

# Assembly Instructions

by [Kim Liao](#) • [Short Short](#) • [Issue 35](#) • 06.24.2013

MALM. ANEBODA. HEMNES. BORGSJÖ. VALLVIK. NYVOLL. These are my friends, we know each other intimately; I speak their language, Swedish. I no longer refer to the little androgynous dudes on the numbered white pages of the assembly instructions, who motion but do not speak, and I work best alone, not with the suggested buddy. All I need is a Swedish name, and I break out my trusty hammer, Phillips head screwdriver, Allen wrench, and voila! A desk, a bookshelf, a bed. A whole room of modern comfort and convenience.

“What did we ever do before Ikea?” Customers gush in wondrous glee as they walk by me. They say the word “Ikea” as if could be chocolate, or the internet, or sliced bread, or crack cocaine. One can spot a first time Ikea-goer in Home Office all the way from Kitchen, or rather, hear; the shrillness carries across in the showroom.

I walk by them, discreetly clad in my yellow polo t-shirt, tidying up the display areas—replacing a pillow that wandered off into a different living room, turning lamps back on, remaking a bed. Parents, never let your children into those beds! Would you let your child lay down on the subway floor? I know those cotton sheets look appealing, but goofy multicolored numbers will not inoculate your child against the diseases of the public schools of Brooklyn.

People. Luckily, I don’t have to talk to them yet. When I get promoted to “sales staff,” I’ll get a pay raise of 50 cents per hour, which I’m pretty sure isn’t worth it. Right now I just take care of the furniture, and after the store closes, I assemble new pieces. It’s the only thing I like about my job.

Estela, the interior designer who designs our sections of the showroom, Bedding, Dining Room, and Home Office, will gather me and the other “carpenters”—we all assemble the new furniture and help her with the displays. “Okay boys—and girl—” she’ll nod to me, “here’s the new layout for our summer showroom. We’re doing an Independence Day theme—for example, in the dining section, ‘celebrate your independence from mundane tableware!’ So I’m thinking a lot of patterns, reds, whites, blues. Let’s set up a few desks with the work pushed aside because the owner left midway through the day to go to the beach. Just bring the completed pieces back here and I’ll show you how I want them arranged.”

She hands us the list and the four guys and I divide it up. There are about 10 large pieces and a handful of smaller items. We like to race, to see who can finish the most objects first. If you have enough time to steal someone’s untouched piece and assemble it for him, then he has to buy you a drink later. I always give the boys the first pick of the furniture. They laugh, and dive for the smallest boxes; I always take the largest box, though, if I can. Two reasons for this: I usually win—I was an industrial design major in college and have my MFA in sculpture—but also, I prefer to work in larger scales. Also, size is not a measure of complexity: small packages often have finicky swinging cabinet doors or drawers.

I glance briefly at the assembly instructions before throwing them away. Sometimes there’s a faster or more elegant way. Then I pull out my tools, line them up, and line up all of the furniture pieces. The dim orange work lights drench us in strange not-quite-night netherworldliness. Surrounded by fake abandoned Home Offices, I get to work. Pegs go in holes, particleboard sheets line up at right angles, bolts thread through nuts, screws cut into wood or click into clever metal holders, and slowly, the outline and the shape of the beast emerges. I make sure it is perfect, and then tighten up every last screw as far as it will go. A resounding bang of my hammer means the piece is ready to be unleashed into the cruel world of the showroom, the endless petting zoo of prospective buyers.

At first the guys scoffed at having a girl carpenter on the after-hours team, but then they realized that this is my medium—fitting pieces together, building objects.

Once, in graduate school, my sculpture teacher gave us an assignment in which he dumped several boxes of Ikea furniture pieces onto the studio floor and ripped up the instructions, co-mingling the components of several unknowable items into a jumbled pile. “Use these as raw materials,” he said. “These are raw materials, for your generation—it’s your equivalent of chopping down a tree. Use these bits of the most ubiquitous bookshelves and tables and chairs, the ones that everyone under the age of 45 has had at least once in their lives.”

We went to work for a week on our sculptures, and I thought about his claim. I thought of all of my temporary apartments in all of my temporary cities and suburbs and towns, and how my roommates and I would move into an empty space, fill it with cheap Ikea furniture or junk we bought on Craigslist or hauled in off the street. We would use and abuse and sometimes wreck the stuff, and then put it back out on the street, or sell it on Craigslist again, or god forbid, haul it to the next temporary empty box.

My project at the end of the week was a dollhouse, whose furnishings would put a Barbie Dreamhouse to shame. There was microscopic molding on the ceiling and miniature French doors, with tiny little joints and translucent panes of laminate. The furniture was ornate: the tables and chairs, bookshelves, and a grandfather clock were all spray painted, shellacked, and stained. I found little scraps of silk fabric in the fashion design department and upholstered couches, cushions, and ottomans. I made the most beautiful, painstaking pieces I could, and I dressed one of the rooms to the hilt. I shined a bright light on the tableau, and my professor and fellow students all craned their necks to look, drawing their noses up to the cutaway floor and walls. “But Ella,” my professor, said, straightening back up, “the other rooms are empty and dark and the walls are painted black. Did you run out of time?”

“No, I wanted to leave the other rooms empty. Because for every constructed, composed space, there’s a void lurking behind it.”

“Hmmm,” he said.

It was such a successful sculptural statement that now I get to work at Ikea, doomed to rot among mass-produced assemble-it-yourself fake wood skeletons. At least we all go out for beers after the last piece is set for the night. Scores from the furniture race are settled, and we can relax. Even Estela can’t wait to get out. “God, the new pieces this season are hideous,” she says over pints at the closest Red Hook bar. The locals nod to us in our terrible yellow shirts; they’ve quietly accepted the invasion of their turf by the furniture and meatball international conglomerate. “Independence from mundane tableware! I mean, if I had any of that tableware in my house, I’d just kill myself.”

I nod and agree. I don’t tell her that in my sublet room, my third perch in six months of living in New York City, I have a BEDDINGE futon, a MICHKE desk, and an EXPEDIT bookshelf unit, not to mention LAGRA and RUTBO lamps. “Sometimes I have nightmares that the little dudes from the assembly instructions are chasing me, and I can’t find Part C! And I’m missing a screw!”

“Ella, you’ve got a screw loose,” she laughs, and we toast. “Can you imagine, some people pay to get their Ikea shit put together. They don’t even know how to follow the simplest instructions.”

I think of the dollhouse, and of how many dark and empty rooms there still are in my life. “Yeah,” I say, “people are lazy. ‘What did I ever do without Ikea?!’”

“There’s this thing, and it’s called taste, and artistic choice,” Estela says. “Before Ikea, there was this thing called wooden furniture, and it filled your home and you treasured it.”

“Because you sure as hell couldn’t move it!”

“And you didn’t want to.”

“Someday, I aspire to have a real piece of furniture, with a history, and a future,” I say.

“To real furniture! To history! To the future!”

Then we stumble out of the bar and into the inky dark Red Hook night, to wander home and sleep and come back to do it all again tomorrow.



### Kim Liao

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Kim Liao was a 2010-2011 Fulbright Taiwan Research Fellow, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She received her MFA at Emerson College, and her creative nonfiction has appeared in *Fourth River*, *Hippocampus*, *Cha: A Journal of Asian Literature*, *Newtown Literary*, and others. She is currently finishing her first book, *In Search of Formosa*, a family memoir and adventure story. Kim lives in New York City with her umbrella tree plant.