

AUCTION SALE

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PICKUP TRUCKS AND cars are parked along each side of the road as it crests the next ridge, and people are walking slowly, with deliberate nonchalance, to a house with its belongings strewn all over the front yard. No one wants to appear eager. Dad steers our truck into a big turn, and I stretch my hand out from the cab, touching the tops of weeds growing by the curve's inside shoulder. We turn off through an open gate into a freshly mowed field, where more trucks and cars are parked in weaving, uneven lines. Two boys wearing white tee shirts and frowns in the sun direct us with lazy gestures.

Dad parks on an incline, and the truck shimmies and knocks before he shuts off the engine. He looks at me and grins a collaborative grin that says: "If your mother'd heard that, I'd get no peace until I'd taken this truck in to the shop." Then he lights a cigarette, having held off smoking during the drive at my request. I ask if we should leave the truck open, meaning unlocked. Dad answers, "Sure, it's hot." Of course, I think, how quickly I forget these things. He never locks the truck. I roll my window back down again, and jump out of the cab.

We've come here to attend an auction sale; in my life we've been to many at such remote Blue Ridge Mountain farms, and I still go along with Dad when I visit my home in the summer. We're not big buyers. I've often wondered about the reasons why we go; it isn't a topic of conversation that would naturally occur between my father and me.

My earliest memories of estate auctions are of ones involving widowed aunts in my father's family, aunts and great aunts with old funny names like Mannie, Hallie, Mint, Annie Payne. They were sad occasions; I remember making footprints in the dust of high-ceilinged, empty rooms, looking at soot rings left from stove pipes on plastered chimneys, and rain, and grey-faced adults carrying boxes. That's why I always search the grounds when we first arrive at an auction, to spot those people whose property is being sold, in hopes

of good circumstances for them. Often a family will hover together, off from the crowd a little, and watch while relatives, neighbors and strangers sniff over their things, or their Granny's things, putting money value on her lace curtains, or her old tin ladle. If I see feelings of intrusion and sellout in their faces, I wait for Dad to look his fill, and we leave.

Slowly, taking it all in, we walk toward a card table that sits precariously in the sloped yard, beside the auctioneer's station wagon. There, a broad ruddy woman takes down our names on a list and gives us white cards with our bidding numbers on them. Dad gabs with the lady; she is the wife of someone he knows. She says that the eldest son is at long last selling his deceased parents' property at auction today. He has leased out the land for years, since none of the family live here anymore. But the time to sell has finally come. "That's too bad," Dad says. The ruddy lady vaguely waves in the family's direction as she tells us their story, and I watch them talking amiably together. They seem fine, so I relax.

Dad and I wander through the belongings laid across the spacious yard. It's best to peruse the goods beforehand; there's no time after the bidding starts. I see items I always see, reliably unwanted by the family now, for all but their cash value. Aluminum pots, mismatched crockery, silverplate, boxes of quilt squares, plastic flowers, old books, yards of unsewn cloth, cases of Mason jars, large pocketbooks, religious pictures in thin frames. Lumped together in no logical way, these things are sold in units called "boxes of contents." There are many wooden chairs, ladder-backed and spool-backed, with cane, rush or needlepoint bottoms. Footstools, a slumped upholstered couch, an old hall tree in need of repair, a nineteen-inch color television, a cherry washstand, a formica-topped kitchen table, a piesafe under four coats of aged enamel paint, several walnut framed mirrors with little silver left.

"Washstand's not bad," I say to Dad under my breath as we head toward the barn. He waits until we've cleared the crowd to reply.

"Reminds me of a pretty little washstand Aunt Hallie had. I've wondered more'n once who bought it at her auction. You thinking of bidding on this one?"

I shrug and say, "I'll have to look at it again," practicing my noncommittal stance. It can be costly to show intent; hawkers mix with the crowd, and watch and listen, ready to push a higher bid out of anyone who's betrayed an itch for possession.

We enter the shade of the tall barn roof. Dad always looks at the farm tools, and if they're sound and not too rusty, he can't resist bidding on numerous ones he doesn't need. I flick a tick off my arm.

In the barn stand two tractors, John Deeres. Piles of tools, coils of barbed wire, sacks of knotted baling twine, kerosene lanterns, a broken grain cradle, some wormy firewood, trash in the corners.

“What’s this, Dad?”

“That’s an old tap and die set.”

“And what did they use this for?”

“Well I’m not sure; looks to be some kind of cobbler’s tool . . .”

“How about this old thing?”

“Law, I haven’t seen one like this in years. That’s an old timey cider press.” Dad shows me how it once worked, and I drink it in, asking question after question. The knowledge is so effortlessly his, collected over his boyhood on a Botetourt County farm, that was itself sold at auction years before I was born. He drawls casual answers to my queries, as if unaware of his daughter’s thirst for her father’s history.

The bidding interrupts us. The auctioneer begins at the barn, selling the livestock first. I walk back down to the house, not caring to see the hawkers run the hot calves up and down in front of the crowd. When I pass by the washstand again, I decide that I’ll definitely place a bid on it.

The Church of Christ ladies are setting up their refreshment tables, boiling hot dogs on a hot plate and heating buns in a steamer. They’ve always got ham sandwiches too, and sausage biscuits wrapped in wax paper, and chess pie and chocolate cup cakes with icing already droopy in the sun. Then there’s coffee strong enough to stand alone, and bottles of Coke on ice to wash it all down with. No one resists the refreshment stand—the aromas will see to that—and your first purchase tastes so remarkably good that in a while, you inevitably decide to buy another. By then, however, the ladies are likely to have sold every morsel of food to their captive customers, and have started packing up for the day, unplugging the tangle of extension cords draped into the yard from the house, tossing out coffee grounds under a bush. I plan ahead and buy two Cokes, two pieces of pie and a hot dog with ketchup for Dad.

The square farmhouse and its acreage are auctioned next. Bidding is sluggish, low; the auctioneer turns to the eldest son, who shakes his head. I feel uncomfortable for him, hoping that there is a higher closed bid that he’s counting on. The auctioneer pleads. The crowd mumbles, unaffected. The property is not sold. Quickly the auctioneer blares into his loudspeaker, redirects attention to the personal property, and as he moves down into the yard and stands on the open tailgate of his station wagon, the crowd’s interest stirs and builds. Here, finally, is what the antique dealers, the professors’ wives from the nearest college town, the depression glass collectors and the old

book hounds have all been waiting for.

The auctioneer picks up a set of dishes, doesn't dally long, sells them fast then on to the next, keeps the crowd craning their necks, up on their toes. Bids are brisk; the hawkers go to work, fixing their eyes on their bidders in the crowd, yupping and howling with lightning speed at every gesture of intent. I buy a box of contents for two dollars. Dad howdees with the man standing beside us, bids twice on some brass drawer pulls, lets them go. Most of the wooden chairs sell low.

Suddenly, the washstand is up. They say you should never bid first, and wear a blank face when you do, indicating your bid with a small gesture. I stand ready, but immediately the bids soar over the top limit I can pay. Soon it is a contest between two women who seem to know nothing of bidders' finesse. They lean to the auctioneer, eyeing each other, waving their bidding numbers riotously. The crowd hums, fully entertained. For a moment everyone is caught in the spectacle, waiting for someone to fold. Abruptly one woman drops out at five hundred.

"Five hunerd once, five hunerd is the bid, liddle lady, y'all done? Fi-fi-five hunerd twice . . . SOLD to Number Twenty-six for a five hunerd dolla beeull."

Exclamations are all around me. "Can you beat that, five hundred dollars for a little old washstand?" "Well, that gal was set on havin' it at any price I reckon."

I feel dazed by the sun, and more disappointed than I care to admit. I know better than to set my hopes on an auction item. Isn't it more that I can't go back and bid on Aunt Hallie's cherry washstand at auction, years ago? I retreat from the crowd's tight circle, and watch them from the shade of a maple tree.

Often I've noted how auctions bring out the whole community. Sometimes three or four generations of a country family come together, the men all leathery brown, dressed in new, stiff bib overalls, and the women in their church dresses or perhaps bright pastel pantsuits. They live here along with newer residents, people who ten or twenty years ago sought refuge from the establishment in Appalachia, and are still bandana-ed, barefooted and long-haired, with their boisterous children swarmed around them. Usually the two populations observe each other from a neighborly distance. But here they chat and mingle on the neutral ground of the auction sale. I listen to one conversation:

"Mr. Childress, good to see you. What? Oh, we're hoping to buy a few cases of those Mason jars over there; we have this wonderful pear tree on one fence row that bore several bushels of pears last year, so

many that we ran out of canning jars. My wife Charity makes these terrific pear preserves . . .”

“Um, you all got the old Harris place, don’t you? I know that tree. Harris, he loved them pears. Now, you shouldn’ look for that tree to bear much this year, if’n it come in last. That’s how it’ll do. Skips a year, bearin’. Them jars’ll keep though, ’til it comes in again.”

“Well, we ain’t here to buy nothin’, just here to visit. And the wife had to see how much that old hall tree was gonna go fer; we got one similar . . .”

I look around at the hills, topstitched with fence and capped with dense woods. Out-buildings are scattered across the property, made of weathered gray boards still whole and sturdy. Hay has been neatly cut and rolled; some pastures are tall again with the bleached green grasses of midsummer. The sky’s top is white with sun and its edges are a milky blue, only slightly paler than the scallop of blue mountains that rise up to meet it. The scene fills me with its familiar, ordered beauty and makes me wish for my camera, though I’ve tried at other auctions to capture on film the charm of such a setting, of the people; to record something of the din and color of an auction sale. Every time, I’ve felt so burdened by the task I’ve abandoned the attempt.

Whatever it is that brings us to an auction, I think with the bark of the maple comfortably scratchy against my back, the essence of the experience refuses to be photographed. I watch two old men in billed caps sitting by the house, nodding off with their canes propped across their knees, and I begin to feel it’s best that Dad and I not talk about why we come. Even if I had managed to buy the cherry washstand here that was so much like Aunt Hallie’s, I still wouldn’t have captured the essence. I’ll take it home instead by remembering the old tools and the cider press Dad told me about, just as Charity’s husband will remember what he incidentally learned about his pear tree from Mr. Childress. It’s fine to watch a place and its belongings stay alive by changing hands, I think, but we’re here more for the joy of those things that revolve in memory, as they come around again.

Dad and I never stay until the end. Most often, we’re ready to leave at about the same time.

“Bet you had your heart set on that washstand,” Dad says.

“I’m happy with what I’ve got.”

We collect my box of contents. Dad swats a bee out of the cab of the truck. “So what’s in that box that caught your eye?”

“Just some old things,” I answer, satisfied with my keepsakes. From the box’s clutter I show him an old flat iron with delicate patterns worked in the handle, a heavy Phillips screwdriver, which I give to him, and a small cluster of quartz crystals, pure and clear as spring water.