

Return to Sender

The melancholy boy with the bloodshot eyes sold furniture that did not exist. Or, possibly, it did *exist*. Somewhere beyond the endless fiber of 1s and 0s that pixelated the photographs he appropriated from this commerce site and reposted on that commerce site, where he liked to imagine people oohed or ahhed (rarely was his nonexistent furniture worthy of both *oooh* and *ahhh*, and even when it was, who had the time?). He sold the furniture that didn't exist in exchange for money that did. More often than not, he could transfer the real money into a real bank account operated by a fictional business before the real buyers realized their armoire or sofa or Eames chair was mythical. He felt no guilt because a) the aspiring furniture owners no doubt received that most 21st century of absolutions, a refund, and b) he knew guilt was useless beyond its performative valence. All the buyers lost was time, which was not invaluable or priceless or our "most cherished resource" as someone had once declared to him in a lecture hall or clawfoot bathtub, though for the life of him he couldn't remember who that person was.

The melancholy boy with the bloodshot eyes' own home was spartan. He possessed a daybed that he slept on at night and a nightstand that he worked on during the day in place of the desk he had meant to buy at some point. He did not like clutter and would have purchased hardly anything he sold. He spent his money on astronomical student loan payments and mind-boggling rent and six television streaming platforms he scarcely watched and a gym membership he did not avail himself of and three meal-service delivery subscriptions, though he usually lost interest in the preparation by Step #3 and made do with microwaving the packaged protein and throwing out the rest.

The melancholy boy with the bloodshot eyes roamed the Internet for hours in search of photographs. It was neither as easy nor as tedious as it sounded. Attention is this century's gold rush, he had heard on a podcast, or heard someone say they had heard on a podcast. Every eye was a vein of ore. Every image a pickaxe or sifting pan or something else analogical, he couldn't quite recall, as the speaker on the podcast, or the speaker who told him about the podcast, was rather boring. While he searched for items he believed the average stranger would find enchanting, he spent equal effort tracking down heady adjectives to describe these items: Plush; cozy; rustic; high-gloss; rococo. People didn't simply want to see the sofa or chaise. They wanted to be steered toward how to experience it. *An elegant credenza ideal for tasteful modern living: a generous maple highboy designed to organize the busy life of the sophisticate who appreciates it; a gloriously snug loveseat perfect for a weekend movie marathon with someone special.* He considered this a complimentary service provided to those he defrauded. Sure, in five to ten business days they would receive absolutely nothing, but for now they enjoyed a crystalline vision of their desires. The furniture was beside the point.

The melancholy boy with the bloodshot eyes received a message about one of his postings. *I LOVE that Chesterfield couch, the message read, but do you have anything larger and bluer. Preferably in velvet. It doesn't have to be a Chesterfield. It could be a camel back or sectional, even a Tuxedo couch. Mid-century European in spirit if not design. And it MUST have a foldout bed, as I have a lot of friends.* Two hours later he'd hunted down a photo that approximated the request. From there, he finessed the image with various fillers and hijinks of scale. Replying to the message, he explained that he did have such a piece, but it had garnered tremendous interest, and he was entertaining only serious offers. He attached photographs. An offer arrived instantly: \$6,500. This unnerved him. Such a wondrous, not to mention unique, specimen of home furnishing was worth easily twice that. Serious offers, he wrote back. *Seriously serious offers.* The price is \$15,000. The counteroffer was \$8,000, setting off an extensive volley of barter. By the time they agreed on \$11,754.32, the melancholy boy loathed the buyer of this gorgeous chimera of

luxury. He relished the buyer's impending humiliation at explaining to his many friends that they'd be sleeping on the floor.



The melancholy boy with the bloodshot eyes planned to deactivate his seller profile before the commerce website did it for him, which he figured would happen once the buyer complained about the undelivered couch. But several potential buyers had shown enthusiasm for a monarch bookcase he'd posted days earlier and he was gunning to close the sale, to save himself the time spent creating yet another fake profile with another fake bookcase and praying potential buyers happened upon him again.



A week passed with the bookcase still unsold and he was surprised that the commerce site's gestapo hadn't wised to him. Days later, he received a message from the buyer of the couch. He knew he should immediately disable his account and rejigger his VPN, but felt he deserved a glimpse into this peepshow of wrath, a flash of this person who had no respect for high-end furniture and the furniture makers and those who sell what the makers make. He opened the message: *LOVE IT!!! THANKYOU!!! FIRST FRIEND STAYED OVER LAST NIGHT!!* Attached to the message was a photograph of a long-limbed man sleeping on a pullout bed of a couch identical to the one he'd used to defraud the buyer. The buyer gave him a perfect seller rating, which was oddly satisfying, the glorious constellation of five stars next to his fake name. The melancholy boy had many questions: *Was this a joke? Who pays \$11,754.32 to carry out a practical joke on a complete stranger?* But also: *Do you often photograph your friends asleep?* He stared at the photo dubiously. As someone who altered photos daily, he spotted none of the telltale hallmarks of digital manipulation. Another message arrived: *Do you have a pair of matching accent tables? I'd pay \$2,500 for both.*

In fact I do, he swiftly replied, the muscle memory of opportunity prevailing over the discomfort of suspicion. *They cost \$5000 each.*



The melancholy boy with the bloodshot eyes relented at the offer of \$6,438.75 for both tables. He sent photographs prior to payment and sent nothing afterward. Three days later, the buyer messaged him: *Even more spectacular in person. I truly love them.* The buyer attached photographs that zeroed in on the ecru ruffled hourglass design. A bottle of Dom Pérignon rested on ice atop the table, alongside a lavish French cheese platter that would have made Louis VI blush. The end tables were undeniably more spectacular in the buyer's photographs, instilling the melancholy boy with an eerie sense of seller's remorse. They paired perfectly with the couch, which also seemed more spectacular than it had in the first photos. A wispy article of clothing draped off its arm. A smoking jacket, he thought. Or a kimono. Something elegant that he did not think real people wore.



In the following weeks, the buyer's requests shifted from indoor accessories to outdoor—a smokeless fire pit, resort-style daybeds, a climate-controlled greenhouse, a hand-carved cedar cottage birdhouse, a shingle-roofed doghouse, a bat-shaped bat house, a commercial-grade daiquiri maker. The boy spent more time seeking out photographs, determined to find something rare if not impossible, which he sent to the buyer. After some haggling, a notification of payment would appear in his in-box. He came to anticipate the buyer's photos—more than the bank transfers and expanding universe of five-star seller ratings—using them to piece together a biography of the buyer. He had grown unsettled by how little he knew about this person. When he googled the shipping address, he was asked if he meant a different address, and when he said he knew what he meant, Google passive-aggressively insisted he did not and then offered him links to a series of GPS products. At times, like when the buyer requested a marble billiards table with cheetah print felt, he pictured a kitschy 60-year-old tomcat on the other side of the computer. But at other times, like when the buyer requested a calf-skin dressage saddle or an antique Parisian shoe trunk, he visualized a taut, jet-setting heiress who graced the cover of magazines the melancholy boy bought but didn't read.

I'm looking for something different, the buyer wrote early one morning. *What do you have that's special?*

I have a bar cart that looks like an apothecary's cabinet, he replied, remembering a nifty piece that caught his eye on a website or television show or advertisement the day before.

Sounds nice, the buyer wrote. *But I want SPECIAL.*

He didn't know what the buyer meant. Staring at the word in all caps he was not certain he understood its definition, its macroscale altering its meaning. He couldn't recall when he last used the word for anything he bought or yearned for. What do you want most that you don't have? he asked the buyer.

The reply was instantaneous: *A mother.*

The melancholy boy welled with pity for this person who was perhaps not as vapid and avaricious as he had initially judged. Then a second message appeared: *How much for yours?*

He hesitated. *You want to buy my mother?*

Any mother, really, though I'd be more comfortable with yours. Establishing provenance for a third-party's mother would be a pain.

Did you grow up without a mother?

No no no. My mother is alive and well but she has a lot of hobbies and has retired from active mothering. At this point, we're really just good friends.

The melancholy boy was tickled. Whatever this was—a prank, a con, a DARPA-sanctioned social experiment—this would be its conclusion. His mother, though not especially special, could not be replicated and was an utterly dour party guest. He named his price and the buyer countered. At this point, it felt more like a dance than a negotiation. They settled on \$35,262.96—the price of three one-of-a-kind Chesterfield couches, which seemed fair.

That evening, after quitting on the mushroom empanadas from his subscription meal service at Step #4, the melancholy boy called his mother to see how she was, but no one picked up the phone.



The melancholy boy with the bloodshot eyes, after weathering the initial shock, was entranced by his mother's unabashed delight in the buyer's photographs.

Drinking tropical-hued daiquiris; swaying among a mélange of grooving bodies; voguing for the camera from the comfort of a Jacuzzi. *LIFE OF THE PARTY*, the buyer wrote, *but she made sure no one drank and drove, and insisted everyone eat crudité before they could have baked Alaska. She sat on my bed until I fell asleep and cooked me scrambled eggs this morning. HEAVEN.*

The melancholy boy loved his mother's scrambled eggs, could all but taste their silky perfection. He asked when he could speak to her, to explain the situation and apologize for its abruptness. *We wouldn't want to confuse her, re: old child vs. new child, the buyer wrote. Anyway, she's sunning by the pool right now and later on she promised to read to me.*

That night, the melancholy boy had a dream that featured his mother. He awoke panicked and wistful. He messaged the buyer and asked if perhaps they could revisit the sale. *I am quite satisfied with my purchase*, the buyer wrote.

I'm glad, he replied. But it's my mother and I only have one.

You had only one Chesterfield couch, correct?

Yes, of course, one of a kind. But last night I had a dream and my mother was in it.

I LOVE dreams, the buyer wrote. Is it for sale?

You don't even know what it's about.

DON'T TELL ME!!!! The fun is in deciphering them.

The buyer paid him and he did nothing and soon the photographs arrived. A series of flickering images of his mother hoisting a football-size loaf of pumpernickel above her head as pigeons alighted on her shoulders, pecked their crumbs, and flew away. He could not tell from where the dream was being projected and was grateful the buyer had sent still frames and not video, as the melancholy boy was certain if he saw those pigeons in motion he would collapse from grief. *Heartbreaking!* the buyer wrote. *I don't even like pumpernickel but I teared up all the same.* His real mother lingered at the edge of the frame with an expression somewhere between amusement and bemusement, as if glad her son still thought of her but wishing he were more a capable and undaunted human being.



The melancholy boy with the bloodshot eyes could hardly eat or sleep. Subscription meal boxes overwhelmed his refrigerator. Magazines collected atop his daybed. The streaming services emailed to alert him to shows other people binged and loved, and that he would too, if only he took the time to do nothing else. The buyer and his mother had struck up something of a friendship, which he knew he should be grateful for, but it left him jealous. The buyer, who would not disclose an iota of personal information despite the melancholy boy's endless, albeit roundabout, prodding, was now privy to a trove of personal information about him and treated it like a sales catalogue.

Sell me the thunderous popping that can be heard two rooms away when you crack your knuckles after a stressful day; sell me that hilarious blind date when you realized you two were cousins AFTER you kissed!; sell me the gnawing guilt you felt for missing the flight to your best friend's wedding where you were a groomsman because you were hungover after the breakup with the married coworker your mother warned you not to get involved with; sell me your first crush. Your mother told me all about her, the girl who used to share her cookies with you because you were chubby and not allowed sweets. Adorable! I want that feeling—and the taste of those cookies!

He sold them all because what value were they to him? The crush, to whom he had never confessed his feelings, had moved away before high school without saying goodbye. The best friend forgave him for missing the wedding, but the episode had irreparably damaged their relationship. Now their exchanges consisted of “happy birthday” texts and social media click affirmations.

The buyer sent photos of these latest arrivals, though it often took the melancholy boy a moment to recall what he had sold. He had no memory of a childhood crush or kissing his cousin, only a memory of the memory, like the negative space of a removed book on an otherwise crammed shelf. But there they were, in essence, an image of a tow-headed blond child with a bag chockfull of Double Stuf Oreos that quickened his pulse; and his cousin, mouth frozen in mortification, her lipstick smudged across both of their mouths, after he realized they had shared a pew at their great aunt's funeral.

I put your knuckle popping and wedding guilt outside, the buyer wrote, the former was too loud and the latter became a downer. I'll probably house them in the shed and bring them out for special occasions, like I do with my flambé station.

The melancholy boy felt a newfangled regret bubble up where, he assumed, the old regret had festered. He was not certain of its precise source, though he felt it most profoundly when noting a change in the buyer's manner, be it the improved punctuation (surely the work of his grammar-policing mother) or the buyer slipping verses of punk rock songs into their exchanges, songs his crush introduced him to, a girl whose name the melancholy boy could no longer summon to mind. He studied these photographs for elements overlooked on first appraisal, searching for the unnamable and unsellable. His shoulders ached and his arms were leaden. He interlaced his fingers and thrust his palms skyward, the shifting of his joints met with abject silence.

The melancholy boy sold nothing for days. He hardly left his apartment, which was not out of character, though now his reclusion was active. He missed his mother, who he admittedly hadn't called or visited enough, and it hurt to think that she might not miss him—that his mother, like everything else he had sold, real or imaginary, was better off in the buyer's custody. After a string of restless nights, he messaged the buyer.

Why do you want all of these things? he wrote. *What use do you have for anything of mine?*

Hours later, just as he was nodding off, the buyer responded: *Why don't you want them?*

I do want them. Some of them.

You sold them. I bet you have other things you don't need and wish to sell. Most people don't know all they have to sell. It's a living tragedy, everything we don't sell. Tell me, what do you have left? The buyer's question unnerved him.

I have everything I need, he wrote. *Everything and then some.*

How lucky! the buyer wrote. *I hope one day to be as rich as you.*

He felt mocked and wanted to tell off the buyer, told himself if the buyer was standing in front of him, between the daybed and the nightstand, the melancholy boy would throw a punch, though he knew he wouldn't and that there was no one in the world who thought him capable of pride-fueled violence.

My best friends are coming to visit, the buyer wrote before the melancholy boy could type out his litany of profanities. Do you have any friends or friends of friends whom you think might like them? It would be a special surprise.

The cord of muscles around his neck tensed. I don't know your friends and I can't sell my friends or their friends or anybody's friends.

You sold me your mother, the buyer wrote.

I didn't mean to.

Of course you did. I've shown her the conversation. She thinks you should've asked for more \$\$\$—at least five Chesterfields worth—before sending her to me.

The melancholy boy nearly spit at the screen. I NEVER SENT HER TO YOU!

Your mother taught me that writing in all caps is childish.

He could hear his mother's chiding tone. I never sent you my mother! Or anything else! Do you understand!? All this time, I've sent you nothing! NOTHING!!!!

Minutes passed without response. He considered that his recognition of this absurdity would spell its end, end its spell, that the buyer would find another seller to haggle and bedevil. The thought of being jilted by the buyer deepened the sadness that he often felt he was floating on, which shamed him, which plunged him into the pitch-black fathoms of his melancholy, which made him long for another message from this person he never wanted to hear from again. He looked back to the screen to see the buyer's response: How much more do you have?

How much more nothing?

Yes. I want to buy all of it.

Do you mean my 'everything'?

If it's part of your nothing, then absolutely, I'll buy it.

The melancholy boy did not like riddles. He was never good at them. Whenever he encountered one in childhood, he'd run to his mother, who would guide him toward the answer. *I don't know if my everything is part of my nothing.*

Well then you might as well throw it in. If I'm not happy, I have buyer's protection and thirty days to return it.

Where will you put it all? he wrote.

Wherever you put it all, the buyer replied, because I'd be buying that, too.

But what about me?

Of course, the buyer wrote. It's only fair. If you're not part of your nothing then how can it be yours? Name your price.

The melancholy boy couldn't plumb the inventory of this request, let alone quote a fair-market value. His nothing was indistinguishable from the nothing of everyone he'd ever known, at least as far as he knew everyone else's nothing. A lightless heat. An echoless void. A mumbling, pendulous tongue that lapped surfaces clean but could not speak its own name. He had long assumed that his nothing was trailing him, less like a stalker than a bothersome younger sibling, interrupting his thoughts at the most inopportune moments to spotlight his deficiencies.

Not that it really matters, the buyer wrote, as if sensing his dilemma. Anything I pay you will become mine under the sale. But you'll be fine. It'll be easier this way. You'll be pleasantly surprised by how much easier things will be. How familiar it will all feel.

The melancholy boy stared at the screen for hours, silently cataloguing every component and feature of his nothing. It was quite spectacular, he had to admit, the infinity of objects and experiences and emotions and dreams and loves and phobias that had eluded him. As the list swelled, he glimpsed variants of himself; some similar, with purple hair and an impressive tolerance for ghost pepper hot sauce, and some radically different, who voted and composted and backpacked for six months through countries where he did not speak the language but was never afraid of being misunderstood. He sat with these boys, loyal foot soldiers in the army of his nothing. Some were clearly men in the estimation of the worlds they inhabited. Valorous and popular and astonishingly content, their eyes clear and rested. Forever on the lookout for something radical and all-consuming.

Yes, he typed to the buyer. Sold. All of it. It's yours.

Beautiful, the buyer replied. Another five-star rating coming your way...and mine.

I'm so tired. Where will I sleep when I get there? the melancholy boy typed with his last ounce of strength.

Close your eyes, the buyer replied. I have a foldout couch with your name on it.

He wondered if this sale would mark the end of his nothing. If he would never again seek or fear or regret. Or, instead, would a new nothing take shape? A smaller one he could snugly fit himself around and around and around, like the hollow chocolate Easter bunnies he stole from schoolmates because his mother refused to buy him his own.

His eyelids grew heavy and he felt himself buckling under the crushing weight of this new freedom. This culmination, this vanishing. He was going to pass out any moment. He could feel it and welcomed it and wondered if this was part of his something or his nothing. If this feeling was a new shape or old. It sounded glorious, he had to admit, either possibility.