

THE AVENUE, selections

Selling Snowballs in the Snow

My friend once told me about a friend of hers who said it takes an object between people to establish any form of communication, so when it snowed, he made snowballs, and lined them up neatly in rows on a piece of cardboard, for sale on the sidewalk, the way they do in New York City. If you wonder how much he priced them at or if anybody bought any—well I didn't ask. My mother often asks me questions like that, the ones I never thought to ask myself, and it kind of annoys me. Makes me feel like the story is full of holes. So I want to establish right now, if you were curious about how much the snowballs were selling for, perhaps you shouldn't read this story, as you will probably never be satisfied.

I can picture those snowballs for sale, like how books and other items are, placed on the sidewalk near clothes hanging on the fence in the makeshift markets that pop up in certain areas, which come and go over time. I visited New York a while ago, stayed in one of the abandoned buildings people turned into homes and ate dinner served by a man in a Teepee in a field of rubble. I followed the spray painted footsteps to Adam Purple's garden.

I went to London once in the '80s, to one of the large and long-standing jumble sales where you can find wonderful things and also a street, with a song about it—*Mulberry? Twopenny Lane?* I can't remember. But there was a street with shoe stores that provided a dream come true to an eighteen-year-old punk wannabe. Wow, the shoes they had. Flat black leather boots with pointy toes, all kinds of buckles, silver skulls, and everything you would never see in the mall at that time.

I remember the first time I saw an American mall. I'd lived in Germany for four years, my dad working for the government. I was like an army brat. The FBI once approached him to work for them but those cats were just too weird and made both my parents shiver. So anyway, we were in Germany and my dad was writing manuals for the soldiers on how to operate tanks safely. We lived there from when I was eight to twelve. I could remember back to seeing Santa Claus in an American mall when I was little, and throwing pennies in a fountain to make a wish, and the mannequins in the front window of a man's clothing store where my mother and I were shopping for my father's shirts. Those mannequins scared the crap out of me! I think one of the clerks told me that they came alive when they turned out the lights at night. But besides Santa Claus, the wishing well, and those eerie mannequins, I had no real memories of shopping at a mall. In Germany there were little stores—an open mall I guess you could say—with a cobblestone street for pedestrians only, no cars, and there were booths outside where we got the best bratwurst on hard rolls with mustard. When I came back to America at twelve, I was so excited to be able to buy Bubblicious in various flavors like grape. It had just come out, or if it had been out for a few years, it certainly wasn't available in Germany. Before that, bubble gum had only one flavor—"bubble gum" flavor. And we

American kids in Germany, speaking only English, hanging out with each other, and going to school on base, proudly thought of Bubblelicious as part of our American identity. Dipping our fingers in Kool-Aid (and for me Jell-O since my mother didn't buy Kool-Aid) was as close as we got to having a choice in various colored and flavored sugar. America, besides being the home of magnificent bubble gum, was also the place where you could choose from endless flavors of Bonnie Bell lip smackers and lip gloss. Once back in the States, I sent my best friend a care package (that is how the army brats in Europe got their Bubblelicious and Pop Rocks, or from those newly arriving or back from a holiday in the States. It was heavy playground barter.) I also indulged in purchasing all the bottles of clear nail polish with different color glitter in it that I could manage. These were magic times, I think they only lasted six months, when all the girls developed except me and wore bras and Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff" came out and we went to roller disco. After my first trip to the mall, I dreamed that night of its splendor. The nail polishes with glitter were upside down, swirling, with light shining out of them. The mall was a castle of colorful abundance, a display of great magnitude; and outside was the creepy dark, the cornfields, old house, monsters and ghosts. I grew up fast in America. I had my mom sew a bra flat so flat-chested me wasn't exposed in the locker room, and started stealing stuff from the mall with my new best friend including Aerosmith and ACDC records: *Disco sucks!*

So that's kinda the story of that. But I feel compelled to tell you one or two more things about me. I was in love with Dawn Dolls as a child. I always loved dolls and stuffed animals and movies and books and had a room full of things, but these Dawn Dolls were

especially wonderful. They were smaller than my Malibu Barbies. They were these little fantastic '60s mod dolls. I think they were models. They had lots and lots of clothes. Things like miniskirts, white or black go-go boots, vinyl raincoats, leopard fur belts and matching hats. They had blue eye shadow, fake eyelashes that stuck out, not painted on—great eyelashes—and straight long hair to their butts. I wished I had hair like that. My favorites were Angie the brunette and Gloria the red head. I've never really cared for blondes. So I had one of each, but not Dale the Black doll with short hair, and I had a little Evel Knievel figure who I knew was cheesy even then with his painted on hair but who was the right size to be a boyfriend—that was really important—but I wanted more. I wanted more clothes for my Dawn Dolls. And I think the fact that I never saw them in a store again, they didn't last too long on the market or something, made me long to see them again. So one night I had a dream there were all these Dawn Dolls and accessories in this toy store and I was so excited! I didn't have any money, though. So I was stealing them, putting everything in my pockets, trying to get out the store. It was a passionate dream. It was real. I mean, I made a moral choice in that dream and sometimes dreams are for real. I would have done anything to get more Dawn Dolls and accessories. When I woke up empty handed I was so sad. I still remember my childish desire for “something” strongly to this day. To collect the rare and desired.

We moved every year and packed our household into an unlimited number of boxes because the government paid for shipping. My mother thought it was best to take “everything” everywhere we went so at least we would have stability in this one respect. Our home would stay the same with our growing collection of souvenirs accompanying

us. These boxes and the process of moving was so familiar to me that at age seven I wished to unbury my beloved pet cat and repack her in a box of dirt so the grave could travel with us. I'm still a bit odd in that respect because I expect everything to change, I have no idea what will happen in the future, but if you place a piece of furniture in the best location for it in the room, I would like it to stay there. Never put it somewhere else. If anyone moves my sofa to another wall, I feel so disturbed I can't concentrate.

Somehow a box of my dolls did get lost in one last move when I was a teenager and I lost my Dawn Dolls. I bought another one, as a young adult, for a bit of a mark up, in an antique street fair—although it was a 1960s doll, not exactly antique. It felt so good to have little Angie in my hands again—like I was the mole husband and she was my Thumbelina. There's such a familiarity to matter and to form. It brings you back, sometimes years back. It triggers something in you. Yes, it helps you to remember. To be in the present and feel something from the past, which didn't travel the same way as you did—not shedding cells. It's good to be able to see, smell, and hold—hold something in your hands. Sometimes you need an object to travel from two states, to communicate from within yourself.

Snake Food

There used to be a pet store. I remembered the tiny white mice there suckling their even-tinier pink babies in glass aquariums. There were snakes and gold fish. The place was full of cages and tanks. It kind of smelled. The owner always made jokes with me when I came in to buy litter for the rats. Rats that I'd bought in such a pet store before. They

were supposed to be snake food, but my daughter fell in love with them. Tiny baby rats that tumbled and played with each other, looked up at us with curiosity. I was tired of saying no to her so I said yes.

Who knew that rats could be so sweet? When she lost interest in them I took them on as my pets. She became older and embarrassed of them, saw them as disgusting.

Houdini was the best one. She loved for me to pet her more than she loved even to eat. She closed her eyes with pleasure and click her teeth when I pet her head. That's to say she loved me a lot, for there is not much most rats like better than eating. To feed tiny creatures is a joy. To pass them a grape between the bars and see their tiny hands take it with greedy pleasure, as if holding a watermelon.

After the rats died I had no one to feed my tiny crumbs to. It made me very sad. A big fat crumb on the kitchen table was now meaningless. My daughter once accused me of feeding the rats better than I fed her. Because I would make them little sandwiches, like peanut butter, cheese, and broccoli in a small piece of pita bread.

Anyway. I would go to the pet store to buy rat litter. I felt lucky to have a pet store so near my house. I could walk out the back alley and around the corner and it was right there.

I didn't really go in there after the rats died.

When it was to be turned into a record store, it looked so different. Cleared out and cleaned out: I saw how long the adjoining rooms were, like how the typical Baltimore row houses are, but appearing longer and wider than when it had been a maze of cages. I watched with interest as the space progressed. One morning as I was walking

by, I looked in the window and laughed to see the new shop owner asleep on the sofa. He was working hard. He probably fell asleep there after working through the night a lot, I thought. *It will be nice to have a record store so near my house.*

Sit and Wait

Working at the shop felt like being the person who sits the longest among a grouping of things, like one is in a box herself, behind the counter, sanctioned to be of assistance and the one you pay. Payment is an obligation to the customer and the employee, a ritual that can be executed well or sloppy. The cash register rings its bell, the slip is spit out, a pen is offered, the deal is mediated—finished, wrapped, arranged to be delivered, and farewell wishes exchanged, out the door. While the shop girl stays behind, her main job seems to be to sit and wait. Buyers don't come every hour after all. Sometimes the day is full of lookers, (strolling "holiday traffic") sometimes the store is empty for stretches and then unexpectedly full as a party walks in, loudly underway, and doesn't know the stillness that lay before them.

Love and Commerce

I didn't set my coffee down on the sidewalk, but I considered. It was hard to get the key into the great big lock, it slid in a bit sideways, and I needed two hands to open the heavy roll gate—but there was blood on the sidewalk, still red. Usually I didn't notice it unless

Mack pointed the spots out to me—usually almost rust colored—spilled from a fight outside the bar the night before.

This morning it was impossible to stop a morning drunk from being a gentleman. I let him slide up the gate for me. He pushed it all the way up when I'd just wanted it half way up so I could duck under it. Now I'd have to get the stepladder to pull it back down.

I was just going in to call Mack and get some supplies to make a sign: *Won't open till 2 today—sorry.* And in little words surrounded by two hearts I added, *everyone, even Mattie, is at an auction.*

On the way to the auction, Mack told me a story about going to an auction where everything was Spaghetti-O's. The Chef Boyardee family went bankrupt and they were auctioning off all their stuff. "Spaghetti-O's!" we laughed.

He said that Laurel would join us later. She was running around crazy.

"She's always slow," I said.

And Mack nodded. "We all have our handicaps."

When we entered the auction house Mack introduced me to the doorman, Carmine (whispering in my ear first, "*He has an art history degree—he used to be great with paintings.*") "This is her first auction."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Carmine said dryly. "You should have brought her someplace better." He explained that he'd been working here for the last two weeks straight. It felt like we were entering a neighborhood bar, or a fish tank of piranhas, and I was the only thing fresh in the room. I eyed him up and down as he eyed me as well.

Carmine reminded me of a man I once knew who was a doorman for a strip club on The Block and I don't know why but I thought of something he once told me: "If you want to know how to tell a street person from someone with money, look down. Always judge people by their shoes."

Carmine had shiny shoes and wore a black suit, like someone would for court. Or the men who stand outside the funeral home next to the library on Falls Road. Bored, tired, and slightly annoyed in suits. You can tell the men that have humor when it's been a long day. The moments that make each day worthwhile are always framed in such wide expanses of dullness and pain. And no matter what your job, death or trying to prevent it, the day goes on just the same when it's your daily grind.

So Mack walked around, never sitting still and with his good eye he sorted out what was worth what and he whispered his running commentary to me: "That's the owner—he's bitter and mean. The men who move furniture here are nice—we joke with each other." He was excited like at a horse race—or on Wall Street—and he was a good guy to be with. He brought me here as a kindness, as all I did these days was dust. Or sit bored behind the counter. There was a lot of boredom to sit waiting through a day at the auction, too. But it was a new boredom.

When Laurel got there and Mack started to leave, he said, "Try the crab cakes! They're great!"

I was surprised to find vendors here also selling delicious homemade chocolate-mint chip cookies and hot cider.

Laurel and I sat and the bids went fast like sing-song. You wanted to land on the right bid when you stuck your number up. I watched the furniture come up and paid attention to what it went for, but I got so tired waiting for them to be done with the Rose Medallion.

Louise XI French stuff is really unpopular and goes for little. An American primitive pine cabinet went for a steal before we could figure out what shape it was in. I thought maybe I could get a bargain on some of the artwork that someone wouldn't notice. But it's never that way with art, Laurel said. Furniture, yes. That's why we did furniture. But the art world was very competitive, and art easier to move. All the pieces that caught my eye and I hoped other people wouldn't notice still went up into the hundreds of dollars. But we got one painting, holding our hand closed when no one bid and when he dropped the bid from a hundred to fifty, we took it.

I looked around at all of us. We looked no different than anyone else, but everyone here knew value and barter. Those more in the know knew how much they didn't know. It was endless, whether the subject was glass or silver.

At the end of the day, hours after the auction, in the loneliness of my evening, I stopped and thought of it all: The trading of things at auction; the folks in the stands selling crab cakes and cookies working for tips and dollars. And people in the streets. The kids who tore off the "Open" flag from the French antique store next to us and dragged it down the sidewalk stepping on it like they were overthrowing aristocrats during the French Revolution and then stuffed it in the gate of the pawn shop just a few stores past us. *What can you say?* There have always been the small time punks and hoodlums. I thought, the kids have a right to it. Flags were meant to be dragged, even the flags of commerce of the hardworking small business owner. It's a tiny tax collected by the

young. I thought about Laurel's new shade of lipstick she showed me and how she told me she hadn't had sex for six years. All work. All worry. The groups that gathered on the sidewalk for Sunday brunch and the people who served them; the baristas and the bartenders; boredom, tips, and laughter. Just wanting to go home. And then when we're home we just wanted to get out of the house. Trading and distilling: rent and traffic: and all that it takes to get back so little. *This whole city! My whole life!*

And what did it all mean to me? What did any of it mean? My service mistaken for friendship, the wood carved to house clothing, and the frame to hold a bed. Emotion saved for once and all—snatched out of the air and out of the hearts: vision shaped into form through the hands of artists, into concrete things. What did the objects in scrapbooks and the objects on walls mean? What did the buildings, streets, and newspaper all mean? None of it meant anything to me. Because if I had a choice, there was only one thing I wanted, one thing that meant anything to me: I was softness crying out for softness; my naked skin on his naked skin and nothing between us.

Love was the only thing that didn't seem empty, like a joke, biding its time because it had too. Things to pay for: rise and shine for.

Wouldn't you trade all this commerce for a kiss? Wouldn't you trade it for love? To curl up in bed and tell each other how you really felt? I couldn't be the only who felt stuck doing these pointless things. The only one who felt frustrated and alone in the middle of so much, unwanted and unwanting of anything besides my heart's desire? For all I cared, for all that felt truly real—I thought, *We're all selling snowballs in the snow, selling our bodies and our minds, buying things with prices much too high.*

Childhood is over

We went through two trunks of toys, trying to sort out what to save and what to give away but decided to let them all go: the tiny Poly Pocket house that opened up with even tinier furnishings, a refrigerator that opened to reveal microscopic groceries; bejeweled unicorn riders; purple haired ebony skinned mermaids; tiny dolls with long hair in rainbow colors; animals, wolfs, elephants, and other creatures; hand-made clothes, little furniture, and flowers that opened up for fairy houses. All her toys, it hurt me to let go of them. The Puerto Rican looking Police Officer Barbie (from the 1993 “Career” series) that came in a navy cop outfit—yes a cop uniform, but it looked butch and she was the prettiest Barbie I have ever seen— a short gold and white dress as well; the American Indian Barbie with the tattoos, Jasmine with her hair all in braids, although her head broke off, Aladdin and his flying rug, the tiger and a monkey. On her way to take the bus to Baltimore City Community College, my daughter tells me, “I have happy memories and that’s enough”. She insists that she doesn’t want me to hold onto any of her toys for her, that we store too much away, and we need to let go. She doesn’t want them anymore.

My mother, my mother’s mother, and I have all saved every toy we have ever had. Why do we save all our toys so? It started with my grandmother; with a salivating hunger that verged on chocoholism, sugar addiction and need for preciousness, handed down in her daughter’s lineage like thievery. Her mother didn’t have a childhood, came to a new country without a mother, and set out to give her daughters what she hadn’t had herself, which included doll babies that she loved almost as much as they did. We needed to

possess these tiny things. My first baby doll I loved him with such tenderness: Baby Michael, he had a plastic head, yawning mouth, little plastic hands and cloth body – my mother sewed him a new cloth body because I carried him around so much and he became soiled - *dirty baby* my aunt called him, my father's mother gave him to me and my mother's side of the family had no value for any thing from his side of family. Only we were the important ones. And our treasures needed to be valued and saved, forever. We put emotion into stuffing and imagination where others had less. I'm 40 years old and I can't let go of little Angie, her fuchsia mini-dress with puffy clear acetate sleeves and fuchsia polka dots long gone, the yellow lingerie I had to beg my mother to buy for my Malibu Barbie, missing, but I still have enough remnants to hold onto, a frog carved of fungus from the Black Forrest and a tiny glass kitten from Venice with glass whiskers and a glass mouse in her mouth. Everywhere we traveled we purchased a token. I was a middle class child of the 70's – Mister Bubble, The Coppertone Girl, Scooby Do, and The Jetsons numbered among my childhood friends. Because only my childhood was middle class, I'm like a Russian princess taken down; it's all in the past, the precious plastic past. I played alone. I played with toys. Childhood is over, and although my families basements and attics were always so rich—I don't think I can save everything anymore, that there is any more reason to save so many things, to save my toys and my daughter's toys, when I always made sure she had the world, and people; the ocean, and music---to keep her company.

And so our Toys“R”Us dreams are packed in a chest, with Evel Knievel and Agent 007 cars, tiny little collections of buttons, jewels, plastic flowers and sparkly things—to take

to the Free Store. They have a warehouse now, and set up once a month in a different poor neighborhood, displaying all their donated articles nicely, just like you were shopping except you can take what you want for free: they say there is enough for everyone if we all share with each other. And so we are bringing all my daughters toys there, some of her best and even some of my collection, it's a giant broken treasure box of childhood. I hope someone opens it up and gasps with pleasure, that some of the toys are adopted and loved again, as much as they once were. It is a little different when it's in a flea market or a thrift store; especially in a Free Store compared to those that are freshly shelved with commercials and a line to stand in and bell to ring if your caught stealing. People are taught not to value what they can have for free. But I remember, years back, the children sorting through our garbage and throwing it up in the air like Christmas, wild to find the buried toys that I had thrown away when we were packing to leave Baltimore and my daughter was in kindergarten. I had thrown away some of her broken toys, snuck them in the refuse since we couldn't carry it all and I knew she would object. When I put out the bags and bags of trash from our households debris that night I didn't think about the kids who played in the alley. In the morning, she looked out the window of our third floor apartment, down in horror to the snow banks of used maxi-pads and egg shells wreckage, where her former play-mates had struck gold, digging through the discarded trash to find broken plastic bows without their rubber arrows. "My toys!" she screeched. I don't think I will ever live that down.

If kids had that much fun with broken toys how much joy they will have to discover all her best ones.

It's a whole lot different when a parent cleans up before a child is ready, and you don't have to let go of everything, its great to keep collections from childhood—but today when my daughter said she wanted to let it all go, I had to learn to let go too. We hold onto too much. Everyday is a little death and how many memories do I hold onto before the museum I live in is too full? I am choosing to go a different way, then my pack rat tendencies, and it's strange but feels right. Finally this family trend that is sweeping through us all, has struck me, its last hold out packrat—purging.

The Price of Spinach

I used to believe we could change things for the better—that the impossible was possible, that I wasn't alone. So I won't talk about that anymore, not the wars or the protests or thinking I might be able to change something for the better. Instead I'll talk about the price of spinach and this work-a-day world. And love. Because love is always something that you hope for, always something that seems like it might be attainable, even though by all logic I've slipped away from that potential, too. Love: I mean that one plus one equals two romantic equation of love. There's always love left for a good cup of coffee. Or company in having a drink on your day off working a dead end job. And that's how it began in a way. With my day off, having nothing to do; and a feeling in my heart of longing for something.