

The Going Rate of a Cash Cow¹

There are two kinds of people who attend the *Antiques Roadshow*. The first arrive bearing family heirlooms, old rocking chairs and wooden spindles, painted mirrors and civil war swords swung by great-great-grandfathers a hundred and fifty years before. These people come for the stories. They're eager to know the value of their items, but when all appraisals are said and done, they rarely sell. The second group is made of people like me. For us, the goal is simple: we want to make money.

According to Marsha Bemko, the show's Executive Producer, the people like me are the minority. "I could tell you handfuls of stories where people sell," she said in a recent interview, "but no matter what the item's worth, they usually don't." Standing inside the Albuquerque Convention Center, I find this hard to believe. The room is abuzz with excitement— *I hope you win big, I hope you win big, good luck, good luck, I'm sure that one's a winner* — as if we're all in line for a new casino, eagerly awaiting the doors to open and the money-making to begin. And like a casino, most of the people here are white-haired, though there's a slew of middle-agers, a handful of kids. The two behind me are Daughters of the American Revolution. The couple in front, retired weapons engineers from Los Alamos. Very few people are my age—early thirties—and no one else is alone.

The last time the *Roadshow* came to Albuquerque was in 2002, and when the eight-city route was announced, some 14,000 vied for the 3,000 available tickets. And now those 3,000 have come with their comfortable

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shoes and folding chairs, and it's clear from the start: everyone is more prepared than me. Those with large items push hand-trucks or small wagons. Others' arms are full of tote bags and bubble wrap. Everyone's items are hidden away, tucked into boxes, covered in plastic, as if they want to make sure their treasures stay not only safe, but buried. Even the paintings, which are hard to disguise, are draped with sheets, turned inward against the holders' sides.

My painting is glaringly exposed. I have no hand truck. No wagon. Without the frame the painting is 30x42 inches large. With the frame, it is 40x52, much larger than your average flat screen television, and three times bigger than any box I could find around the house. Not knowing what else to do, I'd covered the corners in cardboard triangles, attached the triangles to the painting with pieces of twine. Where most people glide through the line gracefully, I am twisting and tugging and sliding. Where they look unruffled, I am damp with sweat. At one point, I set the painting on top of my foot and walk, stiff-legged, one staggering step at a time—"Be careful not to put your knee through that canvas!" a woman calls out. She is one of the wagonneers, and her two paintings are meticulously packed, cushioned by a fleece blanket, a peek of blue tape to protect the glass. Another woman shakes her head, "Girl," she says, "what were you thinking?" I give up trying to keep the painting aloft. I set it on the ground and slide.

When I hit a crack in the cement, I cringe. This is not just a painting I carry; it is a walking price tag, my ticket to a better future. "Well," a man jokes, "at least we know who to mug in the parking lot."

Around him, everyone laughs, and I do my best to grin, but inside, my stomach is in knots. What these people don't know is how much I need this money. I have nine thousand dollars charged on my credit card. Almost twenty thousand in student loans. My 10-month teaching contract at the University has recently come to an end, and no one's certain whether the

budget will have room for me in the Fall. For the last month, I've lain in bed assessing and re-assessing my dwindling finances, crossing my fingers that I've somehow miscalculated my worth. In another month, I may not be able to pay my rent.

Then this painting fell into my lap like some long-awaited gift for my optimism and hard work, and here in line, I'm convinced: Everything is about to change.

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If you've ever watched the *Antiques Roadshow*, you'll know the producers are more interested in stories than anything else: the woman who bought a framed poster at Goodwill only to discover another more valuable piece tucked inside; the man with the \$15,000 doll salvaged from the county dump. My wife, Randi, has been a fan of the show for years. She's always wanted to be one of those people who stepped into some forgotten attic or zeroed in on an unseen treasure at a garage sale. Growing up, she and her mother would wake early on city-junk days and prowl the neighborhood, "dumpster diving" for items they could turn into a quick buck. They learned very quickly what couch could be acquired and re-sold for a hundred dollars, what lampshade was worth nothing, and what obscure knick-knack might garner extra cash at the local flea market. For her, finding something of significance was only a matter of time. For me, it was nothing short of a miracle.

The painting used to hang in a library on the third floor of the Humanities building where I work. That library is small, cave-like with Formica-topped tables purchased in the seventies and walls covered in books. Once, this place was a useful hub – tucked into back corners are ancient computers and forgotten record players, stained coffee pots and chipped mugs—but for the last ten years, it's become a locked fortress, only to be opened for class use and dissertation defenses. A few months ago, the

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English department acquired its first surplus since the recession, and they had two choices: give people raises or renovate the space.

I was not involved in the renovation process or the decision to have it done. I work as a Term Lecturer, which is a new position at the University. Term lecturers teach the same course load as regular lecturers, but for roughly \$15,000 less per year. Many of us are fresh out of graduate school and desperate for a job in our fields, and in that way, we're lucky to have been chosen. Unlike most of our peers who work as adjunct instructors, term lecturers have access to health care and a set paycheck for the rest of the school year. We're also considered full-time faculty, but we don't have voting rights, and we aren't allowed to attend faculty meetings. We are also never certain whether or not our contracts will be renewed, so for two months during the summer, we wait, fingers crossed and hoping. Which is why I didn't know about the library renovation until the day I saw a friend walking down the hallway, his hands heavy with vinyl he scored from the renovation discards.

"Bill Cosby stand-up!" he said, a sloppy grin on his face. "Totally unopened!"

I rounded the corner, and a handful of graduate students were rifling through old records and leather-bound books. There were slides of ancient Greek buildings, VHS tapes of early-American plays, filing folders full of materials for courses taught in the 1980s. Some professor, at one point in time, must have collected owl portraits because three or four giant prints took over one corner of the room, and it was there, tucked behind the birds, that I first spied the painting.

I'd like to say I saw the gold-gilded frame that spoke of European museums or expansive mansions and knew instantly the way the people in stories know instantly that the thing was important, but that first afternoon, my eyes skimmed right passed it. I filtered through the books and left

empty-handed. The same could not be said of Randi. She took two steps into the room and went right towards it.

“Look at this!” she said. She moved the owl portraits aside, and I saw—well, I saw cows. Three in the foreground. Three in the background. In the distance, beneath a tree, lounged several more. Most of the cows laze about the grass; the one in the foreground has its head raised to stare at the viewer. Together, they graze on a rolling hillside, looking the kind of dull-brown you expect from 19th century cows. “Isn’t it something?” Randi said.

“It’s something, all right,” I replied. I did not share in her excitement. Over the last six years, Randi’s beeline towards discarded objects had turned into chairs she meant to, but never did refinish and two-by-fours that might have become a raised flowerbed. Once upon a time, we’d lived in a house with a basement and a backyard and space for such items to accumulate, but we’d recently moved back to New Mexico after a year in Indiana, and we were renting a room in a shared house. Most of our items were still in a Bloomington storage shed. That morning, we’d deflated an air mattress to access our clothes, and this painting would hardly fit into our car, let alone a cramped bedroom.

But Randi was smitten. She convinced me to help her carry the painting into my office where we propped it upon my paper-laden desk. At first, I couldn’t help but laugh: the painting was bigger than the desk’s surface, bigger than the chalkboard that was already too big for the office, which was too small for the four lecturers who’d been squeezed inside it. The wall was pockmarked from pushpins and stray bits of tape, and the work of art was so out of place, so in need of low-lit lighting and expansive wall, that it should have looked absurd. But maybe it was the afternoon light or maybe the strangeness of the thing inside my dilapidated office, but Randi and I stood, speechless, staring into something outside our present state of

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financial worry, outside this building and this department and this pot-hole covered road that had become our lives, and it was only then that I understood what Randi had known in an instant: this painting had value.

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Here is what you should know about Randi: she is a tenacious researcher. Once, in a 200-level English course, she became so absorbed in understanding an obscure poet that she scoured the entire library for every text and article ever written about the man and wrote a paper worthy of a literary Ph.D. She's plagued by a fear of not knowing, which is exacerbated by a fear of looking stupid. Both are impossibilities. My wife is beautiful and brilliant (and not just to me). She bears the facial features of her Irish-Cherokee roots—dark hair, pale skin, blue eyes that sometimes shift color according to the weather, silver when a storm is approaching, green when the day is warm and rich. She has an affinity for patterns and numbers, a depth of thought that can consume her for hours. There's a reason she earned her bachelors in English Philosophy and a reason she's gifted artist, painting murals, drafting graphic novels, publishing short stories in magazines most writers only dream of.

Oddly enough, it's these same reasons that sent Randi to graduate school then back again: the structure of that kind of life didn't allow her to sink her teeth into anything. It expected her to call her writing "good enough," which went against her need to do only the things she could do wholeheartedly. When her mother was sent to Holland for work, and Randi quit her program to accompany her. (Her flight was included, her housing was included—how could she turn the opportunity down?) I returned to New Mexico, and when she met me three months later, she had one question on her mind and one question only: how could she live a life like the one she'd lived in Europe, waking and writing, biking and writing, living her life for her art? It was at this point, two weeks after her return, that we found the

painting. And so, for Randi, the thing was a message from the gods: see, the gods seemed to be saying, you can make a living creating things like this.

That afternoon, Randi spent hours down the Internet spiral, and it was well after midnight before she made her first breakthrough. I heard her cries from the living room and rushed into the bedroom where she pointed at her computer screen. "I knew he was real!" she said, and sure enough, there it was: the same squiggle of line from the bottom of the canvas. The cursive 'E,' the lower-case 'g,' the sprawl of letters that followed a 'C.' Not Champagne, like we'd first thought. Not Champion. But Champney. Edwin Graves Champney.

Randi searched auction sites and other references to Champney paintings sold within the last dozen or so years. Most of these sites are pay sites: \$29.95 for a monthly subscription, \$300.00 for the year. Randi found one with a \$20 daily rate and hit upon the information we were seeking: A watercolor that sold for \$1,400. A few oil paintings, including one with a brown cow similar to the ones in our painting sold for roughly \$2,000 apiece. Each of these works was smaller than ours. A sheet of paper compared to our billboard. And here is what I didn't know then, but I learned very quickly: in the world of art, a watercolor does not garner the same selling price as an oil painting, and even though one would think size doesn't matter, when it comes to oil paintings, it usually does.

Randi and I looked at each other. If these works were worth two thousand dollars, our painting had to be worth more. \$3,000. \$4,000. Maybe even \$5,000. And the thing was sitting on my desk. In my shared office.

"We have to get it," I said. Or maybe Randi said it. Or maybe we both thought it but didn't say a word. Either way, we were overwhelmed with a panic I recognize now as excitement. It wasn't that we thought the

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painting would *actually* be stolen—after all, it had sat in a room of giveaways for over a week and no one had claimed it—but our need to have it with us, where we could see it and touch it and keep it safe, was compulsive and irrational, and so, we crept out the door and into our car and drove the twenty minutes across town, pulling onto the campus grounds and underneath the building (even though this is definitely not allowed), and we were up the stairs and carting the painting down again, quick as thieves.

“If anyone sees us...” I said, and I imagined what we’d look like to someone passing by: two girls carting away a gold-gilded painting in the dead of the night. The thought of this sent us into a fit of nervous giggles.

The entire drive back, the freeway was empty. I kept glancing in my rear view mirror, expecting to see a cop pull onto the road behind us. I have to admit, even now, I cannot get over the feeling that—although the painting was up for grabs, although no law was broken and no rule was breached—we’d gotten away with something.

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In line for the *Roadshow*, people cannot stop talking about the cows. *I love your cows. Oh, those cows! What weighs more: this painting or a cow?* Having grown up in an agricultural community, cows have been a backdrop of my life for as long as I can remember. In grade school, my best friend, a girl who lived on a dairy farm, brought her heifer in to be blessed during the St. Francis de Assisi Catholic School mass. My college dormmate, a born-and-raised Los Angelina, confessed that she didn’t know brown cows existed (on the commercials they were always black-and-white). In my adult days, my interest in cows became political, considerations about methane gas and air pollution, choices between USDA-certified or grass-fed beef. More recently, my jokes about cows have come to revolve around “cash cows,” those one-go projects that might bring in huge chunks of money – the sci-fi romance novel or pilot television episode that could fund my writing career.

The joke, of course, that I never expected a cash cow to arrive in the actual shape of, well, cows.

Here in line, those Herefords take center stage. People hold their knees and lean forward to get a better look. They talk about the cows as if I'm the wall holding up the painting and they're inside an echoing gallery. *They are so peaceful, those cows, so serene. I could stare at those cows all day. I've always wanted a painting of cows. Don't you think those cows would look amazing in my living room?*

I catch sight of a camera from two switchbacks down. The woman has dark brown hair, a round, sun-burnished face. I hold the painting towards the lens and grin. It is an instinct, this posing, rooted in me from childhood. Someone raises a camera, and you have two choices: to shrink away or ham it up. I'm Filipino-American; I always opt for the ham.

"You're going to be on the show," the woman says. "I want to prove to my friends that I saw you." This seems to be a sentiment everyone agrees upon. This painting is something. I will be on television. I'd been in such a rush that morning I hadn't bothered to fix my hair, and I feel it coming out of my ponytail in messy tufts. My jeans are too big. There's a tear in my button-up top. In the haste to prepare the painting, I'd forgotten about this portion of the ordeal and wish I'd remembered to wash my face.

As a side note, I've always wanted to be on a reality television show. Once, I'd even made it a New Year's Resolution because I was looking for an adventure and my life had been unfulfilling. Instead, I'd opted for a graduate program, but the desire for this odd version of fame hadn't gone away, appearing whenever I caught an episode of *The Amazing Race* or scored tickets for *The Price is Right*. The *Antiques Roadshow* had never been on my television radar, but now it sat before me, blinking from the center of the reality-show crosshairs. Around us, screens project clips from

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past *Roadshows*, and I imagine myself and my painting displayed alongside them.

At one point, a gray-haired woman stands from her wheelchair and hands me a business card for a Santa Fe gallery. "Let me know if you're interested in selling those cows," she says. "I'm interested in buying them."

And the more those people see, the more I see. Other people have paintings, too, and I watch them glance from mine to theirs and watch their objects drop in value right before their eyes. They cannot hide their disappointment, but this doesn't stop them from wishing me luck. As if appraisals have anything to do with luck. As if the value were rising or falling with each step and not already existing "as is."

That's the funny thing about this line. While we're in it, we might be millionaires. We might be carrying the next best thing: the new roof, the trip to Maui, the sports car we've always wanted but never believed we could afford. The slot machine wheels are spinning and spinning, and we're all watching those blazing 7's, hoping they'll line up.

Only, there is no motion. There is no gamble. Each of us knows that these values are already fixed. Still, we traverse this line, hoping together.

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For a solid month, Randi devoted her time to understanding and getting to know Edwin Graves Champney. She had Champney's journals sent over from the Smithsonian and spent days scouring microfilm, hoping to find a mention of this particular work. She learned that a painting's value increased with knowledge. Buyers, it seemed, were as interested in a work's history as in the object itself—why it was created, how and when it changed hands (and to and from whom). Bit by bit, Randi put the puzzle pieces into place.

Edwin Graves Champney fought in the Civil War as a soldier and sketch artist. He studied painting in Europe alongside Francis David Millet

and Otto Grundmann, friends who later visited him in the United States. In his older days, he worked on the famous Trinity Chapel with John La Farge and taught art at the Boston School of Fine Arts. As far as Randi could tell, the painting was the largest of his on record, created at the end of his career in 1884. Despite all this new knowledge, she had no idea how the cows wound up in the Southwest. "Once I learn that," Randi said, "the value could so much as double."

The month of May came to an end, and we spent June camping in various sites across New Mexico, Arizona, and later California, where much of my family lives. Along the way, we told the story of the painting to anyone who would listen, and I'm not sure how it happened, but the more we told, the more the reality of the painting transformed into a full-fledged fantasy. Anyone who has ever purchased a lottery ticket knows the way these fantasies go. As soon as the possibility of more arises, it grows, and with its growth comes the dreams of what might happen next, what one might *do* next, and somewhere along our journey, we found ourselves wondering whether the painting were worth \$10,000? \$50,000? Possibly more.

By the time we returned home, the dreams of money became dreams of a house. I am 33 years old. Randi is 28. We've been married for three years, and we want to start a family, but it's difficult to think of raising children when the only thing certain about our future is the increasing size of our debt. The painting, however, had effectively cracked that future open. We found ourselves stopping at "For Sale" signs. Randi learned to build adobe bricks and wire electricity. Whatever that painting was worth, we knew we could begin meagerly. If we could find a plot of land, a small house with good bones. We just needed help getting started. We could work hard to create the rest.

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One day, on a whim, Randi drove out to Tijeras, a small town outside of Albuquerque, to write in her favorite coffee shop, a place that combined the usual coffee fare with a gallery space for local artists. She found the door locked, and the building abandoned. A sign said, "For the last twenty-five years, we've given it our best shot." It left a number in case anyone was willing to give it theirs.

We drove out to the property together on a Sunday. The coffee shop was a converted adobe off Route 66. It had a sloping yard and a small stream. Flower planters sat empty beneath the windows. A garden bed stretched along two sides of the building where herbs grew amidst budding weeds. It was difficult to see inside, but we could tell the space was bigger than any we'd considered, and though we loved the house, it was the grounds that appealed to us most. Nearly an acre of land. An old shed that looked to be a hundred years old. We could build a chicken coop, maybe have a horse and a goat because Randi wanted a horse and a goat, and I wanted the abundance a place like this promised.

After we'd wandered the grounds, we sat on a bench facing the building and tried to imagine what our life might look like.

"Close your eyes," Randi said. "What can you see?"

I tried to picture the house and the kids and all of the rest, but all I could see was the painting. The cows. Up until this point, the fantasies had been just that: fantasies. Idle talk. But staring at the house and the land, the *realness* of it was overwhelming. I said, "I can't imagine this world until I know what the painting is worth."

Randi's face dropped. My deflated state had deflated hers, too.

I said, "I can't imagine a future unless I know that future is possible."

Randi picked the cuticle of her thumb, and I saw the bead of blood before she wiped it on her jeans. Her eyes followed the line of the pitched roof. "All my life," she said, "I've been striving for things people said I could

never have. I wanted to leave Oklahoma. I did. I wanted a horse farm. I had one. I've always imagined the thing first then made it happen."

But Randi had imagined these things and gone after them, and she'd lost the horse farm, been homeless in Albuquerque, and I didn't want to strive for something that only put us further into the hole. But still, still. I could not escape the want. For I wanted this life. More than this, I wanted to be *able* to want it.

And I never meant for it to happen, but sitting there, listening to Randi talk about her hopes for our future, I let that future in.

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At the end of the first line, you're given two tickets, one for each of your items, which you'll then take to the different lines. My other item is a set of Gregorian chant pages that are a family heirloom passed down to my roommate from her grandfather. I get a ticket for "Books and Manuscripts" and "Drawings and Paintings." I opt for "Drawings and Paintings" first.

This line is slow going. It's one-tenth the size of the one outside, but it takes nearly as long to get through it. In here, the hum of people is different, too, more spread out and less excited. The hopeful energy from the outer line has mellowed into understanding as one-by-one, the objects are appraised and reality is allowed to return.

The man behind me is from Farmington. He carries a landscape of the California redwoods painted by his grandfather, and we can both tell it was a painting of learning and leisure more than one of commodity. As he and I traverse the line, his wife takes their other items into the other, shorter lines – the drums to the "Asian Artifacts," the small rocking chair to "Furniture," the Civil War bible to "Books and Manuscripts." She returns with their values (\$50-\$75, \$200-\$300, sentimental value only) and their stories (A Chinese drum used in celebrations, a child's rocking chair that needs to be refurbished, a commonplace sighting at these *Roadshows*), and during each

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telling, they try and hide their disappointment. Though she's talking to her husband, the wife's eyes cannot help but follow the cows as I shift them around. Up until this point, everyone has kept their distance, but when we round a curve, she moves to touch the canvas and stops.

She looks at me, and here is the strange thing. I can see the want in her eyes grow as one by one she reports on her items' results. And the more disappointed she is, the more she seems to want to touch the canvas. As if the value of an item is like a lucky charm, which can be rubbed off and absorbed through the hands. By now, the strings have slid off the corners and the cardboard is barely attached. I slide it along with the utmost care. "You want me to help put it back together?" the wife asks.

"Thanks," I say, "but we're almost there."

A *Roadshow* employee beckons me forward.

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In the end, it was supposed to have been Randi who took the painting to the *Roadshow*. It was supposed to have been Randi because it was Randi's painting, Randi's vision. It was Randi who spent the days researching the painting's origins, Randi who knew this world of junk and treasures. But I'd been offered a much-needed summer class and a friend was taking a road trip through Indiana, where Randi could rent a U-Haul and return with the rest of our things. Financially, it was the best way to go, so it was I who woke that Saturday morning, who packed the painting and hauled the object downtown.

The night before, I went onto YouTube and searched "*Antiques Roadshow* paintings." I watched a man appraise a 19th century landscape that looked similar to ours. It also contained a small herd of cows, but unlike Champney's depiction, this one featured a man in a boat rowing down a stream. "Cows are common during this era," the appraiser said. "As a result, they're not usually popular with buyers." He turned his attention to

the figure on the boat, mentioned the name of an artist I'd never heard of. The camera panned outwards, and I saw the oil portrait's size – it was only 1/4th the size of our painting, and when the man gave the final value, I gasped.

Up until this point, the highest I allowed my fantasies to go was \$50,000, but this new number knocked about inside my head. \$300,000. Three hundred. If my painting could garner half that much, we could purchase that Tijeras House outright, pay off our credit cards plus both our student loans. Even if we lost half the amount to taxes, we'd be well off.

When I think of that time now, I recognize how foolish I was. How much I'd let the desire for a better future cloud my ability to see the answers right in front of me. If I had stopped for a moment to put the pieces together, I could have saved myself a lot of disappointment. But here are some things you should know about me: When I was a kid, I believed I could take over the world. I was driven and ambitious, even in grade school, aspiring to be anything from a doctor to a lawyer to the President of the United States. But my father died of cancer when I was in college, and I started to question what all the hard work was for – he had worked hard, after all. Had immigrated from the Philippines right after medical school and raised his family while he raised his career. And just when it came time for him to appreciate the spoils of his labor, the cancer took over his brain and he died. I was twenty years old, and I didn't know it then, but his death derailed me. I no longer worked towards the future. Instead, I lived for the present. Hung around bars and drank away most of my twenties. And then along came Randi. And along came this painting. And now that the floodgates were open and my ambitions towards a bright and beautiful future were renewed, there was no turning back.

When I talked to Randi that night, my voice was strained. Randi was somewhere close to Louisville, and she didn't understand why I was nervous.

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"You're just getting an appraisal," she said, "you aren't actually selling it." She felt guilty that I was going alone, but she was certain I would enjoy it. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, right? And wouldn't it be fun to see everyone's stuff? "You know," she said at last, "you don't have to go if you don't want to. We can pay to get the painting appraised later. You don't have to do this alone."

My frustration was palpable. The suggestion that we wait, that I not go, a slap. Didn't she understand that this wasn't about her being gone? That it wasn't about the painting at all? It was about our plans for the future, the dreams that she'd watered and helped to grow, and if the appraisal went well, I'd be responsible for holding our future in my hands, for loading it into the car and driving it home. And if it didn't go well? By this point, I couldn't even think about that.

"You should be here with me," I said, miserable. By the time we hung up, Randi was miserable, too.

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From where I stand, I can see the cameras rolling. Everything is blue and black and bright white, and when I approach the appraisal table, I'm not sure what I expect to happen, if I expect the man to take one look at my painting and react the way the people in line had reacted, for him to think, "Now, there's an item worth evaluating!" But he hardly looks at me. His face is void of any emotion.

He is an average looking man in an average looking gray suit. Short brown hair, dark square glasses, thin but fit. His Apple computer is much like my wife's Apple computer and he doesn't need me to lift the painting onto the table. He doesn't need me to remove the cardboard corners or what's left of the twine. "I can see it from here," he says.

He asks me what I know. I tell him about Edwin Graves Champney, nephew to Benjamin Champney, and he blinks recognition at the name

Benjamin, searches for Edwin's signature, types on his computer while I wait, the painting heavy against my side.

It takes two minutes. Three max. When he returns, he asks, "What's your history with this object?" I've been telling the story all morning to the people in line, letting the tale grow more elaborate with each incarnation, but the man seems tired, disinterested. "A library was giving it away," I say. "No one wanted it."

He clears his throat. "Well, the databases hold information about items sold within the last twenty years. They don't hold data from earlier than that."

I wait for him to get on with it. I see myself nodding the way the people nod in the televised clips. The appraiser tells you these things, and you are interested – you are! – but you're also holding out, in their cases for the final price, in my case, to be told to hold on, to get ready.

"As far as I can see," the man says, "this image is quite unique. Most of the Champney paintings are much smaller, and one of this size is extremely rare. No one has sold anything like it in the last two decades."

My ears hold onto the words "unique," "rare," "nothing like it." These are things I already know, but coming from the appraiser's mouth, they are more real, more meaningful.

"From what I can tell," he continues, "I'd say it's worth two to four thousand dollars. Cows are pretty common, but you should be able to sell it, especially around here. People here like their cows."

Up until this point, the man's voice has been monotone, bored. I wonder how many people he's seen that day, how many dreams he's effectively shattered. He looks at me, this average looking man, and something in him knows to say something kind, but he doesn't have the kindness I'm looking for. He cannot change the price. "I'm impressed you

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were able to haul this through the lines," he says. "It's the biggest painting I've seen so far."

I don't know what I said then. I'd like to think I thanked him, but in hindsight, I'm pretty sure I simply left in a daze. Two to four thousand dollars. That should have been good news. When we found the painting, the idea of two to four thousand made us cross town to bring the object home. But I cannot hide my disappointment, not from the appraiser, and not from Farmington's wife who's eager to know how it went.

"Two to four thousand," I say. "I thought it was going to be worth more."

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When I think of this event now, I'm reminded of a story I read about an ex-Wall Street tycoon who earned an obscene amount of money by manipulating numbers. He would feel angered by his \$1.5 million bonus because someone else had earned \$10 million. Eventually, he came to see his quest for money for what it was: an unhealthy form of addiction that needed to stop. Shortly thereafter, he quit his job to start a non-profit geared towards helping those in poverty. For him, the quest for money was about the quest for power, and once he left that quest for power behind, he was able to live a happier, more fulfilling life.

I wish I could say that my reaction to the painting's appraisal followed a similar course. That I, too, had an epiphany worthy of a James Joyce short story, and that I was able to see and recognize myself for the ungrateful brat that I was. But for me, the need for money wasn't about power – at least not in the way it was for him. I'd gone to that *Roadshow* looking for an answer, an easy way out of a debt-filled life, a ticket to a better future, seemingly handed out by that mystery we call Fate. And I had wanted, no, needed confirmation that I was on the right track. That if I

wanted something bad enough, the world was willing to open its arms and provide.

But in the end, it was just a painting. It had been a painting from the moment we'd found it. And would remain a painting no matter what events would transpire next. And the only thing that could change or shift or rise above was me.

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Most people go to the *Roadshow* looking for a story. They hope their items earn high appraisals, but the ones who get the big price tags are few and far between. The rest bring their items back to their husbands or wives. They report on the details. Tell the price. Share the history. I imagine them placing the items on their mantles, the civil war swords and Chinese drums, the old violin, the wooden spindle. I imagine them relaying the events of the *Roadshow* with wistful enthusiasm. This drum is not worth much, they might say, but they used it during celebrations. My great-aunt bought it in the 1920's. See this mirror? It's hand-painted. It's only worth fifty dollars, but we sure treasure it. At night, they turn off their lights, climb into their beds. They might be disappointed, but still, they're satisfied.

When I told Randi about what happened at the show, she didn't seem surprised. "I thought as much," she said. And she kept asking me questions about the people in line, laughing when I told her about the woman with the camera, about the man from Farmington and his wife with the hungry eyes. "I knew it," she said. "I just knew it."

I was not in the mood for her to convince me that the experience alone was worth it. I was not in the mood to be told that money was not everything – some part of me was already starting to understand this, but I didn't want that understanding rubbed in my face. Not just yet. At the time, I wanted to wallow. I wanted to feel sorry for myself. "What?" I said, ready to pick a fight.

Samantha Tetangco

"I knew the painting was special," she said. "I think Champney would be really happy about how many people saw and loved that painting after it was hidden away for so many years."

And I get that what she was saying had nothing to do with Champney and everything to do with her – with me – with that part of us who make meaning of this world by making art. Who need to believe that the people who count are not the people who assign value, but the ones who dream, the ones who let themselves hope and want. And if I choose to, I could see it their way, instead of the way I was insisting on seeing it. I could see its worth – and my own worth – differently.

It would be nice to say that since this time, I've let go of my fears about money, that I sleep soundly at night despite the unsold cow painting that still, quite literally hangs over our heads. That I don't worry about finding a more stable job or that my own writing is not good enough, but I have earned some clarity. I'm still scraping by, but I'm learning how to keep the flow of my wants steady alongside it, not in spite of it.

Since then, I've grown quite fond of the painting. When we wake in the morning, it is the first thing we see, and sometimes, I lay in bed, staring at the cows and trying to find comfort in their patient stillness. But Randi and I won't be like those others at the *Roadshow*. We won't hold on to the painting forever, won't pass it down from generation to generation in the hopes that in another hundred years, it'll be worth more than it is now. We both know that someday, the timing will be right. I'll dig out the business card for the woman with the gallery or Randi will place the painting in an online auction, and we'll pack it up, and send it off, accept whatever monetary compensation is offered (and yes, maybe still wonder at the backs of our minds whether we could have gotten just a bit more). Until then, it waits. I feel it hanging there even as I write this, can almost hear the cows as they graze on that century-old grass, telling me that real value can never

be measured. That at the end of things, money will reveal itself to be little more than slips of colored paper. That our real worth lies not in the things we sell but in our ability to believe in the things we create.