

Garage sales of the heart

By Ruth Ostrow

MY girlfriend rang the other day. She was exhausted from a garage sale she'd just had. I asked her what she was selling. "Terrible things. There was an old suitcase, an electric organ, moth-eaten lampshades, a carved, wooden thing from Indonesia, Mickey Mouse figures bought in Disneyland, plaster angels we found at a garage sale, lace curtains I hated that someone thought wonderful, vinyl furniture, an old PlayStation... I don't understand how we made \$400 for bits of rubbish," she said.

"I guess buyers must see something in an old thingo that the former owner can't see," I said. "That moth-eaten lampshade may seem like a priceless antique to new eyes, or the perfect thing for that corner. Maybe the new owner has the exact piece of material to patch up that side, or cover that stain.

"You know the cliché. One man's trash is another man's treasure."

And suddenly she started laughing. "I guess it's a bit like relationships, isn't it? Look at Bob. When I met him he was pre-loved, second-hand goods. A bit shop soiled, a wheel or two missing. His ex-wife had given him up for broken.

"I thought: 'I'll just dust down the cobwebs. Cover the broken bits. Put the stuffing back in.' And I've had a good decade out of him."

We laughed and laughed when we thought of the world as a "garage sale of the human heart". After being in long-term relationships, some people end up very threadbare, falling apart, knobs off everywhere. And yet often a shopper with a keen eye, or one who's been single for too long, will see value: "I need one just like that for my house."

And they'll be happy to put in the effort. "I'll just cover that hole there with a bit of Freudian therapy, whack a pair of designer jeans down there, and he'll be as good as new," they say, snapping up "a real bargain" while the ex-wife looks on in shock and asks endlessly: "What does she see in him?"

Similarly, a man I know was mortified to discover his wife, exhausted from 23 years of marriage, became an object of lust for a gorgeous man 10 years her junior. First, the woman got such a shock on being abandoned that she finally went on that fitness regime. Second, and most important, contrary to the stereotypical view of life, it isn't beauty or age that really counts in the garage sales of the human heart.

It's timing and fit. Rest assured that your old, discarded thingo will fit perfectly into someone else's home. Without rhyme or reason to the person who no longer has need for it. It isn't personal. It's just in keeping with another adage I love: "There's a lid for every pot."

There are nostalgics who love things from the '70s, sentimentalists who loved my friend's Mickey Mouses, someone who even wanted her lacy-metal garden furniture with chipped, white paint.

Meanwhile a woman I know took up with a man who had the deepest lines etched into his face. "You should have seen how handsome he was when he was young," the ex told her. But the woman only ever adored the maturity and protection that came with men who reminded her of Daddy.

Another interesting observation is that the new owner brings out facets in the thingo that the old owner couldn't. A good polish with the right, tender-loving hands, can make a thingo shine.

I often refer to the film *The Accidental Tourist* because it plays with the concept: It isn't the person you love that's important, but how you are when you're with them. Typically, the ex-wife keeps saying: "You always" and "You never". The new owner sees the leading man a different way and so he opens up and becomes different just because someone believes he is.

That's the profound power of new love. New owners are circuit-breakers, they change the thingo's focus, open up the wounded bits, heal the broken bits, cut off the dead bits, recondition, renovate, do a makeover. And suddenly the broken thingo is roller-blading with his new girlfriend while the ex shakes her head in shock.

Partly it's the alchemy of having an exciting new owner that does the trick. But it's also about the effort an optimistic, new partner will make which we don't make as we tire of our dear, old thingos and leave them atrophying in a dusty corner of the relationship while dreaming of a hot, new thingo that'll make our hearts beat faster - which is probably someone else's old, worn thingo.

A word of sanity to end this column. My friend with the garage sale said she had one huge lament: "I was actually very sorry to see the two Miceys go. I should have realised their sentimental value."

The lesson she offers to all my readers: "Look again at your junk, and try to look through new shoppers' eyes. Then put effort into your old thingo before it's too late. Pre-loved thingos go fast in the garage sale of the human heart."

www.ruthostrow.com

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