

## **Toaster, Sideburns, Friends...**

When John Freyer decided to sell everything that he had, piece by piece, to the highest bidder on the internet, he meant everything.

### **The Observer, December 2002**

Last month I placed the following listing on eBay, the internet's best-known auction site. It appeared under the Books (Entertainment) section, and it had a reserve price of £1. I lifted the sales pitch directly from the jacket blurb on *All My Life for Sale*: 'One day John Freyer decided to sell everything he owned on the internet. He invited his friends over to tag all the possessions in his apartment, and he systematically put them up for sale on eBay. An unopened box of taco shells, half a bottle of mouthwash, almost all of his clothes, his records, his sideburns (in a plastic bag), furniture: John didn't let sentiment or utility stand in his way. Soon his belongings were sold all over the world, with a bag of Porky's BBQ Pork Skins making its way to Japan, and a chair ending up in the Museum of Modern Art. With almost all the objects in his life now gone, he started the second phase of his journey: to visit his one-time possessions in their new homes.'

After this, I added some personal opinion (you have to be scrupulously honest about the condition of the items you sell on eBay, otherwise the buyer sends them back and leaves nasty comments about you in the Feedback section). 'This is a fascinating new book, full of the joys of spring and crazy youth, has a couple of rabbit-ear folded corners and a stain from some fresh orange juice and some Marks & Spencer chocolate cake but otherwise in fine condition. I got this free, so am willing to let it go cheap because I can always call up for another fresh copy without the food stains from my PR contact Kate. I hope you enjoy it if you win, otherwise you've squandered whatever you've paid for it.'

The auction would last one week, and I indicated that I would be happy to send the book anywhere in the world so long as the buyer paid the postage. Any potential bidder would read the following information listed under Payment Instructions: 'Good luck, and if you win I wonder whether I could maybe come round to see where the book is on your shelf, or on the shelf of the person you give it to. Please note: you are under no obligation to comply with this last wish, although it is in keeping with the spirit of the book. And obviously I'm not going to come around if you live more than a few miles away from me because life's too short and I've got work to do, a dog to walk etc.' The day after this book was listed on eBay, alongside perhaps 5 million other items, I flew to New York to meet its author.

'My name is pronounced Fryer,' John Freyer said in the Mayrose café at 420 Broadway two days later. 'I'm 29, and I live in Iowa City, Iowa.' He's the fifth of

seven children. He developed his taste for thrift culture and kitsch from the skateboard scene he enjoyed at his college town in Saratoga Springs, upstate New York. 'My folks could never figure out why their educated son of an attorney was wearing dollar shirts. It may have been rebellion, I don't know.' He says he seldom had enough money to hang out at the mall and buy new things, 'but I found I was still able to participate in the fun of consumerism by getting things from yard sales.'

He's a cool-looking guy, not nearly as geeky as he appears on his bookflap, where he resembles Cletus the Slack-Jawed Yokel from *The Simpsons*. He used to wear contact lenses but he sold them, and now has horn-rimmed glasses. He wears jeans and a white T-shirt with a transfer of a tin of Plumrose Danish Ham on it, a photograph of the ham he sold for \$2.50 after a bidding spat involving three people.

Before he started selling these kinds of things Freyer did a degree in political science. Then, to pay off his student loan, he worked as a snowboard cinematographer and graphic designer. He began a masters degree in fine art, but in August 2000 found himself dissatisfied with his world, and reasoned that he'd rather be in New York City than Iowa. But there was a problem: he just had too much stuff. He wanted to travel with only the things he could fit in the boot of his car, so he began selling at local yard sales and to friends.

After a few weeks he looked around him, saw that he still had way too much stuff, and decided to sell some of it on the internet. He wanted his own site, and thought he could design a neat parody of the online catalogues that some of his friends were designing for American domestic goddess Martha Stewart. He tried to buy the domain name [garagesale.com](#), but it was taken. So was [yardsale.com](#) and every other second-hand-related name he tried. He says he then typed a new phrase into the domain register, and found it was available. It was [allmylifeforsale.com](#). He bought it immediately, nervous that someone else online was bound to snap it up if he didn't. And so his story began, and his obscurity ended.

He asked friends and some strangers over to his apartment to tag everything they could find - an Inventory Party. People went through every cupboard, and dragged boxes from under his bed, and tagged all the items on the kitchen table, and then tagged the table. By early morning they had itemised about 600 things, including an answering-machine tape and his two false front teeth (a childhood accident on a golf course). Freyer started photographing them and putting them up on his site. He then linked this site to eBay, and in November 2000 the items began appearing. The first item to sell was a chrome toaster, which went for \$11.50 to a man called Bill in Grayslake, Illinois. Seven bids were placed on the item, which made Freyer realise that his project might turn out to be more than just a crazy notion.

He began selling his old T-shirts and baseball caps, his pots and pans, his chairs, his LPs, and many of the items were accompanied by arch and unnerving descriptions. In the sale for a barely used 4lb bag of sugar he mused, 'I guess I don't use sugar that much. I have a really tiny oven, so I can't really make cookies, and I don't take sugar in my coffee... I bought this brand because of the label. If you want to market a product to me, keep the label simple and round and I

promise I will buy it.'

This may be more information about John Freyer than you need, but it soon became clear to those reading his sales-pitches that he was selling something other than just his belongings: himself. Freyer was cleansing his soul as well as his apartment, the ultimate consumer's detox. His pure project had several messages: everything in life is for sale; every object is useful to someone; spent objects can be reborn; the internet is the best shop in the world; art is what the artist says it is; someone somewhere will buy another man's facial hair.

As an art student, Freyer was aware of the quizzical attention given to Michael Landy last year when he destroyed all his possessions in a crushing machine in Oxford Street, and he was keen not to appear either a) a copycat or b) an idiot. 'I didn't just want some shock-jock on AM radio saying, "This crazy guy is selling his toilet paper!"' Accordingly, Freyer took great care with his descriptions. In his listing for a pink kidney-shaped ashtray in a steel frame he wrote: 'I don't smoke, and I'm not really sure who gave this to me. I almost took up smoking for a while because this ashtray is so damn' cool. All right, sometimes I smoke, but I never inhale.' In the Mayrose café he says: 'Actually I did smoke, but I didn't want to appear to be that sort of person.' A note at the front of his book, written by Freyer himself but referring to himself in the third person, observes that he is occasionally prone to exaggeration and lapses of memory.

After a few weeks the items appearing on eBay began to take an absurd turn. He listed the Christmas presents he had bought for his family - Mark's Gift, Barb's Gift, Lauren's Gift - but declined to say what lay beneath the wrapping. 'This was basically a way of getting my family involved in what I was doing,' he says, 'and a way of telling family stories that had long been retired.' He was relieved to find that Barb, his stepmother, was the highest bidder for all the presents, but not without competition from strangers. The gift for Sarah, his half-sister, received 11 bids, finally going for \$26.07 after some frantic activity in the last five minutes. The eBay entry read: 'Sarah is now a teenager, which makes me feel really old... I'm sure she now knows all the ways that kids can sneak out of the house at night. (Sarah, if you want to make sure you can get back in after sneaking out, leave the side door on the garage unlocked, but make sure you leave a clear path so that they don't hear you fumbling through the garage. If you get caught just tell them you were working on your bicycle. I think that worked for me once. Oh, and Sarah, you better be the highest bidder, because I think you will actually like your gift from me this year.)' Sarah got a T-shirt printed with an ice-cube tray that Freyer was selling on eBay the next day.

After this, nothing seemed too strange. The sale of his sideburns in March 2001 passed without a hitch (\$19.50 to a man in Pittsburgh who later reported he was disillusioned with his purchase) and a brick went off to a bidder in London (cost of brick \$3, cost of postage \$35, but Freyer felt embarrassed and only charged \$10).

Once Freyer had sold his ring and his photographs - some of them still on an unprocessed roll - there was only one way to go: he would sell his friends. The idea for this first arose at his inventory party. 'When people started tagging my things I was giving them free beers,' he says. 'And at around two in the morning they started tagging themselves.' This would have unforeseen and problematic

consequences. Freyer began by offering Drinks With Shari DeGraw, a friend who taught fine book printing. 'If you like to talk about fonts, paper or leading, this is a great item to bid on,' he wrote. Shari DeGraw was originally up for the idea, until she started getting bids from a person who expressed a preference for a particular sexual act in his username. This turned out to be a wind-up from a friend, and another friend won the auction for \$52. Freyer then offered a Cheeseburger with Sara Langworthy. After a few days he received an email from the Service department of eBay stating that the Cheeseburger With Sara Langworthy auction had been removed because the selling of experiences was not allowed. By this time the date had already received some bids, and Sara went for a meal with the person who was leading at the time of the cancellation. Freyer offers no further details.

Ebay failed to cancel all of the experience auctions, however. One that got through was the opportunity to be John Freyer on his twenty-eighth birthday. This entitled the highest bidder to attend a party for Freyer in a New York bar, and receive all his drinks and presents. A guy called Brian won the auction by paying \$1.25, and he met up with Freyer a short while before the party started. Freyer showed Brian some photographs of his friends, and Brian memorised them so that he could greet them all as if they were old pals. The party went well; Brian turned out to be a nice man. He received a big cake, and they all sang to him, calling him 'John'.

Shortly after he moved back to Iowa, the real John Freyer learnt that Brian was still friends with his friends. 'I'm really not sure how I feel about that now,' he says at the cafe a few blocks from the site of his birthday venue. 'He's now a part of my life but I had it listed under timeshare.'

I accompany Freyer to the Flat Iron building, the home of his publisher, Bloomsbury. His publicity director says that the Chicago Tribune wants to talk to him, and she is pleased about his television appearance that morning on the Today show. Behind her is a shelf containing tins of Plumrose Danish Ham, just like the one in the book and Freyer's T-shirt, which are being sent out to literary journalists in the hope that a free can of ham might encourage them to run a review. 'Originally I wanted to send them a brick,' Freyer says. 'It had to be something heavy. But then I thought a brick might be threatening.'

There is no doubt that Freyer has hit paydirt with this project. His book deal has earned him considerably more than the sale of his possessions (the 600 items sold on eBay raised about \$6,000, and he made a little more from a yard sale). In the course of his three-week promotional tour of the United States he has become a minor celebrity, and the strain is evidenced that evening at a reading at Barnes & Noble.

He set up a little computer monitor in the CD section of the bookstore, and about 40 people gathered to hear his tales of selling his kitchen spatula and retro Seventies spinning chair. Slides of items appeared on the screen beside him, and as they did so he looked at the audience, who were not all weirdos by any means, and said wearily: 'Oh, the socks. Do I really want to do the socks? I think I'll do the salt instead...' The salt was in a salt shaker, and had gone to a woman in Maine for a dollar, and was interesting only for the fact that its sale set off another part of Freyer's project - the travelogue. The buyer was a woman called

Jenn, and Jenn and her daughter Paine invited Freyer to visit his salt shaker if ever he happened to be in the area. He thought this would be a good idea, so he started informing other high bidders of this development, and soon he had accepted invitations to 60 homes all over the United States.

For me this was the most enticing part of his adventure, and the most dangerous. He had arrived at his hosts' with a sleeping bag and a tent, but ended up on their spare beds and sofas. I wondered whether he wasn't a little nervous about spending the night among complete strangers. 'They weren't complete strangers because they were part of the project,' he reasoned. 'And they had trusted me. Jenn had trusted me enough to use my salt.' But still, I said, there must have been moments. 'There was one occasion when I thought my tent might be the best option, and one moment when I worried about some food I was being given. On a few occasions it was clear that the people who had invited me didn't usually entertain guests. They were collectors. Their houses were collectors' houses - stuff absolutely everywhere. On one occasion a person couldn't actually find the object they had bought from me, so they showed me something that they thought might come close to it.'

The following evening Freyer set up his slideshow at Makor, a Jewish community centre on the Upper West Side. This was not his usual spiel though. He explained how the book came about (a literary agent had seen an item about Freyer in the New York Post ), and said that he was now making a short film with a friend about garage sales and second-hand culture in New Jersey, a film made by touring round in a 1977 ambulance he had bought for \$2,700 on eBay. Already big items like this were accumulating back into his life.

Freyer was only one participant on a six-person panel. The others were all people who had bought something from Freyer on eBay in the last year. There was a man who had bought a Stevie Wonder LP, a woman who had bought a US army chair, a female rock critic called Mary Huhn who had bought an old Hawaiian instrumental album, and there was Adam Cohen, a reporter on the New York Times who had written a book about eBay called *The Perfect Store* and had bought Freyer's fish-print shirt. Cohen said that Freyer now had an imitator in Australia who was selling her life on a site called AMLFS.com (she couldn't use the full allmylifeforsale domain name, because Freyer had already sold it to the University of Iowa Museum of Art for \$1,165 after 34 bids).

Finally there was Lindsey Stowe Berns, a small woman in her late twenties who had bought the 4lb bag of sugar. 'I didn't really want the sugar,' she said, 'but I wanted something.' She was an art student too. Freyer had met Berns before on a previous trip to New York. They had gone to a dive called Subway, and as they chatted she agreed that next time he came to the city she would make cookies from the sugar. She was as good as her word, and her cookies were passed around for the panel and the audience. 'Because it's holiday time I put some red sprinkles on the top,' Berns explained. They tasted sweet and delicious. I asked Berns what she thought of John Freyer. She said, 'I think he should have called the site All John's Charisma For Sale.'

Back in London, I logged into eBay to find that two people had bid on my dog-eared copy of his book. A person called Sally5825 had bid £5, but had been outbid by Bossjoan, who had offered £5.50. By the auction's close no one had

outbid Bossjoan. She lived in Edmond, Oklahoma, and I sent her the following message. 'Congratulations on winning the book. I'm sure you'll enjoy it. I met the author last week and he was a nice guy. He said that the film rights had just been bought by Heyday Films, run by David Heyman, the producer of the Harry Potter movies, so I guess the allmylifeforsale story has a lot of life in it yet. I'll go to the post office on Monday to get it weighed and email you the total cost. Do you want me to try to clean the book of its food stains before I send it?'

She asked me to clean what I could. The cheapest postage was £8.21, making a total of £13.71, more than the price of a new copy of the book in the UK and the US. She sent me the money by eCheck the next day. She said she was happy to be a part of the project.