

Junk

On a late afternoon in the fall the chill came on quickly. Above the placid waters of the huge reservoir the air had begun its descent from the surrounding mountain tops. In minutes the afternoon would turn cold, and later the night would bring frost. Summer was over and October upon us.

The 90-something year old black man and I sat on a bench fashioned from an over turned bathtub and a sheet of plywood plopped on top. A fire burned low in a rusty steel half barrel in front of us. The small fire wasn't warming me.

We sat in the quiet of the forest ... the old man, myself, the bathtub and barrel ... like survivors in the middle of a sea of house paraphernalia and construction parts strewn through the woods. An entire housing development might have taken flight one evening and crash- landed on this very spot in the Catskill Mountains, windows and doors and pediments and sinks and toilets and pipes and gutters now thrown over a few acres of property sliding down to the edge of the Ashokan Reservoir. Only the dirt road up from the state route was clear of junk.

The old man threw a small branch into the fire, enough to last until he stirred again to throw in another. He fed the fire only a little at a time, never with larger pieces of wood so he could leave it for a while to go check the grounds of the family owned junk yard. He never checked the grounds. He never went anywhere.

I frankly wondered if he ventured into the dark house behind us at night. I would understand if he didn't. The run down 2 story structure was completely dark in the day's waning hours. Not a peep of light shown from within. It was the best imitation of a haunted house I'd ever seen.

His name was "Sir," as far as I was concerned. He sat under a haphazardly executed hand-painted sign reading "Lamar Lumber" nailed up on a tree. I tried calling him Mr. Lamar on my first visit to his junkyard. He had shaken his head in the negative.

The Lamar's were a Black family who at one time had simply collected parts of homes and other buildings and unloaded them all over their land. This was not an easy task since trees crowded the boulder strewn property as close together as in any eastern forest. The old grandfather sat outside the dilapidated house day after day, cozied up to the small fire for warmth. Even

in summer it was chilly in these woods lying near the water's edge.

Some of the windows and doors, transoms, kitchen sinks and picket fence sections may have come from homes that before 1915 sat on the stone foundations now abandoned at the bottom of the man-made reservoir. Or from the homes New York State bought up and tore down when they widened nearby Route 28 for tourist traffic in the late 1950s.

It was time I got on with my search. I left the fire and stumbled over junk pieces left in the path by careless visitors. A brass chandelier three feet in diameter scraped the side of my calf when I stepped into it. Eventually, I found a small window I thought would be just right for the short wall on a barn addition I planned to build. I began to drag it back to Sir for him to pronounce a price.

I had learned to ignore what he asked and instead without a word pass him a smaller amount of cash. Sometimes he refused my offer and would not take the money. Other times he might take the bill, snap it and hold it up to the light. I'm sure he didn't think I was a counterfeiter, he was just demeaning my offer. I'd add a few dollars until he smiled. The winner in this little game would undoubtedly believe he had conned the other. I think I won sometimes, but frankly it didn't matter. He never cheated me. How could he? Junk was junk and its value was defined in the eye of the beholder. In any case, the give and take was worth the effort because his property held wonderful old pieces with an architectural flair unseen in today's showrooms and catalogs.

The light was leaving the sky when I returned with the window. On the southwestern horizon naked black trees silhouetted themselves against the lighter blue of the sky.

I sat down and slid my butt around, hoping to find a few square inches not so damp from the weather. The wind came up and I shivered.

"Sir," I said, "let me give you five dollars for this window."

I passed the bill over to him, but he did not reach out to take it. He wanted more. I knew what he was thinking. I'd just give up and offer him ten dollars when we both knew he'd probably take seven. Three dollars didn't mean much to either of us, but we each had our code as a junk seller and a buyer. I didn't have any one dollar bills with me. He would say he didn't either. I tightened my jacket collar. I'd be here for a while longer.

Staring into the barrel fire, I thought back to when my career of nosing around junk yards began. I had bought what was left of a Catskill mountain farm, an old house and barn from 1869 and 14 acres of pasture and woods. As I began to refurbish it, I realized how beautiful the old designs were, and how well executed the workmanship. From the catalogs I could buy, for

example, a bright gussied up floor grate in brass costing nearly \$500. But I decided I wanted an old cast iron black grate for less than \$50. Installed, it would look like it came with the house rather than from Renovator's Supply. I didn't want a country landscape painting hanging over the mantel in the kitchen. I wanted an old wagon singletree instead, bolted to the studs behind the plaster. I hammered wrought iron nails into the old wooden wagon part with which to hang our collection of cast iron frying pans. I didn't want a modern wood stove in the kitchen. I found a late 1800's laundry stove with a large flat top on which food could be simmered. It also held a small kettle to heat water for my double bergamot Earl Grey tea. And there was space left for drying mittens. I didn't want an ordinary wall near the back window in the kitchen. I wanted two old small barn doors in that spot, nailed up and re-finished. My wife's foot came down at that point and I had to live with pretty wallpaper instead.

My new "hobby" would have me spending lots of time in junk shops and antique centers looking for just the right touches.

That was about the time I met Fritz, the local area's renowned junk dealer. He said he was a former baker, but I imagined he'd been a carnival barker. Fritz's success story was straight forward. One night many years before he prayed for God to send him a fortune. His request was granted the next morning, he told me, when he was struck by the revelation he could make a fortune collecting junk and re-selling it.

"From God's mouth to my ear," he said in a hushed, secretive voice, although only the two of us stood in his makeshift store near the smoky wood stove that didn't quite keep the place warm in the winter.

The large long room had been a free standing garage Fritz bought from an elderly woman some years before. He knocked on her door one afternoon and offered to buy it. Said he liked her garage so much he'd pay for it, tear it down and haul it off to his property. She no longer drove and many years had passed since the shingled structure housed a vehicle. She used the building to store a few remaining treasures from the earlier days of her long life. She couldn't part with a silver tray given to her as a wedding present, or her late husband's golf clubs. And there were old photographs and bags of gumballs for her grandchildren when they came to visit. They boys and girls were now in the forties, and the gum balls possibly the same age.

Fritz began to gain a basic understanding of the junk business and learn the ropes of his new endeavor.

"I can't believe what people throw away," he said. "They don't even try to fix the smallest problems."

This was his business plan: he would pay a measly sum for something that no longer worked, but could be easily fixed. Sell it for a price that was not necessarily a terrific bargain, but enough so that the buyer would feel bad paying full retail at the shopping center. His profits were enormous. It was like printing money.

He also understood that we consumers accumulate junk neither we nor our friends want. When all that stuff in our attics or basements becomes so burdensome and we yearn for a convenient bonfire on which to throw it all, someone like Fritz appearing on the scene is a godsend even if he's offering only 2 cents on the dollar.

When dealing with customers, Fritz was a master at reading the price they'd pay right off their faces. One winter afternoon in 1976 I found a wooden nutcracker in one of his bins and realized it solved my problem of creating a "screw" for a 12 inch model of an old wooden printing press I was building (think Ben Franklin). I could avoid having to laboriously carve a main screw for the miniature press by adapting the nutcracker's 3/4 inch diameter wood screw for the purpose. I offered Fritz fifty cents.

"Seven dollars," he said.

"You're crazy!" I replied. He opened the small door on the woodstove and made as if to throw my find on the fire.

"OK, OK, Eight!" I said, reaching for my wallet.

"I'll even gift wrap it for ya," he said, smiling and reaching for a sheet of newspaper he used instead of paper bags.

"How did you know I wanted it that bad?" I asked.

"Uh uh," he said, shaking his head no. "Secrets of the trade."

Of course, I also availed myself of the same junk resource I'm sure Fritz and the Lamar family tapped into from time to time ... the town dump.

I could never resist the lure of the dump in our little town when I lived up north. When I'd go to the metal section, I often took a sort of Junk Addiction Sponsor with me. He'd hover behind me saying, "No, Dave, you don't need it, you probably can't fix it and you don't have any space left in the barn for it." I was pretty well behaved for a while, but I came across a roto-tiller I thought I could fix and have working in no time. I got it to run for about five minutes with each attempt. That was long enough to burn out one part or another and I spent a couple of hundred dollars on wrist pins and compression rings and connecting rods and ignition parts before finally giving up and admitting I'd been defeated by the Junk Devil Who Made Me Do It.

So for a while I swore off the mindless and wanton desire to acquire something for next to nothing. I no longer brought home junk. But my addiction was cunning. I was able to forego acquiring a piece of junk for myself, but I saw beautiful objects on the piles that I knew my fellow Junk Specialists would want. So I'd bring the item to their house and leave it outside the garage door. I remember finding a great looking kerosene heater that I was sure my friend Benny would love to fix up and use in the shed at the back of his property. He made a wonderful job of it. But the shed burned down one afternoon when he left the heater on and ran out to the store for a six-pack. Near the shed and singed in the fire was his wife's prized Holly tree. If she'd had a gun with bullets in it, I think she would have shot me.

Next to me on the upturned bathtub, Sir hucked up a good one for a ninety year old man and spit into the fire.

"Have you ever been shot at?" I asked him.

He swung his head back and forth in a mournful No.

"You plan to shoot me?" he said. "You already robbin' me at five dollars for that window."

I laughed. "No. I was just wondering how some of the people reacted when you hauled away their homes."

"They was paid for 'em," he said. "They was gone when we showed up or they was sittin' there drunk."

I wondered what it would feel like to stand helpless while your house was torn down and the pieces hauled away after the State stepped in and told you to get out. It was hard to believe no one had taken a shot at Sir and his brothers. There was something about the old man, his craggy face, his stumped frame, that told me he had borne many a trouble in life. And his grimace at my mention of the previous owners of all the parts and pieces now lying here in the woods told me a vein of sympathy ran through his soul. He would have been sorry to play the Undertaker of Houses to any of the families who stood mute and defeated as their home was carried away in pieces on the back of his truck to wind up here in a cemetery of house parts.

My old acquaintance Fritz who owned the junk store was cleaning up outside his business one day when an older woman drove up and offered him all the junk in the trunk of her car. For free.

"Nice stuff," Fritz said, opening the trunk and trying to be cordial. "Where'd you get it?"

"My late husband bought it all here," she said.

"But you can have it all back. I don't want any of his stuff. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust."

"I'm sorry," said Fritz.

"I'm not," said the woman. "Junk reminds me of how I was treated for fifty-five years."

I suppose I was lucky to not reach a point toward the end of my junk acquisition career where like a Santa Claus in a grease spotted red suit and a rusty sleigh pulled by eight tiny lawn tractors I'd leave junk in your driveway in the dead of night. I left presents only in the day time. So no one ever outright threatened to shoot me ... not exactly ... but I did wonder sometimes why no one ever called to thank me. I didn't really care. I was no longer cluttering up my own barn and basement. And I was still able to experience the thrill of the chase across the dump, pouncing on a roto-tiller or lawn mower or cooking grill or grinding wheel as if it were a prize stag. And then like a lordly hunter I brought it victoriously back along the trail in my truck. Right to your door.

Thus I enjoyed a feeling of mastery and even self-righteousness as I returned to my home empty-handed, eschewing consumption of the kill as if it were meat on Good Friday. Like St. Francis refusing to kill a tiny sparrow offered to him as a snack.

I was happy to leave Benny my last find, even if it meant he would have to overcome a little frustration turning trash into treasure. Not knowing the original purpose of the round brass container that looked like just another piece of crap, I was sure with the proper shade it would make a terrific lamp. A great project for my friend to curse at and stew over. He finally took it to the back of his property and dumped it near the ruins of the burned out shack, where he was trying to nurse a crispy fried Holly tree back to health. The cylinder was messy and appeared out of place. So when his wife complained, he buried it ... next to the tree. It would be a year before the Holly turned purple and the County HAZMAT team came out to pronounce his back yard unsafe for the foreseeable future. It could be a federal offense to mow his lawn.

Had I not moved south, Benny would have come to hate me. His wife still does.

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