

“A Tag Sale Fairy Tale”
By Mike Varley

There are already several cars parked in front of 25 Tulane Way. Mitch stands at the base of the driveway, eyes closed, executing a hamstring stretch with flamingo grace. It is his signature stretch; a time to shut out outside influence and focus his mind to the task at hand. In this pose, balanced on one leg, unwavering and precise, there is no Long Island morning. There are no May flowers or whirring sprinklers. There are no fellow garage sale customers, giving him stares and a little extra room as they pass up the driveway to the sale. No. There is only Mitch and his mission, and as the self recedes, only mission remains. He releases his leg and walks over to the front lawn, plucking out the dandelion he'd been staring at for balance. He pops the top with a flick of his thumb. He's ready.

Walking up the driveway, Mitch can feel the electric hum of the garage sale all around him. “The last bastion of laissez-faire economics in America” he'd say, sometimes too emphatically at a friend's cocktail party just as conversation in the room had hit a lull. Where else can you haggle a never-used wedding present fondue pot down to a quarter? Ever since Mitch was a little boy, he had been captivated by the simplicity, the sheer will versus will aspect of the garage sale economy. Mitch doesn't like to brag, but over the course of many years he has developed the bartering skills of a Renaissance merchant. All he needs from the seller is body language and Mitch knows just which angles to play to get a good price. He even has moves. The Walk Away is his favorite, though he only busts that out for particularly obstinate vendors, like the pack rats who think that *their* sentimentality is worth *his* twenty dollars. Mitch once heard a rumor that there are still markets in far-flung lands where such skills are revered rather than marginalized. He hopes to one day make the pilgrimage, armed with nothing but a pocket dictionary, his ten digits, and a scowl.

Scanning the wares, he sees many of the items typical collectors go for: records, video games, books – even a four-foot long

model of a Tall Ship, which will surely go within the hour. Mitch has respect for such collectors, but had lost his taste for standard fare long ago. No, he was searching for a more exotic fix. It usually only takes a couple of minutes for him to see if the garage sale has what he's looking for or not. Initial disappointment turns into guarded hope when Mitch spots the always-enticing “More Items Inside” sign. Through the garage and into the living room he goes, where several prospective patrons are pawing at red stickered items. There he finds his quarry. He prefers to start Saturdays with the upper body, but beggars can't be choosers, and a little cardio never hurt anybody.

You have to adjust the incline manually, so Mitch gets on his hands and knees and raises the bar to the number two setting. He presses start and the treadmill begins its gradual ascent to 8 mph. The treadmill faces a turned on television, but CNN's weekly market recap is on and Mitch quickly loses interest. He occupies his mind with his favorite game, “Why They're Selling.” Financial Hardship seems out given a living room as nice as this, and Mitch has seen no boxes in the house to suggest Moving. Too Much Junk is always a possibility, though some of the items outside were of high quality for a garage sale. He gives the living room a second thought, taking in the pristine white wall to wall carpeting and the corresponding couch / love seat set. All of the red stickered items seem out of place in the room. From this, he concludes House Redecoration with Too Much Junk being the afterthought rather than the purpose.

The treadmill runs parallel with a set of glass sliding doors that reveal a stained deck and an above ground pool. Mitch refocuses his eyes on the diluted reflection in the glass. He's worn the same outfit every Saturday for the past two years now: “Nassau Community College, class of '99” sweatshorts, the school crest riding high on his right upper thigh, and his thrift store gem, a Poison concert shirt from the 1990 “Flesh & Blood” World Tour.

Mitch is finishing up his cool down when a burly gentleman in his forties comes over and leans up against the treadmill rail.

Mitch had been watching him deal with customers for the past half hour and gathers that he is the man of the house.

"So, whatcha think?" says the brawny man, smelling a sale. Mitch thinks the man was born in the wrong century, and wonders where he hides his old-timey dumbbells and handlebar mustache wax.

"Weslo Cadence, C44 I'm guessing," replies Mitch. "The higher model has an automatic incline adjustor. It does everything the typical treadmill needs to."

"Hey, impressive. It's good to see someone who does research before they buy. How'd you like your test run?"

"Oh, it was everything it should have been, thanks." Mitch gets off the treadmill, glazed with sweat and slightly winded.

"Well, it's only two years old. I bought it for \$450 but uh...I'd be willing to let it go for \$150. Do we have a deal?"

"What? Oh, no thank you."

"What's the matter? You said yourself it does everything a treadmill should. I'm not even getting half my money back."

"Actually, this sells and has been selling for about \$300 at Wal-Mart for a few years now, so unless you picked this up at some independent exercise store, I doubt you paid \$450. But even if you dropped the price down, I only collect infomercial exercise equipment. Sorry. Good luck, though. I'm sure you'll find a buyer before the day is out."

Mitch gives a polite nod and walks away, leaving the strongman slack-jawed at the treadmill rail. He's glad the man lied about the price; it makes the getaway so much easier when you leave them thinking about their own embarrassments. Over the course of his experiences, he's noticed that treadmills are the hardest equipment to work out on without seller confrontation, given the thirty-minute minimum usage. Walking past the merchandise outside, he is reminded of something he forgot in his morning rush.

"How much for this beach towel?" Mitch asks a young girl he guesses is around eleven or so. She's barrel-chested like her father.

"A dollar." It has a well-worn picture of Lion-O from the Thundercats on it.

"Sold," he says, handing over a bill. There are considerably more people here than a half-hour ago. Mitch notes the Tall Ship has sailed. Walking back to his car and wiping the sweat off his body, he decides today is going to be a good Saturday.

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It's late Saturday night and Mitch sits on the couch in his living room with a beer and his friend Terry. The only light source is the television, which is playing an infomercial for the Total Gym. It uses the two-celebrity spokesman format, which is rare for the genre, and features Christy Brinkley and Chuck Norris. Mitch fancies himself built a bit like Chuck Norris. He's not a black belt by any means, but they share a classic physique – not muscle-bound but physically fit.

Mitch has his legs propped up on today's purchase, a near mint condition Body by Jake Ab Roller with only slight wear on the handgrips. He knows it's useless for exercise purposes, but in the collectors market ab rollers are big enough to warrant their own subdivision, thanks to the late nineties focus on the abdominal muscle. As far as ab rollers go, it's fairly common and not particularly attractive, so Mitch plans to put it in storage with his other, less-trophied machines.

"Chuck cracks me up, man," Mitch says.

"Why?" says Terry.

"Just listen to him talk, I mean really listen. If you pay close enough attention, you can tell there's something...off."

"How's that?"

"I mean, I get this vibe from him, even through the television. I feel like he was one of those kids in high school, you know, the ones that are so socially awkward and uncool that

everything they say makes you just want to shake them and tell them to shut up for their own good."

"Yea. Yea I can see that," Terry says, squinting slightly at the television.

"Okay. So we have this high school social bottom feeder whose only outlet was Martial Arts. Sounds familiar, right? I mean, Chuck probably had katanas and psis mounted on his bedroom wall.

"But the difference is Chuck had the *drive*. The other kids eventually fall out of karate and become computer engineers or accountants, or sociopaths working for the post office. Maybe Chuck didn't have a computer or something, I don't know. But somehow he stayed focused, got jacked and rode his hall of fame facial hair to stardom.

"Now, present day, Chuck's persona is this ultra-cool, ass-kicking, good guy. Everybody wants to be friends with the ass-kicking good guy. He's the ass-kicking good guy! *But!* You can break as many boards as you want with as many parts of your body as you want, I don't care. Awkward is as awkward does. And Chuck's awkwardness is so palpable, he can actually transmit it through the magic of television. So I can just *tell* that if I had to spend a *day* with that guy – not Hollywood Chuck, just man to man, salt of the earth Chuck, hanging out at the food court – if I had to spend a day with *that* Chuck, he'd drive me crazy.

"We'd be there eating our lunch and he'd start talking about how much he missed Orange Julius'. And, you know, that'd be okay the first time he brought it up. But then he'd bring it up five minutes later. And then five minutes later. And then ten minutes more. And *then* he'd start talking about his katanas. You see where I'm going with this? This is the Chuck I know."

There's a long pause.

"You've thought about this a lot, haven't you?"

"I mean, it's either that or he's the worst actor of all time."

"Right, right. Christie Brinkley's still pretty hot."

"Yea. Oh, here comes the best part."

Wesley Snipes is brought in as the guest testimonial, under the guise that Chuck sent him a Total Gym to try free of charge. Snipes tells the story of how he received the gift and immediately gave it away to a personal assistant. When he saw how happy this act of generosity made the assistant, Snipes grew suspicious. He took the machine back, wary of anything that would make the assistant happy. He fell so in love with the machine that he declared himself an "Indian giver" and took back the machine. He then continues with his insane, wide-eyed ramblings regarding fitness and how the Total Gym makes him a better Martial artist. He never mentions anything about it being so affordable that, with his millions, he could buy his assistant another one to replace the one he stole.

When the infomercial is finished, Terry stands up and stretches his arms over his head.

"Whaddya wanna do now? There's still two hours till Finnegan's closes."

"Nah, man. There's a BowFlex ad on BET that's about to start up."

Terry falls back down on the couch and lets his neck go slack.

"What?" Mitch asks.

Terry slings the weight of his head in Mitch's direction. "Dude, it's the weekend."

"Yea, and the weekend is the only time I can stay up late enough to watch."

"But you're twenty-nine years old, man. It's Saturday! You should be...you shouldn't be pissing away the final year of your twenties like this, watching commercials for shit you never buy."

"If I get drunk I won't be able to get myself up for the sales tomorrow."

"Let it go, man. The garage sale world will live without your six dollars for one day. Besides, nobody even collects this shit but you."

"Yea, well, we'll see." Mitch turns the channel to BET. Terry stands up and casually makes his way to the living room

threshold. He adjusts his Yankees hat in the hallway mirror, then turns around.

"Look, you know I'm your friend and everything, so you can do whatever and it won't really bother me, but Christ, man, you're almost thirty. You can only pull off this 'waiting for my life to start' bit for so long before it really becomes your life. I'm not saying going to the bar is the answer, but working at a job you hate and watching TV on the weekends ain't it, either. There's a pregnant pause before Terry continues. "Look, I'll see you next weekend, alright."

Mitch stares at the television, jaw set.

"Alright, take care."

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June arrives, sending the garage sale season into full swing. Mitch awaits this weekend, the second of the month, every year for the annual St. John's Methodist church rummage sale. It's nothing all that special; Mitch just likes that he can rely on it being there every year. The day will start and end there, as new families come to sell their goods throughout the day.

His first stop at 7:30 yields nothing of interest. Mitch asks a young mother behind one of the tables if he can use her Stairmaster, does a twenty-minute set, and then excuses himself when he's finished. He makes sure to buy a glass of lemonade from the old lady at the Church refreshment booth before he leaves for the morning, even though it's too early for lemonade.

A sip of the lemonade reveals just how early it really is. Mitch decides it's coffee time. He pours the drink out on the street and gets in his faux-wooden Jeep Wagoneer. The paper cup gets thrown in the backseat to mingle with discarded coffee cups. He checks his itinerary on the seat next to him to see how long he has for coffee. The passenger seat is Mitch's base of operations. Paper open to the classifieds, circled and slashed, a yellow writing tablet with hastily written local addresses, and down in the passenger foot well, Hagstrom's maps of Nassau and Suffolk County.

It's a straight shot down Jericho Turnpike to Bagel Business in Hempstead. The line is already out the door, but the coffee is worth the wait. He's on line not thirty seconds when a familiar voice calls from down the street.

"Mitch? Mitch Hunter?"

He is struck with immediate recognition for the trendy looking mother balancing a toddler on her right hip. He is also struck with the cringing sensation that is unique to meeting a long lost acquaintance at the end of an impossibly long food service line.

"Yes?"

"It's me, Maggie Mulrave. From high school?"

"Oh, God, of course. How are you? Does this little guy belong to you?"

Maggie rubs the baby's belly affectionately. "Yes, this is Connor, my youngest. Say hello, Connor." Connor buries his nose in his mother's armpit. "Aw, he had a rough night last night. He's starting to get his bottom teeth in."

"Poor little guy. Did you say youngest?"

"Yes. My daughter Beth is circling the block with her father. You remember Vinnie, don't you?"

Vinnie was Maggie's Catholic school boyfriend junior and senior year of high school. He had managed to sneak a bottle of peppermint schnapps into Hempstead High's class of '95 prom, themed after Billy Joel's "These Are the Times." By the end of prom, Vinnie was drunk enough to throw up in Mitch's after prom gym bag, containing Mitch's only change of clothes.

"Yea, yea, of course. And you guys are married now, wow. That's great Maggie, I'm really glad to hear all that."

Maggie returns this compliment with a look of pride, "Well, thank you. But how are you doing? What's going on in your life?"

In his head, Mitch curses the bagel store line for its miserable, miserly ways. Small talk is half expended and they haven't even entered the store yet.

"Nothing all that exciting, really. I'm working for Discover Card right now."

"Oh, yea? Doing what?"

"Customer retention, actually. It's...yea."

"Well, I'm sure it's steady at least."

"Yea. Yea, it is. Definitely keeps the bills paid. Health and dental. 401 K."

"Nice."

The conversation reaches its first awkward lull. Maggie tries to rouse Connor with a playful jostle, but he remains disinterested in the affair. There's a silent scramble to remember past interests, shared bonds and free and easy nostalgia. Maggie ends up the quicker draw.

"Hey, are you still big into dumpster diving?"

"You mean garage sales?"

"Right, right, garage sales. I knew it was one of the two, sorry."

Mitch's care and concern for the conversation takes a shot to the gut. "That's okay. Yea, I'm still into it. As a matter of fact, I'm just getting some coffee before I go out for the day."

"And is there any lady in your life that can object to being left alone all weekend?" Maggie says mischievously.

"No, no. Not at present," Mitch responds, applying a thin layer of good humor. A blast of conditioned air hits Mitch in the back and a glance reveals they are next to enter the store.

"Well, I don't want to alarm you, Mitch, but the clock is ticking," Maggie says, with a tone that exudes matronly wisdom.

Civility crumbles to the canvas and looks to be down for the count; nothing but coffee could bring it back now. *I'm not about to take life advice from the girl in my prom party that married Peppermint Schnapps*, he thinks. Not for the first time, Mitch wonders why he continues to live in his hometown, growing further apart from people he never cared for much in the first place, subjecting himself to pop quiz life evaluations. The answer comes hours later, and is always the same: *comfort in familiarity*.

"Oh, yea?" Mitch replies, eyebrows raised. "Ticking, huh? I didn't realize I was on the clock." Connor looks up bleary eyed from his mother's shoulder.

"Well, you've still got at least five years before you really have to worry, but you know how fast five years can pass. I mean it seems like only yesterday when we all used to hang out in the parking lot. We'd all get drunk and Vinnie would do those smoke shows for us in his old Civic? Remember? I wish we could all go back."

Mitch very vividly recalls getting drunk in the high school parking lot and watching Vinnie make an ass of himself. He considers Maggie's words. "Really?" he says after a few seconds. "Feels like yesterday, huh? 'Cause I gotta say, that's lifetimes ago for me." He opens the bagel store door. All three are hit with the icy chill.

The change in environment causes Connor to fuss, his right hand pushing on his lower gums. "Excuse me," Maggie says, walking over to the refrigerators to pick out drinks.

Drained of goodwill and anxious to get out of the store, Mitch assesses the line situation. He's still twenty or so deep, but the store has multiple cashiers. He notices a boy of about ten standing third in line, a twenty-dollar bill clenched tightly in his tiny hand. When he gets to the front of the line, Mitch watches as the bagel cashiers look past him to help the next adult, with the adults saying nothing. This happens several times while the boy, on the verge of tears, remains silent. After the fourth time, Mitch gets out of his place in line and stands next to the boy.

"Next customer, please" says the cashier, a tired-looking woman in her fifties whom Mitch recognizes from previous trips.

"Excuse me, this boy is next." Mitch says forcefully. There is a momentary lurch in the store's activity as everyone is forced to consider the situation.

Mitch stays with the boy until he gets his dozen assorted bagels. The pair exchange no words. When the boy leaves, Mitch addresses the cashier.

"You've just lost a good customer," he says, not bothering to wait for a response. The customers part to let him through the store, and as he walks with his head down he catches Maggie out of his periphery. She's trying to make the chocolate milk in the refrigerator exciting, but Connor's scrambling up over her shoulder to get a look at the scene. Mitch runs across the street to Starbucks, his logic being soulless is better than evil.

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Pint of coffee in hand, the second stop is a four family garage sale taking up the end of a cul-de-sac. There are children everywhere, chasing each other through connecting yards and pedaling around the circular road in vehicles of various wheel combinations. The parents are too involved in trying to get every penny for their old black light posters to care. There's no exercise equipment for sale, but Mitch does manage to snag a VHS copy of Richard Simmons' *Sweatin' to the Oldies 3* for a dime. While it's not really his passion, collecting exercise videos compliments his main hobby nicely. Plus, it gives him something to look for on weekends when equipment is scarce.

Walking back to the Wagoneer he sees her. Chin length chestnut hair, skin too fair for the summer, jeans that cling to her slender legs, and a tee shirt, pink, with the words "Twee as F*ck" on it in darker pink letters. Mitch isn't sure what that means, but the shirt hugs her somewhat small frame beautifully. He narrowly avoids walking into a parked SUV as he attempts to catch one last look at the girl heading to the garage sale.

Mitch's third and fourth stops are busts, but he's too pleasantly preoccupied with the memory of the Twee girl to care all that much. The fifth stop is a single-family sale taking place entirely on the driveway. Orange construction fencing runs parallel with the driveway on either side, corralling the sale and protecting a lush front lawn that begs to be run on barefoot. Even from across the street, Mitch can see the driveway is packed beyond

reason. Customers squeeze by each other through narrow pathways and whole boxes of merchandise go neglected underneath tables.

"Ugh. Poor layout," Mitch comments to himself.

An auburn-bearded gentleman Mitch pegs as forty-seven is sitting in a lawn chair at the front curb. His beer belly gives the New York Jets logo on his tee shirt a fisheye effect. In his right hand is a Miller Light drink cozy containing a glass of orange juice. In his eyes is a look that says Miller Time couldn't come soon enough.

"Hey, welcome to the sale. Stay off the grass, okay? It just got resodded."

"Okay."

"Is there anything you're looking for in particular?" the man asks in a manner that's borderline accusatory.

"Yes, actually. Do you have exercise equipment?"

"Yea," he says, groaning as he gets up from the chair, "C'mon."

There are eight aisles of merchandise going up the crowded driveway, each aisle about a body length wide. *Too Much Junk*, Mitch thinks, though this is one of the more extreme examples he'd ever seen. Usually you can tell who's the hoarder in the family by the types of items at the sale, but already Mitch has seen a box of television bulbs, a strainer filled with Tetley tea figurines, a ping-pong table covered with Disney tapes, and four copies of Chicken Soup for the Golfer's Soul. *But if the whole family's is like this*, Mitch thinks, *who was it that finally pushed them to have a garage sale?* Whatever the motivation, it was too important to put off, even when they came to the inevitable realization that the sod guys were coming the same weekend.

"Here ya go, this is all we got."

The Suzanne Summers Torso Track II, yet another product of the ab obsessed late nineties. This machine requires you to get on your knees, grab the handlebars connected to a straight metal track, and push the handlebars forward; consequentially lowering you parallel to the ground and making your abs burn like hell. Despite

the burning, Mitch has seen no research to indicate its lofty infomercial claims.

"Do you mind if I try it out?"

"Yea no problem. Though I gotta warn ya, it's a killer on little guys like you past the first setting."

"Good to know, thanks."

"Hey, and stay off the grass, alright? I gotta get back to the front."

"Yea."

"Hey!" the man yells to a pair of teenagers just entering the sale, "Keep of the grass!"

It takes Mitch several minutes to clear the room necessary to use the machine. His legs stretch across one aisle, the machine and his torso are flanked on either side by merchandise, and each rep pops Mitch's head out into a second aisle.

He settles on three sets of ten. The first set he listens for any metallic grinding or popping as the handlebars glide along the track. Hearing nothing, he raises the resistance level to check the performance of setting two. Mitch can tell that the machine is in great shape, but he puts it on the highest resistance level anyway just to challenge himself for the last set. No longer focusing on the noises of the machine, he begins peering around the sale from his inchworm perspective. While stretched all the way parallel to the ground, Mitch catches a flash of pink out of the corner of his left eye. His heart rate quickens, though not from exercise.

He quickly returns to the starting position of his knees, only to find a card table piled high with stuffed animals blocking his vision. Another lunge reveals Twee girl. She's talking to the lady of the house, pointing to some item Mitch can't see from this angle. He holds the rep until his abs call out for mercy, then goes to the starting position for a few seconds of relief. His stomach wants him to stop, but Mitch must know what she's buying, must know what type of collector she is. He returns to his spying position only to find the purchase concealed in a shoebox, but he watches as delicate fingers flit through a hemp coin purse. Pain drives him back again to the stuffed animal parallel. He wants just one more

look. He takes a deep breath and grits his teeth, lowers himself for one last rep. He turns his head to the left. The pink toenails and open-toed sandals of Twee girl are on a collision course with his face. Mitch just averts disaster with a quick rep, and even though his heart is pounding and his stomach aching, he manages to catch an "Oops, sorry" still hanging in the air. He does a controlled collapse from his knees to the pavement under the stuffed animal table, and decides he'll skip out on the last six reps.

He heads to the base of the driveway to talk to the beer-bellied gentlemen, the Torso Track II under one arm and the other unconsciously gripping his still cramping stomach. One look at Mitch causes the man to throw his head back with laughter, spilling some of his barely touched orange juice to the ground.

"I told ya, I told ya you son of a bitch. I used to do it all the time before I blew out my knee. Only big guys like myself can handle the high setting."

"Yep, you were right." Even as he speaks, Mitch is looking up and down the street for any signs of pink.

"So you're looking to beef up, huh? Well I'll let you have it for forty bucks."

"No, that's too high," Mitch says, still distracted.

"Well I'm not going much lower, son. On the other hand you did make me laugh. I was rail like you once; although it looks like you don't have many more years of that. Fine, how 'bout thirty-five?"

Mitch gives him a puzzled look. "I was thinking about five."

The man forces out a chuckle. "Son, Making me laugh twice doesn't get you a bigger discount."

Mitch stares at the man for a second. Then he takes his hand off his stomach, straightens out his posture and holds the Torso Track II in his left hand like a walking staff. He looks down at the ground, releases an audible breath and looks back up at the man with the condescending smile.

"Okay." A brief pause. "Here's the deal. This machine is useless. You know it, I know it, your beer belly knows it. Even the

American public knows it, and the American public doesn't know anything. You know why this ever sold at all?"

"Why, smart guy."

"Mob mentality, that's why. The public wanted better abs, and the market supplied them with unreachable dreams and foam padding. For six months, people have a purpose. They're gonna change their lives – turn it all around, get into that pair of college jeans. And you know what happens next?"

"What?"

"The market slows. Your local news does an exposé on the ineffectiveness of the Ab Roller. People stop believing. The mob moves on. So they find something else to believe in. Atkins, Zone, whole grain, no trans fat. Exercise is dead. Dieting is where it's at right now."

Mitch points his right hand at the machine. "There's no market for this. This is a relic, a false idol with no believers. The only people who would possibly want this are collectors, and I'm a collector. And you know how many there are of me in this world?"

The man glares up at Mitch from his lawn chair, arms crossed with drink in hand.

"Me. That's how many there are in this world. So you've got three choices, really. You can sit here and take the five dollars, you can kick it to the curb Sunday night and I'll be here to pick it up for free, or you can keep it in your house till the day you die to spite someone you'll only meet once in your life. And trust me, *I know* you don't have room for this in your house, because for every one item someone puts out for sale there are three more in that basement that are just too darn important to part with. And there's a lot of stuff out here." A final pause. "So how's five sound?"

The man stands up in front of his chair. "I don't have to take this Economics 101 crap from some nut job with an exercise machine fetish. Just gimme the machine."

Mitch cradles Suzanne in the crook of his left arm and reaches in his back pocket. "I know you want to feel like you've won this exchange, and that's understandable. I'll give you eight

dollars." Mitch casually gets out the bills and folds them in half, five on the outside.

"Eight dollars is a sure six pack, my friend." Mitch looks from the money to the man. "And I know you know I'm right."

Mitch flips his wallet closed and holds the bills up in his right hand. Several seconds elapse before the man takes the money.

"Just get the hell out of my driveway, you psycho."

"Thanks. And good luck with the sodding."

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Mitch visits ten other sales over the next few hours, going through the motions in the hope of seeing Twee girl again. He isn't quite sure what will happen if he sees her. For all his confidence in the garage sale universe, Mitch's never been much of a ladies man. The only time he ever approached a girl at a garage sale was three years previous, when he caught sight of a stunning blond looking at some costume jewelry spread out on a collapsible table. Mitch came alongside her and leaned up against the table, but before he could utter so much as a lame "Hey there," the collapsible table lived up to its name, dragging Mitch down with it in its misery. A shiny bauble shard flew up and hit the blond in the cheek, drawing blood. Luckily she seemed unaware of Mitch's advances, and was more than happy to forgive him for the shrapnel. At least Mitch had managed to talk the seller down to eighteen dollars for everything he broke, citing shoddy display set-up.

By the time Mitch gets back to the Church rummage sale, he's resigned himself to never seeing Twee girl again. It's three o'clock, a time when the only merchandise left at sales are the absolute dregs. By now, the shopping demographic consists of hardcore collectors like Mitch and the wannabe collectors that are either too lazy to get up early or can't get to the sales until the afternoon. Mitch can tell his fellow hardcore collectors by the darkened eyelids and a dull stare that could just as easily be found in the slot machine parlor of a casino. The wannabe's are even

easier to spot, and with few exceptions are teenagers and couples with little kids.

Even with a whole new set of families at the sale, Mitch sees nothing that interests him. One of the sellers has a ratty free weight set with some of the foam padding seeping out of the bench. Mitch hadn't gotten a chance to work his arms all day, and asks the seller if he could use the barbell.

"Sure, knock yourself out. Do you need a spotter or anything?"

"No, thank you. I'll be sure to lift below my max."

Mitch's thoughts wander as he goes through his upper body routine. Maybe Terry was right. He knows he was right about his job, but Discover was never part of Mitch's long-term plans. But what if he's wasting the best years of his life at 7:00 AM tag sales where the only eligible females have already achieved widow status? The midday sun filters through the church lawn trees, forcing Mitch to squint as he stares straight up at the sky. Suddenly, a pink cloud passes overhead.

"So are you stalking me or is this just coincidence? I'm cool with either; I just want to know if I need to get my whistle out of the glove compartment."

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Kristina thought it was a pretty good line, as far as lines go. She'd had some time to craft it while watching Poison guy workout with the barbells. He isn't the most impressive physical specimen she's ever seen, but Kristina can tell he's in good shape. Fit, she thinks to herself.

"I, I mean, uhh," he stammers, unsure of what to do with the barbell he's holding. "No, it's just a coincidence."

"So when I nearly kicked you in the head at the second garage sale, you weren't spying on me?"

"What, spying?" he manages to set the bar to rest but remains on his back. "No. No, of course not. I didn't even know you

were there until you nearly kicked me. I was just, you know, working out."

"What? That's the weakest excuse I've ever heard."

"No, I'll prove it." Poison sits up quickly on the bench.

"Here, I even bought that machine, I'll show you. Just come to my Jeep."

"Now I'm definitely going to go get my whistle."

"No, I swear, I'm not a rapist," Poison pleads, "It's just my hobby. I go from garage sale to garage sale working out and collecting exercise equipment."

"Excuse me," interrupts the apparent owner of the weight set, "Are you finished?"

Kristina suppresses a giggle as Poison stands up and walks away from the weight set, face beet red. She just wants a little more fun.

"Hey, Poison, don't think you're getting off that easy. What about that first sale, at the cul-de-sac? There wasn't any exercise equipment there, so your explanation doesn't exactly hold water."

Poison, now about fifteen feet away from her, turns around in a huff.

"First of all, I don't know before I get to a sale if they have exercise equipment or not. Secondly, I didn't even see you until after I left, so how could I have possibly been stalking you at that point?"

"At that point? Sounds like an admission of guilt, my friend."

It seems as though Poison wants to speak, but the end product is a face that looks like someone is pushing the gas pedal and the break at the same time. As he storms off in the direction of the lemonade stand, Kristina decides she's had enough fun at his expense.

"Hey, hey, hey. Wait up."

"What," he growls, face now red with what Kristina suspects is anger.

"Hey, calm down, I'm just giving you a hard time. The fact is, if you're a stalker, you're a pretty bad one, so I'm not too concerned. I'm Kristina."

She extends her right hand towards Poison, who returns the gesture with a glare.

"Don't be mad. I'm a collector too, and I'm new to the Long Island scene. We're bound to be seeing a lot of each other, so we might as well be on good terms."

He meets her hand. "Mitch."

Kristina smiles and the storm clouds lift from Mitch's demeanor. "Well Mitch, this place is tapped, so I'm getting out of here. I'll see ya around town."

Kristina doesn't wait for a reply; she simply walks off in the direction of the parking lot. A grin she can't contain grows larger with each step. Oh, curse the allure of the awkward boy!

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Anybody who's anybody knows you never say goodbye to Denver in January. January is what Denver *does*, and no one is more proud of this fact than those that call the Mile High city home. Yet there Kristina sits, twenty-six windburned winters under her belt, waiting for flight 217 with service to Chicago, Pittsburgh and JFK international airport. She wishes they still called JFK Idlewild – it just sounds classier.

There are only two people seated in the interminable row of chairs facing the tarmac window. Kristina is one, passively staring out at the powder whipping through the night air, Care Bears duffle bag resting on her lap. The other person is Tom, a man of similar age to Kristina, dressed in a gray houndstooth suit. He sits next to her, fiddling with a Blackberry. Tom was Kristina's ride to the airport, and that is all.

They had shared a song once. Not in the watered-down, pick a song for your wedding sort of way. A true shared song is a miracle, a veritable planet aligning event. The special song needs to incorporate the musical tastes of the couple, be danceable, and

inspire mutual adoration. And if that weren't difficult enough, there's still the most crucial element: song exposure. No matter how much the couple loves the song, for some reason they never bother to search it out to add it to their music collection, and as a result the song remains eternally fresh. If they remain true to the song, the song will find them: in bars at closing time, while they're removing wallpaper from their new house, on the car ride home from a parent-teacher conference.

Three years into their relationship with the song, Tom received it on a mix CD from his friend. They were young and impetuous, and the temptation was too great. A lifetime of precious moments was condensed into a two-week musical orgasm, and at the end of it all, Kristina felt the relationship was somehow diminished. That was a year ago, and Van Morrison's *Everyone* would never be the same.

"Tom, I'm ready to go to the gate now."

"What?" Tom sits up straight and puts his Blackberry in his breast pocket. "But pre-boarding isn't for another thirty minutes."

"I know, but I don't want to wait anymore."

They stand up at the same time. They hug. Kristina's chin hits him at the tie knot. Tom decides to break the silence, arms still around her.

"So is this it?"

Kristina pulls slightly apart to look Tom in the face. She finds it free of expectation. "I think so, yea."

Tom takes a long blink and smiles faintly. "Well, we had a good run."

Kristina laughs faintly. "Yea, we did." Now it's her turn to break the silence.

"Be sure to visit my parents, alright? Seriously, they love when you visit. You can get a free meal out of it, too."

"I will. And if you can't find a job right away, don't be afraid to ask for money."

"Tom, I'll be fine. I've already gotten responses from the resumes I've sent out."

"Are you sure you didn't forget anything?"

"There's nothing to forget, I already brought everything on the drive there."

"Okay." They draw closer again for a hug. Tom says it first.

"I love you, Kristina. Please remember that. It's different than what it was, but it's still love."

"I know. I love you too, Tom. Good luck."

Kristina walks backwards for a few steps with the Care Bears bouncing on her knees before she turns from Tom to find the security checkpoint.

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Seven days after the Methodist sale, Kristina sits in her idling '93 Saturn listening to 90.7 FM, Fordham University Radio. She found the station shortly after she moved here and it's the only thing resembling independent radio on the island. The lack of coffee filters in her apartment has left her tired, and she adjusts the rear view mirror to examine the impact on her eyes; they look as though they've had a good rest. She frowns at the light brown freckles that canvas the bridge of her nose and the fleshy part of her cheeks. She was never much for make-up, and she isn't about to cake some on for the garage sale circuit, so Kristina puts the car in drive and tells herself to get over it.

Kristina has always been of the opinion that the driving aspect of her weekend adventures is just as crucial as the shopping aspect. As such, she never plans her weekends in advance and relies entirely on intuition. Most of the time this means things like slowing down at intersections and checking out telephone poles, which has nearly gotten her into an accident on more than one occasion. Another favorite of Kristina's are the always-mysterious Garage Sale Arrows. A task delegated to the youngest members of the family while the grown-ups attempt to set a price for that lamp with the conch shell body, the Garage Sale Arrow is the perfect blend of advertisement and arts and crafts, coercing the

driver out of his or her mundane weekend via silver glitter, construction paper, and smiley face stickers. Still, some of her best finds have come following no advertisement at all, but rather simply trolling the suburbs for a series of parked cars or a collection of incongruous objects displayed on a front lawn.

It takes awhile for Kristina to find her first sale, as the Hempstead roads are still new to her. Getting out of the car, she adjusts her shirt, a modestly cut cream peasant top with flowers embroidered around the neckline. She had picked it out with a smile, remembering her awkward boy. This particular sale is taking place on the front yard, and as her sandals touch the grass she begins to feel the usual combination of excitement and fascination. Even though she enters each sale looking for only one thing in particular, Kristina's curiosity forces her to take stock of every item present. To her, garage sales are a sort of human rebirth: twenty years worth of molted feathers drugged up from the basement and passed off as the finest down. The items bought here can never fully assimilate into the lives of their new owners because, like skin, they retain the contours of their original owner. But Kristina has always assumed that that's the appeal: jauntily wearing the malformed castoffs of another human being like a zoot suit. And the whole process is done in such a way that is irrefutably American: turning old identities into petty cash.

Kristina considers herself lucky that such things interest her, because otherwise she would have quit collecting long ago. She often spends entire days searching the sales with nothing to show for it but an empty tank of gas. On her seventh stop of the day she finds a sale put on by a family with several college-age kids, who are begrudgingly spending their Saturday morning helping push merchandise that once constituted their childhood.

Most of the goods are arranged on six, faux-wood folding tables that look like they were borrowed from some church basement. Any remaining items too small or strange to go on the tables sit at the end of the driveway, cataloged in cardboard with ample space between the boxes to empty each one completely if

necessary. All the merchandise is easily located via printshop quality signage.

"Wow, nice layout" Kristina comments to herself. She scans the tables once, then twice, waiting for one of the parents to make an appearance.

Eventually the mother comes out of the house, counting the contents of her teal fanny pack. When she gets to the cashbox, Kristina decides to make her move.

"Hello, how are you this morning?" Kristina asks cheerily.

"Fine," the mother replies, not looking up from the marble notebook she's using as a ledger.

"Do you know where I'd be able to find the toys?" Kristina says, already knowing the answer.

"They're at the end of the driveway," the mother says, still not showing an interest in Kristina.

Oh well, Kristina thinks, not this time.

Turning from the mother, she catches sight of an item on the tables she can't believe she missed the first two times through.

"May I ask you where you got that lamp over there?"

The mother looks up wearily from the notebook. "That? A trip with my husband to Gettysburg, about '82 or '83. I think I may have written the date on the base."

"And that's Robert E. Lee, right?"

"Yea, that's him."

"You're not going to believe this, but I saw that exact same lamp three years ago in Denver."

"Is that so?" the mother says, inflection and eyebrows raised.

"Believe it or not, yea. It was an estate sale run by a father and his three sons. They had it on a desk in a Civil War themed study. It was next to the bowl of caramels with Confederate flag wrappers."

"Wow. You're kidding me, right? How on earth do you even remember that?"

"Are you telling me you could possibly forget this? The guy had a twenty-four piece knife set with a different major battle

embossed on each handle. I must have spent two hours in that room." The two share some light laughter.

"So I'm guessing it was your husband's purchase?"

"Yes, and it decorated his den for many years. So long as it didn't find it's way to any civilized part of the house, right?"

"Exactly." The pair walk over to the statue to examine it closer.

"Oh my god, it even has the original tag."

Atop his bucking white steed, the famed general leads his legions into battle with sword swinging high overhead. A stunning testament to the iron will and bravery of the fighting men of Dixie!

"Would you like to buy it," the mother asks in a jokingly eager tone.

"Honestly, I was always more of a Stonewall Jackson fan."

"Alright then. Well, you go have a look at the toys over there and if you find something, come find me and I'll see what I can do." She gently touches Kristina's shoulder.

"Great. Thank you very much," Kristina says. Walking down the driveway, she can't help but smile at her well earned "discount shopper" status.

She easily enough finds the box labeled "Toys" and gets to rummaging. She catches a flash of white at the bottom of the box. More sifting reveals some green trim. After removing all the Ninja Turtles and G.I Joe's from the box, Kristina uncovers a 1987 White Hess Truck with rear cargo coin bank.

Kristina's obsession with Hess trucks began when she was five years old, on Christmas Day, 1985. Her Uncle Mikael, visiting from Finland for the holidays, had put his present to her under the tree two weeks earlier, well before any other presents found their way under the tree. The anticipation had gnawed at her five year old brain for fourteen days. It didn't *look* like a Cabbage Patch Kid, but she could hope. On Christmas Day, Kristina's mother read the card aloud to her as she tore through the green wrapping paper:

Dear Kristina,
I hope you like your present. I am told it is a very popular item in the States, and I went to great lengths to find you one. Hauska Joulu!
Love, Uncle Mikael

A truck. Kristina had never gotten a truck before. She wasn't sure what to think of it, but she went over and hugged her uncle anyway. Long after all the presents were opened, Kristina considered the truck again. It had cool lights. She didn't have any other toy with lights. She could crash it into her dolls, and she didn't have anything that could do that either. It was even a bank, and she rejoiced at having a place to put her precious couch dimes. Kristina played with that truck years after the Cabbage Patch Kid she got from her parents that year had found its way down to the basement.

Years later, pressed about the purchase, Uncle Mikael admitted to finding the truck while buying junk food at a gas station in Jamaica, Queens. His flight schedule had called for a night layover in New York, and the only place open that sold food was the Hess station. Once he heard the gas station attendant's compelling sales pitch, he figured why not kill two birds with one stone?

Except it turned out that contrary to the attendant's claims, Hess trucks were not "a very popular item" at all. In fact, Kristina discovered that hardly any Hess stations existed outside the New York area, and no one in Denver – outside of tri-state transplants – had even heard of a Hess truck.

But what did any of that matter? She's here at last: the motherland – the land of milk and Hess Trucks. She knows it sounds silly, and she'd tell you so herself. But even still, Long Island's Hess Truck bounty had more to do with her choosing it as a new home than she'd ever care to admit.

Now, sitting on the grass next to the cardboard box, Kristina takes the pair of C batteries she carries with her to sales

out of her jeans pocket and puts them in the truck. All the lights are in working order. A quick check of the 'made in' marking on the bottom of the truck reveals how lucky she really is. Only one-tenth of the '87 trucks were made in China, and this is one of those trucks. This one's going on the mantel, Kristina thinks; that is, if she had a mantel in her apartment. Kristina laughs to herself at the two-dollar price tag as she drives the truck through the grass while making gear-shifting noises with her mouth.

"Anything good?" a voice says from behind Kristina. She twists her head around quickly to see Mitch stroking his chin in a poor attempt to hide a grin. She notices that he's wearing different clothes than last time, a nice pair of khaki shorts and a plain dark green tee shirt.

"Hey, I guess I was wrong about your stalking skills. Yea, this is actually a pretty stellar find. How about you, find any Thigh Masters or somethin'?"

"No, I haven't been so lucky, though I did work out on a Nordic Track earlier today."

"Ah, very nice." Seeing him without a flushed face for the first time, Kristina realizes Mitch's awkwardness isn't the only thing that attracts her. It may just be the reflection off the shirt, but she finds herself enamored with hazel green eyes.

"Yea. Well, anyway, there's nothing more here for me, so I'll let you get back to your test drive. Keep on truckin'."

Kristina laughs out loud. "Man that was so lame."

Mitch reddens and gives her a sheepish grin "Yea, well, I tried."

Kristina watches Mitch walk off the lawn and out of sight. He's long gone by the time she snaps out of her mini-crush and thinks of something to say back to him. "Yea well, next time, don't."

Weekend after weekend of summer slips by. Sometimes Kristina sees Mitch, sometimes she doesn't. The last time they saw each other was two weeks ago, when Mitch mentioned a massive 2,000 family yard sale planned for this weekend at the Nassau

Coliseum. The county hosts the event every third week in September. He talked about it like it was Mecca, so Kristina figures she'll go down and check it out, even if the whole concept seemed too impersonal to her.

A cold front had come through the area late Friday night, leaving Saturday morning unseasonably cold. Kristina finds her pink crocheted hat in one of the hefty bags she hasn't fully unpacked yet and rouses her knee-length pea coat from its hibernation within the dry cleaner plastic. She knew it was probably overkill, but she's excited for weather that plays to her element, even if it means the end of garage sale season.

The end of garage sale season. The thought hadn't really occurred to her until now. Usually it's only a vague disappointment, one that is easily consolable by telling herself that Christmas and the new truck are just around the corner. But this year there's Mitch. She hadn't felt this type of excitement about a guy since she and Tom met at Colorado State, and even then, this was somehow different. She knows it's different because for all their phone conversations, for all the boring minutiae they discuss every Tuesday night with genuine interest, Kristina can't bring herself to tell Tom about Mitch.

It may be another nine months until she sees Mitch again. What if, after this summer, she never sees him again? Kristina isn't ready to marry Mitch or anything, but how many non-repulsive garage sale guys can there possibly be in this world? And of those guys, how many have hazel green eyes and stammer when a girl talks to them? And a cute stammer, not a vapid stammer: the former are harder to pull off while the latter are a dime a dozen. No, she has to say something before the end of summer, and it looks like the Coliseum is her last chance.

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Oh, the Coliseum. The third weekend in September edges out Christmas and his birthday as Mitch's favorite holiday. Merchandise piled up to the rafters, grown adults quibbling over

fractions of a dollar, erudite collectors fleecing ignorant sellers. Each year Mitch tries to work up the nerve to leave a note in the suggestion box stating that they should pump the smell of exotic spices through the central air system, and each year he explains it away as foolishness. Still, it's the closest thing he can get to his faraway marketplace without actually going there.

Mitch has no problem getting his workout done within the first hour. He plans to spend the rest of his time searching for one or two really great items to buy rather than a few items of mediocre value. About halfway through the day, Mitch spots something that looks like a sled underneath a bunch of boxes. Moving the boxes off the sled reveals that the sled is not a sled at all, but in fact the Holy Grail of exercise equipment: The 1955 Jack Lalanne rowing machine. Only 15,000 were made before the line was unceremoniously discontinued due to the unanimously unpopular and ergonomically shortsighted use of redwood for all the machine accents, including the seat. This made sitting on the machine for any extended period a chore, let alone the time necessary for proper exercise. Mitch ogles Jack's name burned into the wood across the seat.

"Hello there." An older man with a full head of white hair and a matching mustache addresses Mitch. He has the quasi-southern drawl of a New Yorker who's lived in the Carolina's too long. "I see you're interested in the Lalanne. You know only 15,000 of those were made before the line was discontinued."

"Yes, actually," Mitch responds, "I did."

"Well then, I've got a connoisseur on my hands. Would you like to take her for a ride?"

"Yes, please."

"Go right ahead."

It only takes five minutes or so to see why the line was discontinued. Every time Mitch reaches a certain point in his rowing motion his tailbone grinds up against the unforgiving redwood seat. Mitch doesn't bother to continue.

"Hurts, don't it? I never used it more than once or twice myself. Collecting exercise machines was just a hobby of mine. I got

into the game too early though; it's kids like you that will be there when the demand starts to grow."

Mitch and the man start talking shop, the old man about the machines of his day and Mitch about the infomercial age. The conversation is seamless for well over an hour, and they had only just broached the topic of the decline of the cross-country skiing machine when the man excuses himself to take a phone call.

Looking to his right Mitch sees Kristina, dressed in winter garb. Even though the clothing is less form fitting than her summer attire, she somehow looks better in it. More at home. Her pink hat covers down to her ears, creating a halo of chestnut hair around her head. He wasn't expecting her to be here today because she said these particular affairs weren't her style, but seeing her almost makes him forget about the rowing machine.

"Hey," Mitch says when she gets close enough, even though he meant to say, "You have the most perfect freckles I've ever seen, and I've always hated freckles."

"Hey, anything good so far?"

"Yea, actually, real good. See that sled looking thing over there? That's the 1955 Jack Lalanne rowing machine; it's like the Spruce Goose of exercise equipment. It's a collectors dream. I'm gonna try to talk him and see if we can settle on a price."

"Okay, good luck" Kristina says, smiling at him in a way that she's never smiled at him before. It seems...supportive. Usually the only feeling he gets from her smile is friendliness. The smile causes something in Mitch to fall into place.

"This isn't going to take more than a minute. How about you and me go for Chinese food afterwards? Don't worry; it's lunch, the commitment free meal."

"That sounds good," Kristina says. Her smile doesn't actually get bigger, but her eyes squint with extra effort, giving the illusion of a bigger smile.

Emboldened, Mitch goes back to his white haired friend "Alright, what's the starting price on the rowing machine."

"Eighty dollars, and that's not a starting price, it's the final price. Non-negotiable."

Mitch looks in his wallet. It contains: a library card, a drivers license, an NYPD card from his uncle, a two-year old condom, his old college id, a sub stamp card for Subway, two twenties, three tens, one five and five ones. The non-negotiable line wouldn't scare him normally, but Mitch can tell this guy is a tough nut. It would take him at least an hour to bring him down even ten dollars. He looks at back at Kristina, who is looking at other booths while she waits. She has a dry cleaning stub stapled to the back of her pea coat collar.

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?" Mitch says.

"Shoot," says the white-haired man.

"Have you ever been married?"

"Yes sir, for forty-three years until my wife passed away."

"And what's your opinion on the subject?"

"Well, if you ask me, companionship is more precious than a lot of things in this world, and it certainly has more value than a pain in the ass."

Mitch smiles. "You're a good man. Thank you."

"Good luck, and maybe I'll see you around the sales."

Mitch finds Kristina looking at the booth directly across from the booth of the white haired man. He taps her on the shoulder and they walk off towards the exit. Mitch sees the confusion in her face.

"What happened? I thought you said it was a 'collector's dream'."

"He was asking too much and my only option was to try the Walk Away. I guess it didn't work."

