and weathering its share of arguments. It moved with them twice, eventually to their own Tudor-style house in Kew Gardens Hills, where my mother grew up. When she was a teenager, the bed was passed on to her. She used it as a closet, trying on clothes to make her look sophisticated, letting them pile high on the bed, dramatically flinging herself onto its worn mattress if the day took a disappointing turn. Eventually, she married and moved away, returning to visit with her husband, my father, where they would sleep in her old room, sharing the bed that suddenly seemed small. At 6-foot-2, he lay diagonally, his feet hanging over the side. Sometimes, my brother, sister and I would lie on it too, looking at photographs taken from shoeboxes stored in the room - of family members lost in the war.

Then, when I was a teenager, my grandfather died, and Nana sold the house I had come to love. When she asked me what I would like, I knew right away - it was the bed.

Like an old friend, the bed has traveled with me as my life has changed, then changed again, bringing with it a sense of place, of home and of family. Once on a dark night - the only night I've ever been drunk - it enveloped me, stood stalwart as my head seemingly spun in circles.

Thirty-three years later, several pieces of the bedroom set are scattered in different parts of my house, with the bed having taken up residence in my oldest son's room. Long, lean and 17, he lies diagonally, his size 13.5 feet dangling over the side. When I see him there fast asleep, I know he is embraced and protected by the love of all those before him, his great-grandparents, grandparents and parents. My hope is that one day, his children will be able to tell this bedtime story of how the secret to a long and happy marriage is not to invest in a couch, but in a bedroom set, because like love, it should last a lifetime. And then some.

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