

The New York Times

HOUSE PROUD

## Back Off Buatta: Craig Is My Decorator

**SOFA**

Nora DeLigter's sofa, purchased for \$800 at craigslist.com, was given a new identity with a canvas slipcover by M&A Decorators. The sofa's previous owner was preparing to move abroad.

**FOOTSTOOL**

A gilt-legged stool with an embroidered silk cushion was tattered but only \$40. It was sold online by a woman who was saying good riddance to every gift her former husband, who had a taste for antique European furniture, had given her.

**ENSEMBLE**

A store sale advertised online yielded an \$85 dressmaker's dummy and a \$400 cache of vintage French trimmings. The dummy, shown wearing a Geoffrey Beene shawl, is said to have modeled for Valentino.



By PENELOPE GREEN

NEWTOWN, Conn.

**B**RENDA CULLERTON, an advertising copywriter and an author, is a connoisseur of stories, a reader so voracious that she hides her habit from her husband, Richard DeLigter, a commercial film director, by stuffing bags of new books into the corners of their Manhattan loft. Indeed, Mr. DeLigter once had a T-shirt made for her that read, "Why Read When You Can Skim?"

And so it was that in March, when Ms. Cullerton and Mr. DeLigter bought a 1930's Cape Cod house here in southwestern Connecticut as a weekend retreat for themselves and their children — Jack, 18, and Nora, 13 — they filled the place with stories. Other people's stories, that is, courtesy of craigslist.org, the online bazaar.

With no attic or storage bins stuffed with family heirlooms to pick over, buying furnishings through craigslist was a way to fill the rooms of the house, which cost \$500,000, quickly and cheaply. Since the Web site is a marketplace on the ancient model — chaotic, unruly and vividly human (you can find a lunchtime tryst as easily as a couch) — every transaction, Ms. Cullerton said, came with a yarn.

Before long she found herself on a listening tour of New Yorkers on the cusp of a life change. If eBay is merely a feast for gluttons, a groaning table of stuff, craigslist is "an atlas for life," she said. Unlike transactions on eBay, those on craigslist usually require face-to-face encounters, so each of her purchases (she spent less than \$4,000) yielded a moment — or more — with someone eager to share the back story. The larger the object, the more dramatic the tale.

It was one woman's furniture sale, listed online as "My Boyfriend Is a Lying Cheat," that originally lured Ms. Cullerton into her nocturnal hunts. (In addition to having a book habit, she is insomniac.) She scanned craigslist from 3 a.m. on — most postings went up between 10:30 p.m. and 1 a.m., she said — and would be on a doorstep by 10 the same morning, ready for an earful. "They couldn't wait to tell you," she said, "either because they were so depressed or so elated."

Ms. Cullerton bought a set of delicate

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**FRAME** A \$90 gilt frame came from the same source as the little gilt-legged stool. "I'm going totally modern," its seller declared. And then, like many others at craigslist, she moved on.



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**SECONDHAND ROSES**  
Brenda Cullerton and Richard DeLigter, with their daughter, Nora, furnished their weekend house, far left, with help from craigslist. They spent about \$4,000, not including many gallons of paint.

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**SOFANO. 2**  
A seller scrambling to put together a deposit on an apartment sold his Mitchell Gold sofa (since re-covered) for \$1,000.



**ARMCHAIRS**  
A pair of armchairs by Shabby Chic, \$550 from a couple who were renovating, have new slipcovers in velvet and a linen-silk blend.



**NEEDED A GOOD HOME**  
Ms. Cullerton helped a graphic novelist shed his great-aunt's Richard Ginori tea service (\$150), above left, and a Murano glass ash-tray (\$5), inset right, and she relieved an opera singer — en route home to Berlin — of his Wedgwood plates (eight for \$60), below left. An embroidered Madonna, center left, emerged from storage.



**ARMOIRE**  
A woman making room for a new lover in her West Side apartment let her gentleman's armoire go for \$60. Ms. Cullerton gave it a coat of glossy white and put it in her son's bedroom.



**SOFANO. 3**  
A Wall Street worker who lost his job gave up his Jennifer Convertible for \$400 and an ottoman for \$20. Ms. Cullerton slipcovered them and put them in a former media room.

Photographs by Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

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blue and gold Wedgwood plates with forget-me-nots on them (eight for \$60) from a 40-something opera singer on the Upper West Side. He was living in a decrepit classic eight ("The ceilings!" Ms. Cullerton said. "I'd never seen a classic eight!") with his former boyfriend. They had broken up after 24 years but hadn't been able to afford to move. "They were living in this very divided space," she said. "I think they'd been very happy once."

The singer was selling everything he owned to pay for a move to Berlin. He spoke to Ms. Cullerton for over an hour, and when she counted her bills into his hand he exclaimed, "Oh man, I'm going to the movies!"

A Turkish kilim (\$75) came from a young woman who told Ms. Cullerton she was poised to reinvent herself in Los Angeles. She had been making party gift bags for 10 years. "The party's over," she said.

Every surface of her tiny apartment near the Holland Tunnel was sanded, stenciled, wallpapered or otherwise worked over — as distressed as its occupant. "She really seemed at the end of her tether," said Ms. Cullerton, who noted bookshelves filled with self-help primers on anger management and toxin removal.

A woman in the midst of a nasty divorce was offloading every gift her husband, a man with a taste for antique European furniture, had given her. Ms. Cullerton bought a gilt frame (\$90) and a little gilt-legged stool with a tattered embroidered silk cushion (\$40). "I'm going totally modern," the woman said. "Getting rid of every trace of him."

A Shabby Chic couch was the first item Ms. Cullerton bought through craigslist, from a young banker with a loft near Wall Street. (Its owner was moving abroad.) "My sin," she called it, sounding like Julia

Marchmain in "Brideshead Revisited." Here's why. In the spring of 2005, Sam Swope, a friend of 25 years and a fellow writer, sent her an e-mail message with a link to a picture of the couch for her aesthetic approval. It turned out he didn't have the money (\$900) to buy it. Ms. Cullerton did, and wanted it, badly. Decorously, she waited a week, and then pounced without telling Mr. Swope.

"It was the first piece I slipcovered," she said. "To hide my sin. Of course the first time he saw it, he knew. Every time I sit down on it I feel guilty."

One morning in early September Mr. Swope's most recent book, "I Am a Pencil: A Teacher, His Kids and Their World of Stories" (Henry Holt, 2004), was displayed on the little table in front of the offending couch. (Down-filled and covered in red and white circus stripes of heavy Donghia cotton, it was preternaturally comfy.)

Ms. Cullerton sought out rich, hot colors — in paint and in slipcovers — as an in-

## Secondhand furniture, bought online and aching to tell its tale.

pensive way to add character to her new house. The master bedroom is deep purple ("The color formerly known as Prince," she called it) with grape trim; Nora's is a bordello pink watered down with lots of white; Jack's room is like a present, with wide royal-blue and white stripes and shiny oil-based red paint on the trim and doors. The "media room" is Tiffany blue with shiny black trim. (While the place is wired like crazy, Ms. Cullerton said, "we don't actually own any media.")

Mr. DeLigter wants a pool, so Ms. Culler-

ton painted the concrete floor of a screened porch pool-blue as a sop to his wishes. "I would prefer the real thing and am stocking up on Lotto cards," Mr. DeLigter said.

Ms. Cullerton is an unlikely homemaker, itchy to travel, suspicious of rooted spaces with things like yards and dry basements. While her children's friends spent summers on the beach, Nora and Jack have spent theirs in Mongolian yurts, on the trans-Mongolian railway, camped out in Russian dachas and on Cuban farms. Not that they've ever complained, Ms. Cullerton said.

Ms. Cullerton spent five years on her own memoir, "The Nearly Departed: Or, My Family and Other Foreigners" (Little, Brown, 2003), a hilarious and harrowing coming-to-terms tale of a gothic childhood in Danbury, Conn.: "The Ice Storm" meets "The Addams Family." Her family home there was as divided as Cold War Berlin — literally. Her mother built a cinder-block wall through the middle of the house, sep-

arating her own space from her husband's, a curious alternative to divorce. Ms. Cullerton is still stunned, after a life on the move, to be "settling" in Newtown, 15 miles from her family home.

Though Newtown comes with a good story, too. On particularly bad days, she said, Ms. Cullerton's mother would howl, "That's it kids, you're going to drive me to Newtown." Until the mid-1990's, Newtown was the site of the Fairfield Hills Hospital, a vast mental hospital sprawling over more than 180 acres.

Ms. Cullerton said she "never in a million years dreamed of going back 'home,' that is, anywhere near Connecticut."

"Here I am traveling the same road back that led me away, and I'm actually happy about it," she continued. "I have good company." She gestured inside the house, to her newly acquired furniture, each rich in provenance, and now richly colored, too.

"That's the proof," she said, "that it is possible to write the next chapter."



## Paint Isn't Love: You Can Say You're Sorry

"COLOR isn't like marrying the wrong guy," said Brenda Cullerton, who used paint to make an unremarkable house remarkable. "If you don't like it you can change it."

Kellie Downes, an associate producer for Real Productions, a film company founded by Ms. Cullerton's husband, Richard DeLigter, moved into the house temporarily last April with her mother and her uncle, and together they painted it stem to stern in three weeks. At the end of each day she took a photograph of the work in progress with her cellphone and sent it to Ms. Cullerton by e-mail. "That way if we got anything wrong," Ms. Cullerton said, "we could make corrections."

"There was no real color scheme," she added. "Mostly it was about exploring extremes." Unless otherwise noted, all paints are from Benjamin Moore (benjaminmoore.com) and have a semigloss or high-gloss finish. The living room is painted Crisp Green with Shalimar trim. The blue stripes in Jack Deligter's bedroom are Evening Magic, the white is Super White; the trim and doors in his room are Rembrandt Red oil-based paint by Schreuder (merrillpaint.com/schreuder\_paint.htm). Nora Deligter's bedroom, at left, is Go Girl, toned down with a lot of Super White. The media-free media room is Ocean Park blue with Black Brilliant Enamel oil-based trim from Schreuder.

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