

FISH OIL OF THE DEAD

There's a church across the street from the Metuchen YMCA whose lawn sign reads: *Welcoming and Affirming*. I smile at the slogan, and I imagine the slogans that never made the cut: *Censoring and Judgmental? Cool and Condescending?* Or maybe the ones that were purely Madison Avenue: *The God That Refreshes? Life Eternal Hits the Spot?* When I walk down Woodbridge Avenue, the Presbyterian Church event-board announces not only Easter Sunday but also Maundy Thursday. I have no idea what this day signifies, but I like the sound of it, and I sing "Maundy Thursday" to the tune of "Monday, Monday."

Maundy Thursday, can't trust that day....

Lynn and I have been going to too many estate sales this spring. I often leave with a manual typewriter (I now own at least five of them), and Lynn usually walks out with a variety of odd knick-knacks she feels might be worth something on EBay. For a dollar she bought a Wonder Woman hairbrush from the 1960s that she sold for fifteen dollars. More typically, Lynn buys heavy, chippable Corning or Fiestaware that turns out to have cracks she didn't notice until it's too late.

What's unnerving about these estate sales is the sense that you're inserting your muddy shoes, peering eyes, and probing fingers into a world that was never intended to be scrutinized by strangers. Often it feels as if the house breathed with life only hours earlier—and now it's suddenly a museum of Reader's Digest Abridged Editions, its kitchen cabinets opened to reveal

sagging boxes of sugar, unused packages of Cream of Wheat, and half-used bottles of fish oil capsules. Everything is for sale. Old yarmulkes. Jammed staplers. Broken snow blowers. And suddenly, standing in the kitchen in my coat, the life of the previous occupant begins to take shape—in all its abundant perishability and perilous hope.

Against the staircase, always, leans the collapsed aluminum walker. The tripod cane. The portable blood-pressure machine. The shoeboxes of audio cassettes that no one will ever play. The unopened boxes of Christmas cards. The paperback books meant to prolong life and foster health: *The Beverly Hills Diet*, *Living with Type II Diabetes*, *You Can Survive High Blood Pressure*.

In the living room are golf clubs and a mother-of-pearl accordion. There are tables spread with wristwatches, eyeglasses, wallets, earrings. The upstairs bedrooms offer two dozen men's shirts on the bedspread, women's intimate apparel, beaded handbags, perfume-scented mink stoles, and a high-school yearbook from the late 1940s. I think: Nobody wanted his father's yearbook? Nobody wanted the box of old Polaroids?

A line from Tennessee Williams comes back to me: *The monosyllable of the clock is loss, loss, loss....*

Then down into the basement: An abandoned exercise bike. An ImageWriter printer. An orange extension cord repaired with electrical tape. A box of VHS tapes: *The Complete Shirley Temple Collection*.

Loss, loss, loss...

A shiver goes through me at the smallness of all our lives. I shake myself back to the land of the living—and wait outside in the sun for Lynn. She emerges a few minutes later with a stained hand-embroidered tablecloth that, truthfully, I wouldn't have paid a dime for. But she's happy with her purchase, and the promise that it might be valuable. Like the battered, coffee-ringed copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* that she once picked up for free, and turned out to be a first edition worth \$1,500.

We're glad to be back in the car—to be among the living, returning to our own chipped, stained, and cluttered lives; thankful to be flickering through the sunlight for one more day. We pass the Presbyterian Church. “Maundy Thursday,” I sing. “Sometimes it just turns out that way....” But Lynn isn't paying attention; she's already on her phone, checking out prices on EBay, hoping for buried treasure.