

Selling Everything

*Security depends not so much upon how much you have, as
upon how much you can do without.*

—Joseph Wood Krutch

In 1997, I received a call asking if I would be interested in selling several grand pianos once owned by the televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. At the time, I'd been in the auction business fourteen years, specializing in antiques and fine decorative art. I had founded the company in 1983 in Asheville, North Carolina, but the business had grown and we now worked throughout the Southeast, conducting an average of eight auctions a year.

We were often asked to sell objects said to have been owned by famous people. But the stories that came with them usually turned out to have little substance: "I was always told this desk once belonged to Teddy Roosevelt" or "The person who sold me this rocking chair said it came out of the George Vanderbilt Estate" or, most improbably, "This pocket watch belonged to Benjamin Franklin—it has his initials on the back." The claims for the pianos that once belonged to televangelism's famous couple, however, were real: the pianos were housed at the Bakkers' former headquarters, Heritage USA, near Rock Hill, South Carolina. Several days later, we left Asheville with a truck, car, and a crew of six to evaluate the instruments.

During the three-hour drive, my staff and I traded stories about what we knew—or thought we knew—of the Bakkers' very public life: their four condos in California, the gold plumbing fixtures, their matching Rolls-Royces. Robert, a recent college graduate, said he'd heard that they'd owned an air-conditioned doghouse. We all laughed about Tammy Faye Bakker's reputation for excessive make-up and about the once-popular white T-shirts sporting an explosion of black above the caption, "I Ran into Tammy Faye at the Mall." We imagined what we would do if we suddenly held in our hands the Bakkers' immense wealth.

I enjoyed the banter, but the Bakkers' glaring, public celebration of prosperity was several cultural and theological leaps from the religious training of my childhood—spare Mennonite churches, a cappella singing, and sermons emphasizing humility and service. My

mother, like most Mennonite women of my childhood, wore no make-up or jewelry of any kind.

We were glad we had written directions, as there were no markings for Heritage USA along the road. Heritage USA had been a small city, much larger than Disneyworld, and originally included an amusement park, residences, a campground, TV studios, a golf course, a water park, and miles of roads. As we approached the 2,300-acre property, we saw in the distance the twenty-story hotel tower, a large rectangular stump rising from the otherwise featureless horizon. More than 165,000 donors had each given a thousand dollars toward its construction in return for future free lodging in the hotel. The entrance to the property was two double lanes with a grass median, but no signs gave clues to the history of the place. We stayed on the main road, headed for the hotel tower.

We passed a towered castle with an arcaded first floor, which was the entrance to the golf course and was said to be the home of the world's largest Wendy's restaurant. The parking lot across from the entrance was a field of crumbled asphalt. We saw remnants of the water park: concrete animals and curving blue and white walls. We passed leaning, rusted iron fences, graffiti-decorated walls, and buildings with partially collapsed roofs, small trees growing from their gutters. We stared and pointed like curious children.

At its peak in the mid-1980s, more than six million people visited the complex every year, but it was hard to imagine the noise and congestion of so many visitors to this place, now weedy and rusty. The decline of Heritage USA began in 1987 when the personal life of Jim Bakker and the finances of his empire began to unravel. As if to add heavenly judgment to human frailty, the remnants of hurricane Hugo passed through the area in the fall of 1989, causing great damage. The complex closed soon afterward, eight years before we arrived.

As we approached the hotel tower, we saw it was unfinished; large areas of brick facing had fallen off, one exposed place roughly the shape of Arkansas. Our guide met us at the white-columned entrance to a large reception area, part of a vast complex of shops, studios, offices, and lodging adjacent to the tower. He was a tall, friendly man and greeted us warmly. He told us that visitors were once welcomed here by large chandeliers and gilt metal sconces hung in niches high above the floor. The walls were now lined with boxes and dusty office furniture. After we shook hands, our guide led us to the studio where the Bakkers' *PTL* (Praise the Lord) television programs were produced. Beside the stage rested a white, ten-foot grand piano that bore

no identification but was elaborately decorated with extensive gilt carving. It was the first of seven grand pianos we would find scattered in several buildings.

Our guide then led us to a small chapel, other larger reception areas, and several storage buildings. There we found a Kawai, two Baldwins, a Steinweg (an early Steinway), and two nineteenth-century pianos of unknown origin. As we located each piano, my crew evaluated how difficult each would be to load: how many dollies and piano boards would be needed, how many steps, the heights of the loading docks.

We had been told that one of the grand pianos was a Bösendorfer, and I was eager to confirm that it was available for auction. Bösendorfer pianos have been made in Austria since the early nineteenth century and are renowned for their rich, colorful tones and for the nine extra keys at the lower end of the scale, originally added to the standard eighty-eight keys so that J.S. Bach organ transcriptions could be played. If the Bakkers were collecting pianos, this was surely the crown jewel. I had never before seen one of these magnificent instruments, much less imagined I would one day sell one.

We found the piano in a dim storage room with stacks of chairs and other bulky furniture. We slid the fitted cloth cover off the great piano and opened the hinged top, securing it with the wooden prop. From my earlier career as a woodworker, I recognized the book-matched rosewood veneers, streaked black and deep purple, often a sign of skillful cabinetry. I pulled the piano bench into position and slowly lowered myself onto the tufted black leather seat. Though I'm not a pianist, I wanted to hear the hammers strike the strings and the sounding board magnify the waves of sound. This instrument, with its large turned legs, carved rosewood scrolls, and huge brass casters, had the presence of a grounded, living thing, and I wanted to hear it speak. I played a few major chords, then random minor chords and scales. My hands wandered, inventing a simple tune. My crew watched quietly. The sounds were rich and layered: I could only imagine what music this piano might create in the hands of a skilled pianist. I told the man we would be happy to offer this fine instrument in an upcoming auction.

So it was on a cloudy day in early December, after completing the necessary contract, that our crew loaded Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's great Bösendorfer piano onto our Penske rental truck. We first removed the legs, then wrapped and secured the instrument on a piano board, then slowly rolled our precious eight-hundred-pound

cargo across the loading dock onto our truck, guiding its passage from its previous life to whatever new one lay ahead.

Our guide, eager for us to take everything left in the buildings, asked us to look around to see if there were other things we could offer at auction. He led us down Main Street, a broad indoor pedestrian boulevard, past storefronts and amusements, but all that remained were shells of the structures, recreations of nineteenth-century shops with reproduction cast-iron benches, and dark green streetlights, much like an abandoned movie set. It was a vast illusion. We were witness to the remnants of expansive personal dreams in their worst possible moment, naked, stripped of all pretense, rationale, and use.

The Mennonite boy in me struggled with these expressions of wealth. That little boy might have asked what an amusement park, skating rink, golf course, and the world's largest Wendy's had to do with *church*. Were these things really *needed*?

I kept thinking of those plain white Mennonite farmhouses, the homes of many of my twenty-five aunts and uncles, scattered through Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, the dining rooms of my childhood. Sturdy oak furniture, a faded print of the Last Supper on the wall, ironed and mended napkins and tablecloths, muted homage paid to an inherited pressed-glass bowl, badly chipped. Nothing to call attention to oneself.

On the way to a large storage structure, we were led through a smaller brick building and a large, open room, perhaps converted warehouse space. Scattered stains marked the patched concrete floor, and several round industrial lights with wire grills hung from the high ceiling. The walls were lined with desks separated by plywood dividers. Yellow foam cushions showed through the frayed upholstery of several office chairs. An empty canvas mail buggy rested beside each cubicle. At their peak in the 1980s, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker were seen in more than ten million homes.

This was the money room.

My staff, mostly strong, savvy young men used to loading heavy furniture, talked quietly and nodded toward the adding machines and mail buggies as they gradually understood that great quantities of money had flowed through this place. Perhaps they wondered how it felt to hold a stack of hundred-dollar bills in their hands. Tens of thousands of letters were opened here; as much as a million dollars a week arrived in the mail.

Each desk still held an adding machine. I imagined their staccato tabulations, the stacks of checks and cash growing on each shabby

desk, earnest men and rubber-thumbed women flipping through the piles, counting, mail buggies filled and refilled. This room was not intended to be seen, and now quiet, it had an air of sadness. Our voices and steps echoed lightly off the concrete floor. I wondered where the men and women were now, and how they remembered their work, those who had counted those millions of dollars.

We walked into the adjacent storage building crowded with pallets stacked four and five high; hundreds of boxes and crates sagging from weight and time; brochures, calendars, books, small objects wrapped in plastic, photographs, promotional materials, maps, devotional guides perhaps free with a donation of any size—the residue of a badly lopsided dream. Failed entrepreneurial Christianity. There were thickets of artificial shrubs, rows of gold-painted urns, portable steps covered in purple velvet, easels, spotlights, iron arches, gold-framed mirrors, golf carts with flat tires, and whole municipalities of plastic flowers. In a corner, like a sulking child, sat a forklift, a pool of oil between its tires, as though it had relieved itself.

Like some of the pianos, much of what we saw was ornament, decoration to support the pretense of elegance and authenticity. Everything was covered with the fine silt of abandonment. Only the pianos were suitable for our auctions of fine and decorative arts.

As I stood there surveying the room, I wondered if some of these things might be repaired or salvaged. Perhaps a load or two could be donated to Goodwill, but what of the rest? What would happen to this mountain of stuff? The many props used to sustain this elaborate fiction were now only so much clutter. I imagined an oversized front-end loader sliding mammoth buckets-full into idling dump trucks. What would all this turn into, I wondered, as it loses form in the dark ooze of a landfill, as it mixes with disposable diapers, unfixable outdoor grills, broken toys, and torn plastic shower curtains? How long would it be until the calendars and letterheads are no longer readable?

The waste I saw was unnerving. Lodged in the Mennonite church's denial of the secular world was an inherent rejection of showy collections, mindless purchases, and waste. We were encouraged to be good stewards of all we had been given, materially and spiritually. In making decisions about our life work (the word *career* was not used) we were encouraged not to ask, "What do I want?" but rather, "What needs to be done?" In this culture of my youth, clothes, shoes, tools, appliances, food, vehicles, furniture, buildings, lumber, and land were repaired, adapted, reused. Even relationships were rarely discarded: divorce was rare.

From these values grew my pre-industrial understanding of need. If my old, worn shovel was bent beyond repair, and if I could not find a good used shovel, I would purchase a new one. It must be well made of heavy gauge steel, balanced, with a replaceable handle of ash or hickory, and reinforced where the handle joins the blade. And I would buy only one shovel, even if they were on sale: no promiscuous, mindless consumerism for me.

I was aware that my decision to become an auctioneer stood in some opposition to this lean aesthetic, for I regularly dealt with excess—museums with deaccessioned property, people scaling down, those who had stockpiled against imagined future needs, or those selling lifetime collections of silver or paintings they could no longer use or enjoy. People who said, staring at a painting now stored in their garage, “I thought I liked this when I bought it twenty years ago,” or retired couples living in ten-room houses who rented storage facilities because they “have nowhere to put anything.” Sometimes I wanted to ask why they owned so many things; couldn’t their lives be full and happy with a few well-chosen objects? Though often tempted, I never asked any clients this question.

Several years earlier, I’d visited an elderly couple in Tennessee who’d invited me to come and look at their antiques; they might want to have an auction. “There’s quite a bit here to look at,” the man said when he called. A few days later, when I drove down their long gravel lane past unpainted sheds, weathered barns, and an old chicken coop, I realized I was driving through their collections. It was a warm summer day; blue morning glories bloomed on several weathered fence posts. As I drove up to the small brick ranch house, the couple waved from the porch; the man looked to be in his eighties and stood slanted against a porch post, while his wife wore a white visor and leaned with both hands on an aluminum walker. He walked down the steps to greet me, saying he would be happy to show me around. We headed back down the lane, past several old boats perched at slight angles on their rusty trailers, a lawnmower protected by an overturned washtub.

The first building was full of shutters, beds, iron railings, doors, wooden columns, and other architectural elements. A large barn was stacked with disassembled log cabins, the logs on or near the ground already rotting. One building was full of antique furniture and furniture parts. A small shed was stacked with boxes of old bottles and glassware. A long cinder-block building was crowded with farm machinery, garden tractors and attachments—all, I was told, “needing

work.” We looked into a long shed, open at one end, to see an incongruous pile of antique car and buggy parts, wooden steering wheels, windshields, differentials, spoked wheels, an old double car seat holding a leaning stack of old hubcaps—everything slowly sagging into the dirt floor. Even in daylight, the contents of these six buildings could only be examined by poking the beam of a strong flashlight through the dusty air and spiderwebs.

After an hour, we walked back to the porch of the house. She sat on the seat of her walker, he in a rocking chair, and I on a shaky glider. A very old black dog lay on the porch, rarely moving.

“You sure have collected a lot of stuff,” I began.

I set aside my personal convictions about a lean and thoughtful lifestyle. This was not the time or place for preaching. I needed things to sell, and here was a great assemblage of sellable merchandise. I imagined the contents of all the buildings spread over several acres, cars and trucks parked into the distance on auction day. My work as an auctioneer was to encourage people to buy things. I told myself this was redistributing what already existed, not promoting pointless consumerism of new gadgets.

“I don’t know how it got to be so much,” the woman replied. “We just bought things we liked, but I guess we liked a lot of things,” she said, smiling brightly.

“A lot of this stuff you see here I bought to fix up, and I have fixed up some things and sold them,” the man added, proud of his skill and industry.

“He is right handy, you know,” the woman confirmed, leaning her head toward him.

“Your collections would make a great auction,” I declared. “But instead of moving everything, I think it would be better to have an auction right here. It would draw a big crowd and there would be plenty of room to spread things out.”

The woman looked at her husband. He, standing now, his hands in his pockets, stared at the ground, then slowly surveyed the sheds and buildings. I watched his eyes as he raised his head to view the beautiful hills of East Tennessee in the distance.

“Well, we have talked a lot about having a sale since we called you, and we just don’t think we’re ready to do that,” he said quietly. “When we do, we’re planning to call you. But for now, I think we’re going to hang on to things for a while.” The woman nodded in agreement. They exchanged quick glances of affirmation.

I realized that their many years of contented marriage, the barns and sheds filled with the things that had tempted them, and the blue and gray hills in the distance were all connected. Perhaps they imagined the disruption if the doors of the sheds were opened and the furniture, tools, old bottles, car parts, and boxes of hardware were suddenly laid in rows in the bright sunshine, people picking over the piles, pointing out rust and other flaws. Perhaps they felt the ease of continuity: this place, this comfort, their lives together. I understood that ownership, for them, was more complex than the contents of the sheds and barns. I worked with many clients whose possessions were deeply secured to their individual or collective sense of self and place.

From where does the need to accumulate things arise? I have it too. It began edging into my life when I first began going to auctions. One piece of pottery, one basket, and one handmade chair at a time, I forsook my early mistrust of ownership. As the shelves filled, I created rationales to justify new acquisitions. "I don't have a piece of pottery with this mark" or "This basket was probably made in Virginia before 1900" or the best rationale, the one that covered almost everything I bought: "I'm helping preserve the material culture of the region."

Now there was joy and excitement in lining thirty pieces of pottery in rows on the dining room table to compare clay bodies, glazes, forms, and decorating techniques. I had never been a potter, but I imagined digging the clay, turning the wet clay to create a jar or vase, pitching slabs of wood into the groundhog kiln, seeing the red and yellow heat of the firing, and feeling the growing expectation of opening the still warm kiln. Had the planets aligned to create a jar of great form and color?

Someone could now ask me why I needed twenty pieces of pottery by the same maker.

Three weeks after we unloaded the pianos from Heritage USA, I traveled to Ocala, Florida, with a crew of seven and two large rental trucks. The blurry photographs the Estate had sent promised stained-glass lamps, painted furniture, samplers, stacks of Shaker pantry boxes, Staffordshire figures, and rooms of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American furniture for us to offer at auction. When we drove up to the 1950s split-level brick home, we saw scruffy palm trees, hibiscus, and sprawling night-blooming cereus scattered in the unkempt yard.

We entered through a back door that opened into the kitchen. The floor was covered with an uneven tide of debris, broken glass, news-

papers, food containers, bags of garbage, old telephone books, brooms and mops, mounds of clothing, moldy rugs, shoes, broken electric can openers, and blenders. It crunched under our feet as we picked our way across the rubble. The woman showing us through the house, the executor of the estate, warned us to not open any of the three refrigerators, for she felt they might be the source of the strong odor that had greeted us. She needn't have worried; there was no chance we would touch a refrigerator door. We did put on masks and retrieved a flat shovel from the truck to clear some of the broken glass.

Most of the house was inaccessible. Furniture, boxes, lamps, bookcases, and fully loaded china cabinets were stacked against doors and had to be emptied and moved to gain entrance to adjoining rooms. Despite the terrible state of the house, we could see many sellable things under the debris: framed samplers, botanical prints, an inlaid Southern sideboard, coin silver mint julep cups. We decided to stay and sort through the wreckage; we wanted to take back enough merchandise to at least cover our expenses.

After walking through what we could of the first floor, I approached the stairs to the upper level, three bedrooms and a bath. The executor stopped me and said we didn't need to go upstairs; there was nothing there for us: a family member was living in two of the rooms, but he was away at work during the day. I could not imagine anyone living in this place.

The owner of the property was deceased, and the executor told us to take what we could sell and dispose of the rest. We ordered a thirty-foot Dumpster, which was promptly delivered and parked in the driveway. We began at the front of the house. After half an hour of moving furniture and restacking piles, we were able to open the front door and begin our work. Two of our staff filled five-gallon buckets, two ran relays to the Dumpster to empty the buckets—unopened junk mail from the 1950s, used tissues, pillows whose foam-rubber cushions had turned to sticky yellow powder, broken dishes, old clothing, a rubber toy melted into a scaly, shapeless mass and stuck to a glass surface.

Our efforts yielded enough sellable merchandise to keep us digging: a laminated rosewood sofa, a fine Russian samovar, art deco floor lamps. In our work, there was always some excitement in finding a valuable piece, regardless of the context. By noon of the first day we had worked our way through half of the living room, but the prospect of lunch presented new problems. We were far too dirty to enter any restaurant; there was nowhere in or near the house we could sit to eat; besides, we couldn't imagine getting clean enough to hold food in

our hands. Finally we sent someone to get take-out. He brought back lunch, rolls of clean paper towels, and great quantities of disinfectant. The cleanest places we could find to eat were in our trucks, where we sat with doors and windows open to reduce the midday heat. When we needed restrooms, we drove to the nearest McDonald's.

I imagined a conversation with the owner of this house, the person who had been unable to throw away a drugstore advertisement from 1956 or a plastic canopy that had gripped six cans of Diet Coke, the person who could not sort or rank what surrounded her. Would I seek an explanation, or could I, without judgment, allow her to be as she was, in this dense underbrush of trash? Maybe she did not see it, the accumulation having arisen of its own volition, a slow, unnoticed growth around her.

I wondered what would be left for people to sort through when I die. If I knew when it was all going to end, I could slowly reduce my earthly possessions down to a single, neat box, or possibly to nothing, but without this knowledge, what bits and pieces of my life should I keep near me as I grow older? How would I learn to let go?

I thought of a wealthy ninety-three-year-old client I had worked with recently. When the truck came from Habitat for Humanity to take all her possessions except four boxes and a few hangers of clothing, she opened the front door and positioned herself against it, holding the door open with her slight body. As the pieces were carried past her, she, smiling, made small movements with her right hand, guiding them through the doorway and out of her life. "You know," she explained, "the only things of any value to me are my family and friends; all these other things can just go to other people. At the end I want to come out even."

Maybe that's what I should work toward, coming out even.

Several years later, in 2003, I sold all my carefully gathered collections: pottery, baskets, paintings, books, Oriental carpets, Southern furniture, and folk art indigenous to Western North Carolina. I had lived a parallel life, selling things for others while buying things for my own collection, but never mixing the two.

A difficult divorce changed my life. The carefully vetted furniture, fine examples of regional pottery, and Southern Appalachian folk art that I'd once valued so deeply now had a diminished presence. It all seemed slightly suspect. What could I count on? It now seemed cumbersome and irrelevant to surround myself with hundreds of objects,

no matter how carefully chosen or how incomplete my intended research. The excitement of the pursuit of each new bit of material culture had lost its vitality, as had the exploration of the social and cultural context which gave rise to each piece.

Few of us choose to own nothing, and rarely do we read of someone who sells all their possessions and gives the proceeds to the poor, but I was gradually tempted by the idea of selling everything I owned. I had imagined enjoying all of it in my old age—the Samuel Yellin ironwork, the fine leather-bound books, the Persian carpets—but maybe this was the time to clean house. Another letting go, the latest in a long series. The decision to sell everything was not a sudden revelation, more the slow arrival of clarity. I imagined a brightness to it, perhaps an entrance.

So I tested myself. I took a favorite painting off a wall in my house and put it in storage in our auction facility. How did that feel? Well, it felt fine. A few days later, two of my favorite pieces of pottery left the blush of a spotlight and the shelf that had been their home and joined the painting in storage. This produced no adverse side effects. The slight flow from my house into storage became a steady stream. I paused many times as I watched myself packing and sorting, remembering the details of each piece, wondering if I would regret this decision. A few months later, I sold everything I had collected, except a single painting and a lamp. I did so at one of my own auctions, often explaining the history of an object, why I felt it might be important, and telling stories of where I'd originally found the pieces.

As was always the case at auctions, some pieces brought more than expected, some less. I prepared the catalog for the auction with care, including descriptive details and provenance when possible. The auction was a relaxed affair: I had dealt with my anxieties several months earlier and was happy that my collection was well received.

My two-story Tudor-style house, perched on a steep yard on Kimberly Avenue in Asheville, was now bare of all but very basic essentials. Several rooms echoed as I walked through. I felt lighter, more flexible, less obligated. If beauty was part of what I was after in assembling these collections, it would now need to be found in other venues. Had these objects been a source of comfort to me, tangible evidence of skill and intent? I suffered no feeling of loss after they were gone, and I never regretted my decision to sell my collection.

All the rows of books, pottery, and carvings, the walls of prints and paintings, the stacks of ephemera and quilts, were statements to myself and to the world as to who I was and how I wished to be

seen and understood; perhaps I was a gatherer, student, and admirer of regional history and industry. Maybe I wished for my collection to suggest connoisseurship, skill in understanding and evaluating objects. But these personal icons, now silent in boxes, may also have suggested what I was otherwise unable or unwilling to say about myself, messages I am unable to identify. What signals would my empty house give the world? That I was poor? That I was preparing to die? No, if someone had asked, I would have said simply that I had changed.

I embraced the new emptiness. I was back where I began, a spare, undecorated, Mennonite lifestyle, and although I had not investigated it, my embrace probably lacked most if not all the attending theology. Culturally, I was still a Mennonite, somewhat reborn.

We combined six of the seven pianos from Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Heritage USA with the pieces we salvaged from the impacted house in Ocala, and prepared them for the auction preview. We cleaned and polished what we could, then blended them with fine paintings, silver, porcelains, and Oriental rugs from other estates. We decorated walls and corners as parts of rooms—venues suggesting that this rug went well with this chest and this painting. Some displays were organized by period, late eighteenth-century British, or by color, olive-green carpet with a painting and china of the same palette. In our galleries with track lighting playing on carved surfaces, the pieces looked as good as we could make them, gleaming and inviting, encouraging people to own them, blurring the distinction between need and want.

But the seventh piano, the Bösendorfer, was displayed behind the eight-foot glass wall at the front of the Haywood Park Trade Mart, part of a downtown indoor arcade where we housed our business at the time. We trained several spotlights on its fine, rich surfaces. It was resplendent.

One day, as I walked by the piano, a woman tapped on the door, indicating she wished to speak with someone. She looked to be in her forties and wore sandals and pale blue socks. I opened the door and asked if I could be of any help.

"I've come by several times, but not when anyone was here," she said slowly. "I'm sure you know how rare your Bösendorfer piano is." Her eyes bounced in its direction. She told me she was a professional pianist and wondered if there was any chance she could play the piano for a few minutes. Her request was clear and unapologetic.

I told her the piano was slightly out of tune, but that she was welcome to play it. “People are always invited to play instruments during our previews, and we could call this an early preview,” I told her.

She said she didn’t need to own the Bösendorfer and would not be bidding on it when it came up at auction. “I hope that is okay. It would mean a great deal to me if I could just play it for a short while,” she said quietly.

I reassured her that this was fine, inviting her in and closing the door behind her. We walked toward the piano together. As she slowly circled it, her hand trailed on the rosewood surface, marking it, perhaps for a few moments, as hers. She sat down slowly, adjusting the height of the seat. Once she was comfortable, I excused myself to give her more privacy.

Four of us were working that day in an adjacent room, examining a collection of silver, writing catalog copy, planning trips for the following week. First she played part of a familiar Chopin nocturne, then a few quick portions of a Bach piece. I walked to the doorway and glanced out at her. She played a few other fragments I didn’t recognize, paused a bit, exhaled a long sigh, and then began her concert. In my memory it was a piece by Brahms.

Slowly, like mounting waves, the sound cascaded and rolled through the room. It was the ocean. It was the wind groaning against rock cliffs. It was the whoosh of wings as five hundred birds flew by. It was a conversation, then an argument, between two lovers. We all gradually stopped working, able only to listen, our work no longer urgent.

There was a long silence when she finished fifteen minutes later. Then Robert began clapping softly. He had no particular interest in classical music—his tastes tended more toward the latest rock music—but he recognized the skill and devotion of our guest, as we all did. I went out to open the door for her. She was walking slowly toward me, weeping, and waved her hand slightly in thanks.

When the Bösendorfer came up for auction several weeks later, it was purchased by a local physician who wanted a first-rate piano for his home. He prevailed over several phone bidders in the U.S. and Europe and paid more than forty-two thousand dollars, a fair price at the time. The great rosewood piano still rests quietly in the music room of his spacious home, where he occasionally plays a few old jazz tunes for himself.