

## NO EARLY BIRDS

*Sean Maschmann*

“Is that her again?”

Tim Rogers nodded at the grey Toyota Yaris crawling by their yard. His wife Eileen shielded her eyes from the sun and squinted.

“I think so. Her second go-round. You’d think she could park down the road.”

Tim shook his head with a wry smile. “Not this one,” he said. “I know the type.”

Eileen went into the car port for another box, this one labeled “Mags/Books.” She set it down on one of the four folding picnic tables in their yard.

Today was the Rogers’ annual yard sale.

“The type?” Eileen said, opening the box and pulling out a trove of *Mac-lean’s*. “So you’re a Jungian now?”

Tim, the lawyer, didn't take the bait from his therapist wife.

"You know. The people with those bumper stickers: '*Warning. This car stops at all garage sales.*'" He paused. The Yaris had stopped. A red pickup was pulling away. The Yaris slotted into the empty space. "You want to make a wager?"

"Not especially." Tim was always testing his opinions on the strength of five dollar bets.

"Fine. But if you did, I'd bet ten dollars that—"

"*Ten* dollars, Tim? You must be really sure."

He smiled at her. His smile was beautiful. She smiled back.

"I am sure. Listen. This is what she'll do. She'll spend fifteen minutes doing a forensic analysis of our stuff. She'll pick out two things. Maybe even only one. And she'll start to *haggle*."

Eileen rolled her eyes. "It's a *yard sale*, Tim. That's par for the course."

"Sure. Even you can haggle. Albeit *eloquently*," he added hastily.

"So, how were you planning on making the ten bucks?"

Tim smiled. A half block down the road, the driver's side door of the Yaris slammed shut.

“She will refuse to pay at any price,” he said. “She’ll leave the yard sale. She might ask us if she can come back later. But she won’t buy anything.”

Eileen smiled at him as she arranged books by Ken Follett and Wilbur Smith and James Michener.

“All right,” she said.

“Huh?”

“You’re on. Ten bucks. I think you’re full of shit.”

“Is that why you married me?”

Eileen stopped unpacking and stood looking at him, hand on hip. She frowned for a second.

“Honestly? Yes. In part.” She smiled. “You can talk your way into and out of anything.”

“And you like that about me?”

Another smile. “I do.” She put her hand out. “Ten dollars?”

Tim looked at her hand but didn’t offer his own.

“You won’t try to make her go away?” he said.

She sighed. “I won’t. *Jesus*.”

“Okay,” he said. “No cheating.”

They shook. They heard footsteps approaching, though the woman was obscured by their neighbor's tall laurel hedge.

"Get ready for a live one," Tim whispered.

And there she was.

She was short and solid, around fifty-five, wearing an old-fashioned knee-length coat despite the June morning sunshine. Her hair was wavy and grey, her face flat and open, with wrinkles around the eyes that could have come from smiling.

Eileen smiled at her.

"Morning," she said.

The woman nodded. Her clear blue eyes were unblinking. "Open yet?" she said.

"Well, we're still putting stuff out, as you can see," said Tim.

The woman raised an eyebrow.

"But you can browse while we unpack everything."

"Yes," Eileen said. "We've got most of the books unpacked and—"

"How much?"

"Excuse me?"

“How much are the books?” The woman wasn’t looking at Eileen as she spoke. Her eyes were on the magazines and books Eileen had just put out.

“Oh.” Eileen looked at Tim. “What did we do last time?”

Tim thought. “I think it was a dollar fifty each, or five for five bucks.”

A sharp turn of the head. “What? A dollar fifty? They’re cheaper at the Swap and Shop over in Vic West.”

Tim had never heard of the Swap and Shop. He shrugged.

“Well, that’s a fair price,” he said. “A dollar a book.”

“A dollar *fifty* a book,” she said. She turned away and started to rummage through the pile of magazines.

“It’s fifty cents a magazine,” Tim said.

She looked up at him for a second but didn’t say anything.

“Tim?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I get your help in the carport? We need to take some more boxes down.”

“Yeah, babe.”

They walked into the carport as the woman continued to search the table. As soon as they were inside and out of view, Eileen turned to Tim and grabbed

his hands tightly. She leaned into him so her head was on his chest and whispered, "Oh my god. I think I'm going to piss my pants." Her shoulders shook with silent laughter.

"She's right though," Tim said. "A dollar fifty *is* a rip-off. After all, they're practically giving them away at the—what did she say?—'Swap and Shop.'" They began to giggle.

"Excuse me?"

They turned. The woman was at the door of the carport. The morning sun cast her blue shadow across the floor. The wind blew around her. It smelled of the sea; they were only a few blocks from Dallas Road and the beach.

"Jesus," Eileen muttered.

"Yes?" Tim said, stepping away from Eileen.

"That vase. The one that looks Chinese. How much is it?"

"Oh," Tim said. He looked at his wife. "We hadn't discussed it."

The woman's eyebrows went up disapprovingly.

"Give us a couple of minutes. We'll decide."

"How about five dollars?"

Tim and Eileen looked at each other.

“No,” Eileen said. “I’ve had that vase since I was at university. It wasn’t cheap. I was thinking of twenty or even twenty-five.”

The woman walked away from the door, shaking her head. “Suit yourself,” she said as she walked away. “But as you’re selling it, it can’t be worth that much to you.” She vanished back into their yard. Eileen began to laugh again, even harder this time.

“That’s a hell of a perspective,” she said. “We should have said that when we bought the Audi. We could have saved... well, *thousands* of dollars. It’s not like the dealership was using it.”

“It’s not like it’s a Ming vase or anything,” Tim said. “How much do you think you can get away with?”

A short pause. “You don’t think it’s worth twenty?”

“Didn’t say that. Just asking.” He stood on his toes. He didn’t see the woman. “Maybe you could ask her for fifteen?”

Eileen grabbed another box, this one labelled “kitchen.” She placed it on a folding table and began to pull dishes out. “No,” she said. “She rubs me the wrong way. If she wants it, she can pay twenty for it.”

“You might not sell it.”

Eileen nodded. "I might not sell it," she agreed. "And it spends another year in the carport. Is that really so bad?"

Tim shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said.

§

Half an hour later, Tim and Eileen had finished setting the tables up. There were dozens of items reflecting the morning sun. The air had warmed.

"Should we get water for people?" Tim said.

"Good idea. I'll hold down the fort while you grab a jug."

"Do we have any paper cups?"

Eileen nodded. "Should do," she said. "Check the cupboard over the fridge."

"Right," said Tim, and went inside.

The woman was still at the yard sale, but others had arrived. A pickup truck stopped by, and the stout woman driving it bought two books by Michener—*Kent State* and *Hawaii*—along with a coffee cup featuring the Vancouver skyline. A young mother walked by with her baby in a stroller. She bought an old wok for three bucks and left with it in the undercarriage storage so the handle stuck tail-like out the back.

After the young mother left, the woman approached Eileen. She nodded at the vase.

“Well?” she said. “Fixed a price for it yet?”

Eileen tried to keep her voice flat. “Yes. Twenty-five.”

A small shake of the head. “Very well,” she said. “It seems a bit rich for what it is though.”

Eileen smiled and shrugged. “Well, that’s what I’m charging.”

“I wonder what you paid for it.”

A twitch at the corner of Eileen’s mouth. “*Look out for Mount Eileen,*” mom would say. “*She’s fit to blow.*”

“I don’t see how that matters,” she said. She smiled. It felt at least partially convincing.

“Matters to me.” The woman’s jowls shook after she finished speaking. “If you want me to buy it.”

Eileen shrugged. “Up to you,” she said. *Why was she getting so angry?*

Tim arrived with a pitcher of water and a short stack of Styrofoam cups.

“Oh, water,” the woman said.

“Would you care for some?” Tim asked.

The woman looked at Eileen and said, "I don't know. What are you charging for it?"

Tim frowned. "No charge," he said. "On the house."

"In that case, yes please."

Tim poured a cup for her and passed it over. The surface of the water shone in the sun.

"I'm sorry, but there's only half a cup here," she said.

"Oh," Tim said. "Sorry about that."

By the time he topped the water off, Eileen was back in the carport, her jaw suddenly sore. Tim came in to grab another "kitchen" box.

"Why do you want to be nice to her?" she said.

Tim shrugged. "Why not? She's annoying, sure, but we're the ones who put up the signs and took out the ads in the *Times-Colonist* and *Kijiji*." He lifted the lid on the box. "Here it is. My mother's old china."

"Oh. She loved that stuff, didn't she?"

"Yeah, but she's dead." Tim and his mother had had a chilly relationship.

"I don't need it and you said it's too fussy anyway."

Eileen sighed; he was right. “I guess so,” she said. “When we hold a sale, the freaks come out of the woodwork.” She bit her lip. “I hope she has a list of other sales.”

Tim walked to the door, the box in his arms. “She’ll leave soon. That vase is the only thing she cares about.”

“Hm.” She was not convinced.

“*Jeremy, no!*” came a loud woman’s voice from outside. Eileen poked her head out the door. She saw a woman with three kids in tow, one of whom—it must have been Jeremy—was holding the vase. He looked to be seven or eight.

“I want it, Mom!” he said.

“You put that down right now, mister,” said his mother. She was tired-looking, with a broad sunburnt face and yoga pants. She looked at Eileen and smiled. Her eyes looked sad.

Jeremy stood sullenly, holding the vase around the rim. “But I *want* it.”

The original customer watched from a few feet away, looking with equal disapproval at mother and son.

The boy’s mother had had enough. She took two quick steps and wrestled the vase out of her son’s hands, pushing his arms away with no compromise.

“That’s *enough*, Jeremy,” she said, her voice thick with anger. Her other, younger children—both girls—stood and watched with fearful delight.

Deprived of the vase, the boy started to cry in braying, snotty blasts. His mother gave one final look at Eileen. *You know how it is*, the look seemed to say.

But Eileen didn’t know how it was.

The woman took her son by the arm and frog-marched him out of the yard. Her two daughters followed silently, eyes wide. The boy’s honking, goose-like cries came through the hedge. A few seconds later, a car door slammed and the volume of the crying diminished further.

Tim turned to the four or five other shoppers—mostly blue hairs—and smiled. “Another satisfied customer,” he said. There were a few chuckles of appreciation. Eileen looked at the original vase-coveter.

She wasn’t chuckling; she wasn’t even *smiling*.

“Ill-mannered little brat,” she said.

Tim caught Eileen’s eye. He nodded the tiniest amount, and Eileen knew he was silently agreeing with her.

This woman was not just another yard sale chaser, with a funny bumper sticker and a storage room full of dubious treasure. She was something different, more primal, an atavistic remnant of the constant forager, the humorless pedant who insists on counting every grain of rice to guarantee their share.

The child gone, the woman approached them again. She nodded over at the vase.

“You’ll never fetch more than ten dollars for that,” she said. She looked at her watch, a small yellow oval and a thin band of black leather. “I’ve been here almost thirty minutes now. At least ten people have come and gone. Do you know how many people looked at the vase? None.” She sniffed. “Other than that awful boy, of course.”

Tim smiled uneasily. “Well, the vase-botherers usually don’t show up until noon or so,” he said.

If the woman knew he was joking, she didn’t show it.

“You won’t go below twenty?” she said, looking at Eileen.

“Not a chance,” Eileen said. She smiled.

“That’s too bad.”

Tim kept trying to be friendly. “She drives a hard bargain,” he said.

“I need to go. My nephew is coming for tea. And to put out his hand, no doubt. But I suppose I’ll oblige. His girlfriend died, you know. Heroin.” She shook her head. “I told my sister he’d get mixed up with people like that if she wasn’t careful. But Sam tries. He works,” she said with pride. “In Mayfair Mall. The lotto booth next to Toys ‘R’ Us.”

Tim looked like he was going to say something but didn’t.

“My sister is weak. She doesn’t tell him what he needs to hear. Never told me either—she’s older than me. Could have saved me a world of trouble.” Another wind blew in from the ocean. It caught the woman’s hair and lifted it from her head, which was shaped like a smooth potato. Her eyes were faraway. The trouble she had had went undefined. “So I tell Sammy what I’ve learned through hard knocks and the boy listens. Goddamn if he doesn’t listen.”

“How old is he?” Tim again. Eileen’s shoulders ached.

*Why wouldn’t he just shut the fuck up?*

“Sammy? Twenty-three. Lots to learn.”

“Sure,” said Tim.

“Anyway,” she went on, changing the topic abruptly, “I live nearby. I’ll drop by after driving Sammy home. I always drive him. I’ll see if you still have the vase. Maybe two or two-thirty.”

“Oh, we might be done by then,” said Eileen quickly. Tim licked his lips nervously.

“Or we might not,” he said. “But we wouldn’t want you to go out of your way. I mean, it might have been sold by then.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” the woman said, smirking. “Speaking of. What will you do with the stuff you don’t sell?”

“We usually just put it back into storage,” Eileen said. She didn’t meet the woman’s eyes.

“Oh. Get it ready for the next crop of suckers, huh?”

Eileen looked at her husband. “Something like that,” she said.

“My friend Linda has a sale every year.” A pause.

“Is that so?” said Tim.

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “And at the end of the sale, do you know what she does with the stuff she didn’t sell?”

“No.” Tim again.

Jollyng her along. *Goddamn him.*

“She puts it on the side of the road with a sign on it. Do you know what that sign says?” She looked at Tim, but spoke to Eileen.

“I can guess,” said Tim.

“Okay, then. Guess.”

“Does it say ‘Free?’”

She nodded. “That’s right. It’s the law of the garage sale. Not sure how I feel about you just packing everything away to try again next year.”

Eileen had had enough. “Well, how you might feel about it isn’t our concern,” she said. Tim turned his head at an angle of disapproval. “After all, it’s our garage sale. Not yours.”

The woman made no sign of being offended, which disappointed Eileen a little.

“That’s true,” she said. “But Linda gets big crowds. Sometimes the little lot in her building fills up with cars.”

“Well, we’re not Linda,” Eileen said.

She regarded them. “No,” she said. “You are not.” Tim and Eileen looked at each other. Tim looked as though he was trying not to laugh. That wasn’t how Eileen was feeling.

“At any rate,” the woman said, “I’ll stop by on my way home. If you’re still open, I might make an offer on the vase.”

“Of course,” said Tim.

The woman began to walk away.

“I won’t change my mind,” Eileen called out. One or two of the other shoppers looked up.

“What’s that?” the woman said.

“I won’t change my mind about the price. Twenty dollars at least. Don’t come back expecting me to change the price. I won’t.”

The woman stood still and said nothing. Her mouth stretched across her face in a rigid line.

“Just so you know,” said Eileen.

“Ah,” said the woman, then turned and walked away. She disappeared behind the hedge. A minute later, her Yaris sputtered into slow life, raising a cloud of exhaust that rose over the top of the laurel like an omen.

“She’ll come back,” Eileen said. Tim cleared his throat.

“Something to look forward to,” he said.

“I wonder where she lives? She said she lives nearby.”

“I guess it’s in one of those low-rises from the sixties over on Menzies or Simcoe. Or maybe the co-op on Niagara.”

Eileen wrinkled her nose. “You’re right,” she said. “You *must* be right.”

Tim smiled. “Should we shut it down early?” he said.

Eileen shook her head. “No. I won’t let her dictate our hours.”

“We might have sold everything by the time she comes.”

“I doubt it,” Eileen said.

Tim sighed. “Yeah, me too,” he said. “Still, what a pain in the ass. I hope her nephew survives the visit.”

“Can you *imagine* having to have lunch with her?” Eileen shuddered.

“Where do you think they’re eating?”

“Somewhere fancy,” Tim said. “Tommy Tucker’s, maybe. Mr. Mike’s. Salisbury steak for four ninety-nine. You know. *Classy* food.”

Tim could make Eileen laugh. She was laughing now.

“Right?” she said. She imagined the fussy cow tormenting a teen hostess and began to laugh harder.

“Excuse me?”

They turned to see an elderly man in a flat cap. His chin had been patchily shaved. Little tufts of hair poked out here and there. He held a short stack of books in his arms. Eileen had seen him arrive ten or fifteen minutes earlier, pulling up in an old red MG two-seater.

“If I buy ten, will you throw in a better deal?” He had an accent. Yorkshire maybe. Eileen’s grandfather had been from Whitby. He was always going on about it. He sounded a little bit the same.

Eileen opened her mouth to refuse, but instead said, “Yes. I don’t see why not.”

The old man nodded. “So how about eight dollars then. Ten books.”

Tim nodded beside her. “Sounds good,” he said. “But make it seven-fifty. Volume buyers get a deep discount.” He winked at Eileen. She shrugged.

The old man set his books down and paid, and then drove away after putting them in the MG’s tiny trunk; Eileen wondered whether there would be enough room.

The day got warmer and the wind eventually died down. Two seagulls, both grey juveniles, began to loiter on the roofs of nearby houses. More cars pulled up, more change was fished for. Three people asked for things to be held for them while they scooted to the ATM or the piggy bank. By two o’clock, the seagulls were asleep on the roof of the carport and Tim was in the middle of consolidating their dwindling stock onto three tables.

The sale was nearly empty. A young couple were frowning doubtfully at a full-length mirror. Eileen had no doubt that the fifty dollar price tag might be chastening them, but so be it. It had been a good day.

“How much?”

Tim smiled. “Always about the bottom line with you, isn’t it?”

She grinned back. "If by bottom line you mean measurable reality, then yes," she said. "It is."

"Well," he said. "For our morning of labor, we've earned just north of two hundred and twenty dollars."

She put her head at an angle. "*Just north?*" Come on. Out with it."

Tim shook his head. "You got me. Two *twenty-three*. Oh, and fifteen cents. Don't ask me how those fifteen cents got there," he said quickly.

"You trying to fuck me over for three dollars and fifteen cents?"

He spread his arms. "I'm doing most of the grunt work," he said. "Why don't you help me carry this table inside and I'll think about splitting it with you."

"Fine," she said.

They carried the folding table into the carport and set it on its side against the wall. It scraped on the concrete; the sound echoed around the room.

"There's one more," said Tim.

"Oh goody," Eileen said. "Say, how do you want to spend the money?"

Tim took her by the shoulders. "I was thinking about that. Here's my idea. Dinner and two bottles of red at Pagliacci's—they have live jazz tonight—and

then a walk. Maybe a movie. And then come back here and get drunk. *More* drunk. And maybe have sex. *If you're lucky.*"

"There'll be money left over."

"We'll do it again next weekend."

"Deal." They left the carport.

And *she* was in the yard.

Next to the vase.

"Oh," said Eileen.

"Oh' is right. I came back. My nephew is fed and dropped off. And I want that vase." She took a step toward Tim and spoke to him. "Can't you see your way to giving it to me for fifteen?"

Tim looked at Eileen. "I don't know," he said. "It's not mine to sell. It's hers."

Eileen felt her face smiling. She tasted something sour. This was never going to fucking stop.

"I told you already," she said. "Twenty is the lowest I'll go."

The woman shook her head sadly. Her hair fluttered. "That's what I told Sammy. He's my nephew."

"Oh," said Eileen.

“I told him that the couple with the sale had a car worth more than I earn in a year, but they were so money-grubbing they wouldn’t budge for five bucks.”

Tim crossed his arms diffidently. The impossible was happening: he was getting angry.

“I don’t see why you have to put it like that.” He sounded like he was pouting. It bothered Eileen.

“I told Sammy and you know what he said?”

Eileen’s blood roared in her ears. “What? What did he say?”

The woman nodded, her head low. “He told me that’s why you have a nice car and live in a nice unit. Because you’re good with money. I hold a yard sale, I’m practically giving things away. *You* hold a yard sale and you’re counting your profits.”

Tim again. “I think it has more to do with our jobs.”

“Good jobs?”

“Yes,” Tim said. “Well-paying jobs, yes. Not selling knick-knacks.”

She smiled darkly. “It’s the *way* you sell your knick-knacks,” she said. “It’s the same way you both approached school and work. Money, money, money.”

Eileen was getting really angry now, as much at her ineffectual husband as at this loudmouthed bitch.

“I suppose you’re above all that?” she said.

“What’s that?” The woman seemed surprised that Eileen had spoken to her.

“Money worship. You’re what? Divorced from material considerations.”

“*Divorced from material considerations.*” She shook her head in disgust.

“Nice turn of phrase.”

Eileen had had enough.

When she was sixteen she told her Port Alberni logger father and housewife mother that she wanted to study psychology at UVic. Her parents were both proud and disappointed.

“Don’t go all fancy on us,” her mother would say. As Eileen had studied and excelled, she had grown distant from her parents and her younger brother, who barely escaped grade ten and worked as the assistant manager at the Burger King.

Not fancy. Just *distant*.

When her mother had died two years before, her father had hardly said five words to her at the funeral.

“You don’t like the way I talk, you can get the fuck out of my yard,” Eileen said. There was a couple rooting through a box of DVDs; they stopped to look at her like crows interrupted.

The woman looked at her evenly. She nodded and turned to Tim. She took her wallet out of her purse. She pulled out a twenty dollar bill. The queen winked gruesomely beneath her fat fingers.

“Here,” she said. “She wants twenty so badly, she can take it.”

Tim blew air out of his cheeks. He put out his hand.

“No,” Eileen said. “I wouldn’t sell it to you for forty or even one hundred dollars. Get the hell out of my yard.”

The browsing couple quietly left and got into their car. The seagulls woke up and one of them flew away. The other sat there watching them with its stupid black eyes.

The woman nodded as though she had been expecting this. She folded the bill back into her wallet and then deposited it in her purse. She latched it up, looking at the vase.

“It’s a shame,” she said. “It’s a nice vase.”

“Yes, well, it’s not for you,” Eileen said.

And the woman nodded again, then left the yard.

Tim took out a ten dollar bill. He handed it to Eileen, but she batted it away impatiently, and the second gull flew off with an ugly cry.

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