

A Tale of Six Cane Chairs by Stephen Remedios

□About nine days ago, my wife Ray, our boys and I returned to our 17th floor flat in Mumbai after 3 weeks in Bangalore. We opened the door to find a thin film of dust on the door, cobwebs on the ceiling and a few ants in a neat line on the kitchen table. The air in the house was stale, and the wash that was hung out on the day that I had left was hanging limp from the clothes line. Both of us were dreading the prospect of having to whip the house into order with the two boys running around. Being the fastidious mother that she is she got down to swabbing the whole place clean while I whisked the boys out for a walk in the compound so she could work uninterrupted.

□The next morning I picked up a dusting cloth and began to wipe down the cane chairs. Ray had already removed all the cushion covers and put them in the washing machine. The cushions lay piled up in a corner of the hall room. The 6 cane chairs scattered haphazardly across the living room floor was reminiscent of the look a flat takes when one is packing and moving house. I got into a comfortable position so as to be able to clean all the narrow pieces of cane that are fashioned into the chairs. But before I go any further, I must acquaint you with the history of this special set of furniture.

□The chairs were first purchased in Calcutta in the year 1975 when my father shifted into his flat in the city for the princely consideration of 75 Rupees (less than \$2 today). Over the next 25 years the chairs moved from Calcutta to Hyderabad to Bangalore to Madurai to Bangalore. In 2002, when I set up my first house in Chennai my folks transported the chairs there. The chairs have since made the journey between Chennai and Mumbai twice over and currently sit on the 17th floor in Andheri. So these pieces of cane are obviously more than well traveled chairs. They are almost a part of the family!

□In the summer of 2005, things weren't looking very good for me. A broken relationship, a deadlock at work, a growing dependence on alcohol and tobacco all made for a downward spiral that I experienced every moment but couldn't snap out of. I was almost at breaking point when my mother decided to pay me a visit, for like only mothers can sense, she figured out from a 1000 miles away that everything wasn't as rosy as I was making it out to be over the telephone. On the first evening of her visit she tried to get me talking about where I was at in life, what was working and what wasn't. I resisted, was evasive in my responses and tried every trick in the book to keep the façade up. I thought I had succeeded.

□When I got back from work the next evening, my small hall room in 34, Shangri La resembled a painter's workshop. The smell of distemper and drying paint greeted me even before I got out of the lift. As I walked into the house I gathered that my mom had undertaken the ridiculous. She had resolved to repaint every single one of those cane chairs herself every evening at home. Over the next 4 days she painstakingly sat on the

ground till her limbs ached, pursuing perfection in an art she had never practiced up to that point in her life. By the end of the week, the chairs looked brand new. The house looked brighter and to add that little zing to things she had bought a few flowers on the way back from church which were in a vase on the table.

□ Somehow, over the hours spent painting what she was actually doing was standing witness to the situation I was in. In the hours spent in silence she was letting me know that she was there for me even if I didn't want to talk. She was screaming 'I UNDERSTAND' without saying a word. After a long spell of time away from home, I experienced the unconditional, mindful, total love that only a parent can provide. And in that experience my life was transformed. 5 days on I was talking possibilities and after a good sob, feeling much more optimistic about the future.

□ I often consider what drives a person to suicide, particularly with the increasing frequency of bizarre deaths that get reported in the press. Successful engineers in the US, mother of 2 children, 14 year old school boy. What drives them to do something so extreme? I'm going to attempt a OTYNTK (One Thing You Need To Know).

□ People commit suicide when they truly believe that no one understands them or stands witness to their feelings / situation any more.

□ To get to this place, you go through a journey. A journey that starts with complete and unconditional love from your parents. From there on, somewhere along the way things take a turn for the worse, and if you don't have a regenerative community to paint chairs till you are ready to talk, it's a fast ride down hill to the point of no return. The corollary of course is People who feel loved, understood and cared for are unlikely to be suicidal.

□ As I make my way forward to the present, I begin to notice the detail in the painting. The strokes of the brush, fragments of the brush that got left behind in the paint and solidified and become a part of the chair over time. I ponder the definition of perfection and conclude that anything done with love and passion and an honest heart is perfect. My mother is no painter, and there are certainly flaws in the texture of the chairs, but this to me is perfect. I close my eyes and say a quick prayer of Thanksgiving. I recognize that I am at the start of another journey now that I am decided on pursuing my passion, and ask for the courage and strength to stay the course.

□ As I sink into one of the cane chairs later that evening after they have all been wiped down, and have clean covers, I can still feel the comforting embrace of my mother's company from those days she spent with me. All too often we forget that the two unconditional votes you get in life are always those of your parents... As I glance over to my two boys seated across the room, I remind myself of the considerable responsibility of always being present to their experiences, and receptive to their emotional needs.