Ann

The things that share our lives

Showing a friend of mine around the family house, my father is, uncharacteristically, close to tears as he talks about chairs. He is telling her the histories of the armchairs and couches arranged around the fireplace, focussing on one in particular - the armchair he sat in as a student. These chairs, my friend realises, are loved. And it is not for their aesthetic or antique value that they are loved, but because they have been used, because they have been lived in. You can see this just by looking at them - they are not there for decoration or display, even though they are in the front hall, and, after my mother's flower arrangements, the first things that a visitor is likely to notice. These are comfortable, inviting chairs, well worn, but not at all worn-out, for, as is also immediately obvious, these chairs have been well cared for. My father's story-telling confirms all of this: these chairs are loved for the connections they embody, for the family occasions and social gatherings they've participated in, for the generations that have sat in them in this room and other rooms before it, for the home they have helped make. They are loved for the life in them.

But this life, sustained with my parents' care, is now under threat. For, after forty years of living there, my parents are leaving the house and garden to which they are very attached. They know intimately every plant in their acre-

large garden, and every thing, however small, in every cupboard in the house. They love and care for these things. But this is why they have come to recognise, sadly, that they must move. Caring for things and seeing plants flourish are at the centre of their lives, but this house and garden are too big for them to manage any more. They are no longer able to provide, with any ease, the care and attention called for by the house and garden, and the thought of the place deteriorating for want of care is distressing to them. Moving to a smaller place now means that that they can leave their old place in a good state, and be in sufficiently good health themselves to take pleasure in a new place. Nevertheless, in this move, they are facing loss.

While many of their closest possessions - the furniture in their bedroom and the dining-room, for instance - can move with them, (indeed, my father is helping design the new house with particular pieces of furniture in mind), not everything will be able to be accommodated in this house. Not everything that they love. What is to become of the tables and chairs, crockery and glasses, chests and cupboards, for which no space can be found? Every piece of furniture has a story, my father says. What will happen to these stories now? How will they be told, heard? Thus this move has brought deeper concerns to the fore: What is to become of these things after they die? In my father's tears is the question: 'Who will love these

chairs when I have gone?' His mortality is mixed up with that of the chairs that have shared his life.

And so, at a recent family discussion about matters of moving, we, their four children, reassured our parents that every thing that was important to them would be found a home. We would make commitments to particular things, to care for them and ensure their life's continuation, while other things would be given as gifts to people. Thus, in the process of our parents' moving, the significance of relationships with the things that share our lives has slowly been dawning on us: the idea of an heirloom has taken on new life.

For me, this dawning began about a year ago. When asked by my parents what I would like for a Christmas present, I plucked up the courage to say that I would like some of their cutlery, if there were any pieces for which they no longer had any use. For some time I have wanted to supplement my six piece set, a present given to me by my parents over twenty years ago now, but have been at a loss as to where to find the sort of cutlery that felt right. I sensed that, however much I was prepared to pay, I wouldn't find in shops the cutlery of silver and bone that felt right between my fingers, that was the right weight, shape and size - cutlery that I wanted to share with

friends and food. The cutlery in the servery drawers felt right though, I could eat with this.

To my surprise my parents were delighted by this request. An assortment of well-used knives, forks, spoons was wrapped and delivered to my place on their next visit to my place, a two hour plane trip away. The story of each set was told as I unpacked it and carefully laid it in its new drawer. I asked for instructions on 'cleaning the silver', remembering the ritual from childhood.

My hesitation in making this request, I realize, had come of a misplaced sense of propriety, that it might seem greedy to say 'I would like that'. Retrospectively, I don't find my parents' response surprising. Indeed, I now see just how important it is to say 'I would like that', that it is a matter of responsibility. Now, we children have come to recognise that we are, in a way, obliged to say what we would like, and that in doing so, we are saying 'I will care for that'. Our parents' sense of relief is enormous: they can mourn, begin to let go of a life they've led in the knowledge that it will continue in other ways, through their children. And we have come to learn about asking for things graciously, that in receiving there is a giving. As heirlooms, the life of these things will go on. The cutlery carries with it all the parties given by my parents; it will also be given a new life in my pleasure of cooking for friends. My parents' pleasure in hosting gatherings - hence the concern for

the dining-room furniture - will live on through my relationship with these knives and forks.

This attitude towards things is neither silly sentimentality nor projection of human qualities onto inanimate objects. I can hear sceptics saying 'they are only things'. But in failing to respect the life of things, such a view is also diminishing to the human life that it values over all else. For, even with apparently inanimate objects, we participate in a life that is bigger than our own particularity. When we open to things, when we feel the life in them, the mystery, when we recognise their mortality and tend to their needs, when we recognise the soul of things, then our humanity is expanded too.

The love of things is life-giving. My parents (who, as doctors, are not exactly sympathetic to the mystical) explicitly speak of the spirit of gardens, referring at once to 'nurturing the garden' and 'the garden making you feel alive'. But as their emotional responses suggest, they also experience such enlivening relations with the things in their house. They have made a life together, a home together; they inhabit each other. My father's tears are not just for the symbolic value of the chairs or for what they represent of him ('Will the chairs be loved: will I be remembered?), but for the lives of the chairs themselves, which include, without being reduced to, something of his own life. This is evident in our parents' insistence that sets of dining-

room chairs, many with seat covers embroidered by them, not be broken up. Their concern is less for a sense of order, than the integrity of the chairs: breaking up a set would fracture their connected lives.

In taking up the responsibility to care for their valued things we will be preserving not just memories but the spirit of a household. We will be honouring a living relation, a relation that has given life to our parents and that will live on and transform in the life that we share with these things. Hearkening to their stories might help enrich our understanding of the ways in which our particular lives connect with the lives of others, how, in our love of the ordinary things of everyday life, it is possible to glimpse the meeting of history and eternity.