

Yard Sale

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I need to say right off that I am, as you can plainly see, a white man, and I'm not either proud or ashamed of that fact, because it's just a fact, that's all it is, and facts are pretty humble things but they're also the most dependable things we know. Now these facts I'm about to relate will upset some folks of color, which is why I told you upfront I'm white, because it places me at a certain disadvantage. But facts are facts.

My wife Linda roped me into helping her put together a yard sale, to get rid of a bunch of junk and extras and things we don't use anymore. One of these things is an old push mower we inherited when Linda's father died and her mom moved into a nursing home. I wanted to sell it for twenty-five dollars, but Linda said, "If you're willing to give it away, I'd rather keep it." I told her our neighbor Bill couldn't get more than ten dollars for his push mower—and here I wasn't exactly being factual, because I think Bill just gave it away to a friend at work, but this was a fact I was willing to bend a little so as not to hurt Linda's feelings—but she just said that memories are priceless and twenty-five is too cheap for memories.

You probably know that yard-sale hawks swoop down on a yard an hour before the sale is scheduled to begin. Announce a sale that starts at seven in the morning and fifteen people will be standing in your yard at six. If your items are all set up and ready to sell, they'll pounce on them like vultures on a carcass. If you're standing or sitting around looking like a seller, they'll nag you into selling them your old rake or

melon-baller or Army blanket even harder than you want them to buy it. If you're ethical, you'll remind them that the sale starts at seven and they'll just have to wait. But it's hard to be ethical when a middle-aged guy in plaid shorts and black socks offers you three dollars for a melon-baller you thought you'd be throwing away.

We placed an ad in the paper and on the internet, and we posted a couple of signs in the neighborhood, announcing the start of our yard sale at eight o'clock last Saturday morning. Well, somehow we got everything set up and ready to sell by quarter till eight, I don't know how, since I can't function at all most days till ten o'clock and then only after three cups of strong coffee. But we did it, and I was sitting on my old lawn chair with my mug of coffee, ready to draw down my first good swig, when standing right in front of me was the familiar figure of Juanita Howard. I looked around the yard and saw maybe a half-dozen early birds rummaging through our sale items, and there was Linda telling one persistent old guy that no, he'd have to wait till eight to make his offer on our brand-new, never-used aluminum extension ladder, while standing right behind the old guy was an old woman who clearly wanted to buy our Spode Christmas platter without having to compete for it with folks who showed up on time. So I couldn't count on Linda to get me out of having to deal with Juanita Howard. She was standing right before me, Juanita was, pointing behind her and to her left, at the push mower. "Well, hello, Mr Foley," she said, formally and politely, "I didn't know this was your sale. I didn't know you lived here. But I wonder how much you want for that push mower?"

Now Juanita knew she didn't have to call me Mr Foley, as if I was some big shot at the company, she could have called me Bert like

all the other folks do in our department. She was promoted just last month. Well, not exactly promoted, it was more like a lateral move, but it raised her pay above mine and several other folks who've worked there far longer than she has, when she moved out of our general ad-copy office and into the group that puts together promotions for pediatric nutrition products. What Juanita knows about pediatric nutrition is beyond me, since she has no children of her own and no intention of ever having any. She made that all too clear to Gene Flowers when he said one day in front of my cubicle that his goal for his next five years was to marry and start a family, at which Juanita said it was her goal to do just the opposite. She said it almost as if she was mad about it too, and Gene and the two folks huddled around my cubicle all looked at each other as if to ask what had touched her off. Then Juanita must have sensed that she had been a little bit too forceful, and so she smiled and said that she had come from a very large Southern family and said she couldn't wait to leave it for some space and fresh air.

Please don't think I'm a racist for noticing that some folks of color, when they rise a little in the world, like into a good job or after finishing a good degree, get a little formal sometimes. I know a half-Mexican woman who got a PhD when no one before her in her family had ever even finished high school, and she insisted that everybody call her Doctor, everybody except for family and very closest friends. Her voicemail even introduced herself as Doctor, and she asked callers to leave a message for Doctor. Juanita isn't quite so formal, but she can, at times, get that way. When at work she needs something from another department, she'll call the person she's asking Mr or Ms, and

she'll change her voice to sound more proper and businesslike. Every day she's dressier than everyone else in her office, and when Bob Bryan wore jeans to work one Friday, even though it was a dress-down day, she very pompously turned her nose up at him as he walked by. She's worked at the company for three years now, and I have seen her let down her formal self only twice, once when she was having a bad day and actually cursed out loud when, at the end of it, she accidentally deleted a couple of ad files, and the other time in the lunchroom, long after the regular lunch hour, when I walked by and saw her in a corner, dabbing at her eyes. I asked her was everything all right, and she looked up at me, and I could see she'd been crying, and she broke down and told me her mother had just died after a long illness. I stood there above her, holding a cup of coffee in one hand and a stack of documents in the other, and I didn't really know Juanita that well, and so what could I say or do? I asked her whether she wanted to leave for the day and go tend to her family, and did she need anything. She thanked me kindly, said that she'd finish out the day and finish one last project that was already late, and that she'd take a week off to drive to her family's place in Alabama. She seemed honestly touched that I had stopped and asked, though, and so I felt kindly toward her, and have felt that way ever since, though later I couldn't help wondering, and neither could Bob or some others in our department, how she'd got the chance to move into the pediatric area. I knew Bob, who's no enlightened guy by any means, would be telling his close friends that she'd gotten that job because of her race.

And for me maybe I was surprised to see her standing before me, asking about the push mower, because of her race too. This

neighborhood isn't exactly diverse. Oh, a few blocks away an Asian family moved in, Japanese or Korean or something. I don't know them at all, wouldn't recognize them if I ran into them. For all I know, they're Filipino or Hawaiian. I heard that a black family lived just down the street from here, on the next block, I believe, for a couple of years, and that no one gave them any trouble, but they left anyway because they said they didn't feel welcome. That's before Linda and I moved here. This isn't exactly a gated community, in fact we're barely above the working class, but as long as it's been here it's been mostly, or even completely, white. And so here was Juanita, a broad-shouldered black woman dressed in a big pullover thing that was half-sweater and half-sweatshirt, with a few spangly glittery things running down the arms, standing tall in front of me and asking about the push mower. If she were anyone else, if she were that old man trying to buy that ladder from Linda, or that old woman holding that Spode platter, I would have had no problem saying that she'd have to wait another few minutes, till eight o'clock, when the sale would begin. It's not as if Juanita was even making an offer, saying something like, I'll take that mower off your hands for twenty dollars, Mr Foley, sir. No, she was politely but firmly asking me—asking—how much I wanted for the mower. Now of course there was a sticker on the mower, and I'd written on it the price of twenty-five dollars. So it's not as if Juanita didn't see the sticker and didn't know how much I really wanted for the mower. Again, if she were anyone else, I'd expect her to expect me to say back, How much are you willing to give me for it? But this was Juanita, and she was being her formal self, and so I didn't know if she played that game of dickering over prices that I always played when I

went to yard sales. It even occurred to me that I'd never haggled over prices with anybody who wasn't white. Do folks of color haggle? If I haggled, would she know how to play the game? If I just told her the price on the sticker, would she take offense and think I was treating her differently? It's not as if I could ignore her either. She was standing right in front of me, towering over me, and her voice, though it's not loud, carries. I heard her, and she knew it. I had to answer. I wished Linda was here to talk with her.

"Well, I want twenty-five dollars," I said finally, hitching myself up in my lawn chair.

She paused, cleared her throat, looked way above me and beyond, as if something across the street was catching her eye, said, "I know that's the price you're asking on the sticker. But I was thinking you could come down on that, Mr Foley. I was thinking you could come down to, let's say, fifteen dollars."

Fifteen dollars. I was sure she'd say ten, or even five. I was expecting to settle for ten, and having to explain to Linda for the next few days. Don't get me wrong. The mower worked. It will cut your grass, and you can even adjust the height of the blade, unlike on really old push mowers. But still, it's a push mower, for god's sake, and you have to exert yourself to use it, especially on thick grass. It's not one of those fancy two-thousand-dollar riding mowers that come with a flouncy umbrella and a foot massage and a juice bar. For our first year here, this was the only mower I had, and for those first lawn-mowings of spring it was a beast to push through our tough grass. I didn't know where Juanita Howard lived, but if she wanted this mower for herself then I hoped her yard was postage-stamp small, with little spindly grass.

I looked across the yard, and there was the old man sulking away from Linda, angry that he wouldn't be able to buy that ladder for another few minutes. Then the old woman turned around and set the Spode platter on the table where she'd found it and walked out of our yard and drove away. Linda was sticking to her ethics, and so I turned to Juanita and said, "You'll have to wait till eight o'clock, when the sale officially begins." Then I quickly turned away, in case she got angry and wanted to belt me.

She didn't get angry, though. She sighed, reached into a pocket, and pulled out a checkbook. "I have to be across town by eight-fifteen, and I can't wait till your sale begins. On the other hand, I do need a small mower for my lawn. And so why don't we cut to the chase and let me have it for the price you're asking? I know I could do better, but I don't want to go looking around." And she started writing a check. "Now should I make that out to you, Mr Foley?"

According to my watch, the time was 7:53, seven minutes before the sale was supposed to start. Linda had already turned away two early birds, and one of them had already left our yard. I have always prided myself on my being ethical. I've figured if you can't be ethical, then you shouldn't try to be anything. And it wasn't ethical to undercut our yard sale and our on-time customers by selling that mower to Juanita before the sale was set to begin. On the other hand, she was offering our asking price. If she were anyone else, I might wonder whether this mower was something special and rare, like some precious model that could be spruced up and auctioned in New York for a thousand dollars. But no, this was just Juanita Howard, and she wouldn't pull that stunt on me and Linda. She just wanted to buy a mower for her yard, and I

had one for sale, and she was even willing to pay the twenty-five I was asking for it. Who could ask for more? Except that it was still a few minutes before the sale, and Linda was abiding by her standards, and I never, ever compromise my standards.

“Yeah, you can just write Bert Foley,” I said to Juanita. “That’s Bert with an ‘e,’ you know.”

“I know,” she said. And she finished her check, tore it out of her checkbook, and passed it to me.

“I truly appreciate this, Mr Foley, even if I had to give you twenty-five dollars for it,” she said. “I need something for my yard. My landlord used to cut the yard, but now he’s requiring his renters to do it.”

She turned and grabbed the mower by its handles, turned the handles backward over the mower, and pulled. The blade turned, but not in a mowing way, so it wouldn’t make the old familiar whooshing sound that push mowers make and that I’ve heard on only one other machine, those old-fashioned hay-cutting contraptions farmers use every late summer. Those early-bird buyers standing in our yard turned and saw her pulling the mower to her car, then opening the tailgate and lifting the mower into the back end. And Linda turned and saw too. She stomped over to me and demanded to know why I had sold something before the starting time of the sale. I told her it was a colleague from work, someone who paid our full asking price, and who needed it in a hurry and couldn’t wait till eight because she had to be across town, and I even dropped a hint that maybe Juanita might have arranged with me to buy it before the sale even began, like maybe yesterday at work. That was a lie, of course, and I’m sure Linda could tell. I had only one thing going for me, and that was the check

for twenty-five dollars I held in my hand. "I got full price," I boasted to Linda. And that was a fact.

It's also a fact that Juanita was a colleague, and not just any colleague but a black colleague, and a black woman too, and it's a fact that, for the moment when she stood before me talking her formal talk, I had felt intimidated. That's not easy to admit to, and as a younger man I wouldn't ever dare to admit it, but it's a fact. I am deeply committed to facts. But this fact of my feeling intimidated by Juanita because of her formalities and because of her being a black woman, this fact bothers me. Doesn't it make me seem at least a little bit racist? I'm afraid it does, at least a little bit, but I want to swear to you I am not a racist. I showed Juanita a little favoritism, I'll admit, and so if I'm racist at all it's toward my fellow white folks. But how can anybody be racist against their own kind?

After Linda finished her harangue, I hurried into the house pretending to need to use the bathroom but really just hoping to avoid anybody who'd accuse me of being unethical about the timing of the yard sale. And I would wait inside till just after eight o'clock, when the sale proper could go on and maybe we'd get rid of most of the junk we wanted to get rid of. On Monday morning maybe I'd run into Juanita at work, and she'd tell me the mower went just fine over her little yard, and I'd remind her to call me Bert, and maybe she would, and maybe Bob Bryan would be standing by, eavesdropping, and maybe he'd spread a rumor that Bert Foley was awfully friendly to the black folks around here, and maybe my boss would hear about it, and maybe he'd promote me to the opening in the company's diversity office, which has gone unfilled for months.

What really happened was that I didn't see Juanita on Monday, that Bob Bryan got the news he'd been promoted to senior product manager of one of our most obscure products, so obscure I don't even remember what it is, and that the rest of our department got reamed out because our market share was down for the third quarter in a row. That's bad news. After work Linda told me she'd just finished totting up the money from our yard sale and that the numbers didn't add up, that at least one item that didn't fetch us any income was missing. I asked what that item might be. She said it was the Spode Christmas platter. It was just gone. Gone, gone.

In the five days since that yard sale, I've been thinking hard about what happened, thinking about Juanita and my timid way of handling that sale, and I have a lot of feelings and guesses and maybe even a few ideas, but I'm stumped for anything solid to help me understand. I'm a stickler for facts, but there's nothing even remotely like facts to help me understand what I'm supposed to think about black folks and white folks and Asian folks and half-Mexican folks and all other folks both like me and not like me. Facts are just slipping right through my fingers.

Meanwhile Juanita's check is still in my pocket, folded in half and unredeemed. □