

Here I am, in this cluttered room, where bodies, sweaty and loud, stretch from table to table. An old man's voice spiels out behind us, calling out for auction. Some listen raptly, and some forgo it to instead view the items laid out for us. He is impossible to ignore, though. He is loud.

I have always preferred the quiet.

Here in this cluttered room, people search for objects of purpose. Jennifer organized it, of course. A garish turquoise banner cuts across the plain white warehouse wall. "Raise Funds for our Pediatric Oncology Ward!" it reads in a bubbly font, as if its cheerfulness can mask the ugly images of sick, hairless children that spring to my mind; cancer kids.

I know why she's really doing it, though. Like so many other "selfless" actions of public servitude that she has taken, this charity is just one more way to one-up her big sister, to prove how much better than me she can be.

Here, in this cluttered room, people search for meaning. With one singular justifiable purchase, all sins can be washed away by the shining beacon of activism - they're helping, changing the world one child at a time. Here, surrounded by pretty glassware, they can help these kids without setting eyes upon them.

They are just as selfish as the rest of us. The emotional consolation that these objects provide is, in the same way that you fry an egg in a pan, a use. Just one more purpose.

In the mishmash of bodies, nobody but I noticed the drop of a photograph. It does not sail gracefully. In the stale air, it plummets. Even from here, I can see its yellowed edges, just as soiled and lived as every other thing in this room.

The difference: this item has purpose only for one - the blonde woman who dropped it, frazzled and looking as if she has a place that she desperately needs to be. Perhaps that is why she didn't notice as it slipped from her person.

I could call out to her, I think. This photo, sentimental as it is, has no worth to me.

I carve a path through the crowd, through the tables bearing morally validating wares: silverware and bowls that serve me infinitely more purpose than another woman's treasured photograph.

I lean down, cast through the heat of bodies, and my fingernails find the tarnished corners of the photo. I turn it in the flickering light of the overhead fluorescents. I examine it like a baseball card, inspecting the horrendous quality of its edges and the scrapes of white that litter the ink of its worn-to-velvet surface.

It feels as if it could crumble in my hands - it's old. A polaroid.

It is irreplaceable.

It finds its place, lighter than air, in my pocket.

The woman, blonde and frazzled, will miss it. She will return home, and she will not notice what she has lost until after she shuts the door.

My eyes pass over the objects of the bidding, which serve infinitely more purpose to me than this photograph. A glass punch bowl set, a stack of canned tomatoes with expiration dates later than those of the children their sale will serve.

Hours later, I slip through the front door of the auction unburdened save for the polaroid in the pocket of my jeans. I don't buy anything. Just as every other auction-goer, I have found my purpose in an object. I have taken somebody else's.