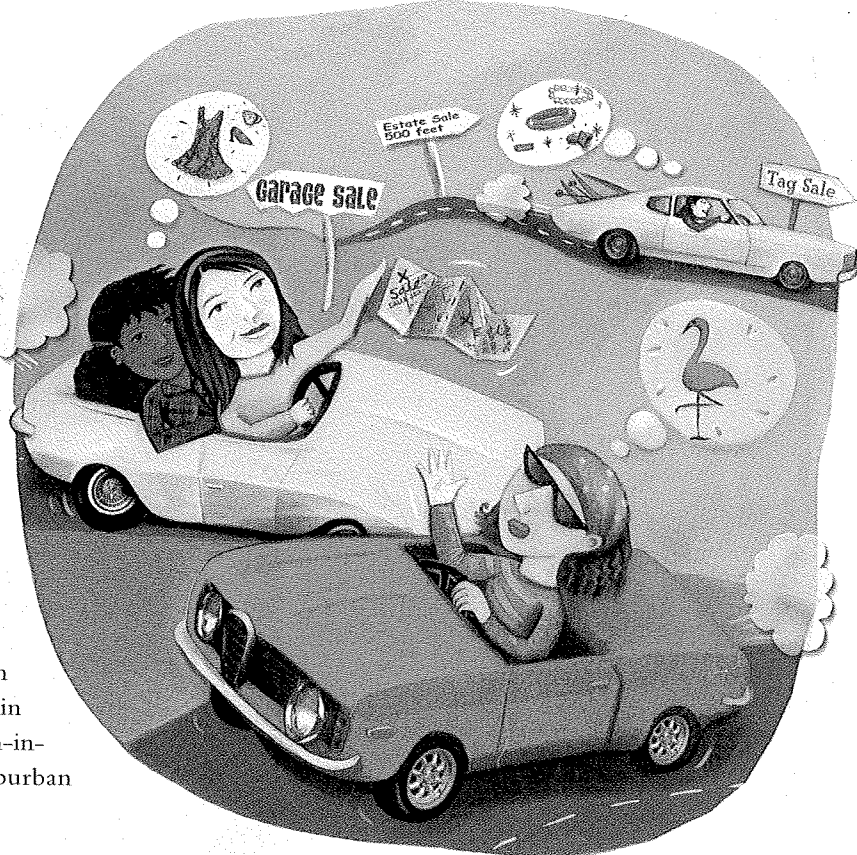


Tag sales, garage sales, yard sales: they're not usually the first places women go to hunt for a bridal-shower gift. Unless, of course, the bride sends them there.

I didn't want a traditional shower. As a struggling artist with low cash flow and many creative friends in the same shaky boat, I didn't want a lot of costly loot. Besides, my taste runs to the once-worn and the lived-in. I'm more mismatched-teacup than just-so-Limoges. So on a Saturday morning in August, 16 girlfriends, my mom and my mom-in-law-to-be gathered at my sister Betsy's suburban Boston apartment for my tag-sale shower.



Something Old, Something Used

TALES
FROM A
TAG-SALE
SHOWER

By Sandra Miller

Once the women were fortified with bagels and coffee, my sister announced car assignments (friends were separated for optimal get-to-know-ability) and distributed maps marked with the yard sales advertised in that week's local papers. Everyone also received a "registry" through which I invited them to look for certain gifts, such as things our grandmothers would have had in their houses, baked-enamel anything, a hand saw and a deviled-egg plate. While my sister and I stayed home to prepare for the backyard luncheon feast, five carloads of women with their pockets full of spare change dashed around the nearby neighborhoods on this scavenger hunt.

By noon, everyone had reconvened, wrapped their treasures with the Christmas wrapping or brown paper and twine my sister provided and were settled for the outdoor ceremonies with appetizers and flutes of champagne. For lunch, Betsy had prepared a salad of baby greens, pistachio-crust chicken, fresh

tortellini with pesto and a chocolate-truffle cake garnished with an amusing Never-Been-Used tag. The tables were lovingly decked with my mom's sterling silver, pieces of my great-grandmother's china and two of my Granny's beautifully worn linen tablecloths monogrammed with her initials.

Katherine, a cheerful poet with an eye for bargains, had found a \$5 Polaroid camera at her first stop and documented the ensuing adventures of her car's outrageous search. Jan, an investment banker, was snapped while haggling hard for a pair of pink lawn flamingos. She wasn't buying at over \$10 but called "Deal!" when the seller threw in a Magic 8 Ball that has since assured me a long, happy life. My mother-in-law was captured on film stuffing a bag with hand-crocheted baby clothes—hoping (correctly) that my husband ▶ 204

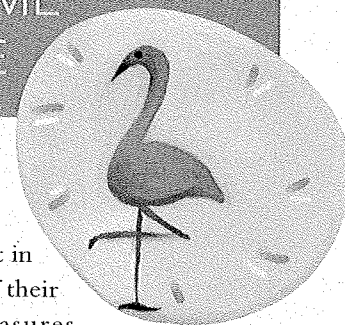
voices

◀ 202 and I would waste no time trying to fill them. And two gutsy girlfriends adorned themselves in vintage housedresses and hats for an irreverent photo-op on some stranger's front lawn.

The stories that came from the rest of the carpools were just as wonderful and quirky, not unlike the gifts. My friend, Jill, told of the couple who was moving into a bigger house because they were having a second baby. "So why," she asked, "was the husband selling off all the old baby clothes?" Joanne, my sister-in-law, and a die-hard yard-sale fan herself, actually caught someone selling the broken-down vacuum she'd left in last Sunday's garbage a block away. She'd bought it at a yard sale a few years back and it still had the same \$7 tag on it. And then there was my Mom's sweet story of a woman who saw her with the registry and wanted to know what she was doing. On hearing about my unique shower, the woman offered two silver-plated candlesticks as a gift. "I was married for 58 years and I hope your daughter is too."

In addition to every imaginable kitchen trimming, including martini glasses, an unopened bread maker and spinning spice rack, I received a plethora of great finds. There were the sporty gifts: cross-country ski stuff—almost my size; a camping lantern that has since lit many romantic dinners on our back porch; and an electric massager. There were the functional: four gorgeous antique apothecary jars, perfect for organizing the his-and-her stuff in our bathroom; the red plastic shower radio I use every morning; and a fabulous tool box overflowing with wrenches.

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I even received the frivolous: a bowler hat and tap shoes. And let's not forget the wedding-oriented: a copy of the Harlequin romance, *The Vanishing Bride*, and an old-fashioned wedding album with thick cream-colored paper and a few old photo corners still attached to the pages. A cherished gift appeared months later when my friend Ellen gave me a pair of stunning table lamps she'd made from crystal vases secretly bought that day. One was filled with flowers from her bridesmaid bouquet; the other with shells and rocks from the beach where my beloved and I had our first date.

After lunch, everyone exchanged the dollar grab-bag gifts they'd been asked to buy. Betsy scored big with a Bakelite bracelet, but not as big as Anjali, who drew a '50s kitchen clock from the orange Hermès shopping bag. Bunches of fresh flowers were given to the five women who had volunteered to drive. And all the while, champagne flowed, conversation bubbled and new friendships bloomed.

Some of my friends became converts, already anticipating the following Saturday when they

would return to the circuit in pursuit of their own treasures.

Others, despite having had a hilarious time, didn't cultivate the same appreciation for used stuff—but at least came away with a new respect for the art of the hunt. Where else in America can you bargain with amiable, lawn-chair salespeople and almost always get your way? Where else can you go mystery shopping and walk away with the completely unexpected for a couple of quarters?

And so it was a bridal shower quite unlike most—and therefore, magical and memorable. That evening my fiancé came home, listened to the whole story and shook his head disbelievingly at the booty sprawled across our living room floor. "So what's your favorite gift?" he asked. Favorite? Well, that I couldn't say, but my eye did go to the '70s-style electric crêpe pan my cousin, Marjorie, had found for two bucks. If it worked well, as the original owner had promised, it might be the answer to a really offbeat rehearsal dinner. □