

Intrinsic Value
by Julie Galante

‘When are you going to get rid of all this junk?’ Gabi yelled, for the four thousand five hundred sixty-first time since they got married. It was no longer a question.

‘It’s not junk,’ came Al’s standard reply.

She pulled a random item out of the nearest pile of newspapers, carpet samples, and broken household electronics. ‘How is this *not junk?*’ she asked, triumphant, holding out a slip of paper.

Al grabbed it from her, hurt. ‘That’s from our trip to Florence. It’s a floorplan of the museum, the one we went to before that little restaurant with the candles and the artichokes.’

Gabi was unmoved by his sentimentality. ‘It sure looks like junk to me.’ She pulled out a cord from the pile. ‘And this?’

‘That’s the power cable to – something. I’m going to figure out what.’

Gabi raised an eyebrow, put down the cord, and picked up a rusty oil lantern.

‘That used to hang in the barn at my parents’ place, remember?’

‘So what’s it doing here? Jesus, Al, why in the world would we need an oil lantern. I swear, one day we’re going to die under an avalanche of all your junk.’

‘It’s not junk!’ Al looked at her pleadingly.

‘Of course not, it’s all treasures. Millions and millions of precious, worthless treasures.’

When they first moved in together, twenty-two years ago, Gabi liked to tease Al playfully about his ‘treasures’ – all the little items he used to keep from the places they went, the things they did. Back then, she had found him charming in every way. The house was plenty big for them in those days; being far fewer in number, the treasures didn’t get in the way. There was venom in the word ‘treasure’ when it came out of Gabi’s mouth now.

‘And this?’ Gabi sounded tired as she held up a box full of boxes of paper clips.

‘You know what those are. And I use them all the time.’

‘But look at how many! It will take a lifetime and then some for you to go through them. You’ll need to live for a hundred years to use all this junk.’

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‘It’s bad, Al. She’s really fed up with you.’

The couple’s old friend Lucy was smoking a cigarette out on their patio. Al sat next to her; he had quit a decade ago, but he liked to keep her company. Gabi was in the kitchen,

shifting piles of stuff around to make enough space on the dining room table for them to eat dinner.

‘What else is new?’

‘Naw, it’s worse than before. She’s thinking of leaving you. You really better shape up.’

Al appeared unconcerned. His Gabi would never leave him. They belonged together. It was the way the world was meant to be.

‘Seriously. Show her you love her. Show her you love her more than you love all the junk.’

‘It’s not junk.’

‘Al. Don’t fuck this up. You two are my favourite couple.’

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Gabi watched Al in her vanity mirror. She had just finished doing her make-up and putting in her diamond stud earrings – the ones she saved for special occasions. It was their twentieth anniversary, and they were getting ready to go out to dinner. Except it was past time to leave, and Al wasn’t ready. Clad in a white dress shirt (which had seen better days), a black suit jacket, and white briefs, he was digging through the back of his wardrobe and muttering to himself. The bed and floor were strewn with items of clothing, resting where he had flung them over the course of the past hour or two.

Gabi glanced at the clock on the bedside table and sighed. Her lack of anger surprised her. She removed the earrings, unzipped her red satin cocktail dress, and went to the bathroom to wash her face.

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‘I can’t do it, I can’t live like this anymore.’ Gabi was sitting at the kitchen table with Lucy. They were drinking coffee out of mugs wedged between all the other things on the table – in amongst the treasures. A few unopened packages from eBay. A broken alarm clock. A stack of identical postcards from a place they’d never been.

‘I don’t blame you. Honestly, I like coming over here less and less these days. He’s really gotten worse. That, or the stuff is breeding.’

‘It’s taken over everything. It’s disgusting.’ Gabi paused. ‘This just isn’t how I imagined spending middle age, you know? I mean, the kids are finally out of the house. My career is doing great. I should be hosting glamorous dinner parties in my gorgeous home, not playing second fiddle to a junk collection. This should be my prime, goddammit.’

‘Do you really think you’ll leave?’

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The next week, Al came home to an empty house. Empty of his wife, anyway. Still full of his stuff. On the fridge was a note: ‘I’ve begged you so many times: it’s me or the stuff. I can’t see the value in your treasures, and you can’t seem to see the value in me. We’ve come to an impasse. I’m sorry.’

In the weeks and months after she left, Al cried a lot and tried to figure out how to win her back. It couldn’t be about the things, not really. Could it? He just needed to make her see.

Gabi wouldn’t respond to his calls or emails, and Lucy wouldn’t tell him anything beyond that she was safe.

He had an idea; he set to work right away. He bought supplies in bulk – PVC glue, wooden boards, big blocks of styrofoam. He watched instructional videos online. He took classes from a local sculptor, and a woodworker, and a collage artist. He arranged and rearranged and glued and molded and shaped. He wove power cords into elaborate tapestries. He soldered clusters of nostalgia into decorative lamps. He decoupage furniture with unopened piles of junk mail cut into intricate patterns of flowers and paisley.

Al kept at it for three years, working day and night, seven days a week, season to season, year after year. He stopped going to work, shaving, bathing. Bills came through the mail slot and ended up as shredded bits of feather on a statue of a phoenix built from bicycle parts and an old, beat-up trumpet. When the electricity was shut off, he lit the house with a mismatched set of standing lamps he crafted from torches, an LED screen, and the rusty oil lamp.

Lucy came by to check on him every once in a while. Upon insisting that he clean himself up a bit, she found that all his toiletry bottles and shaving gear had gone into a Roman frieze depicting the early years of his childhood.

One day, when he was in the front garden working on a particularly large assemblage, a neighbour stopped by.

‘This is very interesting, Al. I run a sculpture gallery in the city. Could I take a look at your other work and maybe take something to display? Do you have other pieces?’

‘I do, yes.’

Al took the neighbour into the house, which was starting to look like a gallery itself. Room after room held sculptures and collages, precisely balanced, alternately delicate and powerful, intricate and bold. The neighbour walked slowly from room to room, mouth agape. ‘I shall take them all!’ she declared.

Several months later, a *vernissage* was held in the gallery. Wine flowed into glasses. Speeches were made. Gallerists buzzed around sticking red dots onto labels. Al took none of it in. He stood awkwardly to one side in his stiff new shirt and trousers and surveyed the crowd skittishly. At last his gaze landed upon her. She stood in front of the large collage on the centre wall. It consisted of thousands of pieces of paper – old photographs, ticket stubs, letters, receipts, and the note she had left him – arranged to create a likeness of her face. Amongst the swirling commotion of the other attendees, Al moved quietly to her side. His arm lightly brushed against the red satin of her sleeve.

‘It’s all here.’ She glanced around the gallery as she spoke, and then let her eyes settle on him.

‘It is.’

‘So the house?’

‘Empty.’

Neither spoke for a few minutes. Gabi turned back to the collage.

‘I’ll take it.’