

In 1974 I left a job with the California Air Resources Board to return, on a temporary leave, to Miami Beach. My mother was in a deep depression, and on the verge of losing the antique store I bankrolled while in graduate school. It was her only source of income, and I was afraid of the consequences of its failure. Jerry Brown's administration replaced Reagan's, and inventing *eyewash* replaced working for real environmental change. I kept extending my leave and waffling about returning. The CARB was in a hiring freeze, and content to keep me on the books. This story outlines the events that caused me to make my decision.

1 In 1974 the posh neighborhoods of Miami Beach were at the height of a demographic
2 change. They were being transformed, from the winter enclaves of rich Midwestern gentiles, to a
3 bedroom community for Miami's lucky sperm club and successful Jewish professionals. The
4 waterfront estates were changing hands as the owners died. Their kids had no interest in keeping
5 them, but to dealer scouting antiques they represented a virtual "elephants' graveyard" to search
6 for ivory. I stumbled into the business as a result of my mother's illness, and hung on as an
7 alternative to a career as a functionary in the State of California's bureaucracy. I had few
8 contacts in Miami, no reputation in the antiques community, little preparation, and questionable
9 temperament for the work.

10 Now converted to a pedestrian mall in an unsuccessful attempt to revive its reputation,
11 Lincoln Road was once one of the world's most fashionable shopping streets. It had deteriorated
12 to a shabby vestige of its former glory. Benches and palm trees made it more comfortable for the
13 homeless than for well heeled snowbirds. A few fancy stores were still open, but sure to close at
14 the ends of their leases. Most of the storefronts were occupied by marginal businesses and
15 schlock souvenir shops, taking advantage of cheap rents. A tacky t-shirt shop next door to Sachs
16 Fifth Avenue epitomized the landscape. Our antique shop, S. Davis & Co., was an "Open by
17 Appointment" hole in the wall operation at the west end of Lincoln Road, on a block with so

18 little regard it avoided the “mallng.” The store served primarily as a place to accumulate and
19 refurbish things, while I tried to decide what to do with my life, and my mother recovered her
20 health. I didn’t have the patience to wait for customers, or the skill to wait on them when they
21 appeared. Relishing the freedom of not being tied to a nine to five job, and the hedonistic
22 excesses of Miami made it bearable. It wasn’t clear if I would learn to like the business or even
23 make a living at it, and I certainly wasn’t ready to commit.

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25 Peter Tompkins and Betty Vreeland were regulars at the house sales we ran as an adjunct
26 to the store. It wasn’t unusual for them to stop by when they were in the area to chat about the
27 sales. Peter was in Miami filming follow up documentaries to his best selling book, *The Secret*
28 *Life of Plants*. One morning he rushed into the store, wild eyed, out of breath, and lucky to find
29 anyone in.

30 He blurted out, “Betty and I are buying a house on North Bay Road. The bank had the
31 contents appraised for the estate, and we can get them for an additional \$16,000. They’re old,
32 maybe antique. Our plan is to rent the house out for a while, and the furniture would make that a
33 lot easier. I’m on my way there to do an inspection. Come along and let me know what you
34 think of it. If anyone asks, tell them that you’re there to look at the plumbing.”

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36 We squeezed into Peter’s VW bug and he careened at full speed to the house. It was a
37 typical 1920's vintage, Mediterranean style, waterfront mansion on North Bay Road. Not as big
38 as you might expect if you didn’t count the servant’s wing, and since it was only intended for

39 winter use there was no air-conditioning. We were greeted by the realtor in a polyester dress and
40 nylon stockings, and a bank exec in what looked like one of his kid's suits. They were content to
41 stay lounging in front of a fan in the living room smoking cigarettes. He with beads of sweat on
42 his forehead; she with makeup beginning to run down her face. A quick look around the living
43 room revealed shabby faded upholstered furniture. Old and maybe antique casegoods showed no
44 signs of ever being restored, or even polished. Broken Venetian blinds covered the windows.
45 Old paintings covered the walls. Every flat surface was covered with tchotchkes camouflaged
46 with dust.

47 After a muttered hello, and an ignored introduction, Peter literally ran me around the
48 house. As we bounced from room to room, he parsed out the story.

49 “An eccentric engineer named Arnold Hanger owned the house. He built the Grand
50 Coulee Dam — ”

51 Entering the dining room there was a large brass chandelier over an 1920's revival Early
52 American table, chairs and sideboard. The kitchen was furnished with painted wood and
53 enameled steel furniture looking like a period movie set. A large monitor top refrigerator still
54 functioned.

55 “He died and left the house, along with its contents, to the Red Cross. The contents were
56 appraised by the Coral Gables auctioneer, J. Wayne Taylor —“

57 Bounding up the stairs to the bedrooms revealed more old furniture dating to the houses
58 original construction. Clothes, suitcases, and sealed boxes, filled all the closets.

59 “Taylor's estimate is that they can get \$16,000 for all the contents at auction. The bank

81 Peter, considerably calmed, drove me back to S. Davis & Co. It was my turn to be
82 excited.

83 “So, what do you think?”

84 Trying to look more confident than I was, “The place is full of treasures. Sixteen
85 thousand dollars may be a small fraction of what the bric-a-brac and paintings alone are worth.
86 You could keep all the furniture and still make money on what’s left.”

87 “We have to move fast. Betty and I are going off to the Bahamas to work on a new book.
88 I have to remove everything we’re going to sell, before we rent out the house. How do you want
89 to do this deal? Are you that we can make the sixteen thousand back?”

90 In those days we charged a twenty percent commission for things we sold on consignment
91 in the store, and receipts from the house sales. I really wanted this job, and Peter wanted some
92 assurance that he would get his sixteen thousand back.

93 “Here’s the deal. I’ll do a tag sale from the house next weekend, and bring back to the
94 store any paintings or bric-a-brac left over to sell on consignment. I won’t charge any
95 commission til we get your sixteen thousand back. Afterwards the commission will be fifty
96 percent.”

97 “Why fifty? How about thirty?”

98 “How about we let God decide? You gotta coin?”

99 Luck was on my side. I won the toss, and had my work was cut out. There were only a
100 few days to get ready for the sale. Ads had to be written, the house staged, and everything valued
101 and tagged. It was Monday; the sale was to be Sunday.

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Saturday, we were still setting up the house, when Peter and Betty came by with a couple of friends. They were to be our first customers. It was Julie Christie's birthday and they pored over the bric-a-brac table where they found a present.

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The Sunday *Miami Herald* would hit the streets Saturday at eight p.m. It concerned me that once the ads with the address came out, the house would be vulnerable to thieves. I decided to spend the night there with two part time employees. My sister's boyfriend, Jay — on the high school basketball team, at six foot five and two hundred and forty pounds — made a pretty formidable baby-faced henchman. Robert, another gentle giant still in high school, parked cars at Joe's Stone Crab where he also served as their bouncer. Kids were much better for security than cops. If a physical intervention was necessary they could be relied on, and the customers knew it. The camaraderie and adventure was more important to them than the money. We would, in addition, hire a cop for appearances sake, and to deal with other cops that might be called by disgruntled neighbors complaining about traffic and parking.

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The most valuable items, and the ones I wasn't sure the value of, were set aside to take to the store and sell later. We tagged the balance for sale. About nine that night, in the middle of eating delivered pizzas, there was a knock at the front door. We couldn't be sure if it was something innocent — or someone bent on mischief, and checking to see if anyone was home. I got up to answer the door with Robert and Jay close behind me, brandishing old shotguns they found in a closet. It was Wayne Taylor and Jay Rumbaugh, the principals of J. Wayne Taylor.

123 They were the premier antique dealers in Miami at the time, and thought they were getting the
124 job to auction off the contents of the house until they saw the ad.

125 “We saw your ad in the paper and hoped that if we came by, we might catch someone
126 here.”

127 It was apparent by their expression that they were disappointed to find me. The kids
128 behind me with shotguns may also have been a little unsettling. I wasn’t going to invite them in.

129 “We could save you a lot of trouble by purchasing everything, at once, right now. You
130 won’t do any better tomorrow.”

131 “I’m sorry but I haven’t any time right now. We’ve a lot to do. You’re welcome to come
132 back tomorrow morning for the sale.”

133 “How about we talk it over?”

134 I ran out of patience, and didn’t want them around trying to queer the deal if Peter and
135 Betty came back to check up on us.

136 “Get the fuck out of here!”

137 And, as if on cue, Robert and Jay moved closer so as to back me up. Wayne and Jay
138 tripped over each other in a mad dash back to their car, accompanied by the sounds of our howls.

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140 Sunday morning hundreds of people lined up outside the door hours before the scheduled
141 start. It was a madhouse most of the day. Things quieted down in the afternoon. A Latin guy in
142 Gucci loafers, who was there in the morning, returned for another look at some English sporting
143 paintings in the library. The sporting paintings, in aggregate, represented some of the more

144 valuable items we were trying to sell from the house rather than bring back to the store. Robert
145 was taking a breather and came in to observe the negotiation. He leaned with his back against a
146 built-in bookcase cabinet, his hands resting on the cabinet top.

147 “How much do you want for the Alken’s as a lot?”

148 There were six paintings that we priced for a total of about ten thousand dollars. I
149 responded, “It’s getting late. I’d like to wrap things up for the day. How about eight thousand.”

150 “Seven is my best offer.”

151 Robert fidgeted against the bookcase cabinet. I was about to take the offer when
152 suddenly, a molding on the cabinet swung out to reveal a secret compartment. A pregnant pause
153 ensued with all attention now focused on the contents of the compartment. It held two old
154 English sterling marrow scoops and a cylindrical box made from a gold coin about the size of a
155 Double Eagle with a small gold folding knife attached to it by a chain. The box held a tiny
156 drawer that hinged out the side. Robert opened the drawer to reveal a white powder.

157 My customer, now transfixed, asked Robert, “What is it?”

158 Robert dipped his finger into the golden drawer and rubbed it on his gum. A shit-eating
159 grin told the story.

160 “Throw the box into the deal and I’ll take the paintings.”

161 “Eight thousand?”

162 He nodded.

163 “Robert, help him with his purchase.”

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165 By the time we got to counting the receipts from that Sunday's sale, the total was over
166 forty thousand dollars, despite Peter keeping all the furniture he wanted, and me taking the most
167 valuable items to the store. I lived off the proceeds from Peter's and my agreement for years,
168 became friends with him and Betty, and a fixture at their parties on North Bay Road. Most
169 importantly, the sale cured my mother's depression, and I was now in the antiques business for
170 real.