

WELCOME TO THE OFFICE OF UNSPECIFIED SERVICES

The gold lettering was what snared you first. On the glass door of a non-descript storefront at 99½ Stanley Street in London, those painted gold letters spelling out “Parker Branch” set off a slew of associations. They exuded the type of vague officiality associated with some far-flung government bureau, perhaps appointed with some desultory archival task. They could have signified a dead letter office, where the nation’s undeliverables lay in postal purgatory. Or they could have marked the HQ for a hard-nosed gumshoe, someone straight out of a Dashiell Hammett novel. In truth Parker Branch had been, at one point or another, all of the above.

Invariably, just beyond those gold letters you would find a small white non-descript room, and in it a collection of things. Here the mystery deepened. At one point the room held three nylon backpacks in primary colours, a framed film production still, and a taxidermied coyote head mounted on a stick. Another time a couple of engravings of cloud formations flanked a Catholic altar in miniature, arranged on a plywood plinth; a bright red life vest hung on the wall nearby. Nothing else in the room gave any indication that most of those arrangements—all of them surprising and utterly beguiling—were the handiwork of Anna Madelska and Jason Hallows, artists, partners in life, and the stewards of Parker Branch. And if your curiosity was stirred, you may have noticed all of these things were hardly dead at all. Like Duchamp’s readymades the objects established their semantic power from how they were displayed and arranged; every thing in that room was inscribed there with some sort of purpose.

Each of these ordinary marvels were acquired through various means. Some were unearthed from thrift stores and antique malls; others were pointedly sought after on eBay. Some objects were temporary loans solicited from artist friends; some were just lying

around. All of these little anachronisms, their original purpose or provenance lost, hazy, or irrelevant until they were brought together and connected, one by one, to a daisy chain of associations or narratives, none of which were immediately apparent to anyone pressing their nose against the glass, but could discover—with a little detective work.

Why is another story. It is not entirely clear to anyone what drives us to collect things and put them on display. It might be just a corollary of our proclivity to make them, or a desire to absorb and classify every thing into our established taxonomies. For a time it was fashionable to own a cabinet of curiosity, or *wunderkammer*, a kind of microcosm that housed specimens from the natural world alongside art objects and antiquities. But most collectors are more scrupulous, focusing only on clearly defined types. Nabokov collected his butterflies, the ancient Nazcas their trophy heads. Not that long ago I met a man who collected banana paraphernalia; he had set up a museum for nearly 20,000 banana-themed things on the shores of the Salton Sea (that place alone a magnet for the weird and wonderful). On a smaller scale, I keep a rock collection on the dresser in my bedroom, which is no more than a box of interesting pebbles I’ve picked up on hikes and trips to the beach and has an annual visitor record of exactly one.

Yet I have no doubt collecting seems to stem from a hunter’s instinct as much as a gatherer’s: few things can trump the thrill of finding that proverbial bauble in a sea of stones. (Parker Branch too was a delightful discovery on an otherwise ordinary street.) I feel a mild dopamine rush when a particular rock catches my eye at the beach, no matter how many I already have. I’m confident the banana man feels the same as he adds one more plastic yellow keychain to his pile of hundreds. Nabokov likely felt that flutter too as he nabbed one more from his lepidopterist bucket

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list. But perhaps the urge isn't about possession but rather bringing the object of your desire into an existing schema or mapping more meaningful constellations around it, even if that schema or map is only relevant to you. This is the core of detective work—collecting clues, observing patterns, and establishing connections between seemingly unrelated things by revealing shared characteristics—and it too has its rewards.

The human brain is hard wired to seek patterns. From an early age we learn about the world through analogy and comparison. (Watching the bit about “One of these things is not like the other” on *Sesame Street* constituted some of my earliest detective work.) Pattern recognition is at the root of a baby's ability to recognize her mother's face or voice, or our own propensity to see a rabbit or a Saguaro cactus in the clouds. And where we don't find a pattern, we dig deeper, dredging up something familiar to connect the unfamiliar or some narrative to satisfy our need to organize what is around us into something more meaningful. *Parker Branch has things in common*, and sometimes that thing about the thing isn't on the surface. And for the insatiably curious (thank god we are many) solving the mystery is an act of finding—and is just as satisfying.

During my last visit to Anna and Jason's home in London, their young daughters helped me navigate through Parker Branch's “collection,” all of the objects the pair acquired over the years. Each exhibition was stored in a labeled cardboard file box, catalogued away as if they were case files. Elsa and Nina pulled objects from the boxes, one by one, and squealed with every new find. There were about a dozen miniature Santa candles, their features melted and fused together, their bodies frozen in slightly ungainly positions. There was also a blonde ‘fun wig,’ its hair the texture of roving wool and affixed to a flat piece of cardboard with a little girl's gap-toothed smile stretching from edge to edge. The girls undressed a realistic doll in military garb

and revealed, under his twill garments, his prosthetic wooden arms and legs. Each object was completely untethered from its constellation of meaning established on Parker Branch's white walls, but here brought together in a different vein of exploration and discovery.

From the last box Elsa pulled out a binder filled with plastic sheets, like the kind you keep baseball cards in. Each rectangular slot held a black and white photograph, all of them candid portraits of people young and old, no one I recognized. “What do you notice about these photographs?” Jason prompted. Elsa looked hard at the page, venturing a couple of guesses. “They are full of people? They are all sitting down?” Her five-year-old eyes scanned the pages. A minute later she exclaimed, smiling, “The shadow!” She pointed at the photographer's dark silhouette at the bottom of one of the frames; similar shapes hovered in every image. Some fine detective work right there.