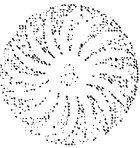


With Bert & Ray
by William



If I have to start at the beginning of things, I guess I would have to start with Pa. Or the end of Pa, I should say. I had long ago heard the expression of someone being *dead drunk*. Well, that was Pa. Or the end of Pa. He died dead drunk when I was six, and that was that many years ago. Half my life ago. For a long time before he died, he couldn't get anyone to sell him any more insurance, and I can't say that I blame them. Anyway, the little bit he did have, didn't hardly pay for his funeral, and the little bit that Ma got from the Social Security didn't hardly carry us from one month to the next.

So what Ma did, after Pa had been dead for three years and we had some powerful dentist bills mounted up, was to sell off all his stuff. Wasn't any of it she wanted around

the house anyways. He had hunting guns and duck decoys and all the issues of *National Geographic* back to when it was started. Pa could pitch a classic fit if anyone ever did touch his stacks of *National Geographics*. He never read the blame things, just stacked them up in a corner of the bedroom and made misery for anyone who got them the tiniest bit out of order.

Ma and I put GARAGE SALE signs up at the light poles on the street leading to our house, and people snuck around to our back door trying to get in and buy some of Pa's things even before eight a.m., the time we said we was starting. They paid right good money for some of the stuff Pa collected, the guns in particular, and even them fancy Jack Bean bottles. We was sold out before noon, and we had brought in two months' worth of dentist bills from that stuff of Pa's.

Two of the people who came to the sale were Bert and Ray, this couple who have an antique store over in the section of town called Huntington. Bert and Ray were at our sale early, and they were kinda thrilled about the duck decoys and the prices Ma had put on them. We had made them odd numbers like the stores do. We put two ninety-five and like that on them, except for the biggest one that we made an even four dollars. They didn't touch the *National Geographics* or the Jack Bean bottle

collection or any of the old camping equipment, but they sure did tuck them decoys under their arms real quick and paid Ma exactly what she asked for them and gave her a card, saying that she should please to call them whenever she did another house sale. Ma took the card and said that she sure would call them if she ever did another. I was speculating about what else Ma could sell until I realized that Ma is just a timid soul who says "scuse me" to the chiffonier when she bumps into it.

Next thing I know, we are over in the Huntington section of town, having our dentist appointments, and right there on Elmhurst Avenue where we stood, waiting on the bus, there was a house that had a sign out front, a neat, lettered sign saying, HUNTINGTON ANTIQUES, *Bertram Grover and Raymond Porterfield, Proprietors*. Right up on the front door was attached another sign, a littler one, and this one just said, OPEN. Ma remembered that that was exactly the name on the card given her by the couple that had bought them decoys on the day of our sale. She took the card out from her pocketbook, and sure enough, even the style of the lettering on the card matched that what was on the sign.

"C'mon, Ma," I said, "let's pay them a visit."

"Aw, William," Ma said. "It's not nice to pay a call so unexpected."

"C'mon, now, Ma," I said. "This here is a place of business, and heck, you don't need no appointment to walk into a open business unless'n it's a dentist." I marched right up onto the porch and beckoned to Ma to follow, and she did. I pushed on the doorbell that was right next to the small sign that said OPEN.

Took a pretty minute or two for them to open the door and Ma was ready to back on down, but I wouldn't let her. I told her to stand right there by the door. I noticed that the porch was fixed up right nice with wicker chairs and lots of plants in pots. On the wicker rocker was a little sticker, white with a red border that said one hundred forty dollars and then I found another sticker on a chair that said one hundred thirty dollars. Each pot that had a plant inside it had a numbered price, too. I didn't have time to point any of this out to Ma, because there at the door appeared Ray, who was smiling and welcoming us in.

Bert was standing in the front hall, and he pointed the way into their parlor, and Ma and me sat down on this here sofa with legs so skinny they didn't look like they could hold up the sofa cushions let alone Ma and me. Bert and Ray asked us to have some tea with them, and I must say that they served it up real fine in little cups you couldn't hardly fit your finger through the handle. I put my cup and

saucer down on a end table and picked up a ashtray and saw one of them little white stickers with a red border on it and written on it was some letters and then a price, twenty-five dollars. It wasn't a very big ashtray neither. I got up from that skinny-legged sofa and began to wander around their parlor, and whatever I took to picking up had a red and white sticker and some letters and some number wrote on it.

"What're these here letters for?" I asked.

Ray kinda winked at me and said that that was a big secret, that that there was their code, saying how much they paid for something. Knowing that, it wasn't too much trouble figuring things out because sitting right there on their sideboard was one of Pa's decoy ducks, and I picked it up kinda casual and saw that it said RIB, and right under that code was written twenty-five dollars. Well, I knowed that we had not charged them but one seventy-five for that there decoy. All of the decoys was marked twenty-five dollars, even though we had charged different amounts, up to four full dollars for them. I just lifted each duck sort of casual like and, remembering what we had charged, I memorized that EAB was two ninety-five, PAB was three ninety-five and UNN was four dollars even. I had already spotted RIB at one seventy-five.

Bert and Ray asked Ma if she often managed house sales, and Ma said no. Then they told her that if she ever wanted help with any, they would be happy to give it to her if she would just let them in first. Ma said she'd be more than happy to let them in first, not quite understanding everything they were asking and telling.

We left their place, and I couldn't hardly wait a minute to write down the number and the letters of that there secret code. I took the card that had our next dentist appointment reminder, and I done my figuring on it.

If EAB was two ninety-five, then E was the second letter and A was ninth and B was fifth.

So I wrote all the numbers in a row and in order and I fitted the letters with their numbers like this:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0
R	E	P	U	B		I		A	N

Weren't but one word could fit into all that, and that word had to be REPUBLICAN, which Bert and Ray probably were.

Thing that happened not long after that was that Ma got a call from Ray, saying that there was the contents of this house to sell. Some old lady had died, and the family that was left wanted Bert and him, Ray, to handle the

whole thing, but that since they had opened their Huntington Antiques Shop, they didn't want to do that kind of business anymore. So they was calling Ma to see if she wanted to handle it. They said that they would come on over to the dead lady's house with her to help her and teach her what to do if she'd just remember that she was supposed to let them in first.

Ma said sure she'd like to help them, not even knowing what was in it for her, but she wanted to thank them for having her and me to tea. She asked Ray if I, William, could help, too. I guess she figured that I ought to since I had had some tea, too, and Ray told her yes, that certainly William could help. He told her that they would lend her one of their standard contract forms to use until she could get some of her own printed up. And Ma said thanks for that, not even knowing for sure what she was thanking for, but living with Pa for as long as she had, she had got into the habit of being thankful for just any kind of common courtesy.

The contract when it came said that Ma was to get twenty cents on the dollar of whatever money she took in from the sale of household goods.

Bert and Ray showed us how you have to go around and put these prices on everything, even old bath towels so wore out that you'd be right ashamed to hang them on

a clothesline, which these people didn't because they had a clothes dryer. And I didn't think any self-respecting person would leave such a kitchen when they died. You would think that Cockroaches United was having a county convention. Ray taught Ma how to tag and mark everything, and Bert taught her how to keep track of what was sold to who and how to do the book work, and they taught me how to clear out the cupboards and drawers and wash the stuff that needed it.

Then Bert and Ray went around the house and concentrated hard on putting the prices on a silver pitcher and a cut glass bowl and other stuff from the china closet. There was also a couple pieces of furniture, one sofa whose guts was pouring out, that he consulted about in some big book called *Nutting*. "I'll just check *Nutting*," he kept on saying. And Ma and me, we'd smile and nod and empty the drawers and closets and clean out the roach doo-doo. Ma and me have a plum good capacity for work, which neither of us inherited from Pa, I can tell you.

It's not hard to guess what Bert and Ray bought when they were the first allowed in on the sale. That big cut glass bowl was tucked under Ray's armpit and the big silver pitcher was under Bert's almost before the door was full open.

The sale turned out real good. We cleared out that whole houseful of stuff, and the heirs were right pleased and so were Ma and me. We made two hundred forty-three dollars and thirty-eight cents for our work, and that was the start of our career managing house sales. The work turned out to be pretty good and a lot steadier than either of us would ever have guessed. When you think about it, though, people are always dying, and something has to be done with all their stuff. Even people like Pa and his *National Geographics* and his Jack Bean bottles. And house sales are most always weekend affairs so's I could help Ma most all the time.

Ma and me got so's people would call us direct and not go through Bert and Ray, and we got so's we could price things out pretty good ourselves. Just ask me what a pillowcase brings at an estate sale or what pie tins go for, and without even having to think about it, I can tell you fifty cents if not worn and twenty-five cents if not rusty.

And there's something else you learn right quick. People will buy most anything at an estate sale. Was a time, once when Ma was having these bad cramps, and I was right worried about her, and I made her to take her medicine and tuck it into the bathroom cabinet while the sale was going on. Doncha know, some old lady

come by and insisted on buying Ma's cramp pills, and Ma sold them to her for twenty-five cents over what she had paid for them, and she had already swallowed three. I said to Ma, why did you sell them to her, why didn't you tell her real forceful like that you needed them? And Ma answered me that the lady was giving her worser cramps just from insisting. But Ma's like that, the giving-in type. How else can you explain her putting up with Pa all those years?

And I want to say one more thing about Bert and Ray because fair is fair. They may have helped us to price some things that they were gonna be let in first to buy, but they never did anything real bad. Like if we had had some duck decoys again, they wouldn't mark them only four dollars and then turn around and sell them for twenty-five. They would mark them just right, that is twelve dollars and a half apiece and then sell them for twenty-five. What I'm saying is this, they never gave themselves the benefit of the doubt.

Ma and me got so's we could tell the antique dealers from the regular people, and the dealers all understood how it was with us and Bert and Ray, and we all got along pretty good because most dealers have someone who lets them in first. Ma and me got so's we could make up the newspaper ads ourselves, and we had signs painted, little

sandwich boards that said ESTATE SALE, real neat and professional, that we would set at the street corners and one on the sidewalk in front of the house itself.

Ma and me even developed a little bit of a social life from our business of estate sales. We also got so's we'd have Bert and Ray over to supper at least once every other week.

They both had always loved antiques they said, but they had had other careers before. Bert was retired from the marines, and Ray was retired from the civil service; but Ma told me that you can retire from those things and still be young. I wouldn't say that Bert and Ray were young. I'd say that they were middle-aged, about what the average TV father appears to be. Each one had different specialities in antiques, and they got along pretty good with each other, except sometimes when they'd be fighting before they got over to our house, and then Ma would consider it her duty to cheer them up with her good cooking and sweet ways.

They had us over to tea about as often as we had them over to supper, and they and Ma talked on the phone a lot. Bert and Ray would tell Ma what good buys they got and what fantastic pieces they had bought or sold. As soon as something crossed the threshold of their shop, it became a fantastic piece. But I was glad that

they found company with each other, and Bert and Ray provided Ma with some of the best gossip this side of *People* magazine, except all their gossip was local, not national.

Ma and me came to see how getting in first was pretty important to an antique dealer. Because the thing of it is this—the hardest part about antiques is finding them and buying them at a good price. Selling them is pretty easy except for some things and those things aren't necessarily the ugliest. Sometimes ugly sells real good. It depends on the style of ugly. After a while Ma got so's she could price out the cut glass and the silver and the furniture, too. She had gathered together a little library of books, including the famous *Nutting*. She didn't ever do the pricing if Bert and Ray were around and if they showed even by a quick look in their eyes that they wanted to keep in practice. Ma always let them because she told me she didn't want to hurt their feelings none, and she didn't want to give them the idea that she had forgot from whence all her new career had sprung.

A lot of dealers came to Ma and promised her things if she would let them in first, but she never even thought about it twice. She was loyal, but seeing the way she had stuck with Pa way past normal endurance, anybody'd guess that.

Meanwhile, Bert and Ray started going up North to some of them big antique shows in places like Philadelphia and Lexington. They got so they were considering taking out an ad in *Antiques* magazine, and considering the price of that magazine and how many colored pictures is in it, a person's got to be pretty fancy to run an ad in there. But them and us never lost our relationship of buyer and seller, and Ma always swooned for them over their fantastic pieces.

In the meantime while Bert and Ray were getting fancier, we were, too. Our house started changing, and for the better. We were upgrading, you could say. It started when Ma couldn't sell a set of dining room chairs unless she'd of come way down on the price, and she just couldn't. She knew they was worth what she was asking, so she decided, heck, we could use them as good as anyone, and then it happened with other things, too. We got a nice set of dishes the same way, and Ma got me a Polaroid, bought it outright at one of her sales. Surprised me with it for my birthday. We also got a Pontiac station wagon at a good price. It was left in a garage, and the lawyers said that it was to be sold as part of the contents of the estate.

In our ads we always said "contents of the estate." We never called them house sales anymore.

One day when Ma and me were invited over to Bert's and Ray's for tea they had just come back from a buying trip up to Kentucky and some other horse country, I think. We no sooner got in the front door good when Ma spotted this piece of furniture leaning over by the wall to the left of the archway that leads to their parlor. Ma went on over to it and studied on it awhile and said, "I just love your *panetière*, Bert. Wherever did you find it?"

"*Panetière?*" Bert said. "What *panetière?*"

"That there cupboard," Ma said, pointing to the piece of furniture leaning against the parlor wall.

"This'n," I said. "Ma called it a *panetière*."

Then Ma looked at the ticket and said, "I see that y'all made a good buy. A right good buy."

I glanced on down at the ticket and saw that they had paid UNNN for it which was forty dollars American, and they had marked it up to a hundred twenty-five.

Ray came in from the kitchen just then, and Bert said to him, "It seems that we made a good buy on our *panetière*, Ray."

And Ray said, "Our what?"

"Your *panetière* right there," I said, pointing to that same cupboard leaning against the parlor wall.

Ray got real upset, and so did Bert, and they said that they didn't think it was fair that we should know their code, and I asked them how did they expect us not to know, seeing's how Ma always let them in first and knew whatever it was they had paid for whatever it was they had carried out under their respective armpits. They smiled, both of them did, but I could tell that they sorta hurried us through the tea. I peeked back in the door after we left, and I saw them pulling the tag off of that there *panetière*, which they didn't even know they had until Ma called it to their attention.

Next week Ma had Ben and Ray over to supper and Ray announced, "Bert and I sold our *panetière* for four hundred dollars to Mrs. Sinclair, the lady who just built that big house by the golf course. She's doing everything in French, and we called her and told her that we had an authentic eighteenth century bread cupboard, and she didn't even know it was a *panetière* until we told her. She bought it like that," he said, snapping his fingers.

"Fancy that," I said, "a genuine eighteenth century *panetière*, and Mrs. Sinclair didn't even know it."

Bert said, "Well, some of these people who have big houses need to be educated in good taste."

Ma just smiled and told them how glad she was for them that they had turned a nice profit. "Well," Ray said,

"it's not hard to do if you buy right and know what you're selling." Ma gave me a look that said "hush," and I didn't say nothing about they never would have thought that they had nothing but a old kitchen cupboard if Ma hadn't been reading a whole lot of books besides *Nutting*.

Bert and Ray were in Philadelphia doing one of their fancy shows when the call came that they would like Ma to come handle the Birchfield estate. Mrs. Birchfield was the widow of one of the richest men in town. At one time, half the town owed her money, and the other half were her relatives. Ma said that she'd be most willing to handle that estate, and we went there, the two of us, full of high hopes, expecting to find treasure like in the palace of an OPEC shah of an oil producing country.

What we found was the same old grease pool in the kitchen and the same old roaches in the cupboards, none of which were *panetières*, I can tell you. The towels and the sheets were such that Ma thought she best sell them direct to the rag man. And save! That Mrs. Birchfield had so many peanut butter jars that it was hard to believe that Peter Pan never did get old.

Ma said, "Some people just don't know how to live."
The furniture was mostly good. Ma knew that. If

you recovered it, it would be right pretty. Some ancestor of Mrs. Birchfield had knowed quality and had bought it. Besides the furniture, there was a nice silver coffee urn and a brass clock that chimed and some big old china tureens and bowls that must have been what the family ate off of before Mrs. Birchfield discovered jelly glasses and peanut butter jars. Ma knew that there was some fine stuff in there even if it was all tarnished, and she was glad that Bert and Ray would be back from Philadelphia in time for her to let them in first.

Ray was in a bad mood when they got to the sale, and Ma knew it, and she tried to cheer him up by showing him the very best things first, and he bought the brass clock and a coupla tureens. Then Ma saw that he was being more cheery and she showed him this big Chinese screen that was made in four panels. Ma had found it wrapped in a old bedspread in the back of Mrs. Birchfield's bedroom walk-in closet. "I put a hundred twenty-five on this, Ray," she said.

Ray looked at it and laughed. "I wouldn't have that thing if you gave it to me. It's a piece of junk."

Ma looked at it real good and said, "I think it's something good, Ray."

Then Ray called Bert over, and they both said that they wouldn't have it even if Ma gave it to them, that

they both thought it was a piece of junk. Bert added that when he was in the marines, every other sailor that hit the port of Hong Kong bought at least two of these things for his wife. After they both spoke on about how junky that screen was, they didn't seem so mad at each other anymore, and Ma looked glad that she had at least helped them to make peace with each other by agreeing over disagreeing with her.

Ma couldn't sell that screen the whole time we had the Birchfield estate sale, and when it was over, she deducted the full amount of one hundred twenty-five dollars from her commission, and she carried it on home with her and set it up in the corner of our dining room where, since our dining room was not even room-sized, she could not open it all the way.

The next day after school we carried it into the parlor and there we spread it out in front of the sofa. There were four panels, and each panel told part of a story of some Chinese ladies washing clothes and doing other dainty things. Ma said that the women were washing silk. She sure had been doing a lot of reading since Pa died and we had started in the estate sale business.

She asked me to leave the screen up, right there in our parlor, blocking our sofa. The next day when I came home from school, she was sitting on a little stool in

front of that there screen contemplating it some more. "William," she said, "I got a feeling in my bones that this is something really good. The next weekend we don't have a estate sale, we're gonna carry this downstate and see if them fancy dealers down there don't want it."

"What you gonna ask for it, Ma?"

"Gonna ask five hundred dollars for it, William," she answered.

I didn't do nothing but swallow.

The next weekend we carried the screen, wrapped in a bed of old bedspreads from Mrs. Birchfield's, to four different shops and didn't anyone want it.

Come the following Monday, Ma got herself over to the library and began some more reading that didn't stop until Saturday, at which time she was more convinced than ever that what she had was something real good. So the weekend after that, we loaded the thing back onto its bed of Birchfield bedspreads and headed North this time. We visited five antique shops and one interior decorator's, but didn't anyone want it.

Had it not come up spring vacation for the sixth grade, I don't know if I would've done the next thing. Spring vacation in the sixth grade means a bus trip to our nation's capital of Washington, D.C., and Ma was real proud that we had some money to send me. I took

some pictures of that China silk screen with my Polaroid. I remembered that Ma had told me that in her researching at the library she had seen pictures of some screens like ours at the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C. She said, though, that ours was prettier, and she thought that it might could be older.

In *my* research I found out that the Freer Gallery was part of the Smithsonian and that the Smithsonian was part of our student tour of Washington, D.C. The whole Freer Gallery was China and other Oriental art.

There was a couple of things about the Smithsonian that I didn't know, and the main one of them was that it's so big, and it's not just one building, and the third one I didn't know was that they don't ever take a sixth grade student tour to the Freer Gallery part. I don't think they ever even took a sixth grade student tour there where the school was all Chinese and Oriental. The Freer is a whole quiet building that hardly anyone goes to.

We didn't.

We went to Aeronautics and Space, and we had a buddy system. The buddy system in our school means that each person has to hold on to one other person going into and going out of places so that the chaperones had only half as much to keep track of. Now, in the

buddy system at our school, they usually have a girl-boy arrangement because things stay quieter that way.

It's hard to break away from the buddy system, and much as I didn't want to cause no trouble on my first field trip ever, I felt more for Ma and how bad she wanted to know about that China silk screen. So I told my buddy Carita that I had to answer a call of nature, and she blushed, even though I said it to her gentlemanly the way I did, and I left Aeronautics and Space and dodged school buses and school groups and made my way over to the Freer.

As busy and noisy as Aeronautics and Space was, that's about how quiet the Freer was. Was about like the way you'd figure it'd be in downtown Mars.

Was a lady right up front at a desk and I told her that I had some business with the person who studied on China silk screens, and the lady smiled at me, like the smile would have been a pat on the head had she knowed me better. She asked me, "Now, what business would you be having with the curator of Chinese art?"

I told her, "I got one."

She pretended that she was looking for it in front of and in back of me, and said, "Where?"

She gave me that smile again, and I could see that she was mighty unlikely to do business with me, so I took the

Polaroids out of my pants pocket. I had put them between two pieces of cardboard so's they wouldn't get mashed on the bus trip. I spread them out in front of her on top of the desk there and said, "I might be interested in selling, and I think you might be interested in buying."

She looked at my Polaroids, and I could tell that she didn't know what it was that she was seeing, and I was beginning to lose patience. They were about to miss me at Aeronautics and Space. "Listen, ma'am," I said, knowing full well how ladies liked to be called ma'am by an accent like mine. "Listen, ma'am," I repeated, "I don't have a right awful amount of time, and I would like to talk to someone in charge of these here Chinese silk screens."

"Our curatorial staff is really quite busy," she said.

And I said, "Back to home, we have an expression, ma'am."

"What's that?" she asked.

"Why, back to home we always say that there's some folk who don't know that they're through the swinging doors of opportunity until they've got swat on their backside."

She picked up her telephone.

A lady came down the hall, a magnifying glass swinging from a chain around her neck. Her name was Mrs. Fortinbras, only don't pronounce the s. She looked at my

pictures through that magnifying glass, and I felt real proud that someone was taking that much of care with them. She took off her glasses and then she studied on me for a while. Finally, she said, "These photographs are not entirely clear and there are fingerprints on a couple of critical places, but it looks as if you might have a very fine screen there. If you ever want to bring it in and have it examined directly, it can be arranged by our staff."

I thanked her real kindly, and I asked her to write her name on the back of one of the pictures and that is how I knowed about that silent s.

I put the pictures back between the cardboard and then back inside my pocket, and I said to the lady at the desk, "I'll be back."

She didn't look a bit like she was glad that I had kept the door of opportunity from swatting her on her backside.

I caught up with my group somewheres between Leonardo da Vinci and the bathrooms in the National Gallery, and I didn't tell the first person about what I had been up to. I saved it all for Ma because she deserved to know it first.

Ma was out loud happy when I gave her my news, and she stopped trying to sell the screen altogether after that. Both of us was waiting, just waiting, for something

to happen, and we knew it would when school was out for the summer.

I told Ma that I thought we ought to pay the Freer a visit, and she was right surprised at how firm I was about it, but she didn't hesitate much either. She loaded us and the Chinese screen into the station wagon and drove us all the way north to Washington, D.C.

"Do you remember the name of the lady, William?" she asked.

I told her yep, that it was Fortinbras with a *s* on the end that you're not supposed to pronounce and that I had had her to write it on the back of a Polaroid.

"Good boy," Ma said.

We got ourselves to the Smithsonian, that part they call the Freer Gallery, and Ma, she found herself a parking space that wasn't too awful far so's we could walk it. We marched us up to the desk there and asked to see Mrs. Fortinbras right off, and I handed the woman, who was a different one this time, the Polaroid with the name writ on the back so's there'd be no mistake about who it was we wanted and so's to cut down on the delays.

The woman behind the desk asked what was it about, and I said, "Same thing's as is on the other side of that there picture. Mrs. Fortinbras and I talked about it last spring."

She asked Ma and me to wait, and she got on her telephone, and we waited for only near a half-hour before Mrs. Fortinbras came on down the hall, still wearing that magnifying glass on a chain around her neck.

I said, "Hey," to her and she said, "Hello," back and then I said, "This here is my ma," and Mrs. Fortinbras stuck out her hand for Ma to shake it, and Ma did. Ma shook it real good.

First thing Ma said was, "We brung the screen."

"Where is it?" Mrs. Fortinbras asked.

"In the wagon," Ma said. "Should we of carried it in?"

Mrs. Fortinbras said, "Suppose you drive your wagon over to the delivery entrance, and I'll have our men bring it to one of the examining rooms."

Ma said, "Shucks, I lift heavier than that any time I do a estate sale. William and me'll just carry it on over from the parking lot, seeing's that I found a good spot not too far from here."

Mrs. Fortinbras said that they'd let us put the wagon in the employee lot if we drove it around like she said to do.

So we backed the wagon on up to the delivery, and two men came and lifted out that screen that was resting in its bed of washed bedspreads from Mrs. Birchfield's,

and that made us feel that already it was important, just like Ma had thought all along.

We went along with the screen to the examination room where Mrs. Fortinbras was waiting and where the two men lifted it onto a examination table. Mrs. Fortinbras said that she would do the examining of it her own self. Ma and I sat around and waited while Mrs. Fortinbras went over the thing with her magnifier, and then she turned to us and asked would we leave it with her for a few days so's they could run some tests, and we said, "Sure." Came time for us to sign a receipt that we had left it of our own free will, and Mrs. Fortinbras asked us what valuation we put on it, for insurance purposes, and Ma said, "Ten thousand dollars." For the life of me I don't know where she come up with that figure since all's we paid was REBNN, that is, a hundred twenty-five.

We decided to leave our wagon in that employee parking lot all day and use our time for me to show Ma all the things that had been showed to me in the spring. And that Ma is a real good appreciator. She said to me, "You know, William, I do think that had I been city born, I might could get a job in one of these here museums. I think I could of. I got some real delicate feelings about some of these here things." And it would make you sad to think of Ma wasted in our little old town

until you saw Ma's face as she looked at the things in the museum. That face just had to make a person happy.

We drove on back to our motel, and we looked for any messages, but there wasn't any. And the whole next day, too, there wasn't. We didn't sit around waiting. We went to visit at Congress and take a tour of the White House.

The third day we couldn't decide should we call over at the Freer or wait one more day when a call came right through to our room. It was Mrs. Fortinbras. She said that she was making a recommendation to the Museum that they buy—she said purchase—the screen at the price what Ma said, ten thousand dollars.

Want to know what Ma said? She said, "Since I been waiting here, Mrs. Fortinbras, my customer back home said that he would double his offer. So's I'm afraid I'll have to ask twenty. Thousand, that is." That's what Ma said, cool as well water.

Mrs. Fortinbras talked over the phone some more, and I heard Ma saying, "I'll do that, Mrs. Fortinbras. Sure, I understand."

I was dancing around the room, that's how anxious I was to know what was going on.

When Ma hung up, she told me that Mrs. Fortinbras said she needed a written offer from her customers back home.

"Yeah, Ma," I said. "Who might that be, seeing's how we couldn't peddle the thing for a even five hundred?"

"Why, Bert and Ray," Ma answered. "I'm sure if I call them, they'll come up with a written offer just like Mrs. Fortinbras needs."

"What do you think we have there in that screen, Ma?"

"Some genuine Chinese painting done along about the time that Marco Polo went to China. You know Marco Polo, William?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. "But I can't remember when he went to China."

"Long about the year 1260," Ma said. "I been doing some reading."

When Ma put a call through to Huntington Antiques, Bert answered the phone, and Ma told him pretty quick what it was she was calling about. And the first hint I had that Bert wasn't too happy about Ma's getting into the museum and all was that he said that he wasn't sure he could send her a written offer because what if the government held him to it. The Smithsonian was a government affair. Ma said that gosh, she hadn't thought about how the Smithsonian was a government affair. I took the phone from her and said to Bert as how he was making his promise to Ma, not to any govern-

ment, and he oughtta know Ma wouldn't hold him to no twenty-thousand-dollar promise. He kept on saying "government," and I kept on telling him that it was between him and Ma, and he could ask Ralph Nader if'n he didn't believe me. I wouldn't let go—even though it was long distance—'til he got my point. Finally, he said he'd send Ma a offer in writing saying he was dying to pay twenty thousand dollars for the Chinese screen. Ma took the phone back and said to him that he should send a telegram. She said that she would pay him back. She figured it'd be cheaper than living in the motel, which was right expensive.

We got the telegram and carried it on over to the Museum, and Mrs. Fortinbras told us that the committee that decides whether or not to buy things wouldn't be meeting until early next month. Would Ma mind leaving the screen? Ma asked was the Museum considering matching the offer we had from Huntington Antiques, and Mrs. Fortinbras said yes, it was. They were prepared to pay twenty thousand dollars for the screen, and Ma said that that being the case, she was prepared to leave it for them to look at some more.

We got a telegram from the Museum when we'd been back home eight days. It said that the committee had voted to purchase the Chinese silk screen and please

to send them a bill and please to keep quiet about it until the Museum itself made the announcement. I just pretended that I hadn't even read that last part of the telegram, and I called up the newspaper and told them, and a writer from the newspaper came on over to the house and listened to Ma's story and published two of my Polaroids besides, not even complaining that they were a little out of focus or that they had fingerprints on them in the wrong places.

We must have got a hundred phone calls the day that story came out in the paper. There was people who had umbrella stands and others who had statues and some who had paintings, but all of them was sure that they had themselves a museum piece and would Ma please to come on over to their place to look at it. One lady told Ma she would love to have her to come over and look at a Rembrandt painting she wanted to sell except she couldn't tell Ma who she was because she had to keep it a secret so's she wouldn't get robbed. Ma said she understood.

I told Ma that what I couldn't understand was why Bert and Ray hadn't called us up to congratulate us. A lot of other dealers had. Ma said that she understood why they had not, and she was feeling pretty sad about it.

I asked Ma if she thought that they was jealous about

the money, and I reminded Ma that she had offered the screen to them first for a hundred twenty-five. Ma said that the money was just a little bit of it. "What do you suppose is the big part of it then, Ma?" I asked.

"It's hard for me to know the words for saying it, William," she said. "I know what it is that's bothering them. It's the same thing that bothered them about the *panetière*, but I don't know the psychological words for it."

Bert and Ray finally called the next day, and I heard what Ma told them. Ma said, "It seems like I got took pretty good, Bert. I found out that that there screen I sold the Museum for twenty thousand dollars was really worth twenty-five thousand. Guess I just still got a lot to learn."

Well, that was it.

Bert and Ray come on over to the house that night and teased Ma about how she got took by the Freer Gallery, and Ma just laughed at herself right along with them.

Well, that was it.

Bert and Ray just couldn't stand being beat out by Ma, who had been their student just a few years ago. Bert and Ray couldn't stand that Ma already knew more about antiques than they did, not only because she studies on

them, but also because she's got all these delicate feelings about things that you can't hardly help but notice when you watch her looking at something or touching it so gentle.

But Ma's been so wore down by everything, including living all them years with Pa, that she figures won't nobody love her if she shows that she knows one thing more than they do.

But I look back on how good she stuck by her guns with that screen when all them dealers and one decorator laughed us out of their shops, and I figure that if she can stand by her guns with strangers, she soon will be able to with people who have us over to tea. And I figure that I got six more years before I finish school and have to go off and leave her, and I'm going to work on her. I pushed her up them steps to Huntington Antiques, and I got her to go to that Freer, and I figure that I can help her to find out how being grateful to Bert and Ray is something she should always be, but outgrown them is something she already is. By the time I leave home, she's gonna be ready to face that fact and live with it. She'll need it, being's she won't have me around to push her here and there anymore.