

Your main commentary should be focused on *modal constructions*. Other topics may also be addressed.

5 'You know that woman from New York, that Abigail Jones, who spoke on "Decorating with Antiques" yesterday at the society?' She asked as we stood between two beds of spaded earth and sodden compost.

'Mm.'

'Well, I was talking to her after the lecture, and I invited her to come for brunch this morning and see the house.'

10 'Mm? And how did that go?'

'It was awful, Janet. I don't mean—' Buffy hunched her shoulders and swallowed as if she were about to sob. 'I mean, Mrs Jones was very pleasant. She admired my Hepplewhite table and chairs; and she was very nice about the canopy bed in the blue room too, though I felt I had to tell her that one of the posts wasn't original. But what she liked best was Aunt Betsy's highboy.'

'Oh yes?'

20 'She thought it was a really fine piece. I told her we'd always believed it was made in Newport, but Mrs Jones thought Salem was more likely. Well that naturally made me uneasy.'

'What? I mean, why?'

25 'Because of the witches, you know.' Buffy gave her nervous giggle. Then Mrs Jones said she hoped I was taking good care of the highboy. So of course I told her I was. Mrs Jones said she could see that, but what I should realise was that my piece was unique, with the carved feathering of the legs, and what looked like all the original hardware. It really ought to be in a museum, she said. I tried to stop her, because I could tell the highboy was getting upset.'

30 'Upset?' I laughed, because I still assumed that it was a joke. 'Why should it be upset? I should think it would be pleased to be admired by an expert.'

35 'But don't you see, Janet?' Buffy almost wailed. 'It didn't know about museums before. It didn't realise that there were places where it could be well taken care of and perfectly safe for, well, almost forever. It wouldn't know about them, you see, because when pieces of furniture go to a museum they don't come back to tell the others. It's like going to heaven, I suppose. Only now the highboy knows, that's what it will want.'

40 'But a piece of furniture can't force you to send it to a museum,' I protested, thinking how crazy this conversation would sound to anyone who didn't know Buffy.

45 'Oh, can't it.' She brushed some wispy curls out of her face. 'You don't know what it can do, Janet. None of us does. There've been things I didn't tell you about – But never mind that. Only in fairness I must say I'm beginning to have a different idea of why Aunt Betsy didn't leave the highboy to me in the first place. I don't think it was because of the family name at all. I think she was trying to protect me.' She giggled with a sound like ice cracking.

50 'Really, Buffy—' Wearily, warily, I played along. 'If it's as clever as you say, the highboy must know Mrs Jones was just being polite. She didn't really mean—'

55 'But she did, you see. She said that if I ever thought of donating the piece to a museum, where it could be really well cared for, she hoped I would let her know. I tried to change the subject, but I couldn't. She went on telling me how there was always the danger of fire or theft in a private home. She said home instead of house, that's the kind of woman she is.' Buffy giggled miserably. 'Then she started to talk about tax deductions, and said she knew of several places that would be interested. I didn't know what to do. I told her that if I did ever decide to part with that highboy I'd probably give it to our Historical Society.'

'Well, of course you could,' I suggested. 'If you felt—'

65 'But it doesn't matter now,' Buffy interrupted, putting a small cold hand on my wrist. 'I was weak for a moment, but I'm not going to let it push me around. I've worked out what to do to protect myself: I'm changing my will. I called Toni Stevenson already, and I'm going straight over to her office after you leave.'

'You're willing the highboy to the Historical Society?' I asked.

70 'Well, maybe eventually, if I have to. Not outright; heavens no. That would be fatal. For the moment I'm going to leave it to Bobby's nephew Fred. But only in case of my accidental death.' Behind her distracted wisps of hair, Buffy gave a peculiar little smile.

'Death!' I swallowed. 'You don't really think—'