

GIFTS FROM THE UNIVERSE

by Leonard Tushnet

THAT SAYING, "THERE'S NO BUSINESS like show business," is all wrong. There's no business like the gift business. You have to figure out in advance what the public is likely to take to, how to set a low enough price and yet make a profit, and most important, be the first with the most of what's new or going to be new.

Furthermore, gifts aren't staples like hosiery or underwear. You never know what's going to catch on. Take delft ware, for instance. One year there's a real craze for it, and you stock up with teapots and pitchers and platters, and six months later you can't give them away. The same with giant pepper mills or Indian temple bells. Or you get a good buy and you figure you'll introduce carved Shesham wood chests, perfect for gifts, and

nobody looks at them. I tell you, in this business you got to be on your toes, especially wholesaling, which is what I do.

That's why, when I saw the sign GIFTS FROM THE UNIVERSE where the vacant store was on Elm Street for a year, I went in. Just to add a customer, so to speak, and to find out why anybody in his right mind would open a store on a side street in a rundown neighborhood.

There was the usual junk in the windows: fake porcelain cups and saucers, majolica-like candlesticks, low-grade colored glass. But inside! Wow! You walk on a thick red pile carpet into a showroom shimmering with diffused light from crystal sconces set all around, and the walls have heavy red drapes. A place like that is decorated for a

chichi store on Madison Avenue, not for Elm Street in New Falls.

And the showcases! Sure, one tall, open glass case shows the cheap items, but then all the others are polished cabinets with heavy plate glass and inside them are things of such beauty you catch your breath at them. Iridescent vases with raised designs, not Tiffany, but better. Polychrome glazed bowls no Japanese could improve on. Nested china boxes with fine geometric decorations. What's the use of going on? Believe me, and I should know, being in this business so many years, the place was full of pieces that belonged in art museums.

I just looked around, my mouth open. Where the owner of this store got such merchandise, I couldn't figure out. Certainly not from the usual outlets. I go to all the trade shows and nowhere did I see stuff like this. He had a source I didn't know about, and naturally, at that thought, I got interested.

A little man came out of the door leading to the back. He looked very ordinary, in his late forties, somewhat bald, paunchy, stoop-shouldered, with thick eyeglasses and a poker face with the unhealthy pallor of a storekeeper. The only thing unusual about him was his hands; he was wearing flesh-colored gloves. I figured he was polishing something in the back of the store.

I handed him my card—MORRIS GREENSTEIN. GIFTS FOR

THE TRADE—and introduced myself.

He was very affable until he understood I was a seller, not a buyer.

"You have some nice stuff here," I said. "Do you mind telling me where you got this?"—an enameled glass apothecary jar—"or this?"—a multicolored faceted paper weight.

He stiffened. "I am an importer. I bring in my own goods."

"No reason to get sore," I said. "I'm not a competitor of yours. But isn't this merchandise too expensive to sell around here?"

"Is it?" he asked, somewhat surprised. "I thought the prices were low enough for any market. I checked around before I put the things out." He opened a cabinet and took out a rope-style cachepot and handed it to me. It looked sturdy, but I was unprepared for its lightness and I almost dropped it. It was as delicate as Belleek china.

"That's fifty cents."

I thought he was a wise guy. "Fifty cents? You mean fifty dollars."

He shook his head. "No. Fifty cents."

What kind of a nut was this? Even if he paid the factory in Baluchistan (or wherever the workers get only a dollar a month) a quarter apiece for the pots, the transportation and duty alone would increase the cost. "What are your other prices?" I asked.

He was a nut, all right, all right. Nothing on display was priced at

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more than fifty cents; some items were a quarter. Nut or no nut, business is business. I took all the bills out of my wallet, leaving myself only a dollar, and said I'd buy whatever he had for whatever I had, which amounted to eighty-three dollars.

The way some people do business you could plotz. No wonder there are so many bankruptcies. He looked at the bills and said, "I'm sorry, but I take silver only."

The only way I could figure out such a *meshugas* is that he came from a country where there was inflation, although I must say he spoke English as good as you or I. "The American dollar is sound as—as—as a dollar." I made a joke.

He just stood there and said no. "I will take only silver."

"So pack up the stuff and I'll go get silver," I said. "The bank's only six blocks away. I'll be right back."

I came back with a bag full of rolls of quarters. You know what he did? He unwrapped every roll and felt and looked at every quarter! He made two piles on the counter in the rear, one small and one large. He pushed the larger pile back to me. "These are not all silver," he said. He counted out the other pile. "Sixteen dollars and seventy-five cents. Pick out what you want, and I'll put it in a carton for you."

There was no use arguing with him, I found out. Of course most of the quarters were this new sand-

wich type, you know, because of the silver shortage, but I managed to convince him that they were as tender just the same. In the end I bought the cachepot and a lot of other single items. That's another thing, he had only one of a kind of everything, but he assured me he could get me as many of any item as I wanted. For silver, of course, only for silver.

He got me so worked up that I stumbled on the sill going out. I fell with the carton. The end of my investment, I thought, and opened it up to see what could be salvaged. Would you believe it? Not a thing was broken!

The man—his name was Peter Tolliver, he said, but I had my doubts about that—helped me brush myself off. When I remarked how lucky I was that nothing broke, he said, "None of that is breakable. Watch." Before I could stop him, he took that beautiful fragile cachepot and dropped it on the sidewalk. It bounced! It actually bounced! "All my merchandise is indestructible," he told me, "unless exposed to strong sunlight. That's why it's kept behind glass, away from ultraviolet light."

Bargains or no bargains, I left there quick. You never can tell with a lunatic what he'll do next. I drove right down to Strauss's department store on Broad Street and saw the gift boutique buyer. She drooled when she inspected the china boxes and almost fainted when I told her

the price. I figured if Tolliver was crazy, I wasn't. I sold her every one of the "samples" for ten dollars each, and she gave me a whopping order.

My problem was how to get enough silver for that crackpot. I took the loose quarters I had in the bag to the bank across the street and asked for rolls of quarters. The teller put them in the coin counter and wanted to give them back to me all wrapped up again. When I said I had to have other rolls of quarters, he looked at me sort of funny, shrugged, and gave me them. I could see him pointing me out to another teller and laughing as I went out. Let them laugh, I thought.

I went to my place of business and opened the rolls of quarters. Out of the packed sixty-five dollars there was only twelve dollars in all-silver quarters. I rewrapped fifty dollars and sent the errand boy to the bank, together with a check for a hundred dollars, and told him to bring back only quarters and half dollars and to make sure the quarters were different from the ones I was sending. You know what? Not one single silver half dollar in that whole pile he brought back! And only seventeen silver quarters!

I took the \$16.25 I had and went back to Tolliver's. He was glad to see me, and gladder to see the money. I picked out what I wanted and gave him the order I got from Strauss's. He almost

danced with joy. I held up my finger to him. "Now, remember, want delivery on this, so give me a date, and no kibitzing."

He became very businesslike. "Mr. Greenstein, I assure you that tomorrow morning you can pick up your merchandise. Cash on delivery, of course. Silver."

"You crazy?" I hollered. "I'll give you a check if you don't want to extend credit. Go tell the bank when you cash it, you want silver, not me! I'm a merchant, not a money changer!"

His eyes glittered behind the glasses. "Sorry, Mr. Greenstein, but we can't trade except on my terms."

What could a person do with such an idiot? And promising me the goods tomorrow yet! I gave in, surrendered. "Okay, Tolliver. But where I'll get so many quarters, I don't know."

I took the carton with me to Beau Mode, which is a very fashionable gift shop in Homestead. I didn't do like at Strauss's. Some items I put on a price of thirty dollars, some twelve, some twenty-two, just to make things look reasonable. Mrs. Dawson, the la-di-da lady who runs the place, didn't bat an eyelash. She bought all the samples on the spot and asked for more. I told her I was expecting other *objets d'art* and I'd give her an exclusive for Homestead if her order was large enough. She was cagey but finally agreed.

I went to the Homestead bank

got twenty dollars worth of quarters, and went home. I was busting with aggravation. I told Sadie, my wife, "Here I got a supply source every buyer in New Jersey—New York, even—will have their tongues hanging out for my merchandise, and I've got to start looking for silver quarters right when the government stops making them on account of the silver shortage." I told her the whole story.

"So take that pile of silver dollars you've been saving from the time we went to Las Vegas," she said. "You must have sixty dollars there, at least. And I'll go with you. There's something fishy about this whole deal."

Again I go, this time with Sadie, to the store on Elm Street. Tolliver was putting new pieces in the cabinets, and one was more exquisite than the other. Sadie, who knows about such things (she helped me in the business when I got started), was speechless. Heavy terra cotta book ends with allover tiny designs, a glass cheese server that looked like it was made out of lace, painted china fruit bowls you could see through—who can tell you what marvels he had there?

I gave Tolliver the silver dollars and the few silver quarters I had. He counted them out one by one, and Sadie selected what I'd get for them. All the time she was looking the place over. When I pushed him again to take a check and he said no, Sadie butted in. "Enough,

Morris. We'll talk this over," he smiled at Tolliver. "Now, we contract to buy all your goods. How much do you think the amount to?"

"I have on hand goods priced at exactly \$524.50," he answered. "But you understand that these are only samples, and I can furnish any amount of any item in twenty-four hours."

I almost exploded. Goods he had there worth thousands, and yet he had his inventory figured out down to the penny. And where, I asked Sadie, would I get \$524.50 worth of quarters?

She didn't answer me and she didn't say anything on the way home. She was quiet. She was thinking. After supper she took out what we'd bought and looked at each piece top to bottom, inside and out, side to side. One thing you got to say about Sadie—she's no dope. She asked me, "How long has this store been there?"

"It just opened today, I ride down Elm Street every day, you know, and it wasn't open yesterday."

"That Tolliver is a sick man. He breathes too fast, and there must be something wrong with his hands; he's always wearing the gloves."

I hadn't noticed the breathing, but now that Sadie mentioned it, I realized that she was right. "That reminds me," I said, "now you say he's sick. There's a peculiar smell in that place like when Uncle Artie

was dying of cancer (may he rest in peace!) and Aunt Bertha had to have an ozone deodorizer in his room."

"Also, there are no country of origin markings on anything, which means either he makes those things himself or he has them made by some small local outfit right around here. That's why they're so cheap and he can get them so fast. Imports they're not, that you can be sure of."

"But he said he brings them in himself," I argued.

"He's a liar," Sadie said flatly. "The prices are so low that even smuggling them in from China wouldn't pay. Furthermore, did you notice that there isn't even one piece of metalwork in that whole store, not a trivet, not a candelabrum, not a frame? No brass, no tin, no iron. Also—there are no animal knickknacks. You know what I mean—china dogs or wooden deer. And not one of the bisque ballet dancers that are so popular now. Like the Mohammedans, no graven images of anything alive. And the silver. Why does he want only silver?"

That last was a very practical problem for me. I would have been willing to buy out his entire stock and give him orders for more goods, only where would I get that much silver? Sadie had the answer. "He wants silver. He doesn't care if it's coined or not. Take the silver candlesticks from the dining room,

and the sterling platter the lodge gave you, and the silver goblet from the Passover set, and the salad serving fork and spoon we bought in Mexico, and your cuff links, and my Navajo bracelet, and the silver frame from the picture on the dresser. I bet you he'll take every one of those things the same as money."

I felt like a junkman or a burglar the next morning, carrying a pillowcase filled with as much silver as we had in the house or as I was willing to part with. I came into Tolliver's store and dropped the clanking bundle on the counter. Sadie was right. He had no objection to silver in any form. Also she was right about him being sick. He looked paler than yesterday and breathed faster; his hands shook when he took out the platter, and he staggered a little when he walked over to show me Strauss's order neatly packed.

He took all the silver into the back room "to weigh it," he said, and came out again with a slip of paper. "At current rates for silver," he told me, "that amounts to \$440, which more than covers your orders from yesterday but is still insufficient for my stock."

I looked around. Again there were new things in the cabinets: prism-cut glass decanters, opalescent oil and vinegar cruets, mosaic ashtrays, alabaster tumblers, and every piece tasteful and pretty. I made a rapid calculation. "Okay,"

I said, "I'll send the truck up for the order, and I'll send with it a thousand dollars in sterling silverware. You get everything ready for the truck to pick up." You see, I trusted him. What was going on I didn't know, but I got an eye for faces and I could tell he was honest.

I went to Walsh the jeweler (he's a cousin, you'd never guess from the name) and negotiated with him. For only ten percent markup I got my thousand dollars worth of silver. When the truck returned, everybody in the place watched it being unpacked. "High class, very high class," Miss Atkins my secretary said. And Herman, the bookkeeper, who's forever taking courses in college at night, he said, "Don't be in a hurry to sell all this, Mr. Greenstein. Have a private showing first for the better shops and take orders. Tiffany's doesn't have better."

Naturally, Sadie said I did the smart thing by buying like I did. She had another suggestion to make. "Why not tell Tolliver to close up that store of his and guarantee him an outlet for everything he can get? You can't go wrong."

So next day after her beauty parlor appointment, Sadie met me and we went to Tolliver's. The smell of ozone was stronger in the store, like after a thunderstorm. The cabinets were full again with elegant gifts, but there was no time to check them. Tolliver came tottering out of the back room and stood leaning

on the counter for support. He looked paler and more shrunken, even his gloves hung loose on his hands. Sadie, good heart that she is, ran to him. "Mr. Tolliver! You're sick! I'm going to call a doctor. Where's your family? Where do you live? We'll take you home."

Tolliver shook his head feebly. "I live here. I have no family. I don't need a doctor."

"Nonsense! Let me see your tongue," Sadie ordered, just like she used to do with the children when they were little. "Let me feel your head." she made him sit down. "Tsk-tsk! I was right. You have a high fever. Morris, help him out to the car. Give me the keys, Mr. Tolliver. I'll lock up."

He protested, but who can win against my Sadie? We drove him home and Sadie put him to bed in Carl's room—he's away to college. She came downstairs looking very strange and got busy in the kitchen. "Go to work, Morris," she told me. "I'll take care of him." She wouldn't let me help her. She carried the tray with the toast, a soft-boiled egg, and hot milk with butter, her favorite remedy, upstairs by herself.

When I came home after a very busy day because by now the word had got around that I had a spectacular line and the phone was busy with calls from even big-name buyers, Sadie gave me supper, including chicken soup, unusual for a Thursday. She was acting myste-

rious and refused to talk about Tolliver until after I finished my tea and cake. Then she made me sit down in the living room, and she told me, "Mr. Tolliver is very sick. He is going to die."

I jumped out of the chair. "Not here! Get him to a hospital!" I yelled. A perfect stranger to die in your house, you know how you'd feel.

She pushed me back. "Now listen, Morris, and keep quiet. Remember something at least from your Bar Mitzvah. Three things assure your place in Paradise—helping the stranger, tending the sick, and burying the dead. This is a complicated case. You do just like I say and don't ask questions. Upstairs is a hero, a very brave and good man, and he deserves the best you can do for him. Later, when it gets dark so the neighbors won't see, you'll carry him down to the car. I'll go with you and we'll bring him back to the store. There he'll die, and we'll do the rest."

Now I was shocked. My sweet Sadie to be so hard-hearted as to turn a dying person out of the house! But she had an answer. "Wait. There's a reason. When I undressed Tolliver to put him to bed, I saw. He is not a human being. He is very much different from us. That face is a plastic mask. He told me, while he could—"

"What do you mean—while he could?" I shouted. "He's already dead?"

"No, he's now in a coma," she answered. "He has what I suppose we'd call a cancer. He called it something else, but it acts the same. Where he's from—from what I could gather it's deep in the ground in the planet Venus—it's almost an epidemic. But they've got a simple cure for it, which is more than we have, only they need silver to make the cure, and their silver is rarer than by us uranium. Furthermore, they can't change another element into it for some reason. He explained, but I couldn't understand. So he volunteered to come here."

"How? A flying saucer?" The whole story was ridiculous.

"No. They've got what they call teleportation. They put an object in a chamber, and the atoms fall apart, and they re-assemble them where they want the object to be. Tolliver came here a month ago with six companions—they're all dead now—on a mission to get silver. Not to steal it—they have strong ethics—but to get it by trade, and at the same time not to upset Earth economy. So they looked around and decided on the gift business because it's not very essential and yet it makes money."

"Not one word do I believe!" I said. I was sore how calm she said the gift business was like a nothing and all the time families like ours live from it. "If the Venus people are so smart and so ethical, why didn't they send delegates to Wash-

ington to the President? He'd give them all the silver they'd want in exchange for a few secrets. Like this teleportation."

She sighed. "That's just the trouble. They've been watching us for a long time. They don't trust us, or the Russians, or the Chinese, not even the Israelis. They feel that already we're about to destroy this whole planet with what we know already, so why should they hasten the process? Trade on the q.t. was better, they thought."

"So why did they send a sick man?" I asked.

Tears filled Sadie's eyes. "That's why I said he's a hero. Teleportation is fine for dead things, but for living things it shortens the life. Tolliver knew that he was going to die in a year or two anyway, so he volunteered. The others the same, but he was the strongest and lived the longest. They were pioneers. If their mission was successful and they sent back enough silver, more would come from Venus, and they'd open stores and sell for silver. Ceramics they're very good at. You saw."

"But meanwhile what about Tolliver? Why can't we send him back home wherever he came from by the same method?"

"Because it's very painful. No, we'll do like he says. I wrote everything down." She showed me a paper. "About the store—the landlord knows it was only for a month tenancy and the rent's paid. He

says we could have the fixtures and whatever's left in the store." Up to now her voice was steady, but all of a sudden she started crying. "Oh, Morris, if only we could send some silver back with him! All those poor people dying of cancer and we could help!"

You know, one word from my Sadie and I'm on the go. In the next two hours I went from relative to relative, to friends and acquaintances, buying up all the silver they'd give me, paying anything they asked, just to make Sadie happy. They couldn't understand what I wanted the silver for, and I couldn't explain.

When I got back, Tolliver wasn't dead, but he was as good as. He was unconscious, breathing very fast, hot as an oven, when I carried him down. The back room of the store had nothing in it but a big box (like a coffin, I thought) with wires and tubes going every which way out of it like a Rube Goldberg invention into another box alongside of it. By the time we put Tolliver in the box with the silver, he wasn't breathing any more. Out of respect I said Kaddish for him, and we set the dials according to the paper Sadie had. There were symbols, not numbers, on the dials, and one of them, Sadie said, meant Final Return. We turned the handle, and we went out into the store like he said to do.

In a couple of minutes we heard a faint whirr, and the ozone smell

got very strong. The floor shook a little with vibration, and then everything was quiet again. We went into the back room. Everything was gone, including the smaller box. The room was bare.

There's more to the story. That afternoon I had my delivery man disconnect the crystal sconces and take down the drapes. I helped him carry out the fixtures and the two cartons that were left. I unpacked the cartons in my place and found more bowls and vases. I put them in a cabinet in my showroom; they were there only two days before a buyer from Dallas took them at a hundred dollars each. One thing I kept for Sadie: an epergne of violet glass with such finely etched lines for decoration that it almost shone in the dark. You know what Sadie did? She put it in a closet for when my daughter would get married.

It was just as well. About six months later I got a complaint

from Strauss's buyer. She took one of the cachepots for herself and put it outside on her porch for a week. When she touched it then, it crumbled, almost like the spun sugar houses on fancy cakes. A couple of other customers said that after a week of sunlight whatever was exposed to it became very fragile. Tolliver warned me about that, so I passed on the word to the buyers. "This is for show only, in a cabinet with glass doors. Don't let the sunlight hit it."

Sadie, when she heard about how the stuff changed, made me give the epergne to the New Falls Museum. They took it gladly. It's there now on the first floor with a card: GLASS EPERGNE—MODERN. ENGRAVED. ARTIST UNKNOWN. DONATED BY MR. AND MRS. MORRIS GREENSTEIN. Can you picture that? Me, Morris Greenstein, a patron of the arts?