

My Ongoing, Quirky, and Passionate Relationship with Stuff

By Mameve Medwed

My paternal grandfather was in the antiques trade (which, because that generation consisted of immigrants, was no doubt a euphemism for junk dealers.) One uncle inherited the business; the others became lawyers. As a child, I spent hours poking around in Uncle Sam's musty, magical shop and always came home with some odd treasure—a porcelain dog, a toy soldier, old glass beads, a monocle, a top hat. My parents collected antiques, too. Our house had no mod cons, no shower, dishwasher, drier, just one claw-and-ball footed bathtub in the one Dickensian bathroom, rugs in the kitchen, a refrigerator hidden behind a Japanese screen, etc. etc. (I've attached an essay about the house.) Doorknobs would fall away in your hand; there wasn't one comfortable chair anywhere—nevertheless, at every turn you'd find beautiful yet useless things.

I live in an 1860 Victorian house in Cambridge stuffed with all kinds of collections. When people come for the first time, they usually exclaim, "Wow!" Followed by "How do you dust all of this?" I used to reply, "I don't," but now have learned to nod mysteriously in case I scare them into donning latex gloves.

Like my character, I love auctions and flea markets, yard sales, junk stores. I've spent many hours trudging the muddy farmers' acres at Brimfield (a giant flea market held three times a year outside of Sturbridge, Mass) and braving the black flies at the Union Antiques Fair in Union, Maine; I've lugged innumerable treasures home. One of my favorites (especially these Go Sox! days) is a seven-foot-high carved and painted Red Sox ballplayer wearing an old-fashioned striped uniform. He stands on the staircase landing and has to be moved every time we lug something up the stairs bigger than a breadbox.

A friend just gave me a Victorian chamber pot to celebrate the finishing of this novel. (After I wrote *Mail*, I amassed a collection of postal memorabilia. I stocked up on birdhouses for *The End of an Error* even though *Host Family* didn't ignite a desire to collect lice.) Some English houseguests just brought me a packet of Elizabeth Barrett Browning postcards from the National Portrait Gallery. I hope that one chamber pot and fifty postcards will be enough. But, then, I look at that chamber pot and think: planter? Mail receptacle? Postcard displayer? Loose change repository? Maybe I need one or two more.