yellow cardboard sign on a plain wooden stake reads “Estate Sale: Saturday, 9 a.m.-4 p.m., 1604 South Oak.” It’s the sign we have been looking for—identical to dozens of others provided by the local newspaper giving directions to garage sales, yard sales and estate sales around town this dreary, damp, early October morning.

A turn to the left, two blocks down on the right; park the car on a side street and walk to 1604. The house is an unpretentious brown, two-story Tudor of the early 1900s, with peeling paint and frayed shingles. A large silver maple with dying limbs and flaking bark stands in front; two pyramidal senescent spruces guard the north.

We are a little late. People are already in the house, and a line is waiting at the side door. Four people are allowed in at five-minute intervals. As we wait, we hear fragments of conversations: “...died a couple of months ago...” “...in her early 90s...” “...visiting nurse found her in bed...” “...husband had been dead for about 20 years...” “...lived here most of her life...” “...no family left.”

Our turn to enter. Three steps down to the right and into a single-car garage that has not felt the tread of tires for years. A look around. A collection of rakes, hoes, shovels and forks, their handles worn and loose, the effects of untold hours spent preparing flower beds, planting shrubs, cleaning the yard in spring, and planting “victory gardens.” How many blisters had they caused? How many sore backs? How many compliments from passersby had they heard? And we can almost smell the smoke of the countless piles of burning autumn leaves.

In the back corner rests a scratched and dented little red tricycle. I can still feel the sting of scraped knees and elbows. Next to it leans a boy’s faded blue balloon-tired Schwinn bicycle, the tires flat and brittle from decades of idleness. The paint on the upper bar is worn down to the bare metal. How many rounds of delivering the morning papers did it take the swinging bag to wear away the paint? And, how much was worn away by the twisting dress of a freckled-faced girl as he rode her to Chet Towse’s drugstore for vanilla phosphates after school?

We climb back up the steps and into the kitchen. The table and counters are covered with chipped dishes, dented pans, worn cooking utensils and the myriad other small, commonplace kitchen items that unknowingly weave together the everyday events in a family’s life.

I pick up a smooth, shiny roll-
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Wheaties was gulped down after the call of the Joe Louis prizefights, of Roosevelt’s fireside chats, the twist of the switch and the green lights up, but no sound escapes the brown cloth-covered speaker—only the unheard echoes of Roosevelt’s fireside chats, the call of the Joe Louis prizefights, the War of the Worlds broadcast, the clatter of Fibber McGee and Molly’s cluttered closet, Lum and Abner’s chuckles at the Jot-'Em Down Store, Gabriel Heatter’s “There’s good news tonight” war-time broadcasts, The Romance of Helen Trent and the haunting music of I Love a Mystery.

We go on into the living room where we find a large, sagging, flowered sofa, an equally sagging matching chair, and a newer reclining rocker with a built-in heater. “The heat feels good on your ach-ing joints.”

By the window sits a Boston rocker, the ends of the rockers deeply grooved with puppy teeth marks. “How could you even think of refinishing it and removing the only traces of his very first pet?”

In the far corner stands a grandfather clock with three weights and a slowly swinging pendulum. How many times did the weights run their downward course? How many times did the chimes mark the hours, the quarter-hours? How many times did the pendulum make its arching back-and-forth trip? How many ticks, how many tocks, in the life of a family?

Against the near wall, an upright Baldwin piano stands, its ivory keys yellowed and chipped with age and the long hours of fingers stroking them. How many winter nights were made more cheerful by the sound of the notes? How many tears were dried away by the determined buffeting of the keys?

On the piano bench is piled a large stack of sheet music. Leaf through the folded sheets—Little White Lies, with a picture of Rudy Vallee; Don’t Cry, Swanee, with Al Jolson; I Want My Mammy, with Eddie Cantor in blackface; and Memories, its worn pages and brittle, crumbling edges held together by yellowing tape.

Upstairs next. As we move toward the stairway we pass the line of people already checking out with their purchases. Their arms are filled with bits and pieces of the fabric of a family, now being unwoven and forever scattered to the winds.

Up the stairs and down the hall. To the left is a small bedroom with a single wooden bed. Near the head of the bed stands a small desk. Although the room has been painted several times, nail heads still protrude from the walls and ceiling. Which one held the picture of Dizzy Dean? Which one Lucky Lindy?
To which was attached the model forced embarrassed grin, the large bill of his Army Air Corps cap making his boyish face look even younger than its years. We turn the frame over. Stuck in the back is a folded yellowed newspaper clipping. Only the small headline shows—“Local Airman Killed Over Germany.”

We move across the hall into the master bedroom. Here we find a small vanity, a nightstand, a dresser with an equally large mirror. On the dresser top, a well-used pocket comb, a well-worn watch chain, a gold brooch, an iron bed in need of paint—$25.

As we leave the room we see the music box—jewelry chest on the vanity. Three flaking brown glue stains inside the top are a reminder of a long-lost mirror. A twist of the key, Memories—his first Christmas present to her? In the box lies a tangle of costume necklaces and broken brooches. Each “just matches” one of the dresses or sweaters in the closets.

At the bottom in one corner, a small brooch with seven green rhinestones, partially wrapped in brittle brown tissue paper, the creases cracked from countless unfoldings and foldings. As I open the tissue paper I sense the scent of pine drifting from a green, red and blue light-enshrouded tree of a long-ago Christmas morning.

I examine the pin more closely. In the reflections from the stones I see the excited bright eyes of a small boy sitting in a disarray of torn paper and open boxes looking up expectantly at the delicate, slender fingers of the young woman holding the pin as she exclaims, “Oh, how beautiful! Mommy will treasure this forever.”

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In the bottom of the box, a heavy wooden frame encases the picture of a uniformed young man with the same sparkling eyes and a forced embarrassed grin, the large bill of his Army Air Corps cap making his boyish face look even younger than its years. We turn the frame over. Stuck in the back is a folded yellowed newspaper clipping. Only the small headline shows—“Local Airman Killed Over Germany.”

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I examine the pin more closely. In the reflections from the stones I see the excited bright eyes of a small boy sitting in a disarray of torn paper and open boxes looking up expectantly at the delicate, slender fingers of the young woman holding the pin to the breast of her faded pink chenille robe as she exclaims, “Oh, how beautiful! Mommy will treasure this forever.”

“Forever” ended today with a yellow cardboard sign on a plain wooden stake: “Estate Sale: Saturday, 9 a.m.—4 p.m., 1604 South Oak.”