

# **KILLER STUFF** **and TONS OF MONEY**

SEEKING HISTORY AND HIDDEN GEMS  
IN FLEA-MARKET AMERICA

**Maureen Stanton**

THE PENGUIN PRESS  
*New York*  
2011



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*For my parents, Clarissa Starr  
and Patrick Stanton*

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## A NOTE TO THE READER

My journey into the flea market and antiques subculture began in 2000, when Curt Avery, whom I met in college in the 1980s, flew from Massachusetts for an auction in Ohio, where I was in graduate school. I was immediately intrigued by the story—that with \$4,000 in his pocket he traveled a thousand miles after a couple of old bottles, that he stared at a single bottle for a half hour during the preview, turning it this way and that, holding it up to the light, running his fingers over its lip. How he hid behind a pole at the rear of the room to bid, using me as a decoy to fool his competitor. Four years passed, and I had a chance to work a flea market with him. Over the course of the next six years, whenever I could get away from my job, I entered this strange “flea” realm as a participant observer. Curt Avery gave me access into this world, tutored me, and spoke to me for hours and hours about the antiques business, partly as a favor, but mostly I believe because he wants people to understand and appreciate antiques.

From the beginning, Curt Avery asked to remain anonymous, which allowed him to speak candidly and to remain the private, modest person he is (“Why should there be a book about me?”). In our Facebooked, YouTubed, celebrity-idolizing culture, it’s rare that someone does *not* want attention. To honor my agreement with him, and to protect his privacy and the privacy of others, I have changed his name and the names of some dealers, collectors, and customers, and I have made slight moderations of other identifying characteristics. I used real names for public figures, *Antiques Roadshow* personnel, celebrity collectors, museum curators, top dealers, auctioneers (except “Walt Johnson”), show promoters, store and/or Web site owners, and others whose names have previously been made public in articles. This is a work of nonfiction; there are no composite characters, no fabricated scenes or dialogue. Most of the material I observed myself, though a few stories were related to me. As a work of synthesis, this book owes a great debt to dozens of historians, journalists, cultural critics, anthropologists, collectors, and scholars, on whom I relied for documentary research. I am not an antiques dealer, collector, or historian; I sought only to convey a subculture that fascinates me. Any misrepresentations or mistakes about the field of antiques and collecting are fully my own.

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# PROLOGUE

## Treasure Hunters: The Reality

Curt Avery has an idea for a reality show: Give ten antiques dealers a thousand bucks each and turn them loose on the carnival fields of Brimfield, the country's largest outdoor flea market and antiques show. "You continually buy up, trading for more money, more valuable objects," he says. "You take a piece of shit and you turn it into a Chippendale chair."

For Avery, this is not a reality show, but reality. The stakes are higher than a brief moment of fame. Avery must do this every day to put food on the table, pay bills, for his son's braces, his daughter's dance lessons, for the college fund, his own retirement. Every week he plays to win, searching through piles of junk at flea markets or through fancy antiques stores, avoiding the glut of reproductions, the clever fakes ("land mines," he calls them), outmaneuvering his competitors at auctions, applying twenty years of hard-won knowledge, wisdom that he gained the long way—awake at dawn for flea markets, up till midnight hitting the books—and the expensive way, the most painful lessons of all: buying "mistakes." Another antiques dealer I met, Wesley Swanson, learned about antiques by "losing thousands of dollars," he says, "just not all at once."

It's not an easy life. There are no paid sick days or vacation time, no pension fund or retirement plan, no corporate ladder where hard work gets you recognized, no year-end bonus or profit sharing. No safety net. In this endeavor, you survive by your wits alone. Or not. In his early days when the learning curve was ahead of him and profits meager, Curt's wife, Linda, out of work with their second child, would beseech him to sell a bottle from his collection, trade a nineteenth-century bitters bottle perhaps, for a plastic one filled with juice. "How many guys my age are in this business?" Avery says. "It's like giving up on normal life and running away with the circus."

But how many people have a job where every day is a hunt for treasure, every day infused with the hope and possibility of finding a pot of gold, something to love and keep, something unique. "Gold is where you find it," Avery says, meaning that a great antique can show up anywhere—junk stores, yard sales, flea markets, auctions, high-end antique shows. "The beauty of this business," he says, "is that you can do it anywhere. You just need a checkbook, a pen, and a pair of eyes." True, but the checkbook needs a healthy balance, and the eyes must be knowing. "It's all about recognition," he says. He tells me about a period card table that sat in a Gloucester, Massachusetts, consignment shop for "months and months" priced at \$600, until one day a savvy antiques dealer recognized the table's value, bought it, and sold it at auction for some \$14,000. Each day in the life of an antiques dealer challenges his or her knowledge and instincts, an aesthetic IQ test. Recognizing the prize is no easy feat. A seven-by-ten-foot painting hung in an elementary school auditorium in North Attleboro, Massachusetts, for forty-eight years—its value unknown—until one day a man recognized the painting as *Afghans*, an important work by Alexandre Iacovleff. The painting was appraised at over \$800,000.

Even with knowledge, it takes a workaholic compulsion to unearth treasures—rising before dawn for flea markets, knocking on doors, taking one last tour around the antiques shows after everyone else

has left, outfoxing other dealers, doing time in the attics and basements of homeowners looking to divest. Like a rock star on tour, Avery is on the road peddling his wares nearly every weekend: New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, a grueling circuit of thirty to forty shows each year.

There are dealers who take the easy way out by selling reproductions, or passing off fakes and forgeries to unwitting collectors, “crossing over to the dark side,” Avery says—the greatest peril to the pleasure and business of antiques. Like gold prospectors in the Wild West, the antiques and flea market world can attract “colorful” characters, sometimes unsavory or unscrupulous, sometimes canny and diligent. The competition is fierce, the rules few, and the true treasures are rare or well hidden except to the sharp eye of the autodidact.

Like all dealers, Curt Avery awaits the “perfect storm” of antiques, the day when all the factors converge in a cosmic alignment—a bit of arcane knowledge from two decades of self-study that signals this object is the one, the opportunity created through hard work, being out early and up late, and the most elusive factor, luck, the antiques gods smiling on him, his competition asleep or absent, and he’s got a pocket full of cash—a brilliant shimmering instant on a dusty flea-market field or in a posh antiques shop, when there before him that object sits on a table or shelf—the lottery ticket, the “retirement piece,” the “super-best,” the Holy Grail—and he knows it.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Opium Bottles and Knuckleheads

It's 5:00 A.M. on a May Sunday in Massachusetts, and still dark outside. Curt Avery sits in front of me in his fully loaded pickup truck, part of a mile-long line of dealers waiting to get into the Rotary Club flea market. We inch along for an hour, as the rising sun evaporates dew from my windshield. Inside a chain-link fence, flagmen wave dealers into allotted spaces. Avery is peeved because the setup is disorganized and he must wait in line instead of being able to quickly park and then "pick" the show, antique-world parlance for plucking hidden gems off other dealers' tables. Ahead of me, I see him brake, jump out of his idling truck and sprint down a lane where dealers who arrived earlier are setting up. Half a minute later, he jogs back and tosses what looks like a small footstool into the front seat. He moves his truck another thirty feet, spies something down another aisle and leaps out to buy it. Drive-by antiquing.

He finally pulls into his spot and immediately a man materializes, nosing around the back of the truck, but Avery has come mainly to buy, so once he unloads sawhorses and plywood, he locks his truck and we cruise the aisles. The gates don't open for another three hours, but the "show" starts the minute Avery passes through the chain-link fence. By the time the unwitting public arrives, it will be over, the good stuff gone. There will likely be no great finds left. This is the show before the show, when dealers trade with one another out of their still unemptied trucks. Coffee cup in hand, Avery hunkers down the lanes. I follow. "Fresh blood," he says, spotting a Ryder truck. A rental truck can mean that somebody has inherited an estate, or some other one-time circumstance. Amateurs. People who don't do this for a living, who haven't taken the time to research their stuff, who want to turn a quick buck. The objects are new to the market; they haven't been floating around from show to show with the ink on the price tags faded or blurred illegible by rain. "Fresh tags can be good," Avery says. "Or a guy just trying to dump something by lowering the price with a big fat fresh tag."

As we approach the Ryder truck, Avery scans the objects, like the Six Million Dollar Man with telescopic vision. Twenty feet away from the table, he sings a ditty into my ear: "I just made a hundred *doll*-ars." He picks up a butter churn, a small glass canister with a wooden paddle wheel inside, pays the asking price of \$40. "They made very few one-quart butter churns," he says out of the dealer's earshot, "because for all the work you did, you only got a little butter. You do the same amount of work in a two-quart churn and double the butter. Once they figured that out, they didn't make too many of the one-quarts. They're rare." This bit of esoterica—and Avery has hundreds of such factoids—will earn him a clean C-note when he resells the one-quart churn for close to \$200. This is my first five minutes in Avery's world, and he makes finding treasure look easy. But the easy money is deceptive. Avery's apparently effortless profit is the result of years of being on the scene, gleaning tips from other dealers, working at an auction house for minimum wage, studying obscure reference books. "It's a long education," he says. "You really don't start until you spend \$100. I can remember the first time I broke the \$100 mark. It was traumatizing."

Now the Ryder truck woman is unloading a variety of two-inch-tall, delicately shaped perfume

bottles. Avery picks one up, asks how much. “Five bucks,” she says. It’s an anomaly to see Avery gingerly handling the fragile bottle. He was a wrestler in high school, and still has the wrestler’s form: a low center of gravity, with beefy arms and legs and a barrel chest. He has tattooed biceps, a wild mop of carbon-black curls, and a five o’clock shadow by noon. With his dark, deep-set eyes and heavy eyelashes, he’s handsome in a rugged, Bruce Springsteen way.

As the woman unloads more bottles, Avery picks up each one, asks the price. Same as before, five bucks. Finally he says, “How much for all of them?” He walks away with a shoe box of thirty antique perfume bottles for \$100. Probably some woman who collected perfumes died and her collection, her lifelong passion, ended up in the hands of these people, who didn’t know its value, and—it would appear—didn’t care. Avery will later sell the bottles on eBay, most for \$20 to \$50 each, and one for \$150. This is capitalism down and dirty, no guarantees, no regrets. There is a rebellious, outré air to the flea market, “suburban subversive,” one researcher called it, “libidinous,” said another.

“Flea markets,” Avery says, “are the carnal part of this business.”

THE TERM “FLEA MARKET” is from the French *marche aux puces*. In mid-to-late nineteenth-century Paris, *biffins* (rag-and-bone men), *chiffonniers* (ragmen), and *pêcheurs de lune* (“moon fishermen”) sifted through trash in search of resellable items—glass, nails, animal carcasses, human hair, rags, cans. Hair was used to make wigs, carcasses rendered into candles, animal bones used for buttons or glue. Metal and glass were melted and recast. Sardine cans were fashioned into cheap toys like tiny tin soldiers. An estimated thirty thousand ragmen hooked scraps of cloth out of the trash to sell to paper producers. Stories of the flea market’s origin vary. One account claims it arose when the municipality of Paris organized trash collection to prevent outbreaks of infectious diseases, like cholera. In 1884, the government of Paris passed an ordinance that required every building to be equipped with a lidded garbage can, an effort spearheaded by a city official named Monsieur Poubelle. His name is fixed in history—*poubelle* is French for garbage can.

Another theory says that city rents were rising and scrap dealers, who bought the scavenged goods from the rag-and-bone men, moved to cheaper locales on the outskirts of Paris. Emperor Napoleon III charged a civil servant named Baron Haussmann with rebuilding Paris. Under Haussmann’s vision, crooked streets were straightened and whole neighborhoods razed, including run-down buildings that housed salvage dealers. The poor were divided from the well-to-do. Haussmann’s boulevards were designed to inspire commerce, though mainly for the bourgeoisie. Trades involving “an oven or a hammer” were banished from certain areas. Another story suggests that rag pickers and other secondhand merchants could sell goods outside the jurisdiction of Paris without paying city taxes, so they congregated beyond the city gates at Saint-Ouen near Porte de Clignancourt. Since the rags and other merchandise were likely infested with fleas and lice, the market earned the nickname *marche aux puces*.

Probably all of these forces contributed to the development of the flea market, but by 1890, the town managers of Saint-Ouen built roads and walkways, and merchants erected stalls. Vendors at Saint-Ouen paid a fee to exhibit their goods, as dealers do today. The original *marche aux puces* at Saint-Ouen, which bills itself as the world’s largest antique market with 2,500 vendors across seventeen acres, is now a protected architectural heritage site that attracts up to 150,000 visitors each weekend, more than the Eiffel Tower.

EVERY AND I wander up and down the aisles, stopping to chat with other dealers—what shows they'll work this summer, rumors of a real Louis Vuitton suitcase discovered here earlier this morning for \$50, worth thousands. We wend our way down the field, skipping some booths, veering toward others. Avery buys a set of Quimper plates for \$10. Quimper (pronounced kem-pair) is a town in the Brittany region of France where faience pottery, a type of glazed earthenware, has been made since 1690. The Quimper plates that Avery buys feature small, Dutch-looking figures, bonneted women with aprons, and men with tall hats and yellow or blue pantaloons. In an antique shop, a set like this might cost twenty times the ten bucks Avery paid.

At the next booth, he buys a glass paperweight for \$3, a rather ugly translucent blob that he says is from the early nineteenth century, and worth about \$150. This seems like finding nuggets of gold in a shallow stream. It's exciting and addicting, but it's clear that the breadth and depth of knowledge needed to get to this point is daunting. Knowledge is what makes this robbery okay. Robbery is not the right word, though, because the information is available to anyone willing to study, to do the homework. "If you buy something off someone's table, you don't owe them anything," Avery says. The dealer is responsible for setting the asking price. *Caveat venditor*. He tells me about a woman who bought an eighteenth-century tapestry "for nothing" and resold it for six figures. The first dealer learned of the six-figure sale, which left her with a sour taste, especially as the buyer had "beat her up" on the price. "That first dealer fucked up," Avery says. "It's different when you see a great thing and you *still* haggle down the price. My philosophy is, just give them the money. I don't bargain there. I just buy it. I never want that person coming back to me and saying, 'You knocked me down \$10, you cheap motherfucker.'"

Avery has even double-checked a price to give the seller a second chance. One year at the Brimfield flea market, in the "Pennsylvania Triangle," where three top Pennsylvania dealers set up, he saw a piece of redware. "I asked the price and the kid said \$25," Avery says. He didn't think that could be right given the dealer's reputation, so he asked the kid to check again. "The kid yells over to his father, 'How much for this?' The father said \$25." As to the value of the redware piece, "Add two zeros," Avery says. I ask him how this happens with knowledgeable dealers. "They just missed," he says.

Avery and I shop for a couple hours, and when the show opens to the general public at 9:00 A.M., we return to unload his truck. Avery isn't selling much here. This is not the crowd for pricey antiques. This is a flea-market crowd, people who want a bargain, people who lack knowledge yet still want to find something valuable for cheap, people—I shamefully realize—just like me. I am Avery's nightmare customer. "At this flea market, ten thousand people show up, but only nine people know anything," he says. "I saw a little girl about Kristina's age pick up something from my booth." Kristina is Avery's eight-year-old daughter. "I said to her, 'I bet you can't tell me what that's for.' And she said, 'Oh, I think it's a bed warmer.' The mother said, 'I thought it was a popcorn popper.' The kid learned it on a field trip to Plimoth Plantation or something."

A woman picks up a small, delicate bottle from Avery's table, asks how much.

"Twenty," he says.

"Cents?" she asks.

"Dollars," he says.

She quickly sets it back on the table. The bottle is four inches tall, about the circumference of a nickel, with a brownish tarry residue inside and a crusty cork jammed in the top, circa 1890. Raised



lettering on the glass reads *Dr. McMunn's Elixir of Opium*. A fragment of the label signed by the apothecary attests that the opium is "genuine." I recall from my "History of Lizzie Borden" class in college that Borden took opium and morphine (its derivative) regularly, indeed on the day she axed to death her father and stepmother (allegedly: she was acquitted). Avery has a few opium bottles—he gives me one as a gift—but they are fairly hard to find, which seems odd since opium was so widely used. In a single year, 1859, just one glass factory in France produced eighty million bottles for opium. Until it was banned in 1905, opium was cheaper than beer or gin, and easily purchased in grocery stores, by mail, and over the counter at pharmacies. Parents even gave opium to fussy babies as a product like Street's Infants' Quietness, which "quieted" many infants through death by overdose. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, Thomas de Quincey called opium a "panacea for all human woes" and "the secret of happiness." Opium addiction was so widespread that an English pharmacist, C. R. Alder Wright, formulated a derivative called diacetylmorphine, which he hoped would be less addicting. The new drug, sold by the German company Bayer, was called Heroin for its heroic ability to cure. Heroin was the best-selling drug brand of its time.

After I learn about the opium bottles, later at a small one-day antique show with Avery, a girl about eleven years old picks up the bottle and reads the lettering. "What's opium?" she asks, pronouncing it "opp-eeum." I tell her a little bit about the bottles. "Awesome," she says. "So much history in a little bottle."

A WOMAN PICKS UP a \$90 Japanese Imari porcelain plate from Avery's table, says to a friend, "Oh, I saw one just like that at Job Lot," a warehouse filled with liquidation items. I grimace as the woman wanders away. Avery disparages the shopping strategies of this class of buyers. "They are *aiming* for cracked things," he says. "I can have the perfect plate in my hand and it's \$12, but they'll be like, 'Oh no, I'm fine with these. Do you have any more like this?' I couldn't sell a good thing to these knuckleheads." I cringe, as this has been my strategy—buy the slightly "off" thing for cheaper. I, too, am a "knucklehead."

Earlier that day, Avery bought an antique chest of drawers for \$20, a lovely smallish piece of solid oak. No fiberboard or cheesy plywood backing or fake wood-grain veneer. He put a tag of \$80 on the dresser, about half its retail value at a better show. Dozens of people admire it. It's such a bargain that I'm tempted to buy it even though I have no place for it. I am amazed that Avery can't sell this solid oak dresser for less than anyone would pay for a factory-assembled, particleboard imitation from Walmart. He drops the price to \$50, and now this becomes a sociological experiment—a test of what I'm not sure, perhaps a theory about American culture, that we are easily satisfied with simulacra, the surface of things over substance and quality. The dresser still doesn't sell.

At the flea market, Avery sells objects far below their value. He's willing to be flexible and take a hit on his prices here, but he has his bottom line. "I had this really, really good lampshade in cranberry glass with an oval cut to clear," he says. "They dip the blowpipe in clear glass, then in cranberry glass and then blow it into form." After the piece is shaped, a pattern is cut into it. "This lampshade was rare, from the 1850s," he says. "It was beautiful. It had a couple of chips, but it was just a rare, rare thing." Avery glances occasionally at the people wandering through his booth. He continues. "I started at \$200, but I had trouble selling the lampshade because it was a single, so I marked it at \$129. This woman says, 'Would you take \$80?' I looked at her and I go, 'NO.' I mean, I'll smash it before I'll sell it for \$80. The lady was like, 'Would you take \$85?' I said, 'Do you even know what you are

buying?’ The lady looked at me. ‘Oh, yes, yes.’ I go, ‘It’s \$100.’” For that price, the woman couldn’t refuse.

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“This isn’t about the money,” Avery says. “It’s about appreciation.” We joke that he should make customers pass a quiz before they’re allowed to buy something, to prove they *deserve* the piece. For Avery, this is about a love of objects, a keen understanding of the skill invested in creating a lampshade without the benefit of technology. In the nineteenth century, a glassblower’s apprenticeship was seven years. For Avery, an antique has value beyond utility. He and other dealers and collectors are lay historians, approaching their subject through the back door. Avery is a teacher at heart. When I arrived at his house before the show, he brought me into his living room and pointed to a framed sampler on the wall. “What do you notice about this?” he asked.

I looked at the eighteen-inch-square sampler, frayed at the edges with spots of dry rot, the alphabet embroidered across the top and the bottom by some young girl, lessons in feminine crafts. If I saw this at a flea market, I might pay \$10. It’s pretty, but worn and faded. I studied the sampler and found nothing odd or amiss. I didn’t notice that one of the alphabets omits the letter *J*. “The letter *J*,” Avery said, “was not in usage until 1780 to 1790. Prior to that, the letters *I* and *J* were written as *I*. You had to discern which letter was in use by the context. Obviously ‘is’ was meant to be ‘is’ and not ‘js.’” On Avery’s sampler, the upper alphabet includes the letters *I* and *J* while the bottom alphabet omits the *J*. The sampler is transitional, Avery hypothesizes; the girl who sewed it had forgotten in one instance to include the new letter *J*. He dates the sampler to the late eighteenth century and values it at \$600. The sampler tells a story of a girl’s life, what girls were taught, but it also tells a story of the English language. The sampler is literally a stitch in time.

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AFTER THE ROTARY SHOW, on my drive home to Maine, I stop at an indoor flea market just before it closes. I spot a perfume bottle that is *exactly like one Avery bought*, with a hand-painted gold stripe around its belly, in delicate purple glass, for \$20. At home, I’m still patting myself on the back for negotiating \$4 off the asking price when I discover through a quick Internet search hundreds, if not thousands, of identical bottles for sale, blown a week or a month ago in Turkey, asking price: a buck. I recall some of the things I’d learned from Avery that I’d failed to apply: wrong color, no discernible wear, and too easy a find, especially at the *end* of the day. That twenty bucks was my first installment on a homeschool education in antiques. The real proving ground is the Brimfield flea market and antiques show, reportedly the largest in the country. For dealers, Avery says, “Brimfield is boot camp.”

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## CHAPTER 2

### One Man's Trash

In John Cheever's 1941 story "Publick House," a young man comes home to find "an unnatural profusion of antiques in the hallway" of the eighteenth-century summer home his widowed mother had transformed into a tea room. She's pawning the family heirlooms for funds to run the restaurant. "Yes, the rugs are for sale—real Maine hooked rugs. The small one is \$15," his mother tells a guest. The woman's elderly father is sick of the "god-damned tearoom people." He says to her, "You've sold all my things. You sold my mother's china. You sold the rugs. You sold the portraits. You've made a business out of it—selling the past. What kind of business is that—selling the past?"

In spite of his love for old things, Curt Avery never set out to "sell the past," but perhaps antiquities were in his destiny. Avery grew up surrounded by the ghosts of history. His hometown in Massachusetts was one of the earliest European settlements, established around 1627 when pilgrims left the sandy shores of Plymouth in search of fertile soil. "Where I grew up it was a time capsule," Avery says. His home, built in 1861, had nine small, oddly shaped rooms, one of which was connected by a small door to the upstairs loft of a cavernous barn, with three carriage stalls in berms below ground. The yard, ringed by a small stream, abutted a field where his sister kept a pony. Beyond the tiny brook was a stand of old-growth pine. One day when he was about ten, he saw some trash sticking out of the ground just beyond the stream. He poked at the dirt and uncovered a bottle.

Before the advent of incinerators, and then trash collection and landfills, people dumped their trash on the streets. In most American cities, pigs ran loose eating garbage (and were, in turn, sometimes eaten by the poor). Small towns built "piggeries," where swine were fed garbage, and people buried trash at the edge of their property or tossed it down the outhouse or "privy." When Avery, as a boy, stumbled upon the century-old dump in his backyard, his hobby of "bottle digging" was born.

He and his childhood friend, Dennis, spent many days digging the old dump. "It was like that whole treasure thing," Avery says. "'Look at what we found! This has got to be worth \$1 million!' Dennis found a pair of spectacles one day. I was so jealous," he recalls, "but I found something that he wanted, so we traded." He laughs. "It goes back that far." Avery tells me about the bottle digging "rage" in the sixties and seventies. "You didn't have to go far to find somebody who dug." The first bottle digger Avery met was a friend of his mother's, who helped him identify his bottles, and offered to take him digging. When Avery was in high school, Ken Hartwell moved into town, and he and Avery dug together. They would locate older houses and dig the embankments behind them. "Ken and I got really good at digging holes in people's backyards without their knowing," he says. Bottle digging is a quasi-archaeological endeavor, sans the tiny brushes and sieves and advanced degrees, and it often involves a petty crime: trespassing. "To some people," Avery says, "bottle digging is rape-and-pillage archaeology."

With their loot from digging, they set up at bottle shows on the East Coast in summers during high school and college, meandering along back roads in Avery's Volkswagen, sleeping under the stars. "Ken and I would get in the car and aim toward a bottle show, finding dumps to dig along the way. We

never once paid for a campsite. We'd sleep in the bushes." He continues, "One time we were going to Saratoga for a bottle show and along the way we found a Ballston Spa bottle. We felt like such hot shits." In the nineteenth century, wealthy Americans traveled to Ballston Spa near Saratoga, New York, to partake of the natural mineral springs, literally, a "watering hole." The spring water, which contained salt, calcium, and magnesium, was bottled and sold as a cure. "We dug a Franklin Spring water bottle and sold it for \$350 the next day at the show. It was a rare bottle. It's still a rare bottle. I've never had another one," he says. "I'm sure we went out and bought beer and got drunk as hell."

Avery's wife Linda, tall, dark-haired, with big brown eyes, recalls two things about their first date in college: the Rolling Stones and bottles. Early in their relationship, Avery took Linda bottle digging in the woods in a suburb of Boston. They were caught by local cops and questioned about trespassing. Linda saved the town paper's police blotter as a souvenir of their courtship, a report of "suspicious characters."

GROWING UP, dump picking was a ritual in my family. On Saturdays, my mother took me and my siblings to the town dump, where we rescued old chaise longues, furniture in need of minor repair, and phones. My mother had an odd predilection for reassembling rotary phones. I vividly recall her amid tiny phone parts, working with a long thin screwdriver. Her penchant for dump picking was about recovering something valuable discarded by someone less thrifty, less resourceful. She grew up poor, the daughter of a widowed housekeeper; scavenging was the economic imprint of her childhood. For me, dump picking was a treasure hunt.

Scavenging is a habit that dies hard, or maybe never dies. In college, the lessons of my childhood meshed with my desire to be unconventional. I wore thrift store couture, and haunted junk stores. When I met Avery in college and learned of his bottle digging hobby, I asked if I could go with him, so one Saturday we drove to an old church in Massachusetts that he dated by the architecture as 1700. The parking lot was empty, so we trespassed into the woods behind the church, stepping over a mossy stone wall. He walked around like a surveyor, scanning the leaf clutter. "We'll dig here," he said, pointing to a spot that looked random to me. To his trained eye, a slight rise of the earth bespoke the century-old dumping ground. We shoveled off the duff and the top layers of dirt. Twenty minutes later I stood knee-high in a hole. Avery said, "Why don't you dig here?" After I traded spots with him, my shovel instantly clinked against glass, and I realized he'd positioned me to find the treasure. On our hands and knees, we clawed the dirt, unearthing cracked china, bottles, and jars. I found a whole "Sawyer's Crystal Blueing," an aquatinted, mold-cast bottle that once contained bluing, used when washing clothes, to make the whites look whiter. The first colonists washed their clothes on Mondays, so laundry day became "blue Monday."

I dug up a "Dr. Cumming's Vegetine," a "Marvelous Cold Cream—Richard Hudnut, New York," and a brown bottle with embossed lettering: "Liquozone, Manufactured Only By The Liquid Ozone Co., Chicago, USA." Liquozone was a "snake oil" potion sold in the late 1800s as a cure for everything—from dandruff to cancer, its ads boasted—including diarrhea, eczema, goiter, malaria, piles, and scrofula, a disease of the lymph nodes that caused growths around the neck. Liquozone was purported to be liquid oxygen, which if true would have killed you. It was later debunked as 99 percent water with some sulphuric acid, and banned.

The bottles are puzzle pieces offering a brief glimpse into life one hundred years ago. I was amazed that such old artifacts fetch only a dollar or two at a flea market. My favorite find was a ceramic doll

just two inches high, unsmiling and armless. “That’s turn-of-the-century,” Avery said. “You can see the seams from the mold. Worth about ten bucks.” I fell in love with the doll. There was something transformative about the primacy of that experience, which affected me like no history book ever had. The doll made history *real*, the way I suppose the Shroud of Turin proves Jesus real for some people.

FOR AVERY, bottle digging was the genesis of his life as an antiques dealer. The first antique he bought specifically to resell was something he recognized from his digging days. “I was on a job in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire, on Lake Winnepesaukee, the oldest vacation community in the United States,” he says. Avery worked as a delivery driver in high school and college. “During our lunch break, I went into an antique shop and I found a stack of five redware cups from the nineteenth century. I knew what redware was because I’d dug it up.” He paid \$15 for the redware pieces, and later took them to a flea market. “I put them in a knapsack and walked around looking at dealers’ stuff, talking to them. I peddled them all for \$15 to \$25 each.”

Avery started with five pieces of redware in a knapsack. Fifteen years later, when he sets out for the Brimfield Flea Market in July, his pickup truck fully loaded, he’ll be hauling \$30,000 worth of antiques.

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## CHAPTER 3

### Boot Camp

The alarm startles me awake at 3:00 A.M. on a Tuesday morning in July. Heart pounding, nauseated from lack of sleep, for a moment I am lost in the blackness until I remember where I am: transposed to the life of an itinerant antiques dealer. It's too early for birds, for food, even for coffee, as I pull on my clothes and head downstairs to meet Avery. I'd arrived at his house the night before to accommodate our early departure for Brimfield, the Mother of All Flea Markets. For six days in May and again in July and September, the sleepy burg of Brimfield becomes a tent city, with up to 5,000 dealers, like temporary squatters, and as many as 250,000 visitors. The dealers' booths spread across twenty different fields along a mile of Route 20, Brimfield's main drag, forming a patchwork quilt of small "shows" with staggered opening times. "There's so much to see you can go blind," Avery says. "Brimfield is half antiques, half collectibles, and half flea-market junk." His fuzzy math speaks to the sheer superfluity of Brimfield.

The Brimfield Flea Market began in 1959 in Brimfield, Massachusetts, a village settled in the early 1700s, now with 3,700 citizens. Brimfield's organizers boast that it's the largest outdoor flea market and antiques show in the United States, though two other markets claim this distinction as well. The manager of the Rose Bowl flea market in Pasadena, California, which started in 1968 and attracts 3,000 vendors, said, "It's understood that this is the world's largest flea market." First Monday Trade Days in Canton, Texas, its manager claimed, is "the world's oldest and largest flea market," with 3,000 vendors occupying 400 acres. First Monday Trade Days began in 1850, when a U.S. circuit judge held court on the first Monday of the month. People gathered from near and far to follow the action, perhaps witness a hanging, and the crowd attracted hawkers.

As an unregulated industry, there are no reliable figures for the number of flea markets. One source, *The Official Directory to U.S. Flea Markets*, reported that there were 4,000 flea markets located between Kansas and Texas alone. A mid-1990s study estimated that more than 3,500 flea markets produced \$10 billion in gross sales annually. As of 2004, according to the National Flea Market Association, there were about two and a half million flea-market vendors, with annual sales exceeding \$30 billion.

Brimfield has the ambience of a protest march or an outdoor concert. One year, the Rolling Stones showed up in a limousine. At Brimfield, babies are born, people die, romances blossom. In 2002, a couple got married at 6:00 A.M. while they stood in line waiting for the J&J antique show to begin. When the gates opened, the newlyweds, the groom in shorts and a tux, the bride in a dress, ran around shopping. One presumes they were searching for "something old" to go along with the new, the borrowed, and the blue. Brimfield, with its mile-long stretch of booths on both sides of the road, hundreds of feet deep, is like a reverse parade, where people stroll along looking at fixed displays. It is an enormous outdoor museum, the Smithsonian on the fly and up for sale. In fact, in 1983 the Smithsonian sponsored a research expedition to Brimfield, headed by anthropologist Dr. Charlene James-Duguid, who dispelled the myth that flea markets were "filled with vagrants and gypsies."

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I SLIDE INTO the passenger seat of Avery's pickup, odometer reading: 234,621. He bought the truck when he set up at his first Brimfield fifteen years ago. He squeezes in behind the steering wheel, downs three aspirin with a slug of Pepto-Bismol. "The antique dealer's cocktail," he says, then stuffs the bottle in his mobile pharmacy, the pocket compartment of the driver's-side door, which contains the necessary remedies for the modern-day peddler: bug spray, deodorant, toothpaste, Balmex (for thigh chafing from hours of walking on sweltering days, or in wet clothes during rainouts), a small bottle of shampoo. His style is minimalist, baggy shorts, a worn T-shirt, two pairs of athletic socks (to alleviate painful flare-ups of plantar fasciitis from hours on his feet), and sneakers. His luggage is a plastic supermarket bag with an extra shirt and changes of underwear and socks, which he squashes behind the headrest.

Every other possible space is filled with objects. Nineteenth-century oil portraits are wedged behind the seat. A turn-of-the-century cane with a fourteen-karat gold knob, and another cane with a carved ivory handle poke out from under the seat, each dangling a price tag of \$250. A few marbles rest on the truck floor, along with a hammer. It's a trade-off: he could carry more clothes, a chair, a cooler, but that means he'd forfeit precious square footage, space for one or two more antiques, which could translate into thousands of dollars.

I'm still waking up, but Avery's on his second cup of black coffee, which he drinks cold. Like an avid fisherman, he's got a thousand stories, deals he's made, the ones that got away. "Last year I bought this pitcher from a dealer named Chet. It was this big fancy teapot thing. I looked at it and I said, 'My God, that's yellowware squared.'" Yellowware is thick, sturdy pottery fired from the ochre clay found in the Northeast and the Ohio River valley in the early nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries. Avery had bought the pitcher for \$500. "Turns out that between the time I bought it and now," he says, "the papers showed one of these pitchers with the lid missing selling for \$3,000. Well, this guy Chet saw the article, too, and he says, 'You know that pitcher I sold you? One of those just sold for a lot of money.'" Avery bought the piece on instinct. He wasn't sure of its value, but even if he had been, I ask, how could he be blamed for his knowledge? "And this guy completely understands that," Avery says, "but unfortunately, he's also human. He didn't really grumble, but because of that, I'll spend five hundred bucks at his booth whether I need the stuff or not. It's a reciprocal thing." I ask Avery if he'd sold the pitcher yet. "I'll give it to this midwestern auction house to sell, Ohio or somewhere. They specialize in pottery." Antique dealing is all about taking an item out of the wrong setting and placing it in its rightful frame of reference. As Avery says, "Context is everything."

Off the highway, we pass through Sturbridge, then Brimfield. These towns are picture-postcard scenes with steepled white churches overlooking trimmed lawns of the commons, graced by huge oaks and maples, and usually a cast-iron cannon, or statuary of some forgotten local hero on a horse or shouldering a musket. These towns look like movie sets, almost caricatures, but in the layout of the roads and in the architecture you can glimpse life in a previous century—the narrow roads once paths for horses and buggies, the triangles of grass that denote the "common," where villagers gathered to trade, hold militia training, or graze cattle. The setting is apposite to the occasion—peddling centuries-old stuff.

We pass a church that rents its lawn for parking, ten bucks per spot. "Fifteen years ago there would have been a hundred cars in this lot already," Avery says. "Brimfield and antiques in general aren't as popular as they used to be. What a shame." This is a lament I will hear from many dealers, though

Avery is an optimist. “It’s purely a lack of knowledge that separates consumers from antiques,” he says. “~~No one would think of buying a new piece of furniture, outside of a couch, if they knew about antiques.~~” I admire his faith in the latent tastes of the American populace. It’s more aesthetic credit than I would give us. Down the main strip you see tents and booths and stuff for sale on the sidewalk and food vendors, Ben & Jerry’s, Dollar Burgers, fresh-squeezed lemonade, fried dough. Young, robust cops in Bermuda-shorts uniforms patrol the streets from mountain bikes. Teenage boys wheel dollies, yelling, “Porter for hi-yah,” the same scrawled in Magic Marker on their T-shirts.

At the farthest end of the main thoroughfare is Acres North, a four-hour-long, gated show with two hundred dealers, the first of two shows this week at which Avery will sell. Entrance to Acres North is carefully guarded. Giant signs warn, “NO SELLING UNTIL 1:00 P.M.,” when the show officially opens. The shows are a battle between the promoters, who want to assure their gate audience—for a \$ fee—gets quality “fresh” merchandise, and dealers, who want to “pick” the field before the show opens. Antiques dealers have a constant need for fresh things to mark up and resell. An ad for one Brimfield show says, “Expect to find hundreds of exhibitor displays of *fresh merchandise*.” Some pickers offer Avery \$50 to \$100 to “assist” him, getting into the show early under this pretense, but today I am his assistant. (Pickers have been known to hop the fence in back, taking their chances with cow pies or a grazing bull.)

The sponsors at the gate direct traffic, make announcements over the PA system: “Elgin Crittendon you are in the wrong space,” they announce twice, punitively. Avery and I pass through the chain-link fence onto a bucolic, tree-rimmed pasture with cows in the lower acres, the smoky foothills of the Berkshires as backdrop. Avery erects his tent first, a routine he could perform blindfolded, and then sets up five tables. I help him unwrap hundreds of items, anxious about making a \$1,000 slip of the hand. The day quickly grows stiflingly hot and sticky. After just two hours my breathing is labored and my fingers have swollen into sausages. We have until 1:00 P.M. to set up, and so in the 90-degree swelter, we unwrap “smalls” and place them on tables. Avery’s marketing strategy is to overload his booth. His theory seems sound; you can never predict what will sell. In a quick census, I estimate that he’s brought over three hundred objects. He spent two days carefully selecting merchandise and loading his truck. But in spite of the preparation, what might sell is still a guessing game. Most of the objects range from \$100 to \$1,000, with a couple dozen higher-ticket items, like a rare inkwell for which he paid \$1,500 and hopes to sell for double.

WE ARE JUST ABOUT finished setting up when 1:00 P.M. hits and the gates open. From our vantage point halfway down the field, we can see them coming, the buyers, making steady, hurried progress, not running, which would seem undignified, more like race-walking, that odd sport. They approach in a way that reminds me of *Dawn of the Dead* zombies: at first they appear distant and untroubling and then suddenly they’re upon you in a devouring swarm, with their straw hats and fanny packs and walkie-talkies and cell phones and thick wads of cash and two-wheeled carts for hauling loot.

“Got any violins?”

“Fountain pens?”

“Do you have any scouting stuff?”

A one-legged man crutches by and shouts, “Cast iron cookware? Pots? Pans? Waffle irons?” What is it about cast iron cookware that strikes him? Why does he want, love, *need* an old waffle iron? (Investment perhaps: a “Favorite Piqua Ware” double-loaf cast iron cornbread pan sold for a record



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