

## MY SECRET SHAME

After dinner, I give Mom a quick call at the hospital (“Are you coming tomorrow?” “Yes, Mom.” “Don’t bring me anything. I’ve already got too much garbage here as it is.” “I won’t, Mom.”) After I hang up, I check the papers for estate sales. There’s not much going on in the classifieds of the Free Press, but when I get to The Observer, I grab my red pen. Right there under “Estate Sales,” between all the 3 and 4 column inch sale ads run by auction houses and professional liquidators advertising items like: “French hand-painted, marble top commode,” is one tiny ad. I wipe the old horn-rims before I read:

ESTATE SALE  
Hamtramck  
Sat only, 9-4.  
40+ yrs accumulation.  
Furniture; household; basement; garage.  
Many unusual items! Don’t Miss.  
Sale by Betty L. & Co.

These are the kind of ads I live for.

Hamtramck: ancient factory town, adjunct of Detroit, home of the now-defunct Dodge Main, one of the city’s toughest plants; birthplace of Kowalski Sausage (note 20 foot tall neon kielbasa); labyrinth of cramped streets of pre-war bungalows and two-flats (covered in *trompe l’oeil* brick asphalt sheet) with welcome mat lawns and porches so whopping big you could park a ‘57 Chrysler C300 on them; populated by factory rats who did their forty years at the plant, then keeled over in their first year of retirement, leaving black-clad peasant-stock wives to live another thirty years, hobbling to church every day, clutching their rosaries, cursing the invading blacks and Moslems and Bangladeshi, then returning home to clean their forty year-old ovens. Junking demographics don’t

get much better than Hamtramck. Not only is it filled with older folks who take care of their things (things that were built to last in the first place), but also more Eastern Europeans than practically anywhere outside Warsaw -- meaty people with a low center of gravity, so they don't move around much. That's what you need for good junking. People who stay in one place forever.

At an estate sale, a person's life is laid in front of you. A man's bakelite Donald Duck pencil sharpener from his Twenties childhood can be found in the same room as his walker and oxygen tank. (I snagged that pencil sharpener, by the way.) It's strange to see someone's life collapsed in this manner. Strange, but exhilarating. Like it or not, the blood rush of the estate sale is that you have won; you have outlived one of your villagers, you were born later, luckier --now you are entitled to what was theirs. When I buy this fondue dish, I have eaten the heart of my enemy. Maybe this is what makes people so nuts. (They scowl and push, toss elbows, body checks. A shame really: people can't be pleasant while plundering.) It isn't just greed or competition or the thrill of the hunt that drives them -- something else is going on: elemental, scary, addictive. When they call your number and let you in that house and you start running around with all the rest of the junk-crazed lunatics, something happens. A door has been opened and you are suddenly privy to the secrets. Not just the deceased's secrets, but to *the* secrets: fears, joys, angers, despairs, boredoms. Life and death were acted out, but you missed the show and now you're backstage, going through the props, trying to figure out if the production was "Hamlet" or "Under the Yum-Yum Tree."