The stranger

TREASURES AND TRASH.

by **CHARLOTTE HSU**

The door opens at 9 a.m. and I step into a stranger's home. The first thing I see is a heap of sock monkeys ($6 ea.) on a wingback chair ($125), perched atop a braided rug ($345).

It's Day 2 of a huge estate sale in Akron, and just about everything that isn't anchored to the wall has a price tag on it.

Everywhere, there is clinking and banging, the sounds of people rifling through someone else's possessions. In the kitchen, a man clutches two model airplanes while scrutinizing a frying pan.

"It looks like nothing was even sold yesterday," exclaims a woman in a beige parka holding a candlestick (candle attached).

"Oh my God," she says, confiding with a friend on the phone. "The doll that I had when I was a kid is here."

There are, in fact, hundreds of dolls. The former residents of this home were collectors. Red-haired Raggedy Anns peer at shoppers trolling a bedroom, while in the basement, an army of Cabbage Patch dolls stands guard. Teddy bears are going for $6 or $8 apiece, according to the masking tape labels on the bottoms of their soft plush feet.

As I move through this mountain, this mass, of stuff, I wonder: a lifetime of accumulations—wedding presents, birthday gifts, impulse buys—can be liquidated in a matter of days.

I've spent the past few years trying to minimize the number of things I own, hoping to avoid the needless clutter that seems to accumulate so easily in our lives: Books that go unread. Dresses that go unworn. Artwork that never graces any wall. I'd like to purge my house—my life—of these things.

Given that philosophy, I thought I would be repulsed by the extravagance of a sale like this one.

Instead, I find myself holding a small toy sheep ($2, but really $1.60 because everything is 20 percent off today). It's six inches long, with a squishy white coat, and it looks handmade, possibly by the woman who used to live here. It wears a disapproving expression. I'm in love immediately.

I can't explain, exactly, what draws me to this sheep. I know that objects don't have souls. I know they're not alive. But this sheep is looking straight at me. "Take me home!" it seems to be saying, its wistful, painted eyes meeting mine. Maybe the child in me still wants to believe the "Toy Story" version of the world, a place where objects have awesome, secret lives.

I pick the sheep up and carry it around. I put it down. I hide it in a cache of other stuffed creatures, hoping that no one else will see it while I deliberate over whether to purchase it.

People who frequent estate sales describe a frenzied atmosphere. Think piranhas. Shoppers line up at the door each morning, waiting to get in first. There are antique dealers, art collectors, history buffs, families looking for furniture, and owners of resale shops that rely on estate sales for much of their inventory. An oft-heard refrain is that the good stuff goes on Day 1.

I find it a little morbid: All these people sifting through the treasures (and trash) of the departed. The bargain hunting, the haggling, the attempt to assign value to another person's possessions—my first impression, which will change, is that these acts are crass.

I look around.

Teapot: $15. Orange juice squeezer: $16. Hardcover book: $4. Softcover book: $3. Hen candy dish: $16 (green), $12 (blue). Jeweled birdcage: $80. Wood rolling pin: $6. Old-fashioned ice cream cups: $4 ea.

"Goodbye Stranger" by Supertramp is playing on a vintage-style Thomas radio (also available, though I fail to note the price).

Two weeks earlier, I attended a much smaller estate sale on a placid street in Amherst. It looked like the home of an older gentleman. Judging from his belongings, he was a proud Buffalonian who liked guns and sailing.

By 10 a.m., many items had been claimed. These included a quartet of semi-ratty bar stools, metal with lime-green tops, that someone salvaged from the garage. In the living room, a Kittinger brand couch, worn but lovely, went immediately for about $650.

What struck me most, however, was not the appetite of the buyers, but the objects they had come to investigate.

The number of people who crowded into the basement to check out the tools was astonishing. At one point, seven or eight people squeezed into one narrow room, studying

illustration by **TIM STASZAK**

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wrenches, hammers, power drills and a medley of other utilitarian-looking items I couldn't identify.

One patron wanted to know where the barometers were: "I saw in the paper there were barometers for sale. Do you know what room they're in?"

Barometers. And tools. I smile a little. This is what the shoppers have come to see.

The objects we value in life aren't always the things that other people want. I wonder what the fellow who lived here would have saved in a fire. What were *his* favorite possessions? The things that made *him* happy? Probably not the barometers.

In the end, an object's true value has nothing to do with price or rarity or whether it's in mint condition or not. Instead, our memories are what breathe life and love into the inanimate.

I think about what I would save in a fire: The dirty, battered Totoro doll that my sister, Caroline, and I sewed when we were 10 or 11, living in Taipei with our grandparents, who are both dead now. I'd reach for my torn up copy of Thomas Pynchon's "V."

I'd pull a painting of a bird of paradise off the wall, thinking of the artist, my middle and high school classmate Tina, whom I grew up with and still consider a dear friend though we rarely talk anymore.

It makes me happy, this small idea—that an object's real meaning lies in its story.

At the sale at Akron, I circle back to see if the toy sheep is still there.

It is! I reach for it.

I'm told that the lady who used to live here crafted many of the keepsakes now on display. I imagine her sitting by the window, the morning light spilling in, her fingers fastening tiny buttons onto tiny doll jackets, or cutting pieces of fabric to sew into a quilt.

Though I was initially put off by the idea of an estate sale, it is comforting to know that the items in this home will not be going into a Dumpster. Thousands of people will move through the house in four days, admiring and rescuing the objects that the residents made and collected.

When I die, I think to myself, I hope that Totoro is lucky enough to find a new home.

Both George Armbruster, the liquidator running this sale, and Sandra Ziemer, a competing liquidator who ran the Amherst sale, shared with me a piece of wisdom that will stay with me for a long time.

Use your fine things, they said. Eat dinner on your most beautiful china. Wear your most exquisite dress.

After years in the business, both have seen all manner of marvelous objects stashed away in the dark corners of attics and basements.

I vow that the sheep will not become one of these forgotten treasures—an object without a story. When I get home, I make a spot for it on my bedroom dresser. Here, it will greet me each morning with its solemn look and cardboard ears, making me laugh and opening my day with a modicum of joy.