The hot, wet stink would linger on my clothes and hair for hours. The high pitch of cicadas ringing in my ears, I took to wiping my hands repeatedly on the back of my jeans, worried about needle sticks, rats, and other sources of disease or contamination. We ignored the lone, silent man leaning into a far dumpster; my family always seemed to see other garbage pickers as dangerous weirdoes, even as we were knee deep in Glad Bags. It was all about the find, the anticipation of what we would triumphantly haul home in the back of our wood-paneled station wagon.

I became a believer in dumpster diving early on, indoctrinated into my family’s obsession with that which others leave behind. My conversion was complete one summer afternoon in my childhood when, kneeling in the gravel over a cardboard box of books taken out of the trash, bills began fluttering out of the pages of a paperback thriller: a five, some singles, a pair of folded twenties. My two sisters, brother, and I immediately tore through each musty paperback, finding even more bills, and then stood aside, wide-eyed and grinning, as my father ceremoniously counted out the cash on the hood of our sun warmed wagon: $135. This magical bonding moment not only allowed us to buy a family size tent that we would use for the next two decades, but it also validated the atypical ways my arguably odd family chose to spend its time.

I vividly remember a fervent need to tell this story to my friends: finding that kind of money was a huge deal to a ten year old. Yet, even at that age, I was aware of social
norms that required that I fudge the specifics. I only had to recall an earlier experience when I had proudly announced to my second grade class that my father had found a perfectly fine Barbie carrying case at the dump. “The dump?” my teacher inquired, eyebrows raised, and then moved on to the next hand. This may have been the first of many subtle signs that led to my eventual realization that the vast majority of families did not work dumpster diving into their weekend activities.

As a teenager, I was of two minds regarding my family’s love affair with other people’s garbage. While I completely bought into the mindset of treasure-hunting that framed all of our trips to the town dump or stops to poke in the neighbor’s trash, there was still something deeply embarrassing about being summoned to help your parents carry home the discarded couch of a classmate. In the time since I was a teenager, the nation’s relationship with its own refuse has changed. A sure sign of the times is that inputting the search phrase “dumpster diving” on amazon.com reveals no fewer than six how-to guides for this increasingly acceptable pastime or, for some, lifestyle. I can now speak of my family’s commitment to “reusing” with an element of pride.

There was a time when the only ethics surrounding what people hauled to the curb was whether they did the neighborhood kids a favor and removed the door from their outdated refrigerator. In the frenzy of consumerism that has taken place in the last thirty years, the omnipresent emphasis on what we buy has, inevitably, brought with it questions regarding what we throw away. The intermittent refrain of reduce, reuse, and recycle can now occasionally be heard above the ever-present command that we buy, order, and consume product after product. This mixed message has resulted in placing
the phenomena of refuse on a level of interest that transcends simply taking out the garbage, sorted or not.

In keeping with the popular concept of “reusing,” many home decorating magazines champion the concept of turning the abandoned into beautiful or going “shabby to chic.” As a committed scavenger, I admire this trend yet have failed to see these magazines give the true picture of picking junk: the moments of discovery are always very pristine, involving no encounters with the stank and funk of real life trash. These articles always seem to presume that you serendipitously bump into your neighbor as she is bringing her weathered, antique furniture to the curb, or that the elderly woman across the street begs you to take family heirlooms off her hands so you can refinish them using the latest sponge technique. Yet it certainly is a positive sign to see the promotion of repairing or refurbishing furniture rather than simply replacing it at the local department store.

As the nation has become more and more encouraging of recycling and reusing practices, I have moved from a fairly friendly suburban town into the heart of the city of Milwaukee. In my neighborhood, the politics of garbage are what, at times, brings my otherwise disconnected community together. When the stink of the apartment building’s dumpster next door becomes overwhelming, I am forced to communicate with my neighbors. After years of tolerating the habit of the storefront church on the opposite side to fill and overfill my single trash bin, I finally found the guts to address the issue with the pastor. When he asked where he could get a bin of his own, I replied, without any intended irony, “Well, usually people just steal them from each other.” The pastor finally ordered six new trash bins from the city, five of which were promptly stolen. My
upstairs windows overlook an alley, and I often rise to the beat of feet crushing cans as pickers push shopping carts across the brick pavement. The regulars have likely realized that there’s not much of value in my trash: I learned a long time ago that it is a sign of poor character to throw away a perfectly fine cooler simply because you didn’t want to take the time to sponge it clean.

Although some people are wary of having others in their trash, I cannot begrudge anyone’s efforts to make a buck or find a meal in an economy that has most impacted the middle and lower rungs of the social ladder. Even the well off are less likely to throw anything away, leaving those who subsist on their cast-offs to go without. While my father still beats the garbage truck to the curbside piles each morning on his precisely mapped out junk route, he reports that the epic finds have become few and far between. In this age of slim pickings, I have taken to the thrift stores to purchase what, in the past, might have come out of either Target or the trash. I have developed a faith in thrift stores that I don’t hold in any religion or supreme being: if you need it badly, wait long enough, and look diligently, the thrift store will provide. Second handing is as random and often as funky as junk picking, sharing the same joy of discovery for only a slightly higher price.

You can be yourself in a thrift store. There doesn’t seem to be an established code of ethics when it comes to issues such as passing gas in the aisle or talking on the phone in extremely loud, angry tone. Sure, my favorite Value Village sometimes smells like pee, and that one particular dressing room at St. Vinny’s will always reek of vomit. Yes, I have had quite a few unwelcome encounters with men seeking companionship and lonely older women who want to talk, sometimes endlessly, about the items in their
baskets. I have become quite familiar with a man with a distinct odor, a man I have reflexively named “Stinky,” who obsessively sorts the paperback books into a precise pattern that only he can see. Stinky doesn’t work at the thrift store, but many people often believe I do. I usually play along, and direct them to the baby clothes or men’s belts, happy to share any information I have. No, clothes aren’t half off today, and usually the only time to find shoes on sale is the weekend.

I can write a history of the last decade of my life based on the items I have carried home from thrift stores. Back in my disco days, I thifted all my mini-dresses and platform boots. During a rather long period of unemployment, I supported myself by selling secondhand vintage shoes, books, and clothes on ebay. While I was working in area group homes for individuals living with chronic mental illness, the Salvation Army provided such essentials as clothing and dishware as well as extras like Halloween costumes and games. As a student teacher buried in loans and with minimal income, I depended on thrift stores to allow me to meet the minimum standards of dress for a Milwaukee public school teacher.

While family trips to the dump don’t happen as frequently as they used to, the lessons of our diving days prevail. Holidays and other family gatherings aren’t complete without each member reporting out on his or her best finds of the season. My sister paints an intoxicating picture of riding her bike through Madison on the first of any summer month, flashlight clamped between her teeth, and all the bounty one could hope for spread out before her: in a town which prides itself on its farmers’ market, bike trails, rate of recycling, and other sustainable practices, college students in Madison have found it vastly more convenient to dump their possessions rather than move them to their next
apartment. My brother routinely reuses scavenged computer parts to fix and upgrade his systems. When a grocery store near his home in Green Bay recently closed, my father kept a close eye on their dumpsters in the days following the last clearance sale. His diligence paid off: he has assured me he has enough imitation pineapple extract to last us all a lifetime.