

I

A cold rain whipped across the clapboard facade of the old house, spattering against the panes. Like everyone else in the bone-damp parlor set up theater style with folding wooden-slat seats, the auctioneer raised his gloomy eyes toward the windows, perhaps hoping the gusty rain would shoot out the glass and abort the abysmal performance.

Oliver Rose sat on an aisle seat, a few rows back from the podium, his long legs stretched out on the battered wooden floor. The room was less than half full, no more than thirty people. Behind the auctioneer, strewn around like the aftermath of a bombing, lay the assorted possessions of the family Barker, the last of whom had lived long enough to make some of this junk valuable.

“. . . it's a genuine Boston rocker,” the auctioneer droned, his voice cracked and pleading as he pointed to a much abused Windsor-style rocking chair. “Made by Hitchcock, Alford and Company, one of the finest names in chairs.” He looked lugubriously around the silent room, no longer expectant. “Damn,” he snapped. “It's a genuine antique.”

“Ten bucks,” a lady's voice cackled. She was sitting in the first row, bundled in a dirty Irish sweater.

“Ten bucks?” the auctioneer protested. “Look at these tapered back spindles, the scrolled top rail, the shaped seat. . . .”

“All right, twelve-fifty,” the lady huffed. She had been buying most of the furniture offered, and it seemed to Oliver that the auction was being held for her benefit.

“The whole thing stinks,” a voice hissed. It came from a veined Yankee face beside him. “The rain's mucked it all up. She's got the antique store in Provincetown. She'll get it for a song and sell it off to the tourists for ten times as much.”

Oliver nodded, clicking his tongue in agreement, knowing that the rain was his ally as well. Most of the tourists who had crowded into Chatham on Thursday and Friday, hoping for a pleasant Memorial Day weekend at the beach, had left by midmorning. At the Breaking Wave, where Oliver was a summer waiter, the dining room for the Sunday lunch looked and felt like an off-season resort, and his tips had matched the mood.

But the weather on Cape Cod, at best, was uncertain. He was used to it. All through Harvard undergraduate school, he had worked summers at the Breaking Wave, amusing himself at the antique auctions on those days he couldn't get to the beach. He was especially fond of those held at the old cottages after the owners had died off. Rarely could he afford to buy anything, although occasionally he picked up a Staffordshire figure for a song.

He had grown up being watched over by the four female figures of Staffordshire pearl ware representing the Four Seasons garbed in décolleté white robes. They peered out of his mother's dining-room china closet, emblems of his father's war service in England. Once, he had broken Spring, which he had removed in a clandestine prepuberty compulsion to feel the little lady's tits; the figure had slipped out of his hand, and was decapitated on the floor. Always good with his hands, he had done a magnificent glue job and his mother was never the wiser.

Now, as if out of guilt, he had acquired a modest collection of his own, some common sleeping-child figures and a ubiquitous sailor and his wife and child. He had done a bit of research on the subject as well and, although the figures were comparatively cheap, he suspected that, someday, they would increase in value.

The auctioneer reached for the boxing figure and held it above his head. Then, putting on his glasses, he read from the spec sheet.

"Staffordshire pearl ware. The pugilist Cribb. He was the champion of England in 1809. . . ."

Oliver stiffened. The idiot is breaking the pair, he thought, appalled by the man's ignorance. Cribb was white. There was a black

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figure as well, Molineaux, an ex-slave who had fought Cribb twice, losing both times. Both pugilists had been immortalized by caricature in drawings, on pottery, and through figures like these. They were always pictured together, facing each other, fists raised.

“Fifteen bucks,” the lady in the first row shouted.

The auctioneer looked at the figure and shrugged. It wasn't, as Oliver knew, a work of art. Merely a souvenir, probably selling for tuppence when first made by an anonymous back-street potter. The auctioneer glared contemptuously at the audience, obviously wanting to hurry the sale.

“I have fifteen,” he croaked. “Going at fifteen. Do I hear sixteen?”

Oliver raised his hand. The auctioneer smirked, perhaps at Oliver's youth.

“I have sixteen,” the man said, showing a sliver of optimism.

The lady in the dirty Irish sweater turned in her chair. Her face looked like soggy dough; her red-tipped nose was runny.

“Seventeen,” she cackled.

“I have seventeen,” the auctioneer said, his eyes shifting back to Oliver.

Oliver raised eight fingers, clearing his throat as well. The heavy lady huffed and shifted in her chair. Reaching into his pocket, he nervously pulled out his money. He had thirty-seven dollars, representing his total weekend tip income. If he got Cribb, he wanted to have some left for Molineaux.

“Nineteen,” the lady boomed out. A gust of rain spattered against the glass. The auctioneer ignored it, warming to his task. Oliver's heart pounded. “Bitch,” he muttered.

“Twenty,” he shouted.

“Idiot,” the woman rebuked, turning to fix on him her gaze of utter contempt.

“I have twenty. Twenty once.” The auctioneer, a thin smile of satisfaction growing on his lips as he looked at the woman, raised the gavel. “Twenty twice.” Oliver held his breath. Down went the gavel. “Sold.”

“Goddamn,” Oliver muttered, energized by the experience, savoring the flush of victory.

“Well, you beat the old cow,” the Yankee beside him twanged.

The black figure came up a few moments later. Oliver felt his guts tighten. It’s a pair, he told himself, pumping his resolution. He peeled off what he had spent on Cribb and tucked the money safely in his pocket, clutching the remaining bills in a sweaty hand. There was only seventeen dollars left.

“This is another Staffordshire pugilist, the fighter Molineaux, a former slave, who boxed in England in the early eighteen hundreds.”

“Ten bucks,” the lady in the dirty Irish sweater shouted. She did not turn to look behind her. Oliver shouted out, “Eleven.” Please, he begged in his mind, enjoying the excitement, sensing his surrender to his determination. At the same time, he rebuked himself. He had no business squandering his money.

“Twelve,” a voice chirped from behind him. He turned quickly, startled by this new voice. Two rows behind him, a young girl with long chestnut hair hanging from under a sailor cap smiled primly, a flush on her apple-contoured cheekbones.

“Shit,” Oliver mumbled as the auctioneer responded.

“I have twelve.”

“Twelve-fifty,” the girl shouted without hesitation.

“Don’t they know it’s a pair?” he whispered to himself, as if their bids were, somehow, a form of vengeance. He held up his fist, in which he clutched the sweaty bills.

“I have thirteen,” the auctioneer called, staring directly at the girl. She’s hesitating, Oliver thought.

“Do I hear thirteen-fifty? . . . I have fifty—thirteen-fifty,” the auctioneer shouted. Oliver was sure the auctioneer was playing games and scowled at him, then turned and rebuked the girl with his eyes.

“Fourteen,” he growled. His throat was tightening. He felt the tension in his stomach. Damned bitch, he cried inside himself. It

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made no sense at all to break up the pair. The auctioneer looked toward the girl.

“I have fifteen,” the auctioneer shouted, warming to his task, ignoring the whiplash of rain that pounded against the house. The audience grew restless.

“Sixteen,” Oliver croaked.

“Seventeen,” the girl responded quickly, her voice carrying over the din.

“It’s a damned pair,” Oliver shouted, shaking his head. He opened his palm and unrolled the bills, checking the denominations. Seventeen. That was it. Not even small change.

He turned again and looked at the girl. She was calm, almost serene. But there was no mistaking her determination.

“I have seventeen,” the auctioneer said, staring at Oliver, his glare offensive, intimidating.

“Eighteen,” Oliver shouted, his voice crackling. The room seemed to grow quieter. The sound of pounding rain faded. Knowing he hadn’t the money, he felt sinister, manipulative. His breath came in short gasps.

“Nineteen,” the girl responded.

“Twenty,” he shot back.

The girl hesitated and a lump rose in his throat. He looked at the girl again. Their eyes met. There was no mistaking the fierceness of her determination.

“Twenty-one,” she snapped.

All right, he decided, nodding, thankful for the reprieve. Tough little bitch, he thought.

“I have twenty-one once.” The auctioneer paused, watching him. Oliver felt his blood rise. So I’m a coward, he told himself, wallowing in his humiliation.

“Twice . . .” The auctioneer shrugged. Down went the gavel. “Sold.”

Oliver sat through the rest of the auction in a funk. Hell, he could have borrowed the money. But why? What was the point? By the

end of the auction he had calmed down, and when he went to pay for and collect his figure he confronted her.

"It's a pair," he said. He must have been eyeing the figure acquisitively because she seemed to draw it closer to her. "They go together."

"That's not the way they were sold," she said, flashing green eyes, widely set, in rebuke.

"He didn't know what he was doing."

"I liked it," she said as they walked out of the parlor, huddling in the crowded hall as the group opened umbrellas and prepared to walk into the gusty rain.

"All I had was seventeen bucks. I deliberately bid it up." He felt foolish and vindictive, telling her that.

"I got carried away," he added, hoping to blunt his pettiness.

"So did I," she admitted. "That's me."

"Too damned stubborn."

"My father says tenacious."

She smiled, showing white, even teeth. The smile warmed him and his antagonism faded.

"Suppose I'd bid it up to a hundred?"

"I was worried you would."

"You would have gone along?"

"I hate to think about it."

He returned her smile and moved with her to the doorway.

"Why did you want it?" he asked.

She hesitated, coy now. He sensed the give and take of flirtation.

"It's for one of the girls at the Chatham Arms. I'm a baking assistant for the summer. Her brother's in Golden Gloves. She's one of the maids. Takes a lot of crap. I thought it would be nice. Instead of a tip."

He was touched, feeling guilty suddenly.

"A shame to break up a pair. Even for a good cause."

She opened her umbrella and stepped into the rain. He ducked under it, although it didn't do either of them much good.

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“Hope you don’t mind.”

“I’m a sportsmanlike winner.”

“I’m a lousy loser.”

The Chatham Arms was on the other side of town and they walked through the main street. His hand covered hers as they jointly clutched the umbrella against the wind. The rain came at them horizontally and they finally took refuge in the doorway of a closed toy store.

By then they had traded vital statistics. Her name was Barbara Knowles. She was a student at Boston University. She had wanted to spend the summer as a volunteer for Jack Kennedy to help him win against Nixon, she told him. But she couldn’t afford that.

“Anyway, I like baking. It’s fun. And the pay’s good.”

“Unless you spend it all.” He pointed to the figure wrapped in soggy newspapers.

“You, too.” She laughed and he noticed that her eyes were really hazel and had turned from green to brown in the late-afternoon light.

“I guess I just like old things. They’ll be worth more than money someday. Like these figures.”

“You can’t eat them.”

“Unfortunately not. Anyway, I’ll have to avoid temptation. Better stay away from auctions,” he told her. “Harvard Law is damned expensive. I start in the fall. My deal with my folks is that they pay tuition and I pay living expenses.”

They were huddled together in the tiny storefront entrance. When she spoke, he felt her warm breath against his cheek. A current, he knew, was passing between them. Something wonderful and mysterious. He felt her response.

“Don’t give him away,” he said, sensing his note of pleading. It was, after all, a symbol of their meeting. “Not yet.”

“It’s mine.” She pouted with mock sarcasm, holding it over his head like a club.

“One isn’t much good without the other,” he said. “It’s a twosome.”

Warren Adler

“I beat you fair and square,” she said.

“Well, the battle isn’t over yet,” Oliver whispered, wondering if she had heard his voice above the beat of the rain.

“Not yet,” she agreed, smiling. She *had* heard him.

SAMPLE

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