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## How I stole a Yale chair

Brandt Goldstein



## FEATURES

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By [Brandt Goldstein](#) | Jan/Feb 2011

Brandt Goldstein '92JD, the author of *Storming the Court*, is at work on a nonfiction legal thriller and a novel.



Mark Ostow

Brandt Goldstein '92JD poses with his purloined chair in his New York apartment. [View full image](#)

What have *you* stolen from Yale? Send your stories and photos of purloined furniture, dishes, and other Yaleiana to [alumnimag@yale.edu](mailto:alumnimag@yale.edu).

**After 20 years, it's time to come clean.** As I write these words, I'm sitting on a chair stolen from Yale.

I didn't steal it—at least not at first. The chair came with the apartment that I rented as a second-year law student in the fall of 1990. Left by some Yalie who lived there before me, it's a sturdy piece, with a hardwood frame, a dark leather (or leather-like) seat, and a firm back secured by twin rows of brass tacks.

The Law School dining hall had chairs that were similar enough to rouse my suspicions. But when I ventured over to Commons for lunch one day, any doubt was erased: I saw hundreds of exact replicas of “my” chair. It was definitely stolen property.

Being short of cash and needing a solid desk chair, I decided to use it just for the year. And while the chair had seen better days—the wood was scuffed, the seat had started to peel and crinkle—I found it was perfectly designed for long hours of study. It invited good posture when I was fresh and was stable enough to handle slouching and crossed-leg hunching when I grew tired. I liked the chair so much that I broke my silent pledge to bring it back to campus at the end of the year. Instead, I took it with me to my new apartment. When I leave New Haven, I thought to myself. That's when I'll return it.

But by the time graduation rolled around in May 1992, I felt too attached to the chair to let it go. After all, I'd largely earned my JD sitting on it. So I loaded it into a small U-Haul and drove off to my new job in Washington, DC. I used the chair at my home desk in Washington for 14 years, and when I moved to New York City in 2006, I again took it along.

The irony of all this hasn't escaped me: I'm a Yale law graduate breaking the law. At least, I think I'm breaking it. The truth is, I'm not really sure what the law of Connecticut says about possession of stolen property (which should only reinforce my alma mater's reputation for teaching Big Ideas, not black-letter rules). Of course, there's the old chestnut that possession is nine-tenths of the law. But my gut tells me that this isn't really *my* chair.

So why have I kept it so long? Initially, I guess, the chair somehow connected me to the things I missed about Yale—Friday afternoon football games with my classmates, late nights at Yorkside Pizza, doughnuts (halved and fried in butter) at the Doodle. Over the years, though, my stolen chair has accreted much greater meaning, and the truth is that today, parting with it would be very difficult. The chair has literally supported me for my entire writing career—a career that began during law school, when I realized I wasn't a lawyer at heart.

I was sitting on this chair while I wrote my first short story, my first screenplay, and my first chapters of a novel; while I read my first rejection letters; and, perhaps most important, while I struggled to finish my first book. Fittingly, that book was, in large part, about Yale—the story of how my classmates took the U.S. government to court to free innocent refugees held at Guantánamo in the early 1990s. Part of my challenge was to recreate the atmosphere of the Law School—and sitting every day on the same chair I'd used back then surely must have helped me.

Today, my old Yale chair is in bad shape. The legs are splintered and the varnish is wearing away. The seat upholstery is shredded, and I've covered the loose spring coils with a couple of cloth napkins from IKEA. Friends say it looks like something I retrieved from a dumpster. But when I sit down to work each day, I don't see an object for the trash heap. I see an old friend, a constant companion that has been with me through the ups and downs of what is, in the end, a terribly solitary profession.

As part of a recent Law School fund-raising campaign, I pledged an amount that I thought would cover several new chairs. Even so, for the punishment to fit the crime, I guess I should donate a few copies of each book I write to the Yale library.

And maybe one day, many years from now, I could get the chair properly fixed up, carve "Brandt Goldstein" in some hidden place, and drop it off in the Law School library. It would be nice to have my name on a chair at Yale.

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