

This Is a Story About Loss

On losing things, losing people, and finding God at Unclaimed Baggage Center

STEPHIE GROB PLANTE • Oct 20, 2015, 10:00a • Photos by Cary Norton

Oh, that's so *sad*." This is how my mom responds when I describe the Unclaimed Baggage Center, the reason I've found myself in Scottsboro, Alabama. Over the phone I tell her that UBC is a store full of items that people have left on planes and trains, lost luggage and bags never reunited with their owners, forgotten or misplaced stuff now available to the public at reduced prices.

I haven't been to the store yet; I've only just checked into the Hampton Inn, after driving an hour from Huntsville International Airport, after taking two planes before that. I can tell by the softness in my mom's voice that she's really thinking about it, hard. She heard "lost" and she's honing in on that, what it would feel like to lose your belongings. "So sad," she says again.

This is a story about loss.

When I first looked at [UBC's website](#) months ago, I felt that same twinge of, "It's a store full of lost stuff? That *sucks*." I figured I would write a quirky piece about a kooky store, to compensate for the inherent sadness. But my world changed this summer, and now I'm here in Alabama, and the idea of losing stuff on an airplane feels decidedly less heavy.



I lost my lifelong best friend in July.

Julia was a passenger in a car struck by a drunk driver. Her younger sister says that she was snatched, and that's really the only word there is for it, to qualify the immediacy, the searing pain, the lingering disbelief. Everyone in her world — her parents and siblings, her huge yet tight-knit extended family, her devoted friends, her co-workers, and me, her "BFF!F" (we add an exclamation point for emphasis and an extra "F" for an extra "forever") from preschool onward — says the same thing: Julia was the most constant, life-affirming presence in all of our lives.

I told the 600 people that gathered for her memorial that, "Our bond over the past 26 years is the most steadfast thing I know and ever will know." I couldn't bring myself to say "was." Because saying that "our bond was," or "Julia was" felt, and feels, so wrong. I hate that the only way I can now say "Julia is," in present tense, is to say that Julia is gone.

After July, and everything that's followed since, alongside every tragic, awful thing that happens everywhere every day, because our loss is far from unique, how could losing any single, inanimate thing feel sad ever again?

"People come in and go, 'Wow, that's a lot of lost baggage,'" says Brenda Cantrell, Unclaimed Baggage Center's brand ambassador, and my tour guide during my two-day visit in September. "But you've got to put it into perspective: we're the only place in America that does this."

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To put it into even sharper perspective, Unclaimed Baggage Center occupies more than 40,000 square feet. The store covers an entire city block.

"When you think about the volume of travel, and it's less than one half of one percent of all bags that go unclaimed, it's enough to stock this store. And we don't sell everything we get either. We donate and recycle and throw away more than half of what we receive."

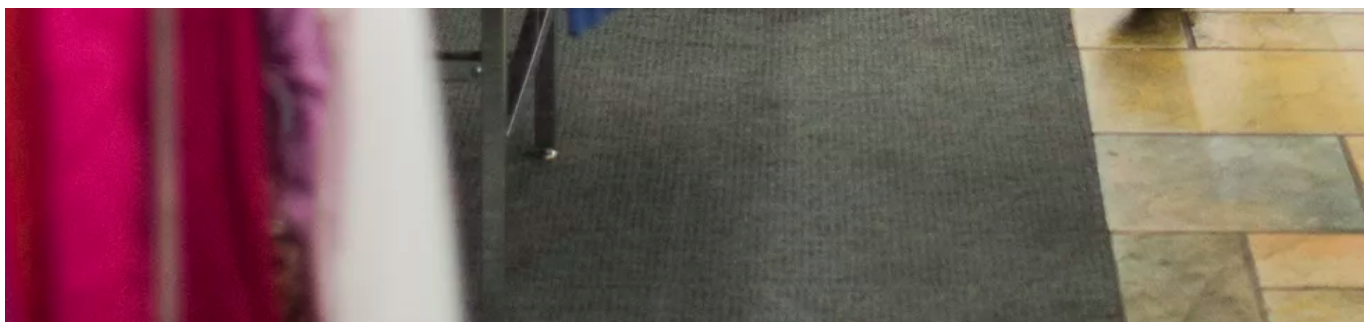
Some of what's left on the racks and the shelves is the stuff of fashion dreams. There's a pair of black velvet, gold-soled, peep-toe platforms by Prada. Retail price: 579.63€. For sale at Unclaimed Baggage: 267.51€. There's an Hermès black lambskin blanket-scarf — blarf? — that has certainly never seen a moment of inclement weather. It's not available in Hermès stores or online at the moment; it'll sell at Unclaimed for 668.8€.

UBC prices its found items at anywhere from 20 to 80 percent off suggested retail, says Brenda who's been with the company for 17 years. The high-end, designer stuff is mixed in with lower priced items on the main floor. Like most thrift stores and vintage shops, you need to browse item by item for the real gems, but the similarities to other **second-hand retailers** really end there.

"We're not Goodwill," Brenda explains. "These items were not donated to us, and they were not unwanted, which is the premise for most thrift stores. Ours are things that people wanted. They packed them and wanted to carry them on to their destination, so it's usually their better item

A glass showcase of wedding bands and engagement rings alone is gawk-worthy. There's the diamond eternity band, 9.78 karats worth of stones, priced at 14,014.62€. A 4.8-karat emerald ring, surrounded by 5.2 karats of diamonds, appraises at 10,165.86€ — though it's yours at Unclaimed for just 6,100.4€. I joke to Brenda that you're practically *making* money off of a buy like that. She nods: "The way I look at it is there's good deals, great deals, and fantastic deals."





Forty-two thousand dollars is the appraisal for Unclaimed Baggage's current showpiece, an 18-karat gold-rope, diamond-encrusted bracelet. It is the highest ticket item in-store right now. UBC has priced it at just about half of the appraisal, at 19,438.19€. "How many diamonds are in this thing?" I ask my host as she happily lets me try on the wrist-sized equivalent of a medium-sized car, or a year's worth of college tuition, and pretend for a fun moment that it's mine. "A lot," she laughs.

"If you like bling-bling, we have Gucci," says 10-year UBC veteran Pat Gray from behind the counter as she moves around the watches displayed inside a vitrine. "Those are diamonds. You know what," she trails off, scanning the rows of watches below. "I'm not seeing the Lamborghini watch, so perhaps the Lamborghini watch has sold. I've been on vacation for a few days, so maybe it sold while I was away." She holds her index finger up to the face of the Gucci watch, to scale. "Diamond to diamond, you've got two inches. Those are some nice-looking diamonds in there, too."

Can you believe they found that? Can you believe someone lost that?

That watch will sell for 2,575.34€. Right alongside it sits an 18-karat gold Ralph Lauren watch with a brown leather strap. Apart from the high-quality metal, it's pretty average-seeming. So why is it priced at 13,376.14€? Pat flips it over, and shows me the engraving on the back: "WITH GRATITUDE — RL 2009."

"If this was a gift from Ralph Lauren to me," she says, "I would definitely want it back."

Across the parking lot, a one-time auto body shop now houses UBC Etc., UBC's home goods, beauty supply, kids' clothing, and last-chance clearance operation. There you can buy a bag of Las Vegas souvenir magnets for 2.93€, an oversized Woody from *Toy Story* headpiece that look near theme park quality for 32.09€, any number of Tervis double-insulated cups, flat irons as far as the eye can see, an Eddie Bauer baby carrier, a memory foam mattress topper, an As Seen on TV pancake flipper, a bin's worth of flip phones (the better-quality iPads, laptops, and DSLR cameras are over in the main building), pillboxes, makeup cases, toiletries, novelty artwork, etc. (truly, "etc.") all for low, low, obscenely low prices. UBC Etc. is where store regulars and Scottsboro locals shop. A lot of the goods are unclaimed freight and cargo, stuff that very well may have fallen off the back of a shipping truck.

Out-of-town visitors come for the big finds in the main building, though. To wit, Unclaimed Baggage Center is one of the **most popular tourist destinations in Alabama**. Folks plan special trips, as well as venture off I-565 en route to farther destinations, to ogle loot like the men's platinum Rolex that retailed for 57,071.52€, and sold last year — just two weeks after its arrival on the sales floor — for 28,535.76€.

"Someone was probably pretty sad that he lost that," says Kayla Wilborn during Tuesday's **Baggage Experience**, the six-day-a-week presentation that gives customers a taste of "what it's like to open an unprocessed bag at Unclaimed Baggage." The genuine Rolex was originally thought to be fake before it was appraised, and it's something of a pride point for the Unclaim Baggage team. I myself am overcome with the flush of awe that gets most visitors at UBC: can you believe they *found* that? Can you believe someone *lost* that?



"Pretty sad" is, most likely, something of an understatement for the sensation the person who lost that Rolex must have felt. But also, what was that guy thinking when he packed that Rolex in his bag? Why didn't he take his bag off the plane, or why didn't he pick his bag up at security or did he take this platinum costs-as-much-as-a-house-down-payment watch off in his seat, or did he leave it in the airplane lavatory? How long was it before he knew it was gone?

"We get it all the time," sighs Pat. "'Why? Why would anybody want to pack this?' And we're like 'We don't know.'"

Depending on how big your empathy quotient is for probable millionaires, it may be somewhat challenging to relate personally to the loss of a dearly beloved Rolex. But what of the wedding band that very well may have slipped off someone's hand as he slept in an air-conditioned cabin? What about an expensive camera that might've cost its original owner a substantial amount of savings? Or a poor-quality suitcase with a broken handle and a busted wheel, packed full of someone's best clothes? It does get sad. I feel that sadness creep in as I wander the aisles and graze my fingertips over the countless items that belonged to countless others.

UBC gets new merchandise — "thousands of new items" — every single day. How many of those thousands mean something? How many mean everything?

"Airlines have 90 days to reunite bags with their owners," says Brenda, walking me through the process. "I would say over 99.9 percent of the bags get reunited with their owners. Most of it happens within 24 to 48 hours, and then the next big chunk happens within the first five days, and then it gets harder over those next 90 days. We've heard plenty of stories where you get in 80, 90 days and bags get reunited, but at that point, a claims process takes place. If you had lost your bag, you'd get some type of settlement based on what they're able to validate for your claim."

Okay, so, those who lose expensive items are compensated, theoretically. But what about the super private, personal stuff? Laptops follow Department of Defense protocol, getting secure-wiped back to factory settings, says Brenda. I ask her if they find many journals, or photo albums, or camera memory cards, belongings that can hardly be quantified with any solid price tag. The stuff that no one but the owner would ever want.

Brenda normally speaks a half-marathon a minute. Her enthusiasm for UBC is contagious, and I catch it frequently as she shows me around the sprawling store. But when I bring up the question of journals and photo albums, the light in her eyes dims for a moment, and her voice grows quiet: "We do, and we destroy all that. Photo albums, and... well, that's a sad one there."

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"Some items in jewelry, especially in the rings, are antique," says Pat. "To me, those were probably very important items for the individuals that owned them, because maybe they'd been passed down for generations. And you're thinking, 'Oh wow, I really do feel for those people,' because there's no amount of money that can cover that. Even if it only cost 20 bucks, to you, it's worth 25,000 or more."

The thing I'm most terrified of losing is my *chai* necklace. It's 14-karat gold, but slight: a flat pendant bearing two Hebrew letters side-by-side, a *chet* and a *yud*, strung onto a simple gold chain. It rests at the top most tip of my sternum. I wear it every day. I sleep in it, I shower in it. My maternal grandpa, who I called "Poppy," or "Pop" for short, gave it to me for my bat mitzva. I'm sure there were periods of time between the ages of 13 and 29 when I didn't wear it, but those gaps were brief and forgettable. I wear it because it reminds me of my Pop, not because it reminds me of my faith. I've never considered myself religious, despite the half-dozen years I spent at Jewish day school.

Chai is the Hebrew word for "life."



Nearly every photo that exists of me, there it is, front and center, glinting off the camera's flash. I do remove it whenever I go swimming, and those rare necklace-less excursions are marked by frequent jolts of "I'M NOT WEARING MY NECKLACE" panic, followed by internal, necessary reassurance that "Stephie, you took it off before you left the house, and it's safe," followed then by the fear that somehow the *chai* unzipped the satin case I secured it in, slipped out of the drawer I tucked the satin case into (the drawer that I checked three times before leaving the house), and flitted away, never to be seen or heard from — let alone worn — ever again.

The fear, I know, is irrational, but it feels impossible to abate. I've developed a nervous tick over the years where my fingers check for the pendant with zero communication from my brain. One time following this routine check, I discovered that the pendant was indeed gone. I was on a New York subway platform and I almost threw up. I found my *chai*, loose, tucked into the fold of my scarf.

I don't know how much my necklace cost my Pop back in 1999. Nor do I know how much my engagement ring cost my husband in 2010 ("Um, a *lot?*" he says). And I don't know how much it cost Julia's mom to buy Julia's sisters, cousin, and me matching "J" bracelets this past summer. The price is inconsequential, of course. I feel nauseous imagining myself losing any of those pieces on a plane, or in an unclaimed piece of luggage — or on a boat in the middle of a 532-foot deep lake.

Immediately before arriving in Scottsboro to visit UBC, I meet Julia's family at Lake Mead, to mourn the single greatest loss of our lives, and to celebrate her. We had talked about spreading her ashes that weekend, but ultimately decided to wait. Julia's mom wants to keep them in the house a little longer.

All I know is that I can't bear the thought of losing my most valuable stuff, the totems of those most precious to me: my grandpa, my spouse, and my best friend forever, forever.

We laugh hard, we cry hard, we sing hard. Out on the water, every emotion functions at maximum capacity. It feels healing and devastating and magical all at once. Days later, as I zombie-walk through the aisles of Unclaimed Baggage, I can't parse the sadness of that weekend from the joy of the same trip.

And then I remember that day at Lake Mead when our boat almost capsized in the storm.

To be clear, it didn't *really* almost capsize, because there wasn't *really* a storm. It rained, lightly. But I'm an alarmist, and the kinda-gray clouds, sorta-choppy water, and slightly-rocking boat were enough for me to crawl into the bow, unknit the canvas tote bag I'd knotted several times back on the dock for safety, and retrieve my *chai* necklace, engagement ring, and "J" bracelet from the jewelry box I'd sealed inside a Ziplock bag.

I find two of Julia's cousins in the water, drinking beers. I wade in gingerly, wearing everything.

"Well," I say. "I figured if I'm going over, I better have all my jewelry on."

They laugh (because I'm pretty funny), and I laugh (because I know I'm being deranged), but now, in Alabama, I'm still thinking about it. I really did feel panicked. I felt worried enough that I didn't trust my jewelry back in the motel room out of my sight, but I didn't trust my jewelry on my person while I swam and wakeboarded either, and then I *needed* it on me in case disaster struck. For what, though? To keep me safe? Am I superstitious enough to believe that? All I know is that I can't bear the thought of losing my most valuable stuff, the totems of those most precious to me: my grandpa, my spouse, and my best friend forever, forever.

Here, in no particular order, are some of the weirder objects Unclaimed Baggage has recovered over the years:

A turtle shell;

A xylophone whose black box is marked NEIL DIAMOND in white chalk;

A homemade model of the HMS Surprise;

A pair of giant drumsticks made out of a yard of solid wood;

A helicon tuba, circa 1909;

A leather-bound French newspaper from 1934;

Antique Finnish skis;

A WWII-era Japanese Samurai sword;

A vintage 8mm film collection containing *The Dwarves Dilemma*, *The Jetsons*, *World Without Sound* and *NBA Highlights 1970*;

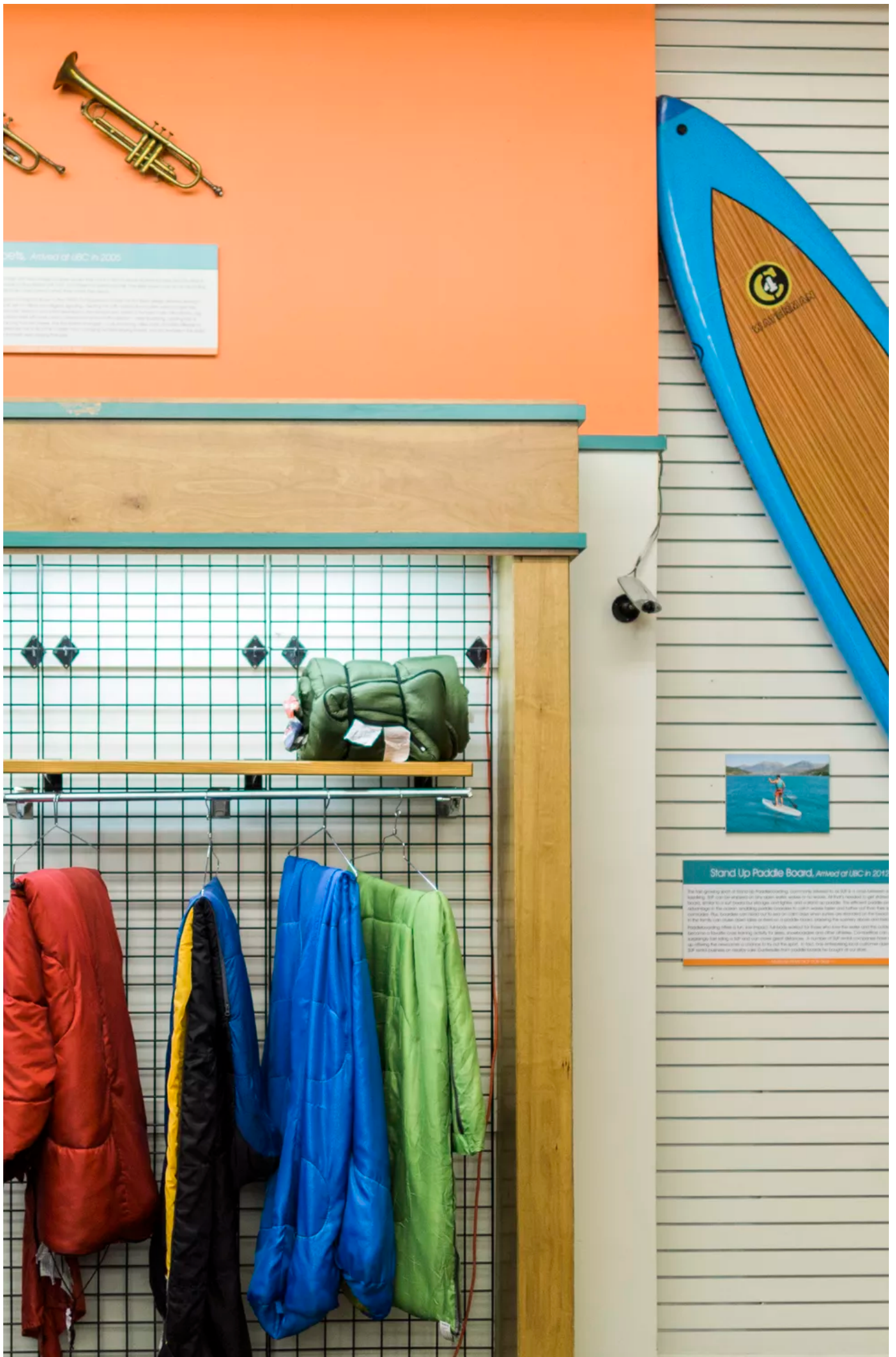
A pair of McDonald's Golden Arches;

A 43-karat raw emerald that appraised at 28,535.76€;

A human-sized papier-mâché Tinkerbell;

A unicycle;

And a live snake, found in the side of a duffel bag.





All of the above, with the exception of the jumbo-sized emerald and the live snake, are featured proudly around the perimeter of the main store, hung where wall meets ceiling as part of UBC Found Treasures collection. The emerald sold. The snake is long gone.

"There is a cemetery behind us, and we let it go, dead or alive," says Brenda, with something of the same airiness you might attribute to pitching pennies in a fountain. "So yeah, he's back there I guess, somewhere."

The snake's arrival at UBC preceded Brenda's. She started at the company 17 years ago as a newly minted college grad and mother to a four-year-old son. She first worked at the guest services desk, and ultimately became the face and voice of the company, making media appearances on the *Today Show*, most recently, and *The Late Show with David Letterman* back in 2007 when she was the 31-year-old director of retail sales and marketing.

Unclaimed Baggage is a family-run business, founded by Doyle Owens and his wife Sue in 1977 and currently under the leadership of the older of their two sons, Bryan, who bought the company from his parents in 1995. Most everyone I meet at UBC, employees and regular customers alike, has known the Owenses as long as they've lived in Scottsboro, a smallish town of about 15,000. It's the type of smallish town that boasts a historic downtown square, a

Bible study group, and so on. She shows me her wedding band.

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"Mine was a man's wedding band, it was a platinum wedding band, and, you know, when you're young and on a tight budget — I didn't have a problem with it. This actually had a man's name engraved in it, and it was probably the only platinum one we had in the case for the size I was looking for, so I just took it down to the local jeweler and he buffed it out, and resized it for me and I got my ring for like 133.76€ instead of four or five hundred. Worked for me."

Her best recent find? Sock matchers. "People go, 'What's your favorite thing?' And they're expecting something grandiose, but it's a sock keeper-together thing from Germany for a quarter." So you don't lose your socks? "So I don't lose my socks!"

Brenda is not an Owen by blood, but the blood that pulses through her veins, instilling her with enviable energy, is Unclaimed Baggage blood, through and through.

"I remember standing in line to get in on Saturday mornings with my mom," recalls Brenda. "I remember my fifth grade class picture's in a dress from here. I remember buying a green raincoat, and getting home and finding earrings in the pocket. I don't know if the traveler left them in there, or somebody had dropped them in there — I didn't know what shoplifting was then, and somebody may have dropped them in for all I know — but I just remember feeling excited that I found earrings. They weren't my style, but it was like, 'Oh, I found a treasure!'"

That excitement of unearthing new fortune hardly faded once Brenda became an adult, nor has it dulled for the overwhelming number of native Scottsborians who shop here to this day, even if the found treasures in question are comparatively mundane. They get just as excited about sprinkler heads and contact tubing and car seats and silver enamel fish platters as they do about fine gems, designer clothes, and professional-grade electronics. Unclaimed Baggage has been so much a part of their lives — often for nearly their entire lives — that removing UBC from their day-to-day is pretty much impossible.

Lisa Reese has shopped at UBC for 43 of the store's 45 years. Her husband, Mark, "isn't from here" — he's shopped at UBC for "only 25," he laughs. Keshia Gardner stops us in the parking lot between the main building and Etc. to tell Brenda that she used to sneak out of the upstairs room that is now Brenda's office with the childhood friend who lived there before Mr. Owens purchased the building. and then informs her. "I'm thinking I'm going to wipe you out" of a new

Brenda finds Linda Camp in the hallway and surveys her shopping cart. "When I see her husband in town he goes, 'I tried to call Linda, and she didn't answer, so that must mean that she's at Unclaimed.'" The buildings are made entirely of metal and afford terrible cell service, Brenda explains. "I'm like, 'I don't know, I didn't see her...'" They both giggle, because of course Brenda saw her. Linda shops at UBC several times a week.

The thing I can't get over during my Unclaimed pilgrimage is the warmth: between Brenda and her regulars, between longtime UBC employees and relatively new recruits, between salespeo

and wide-eyed first-timers, and between locals who meet at the store *on their lunch breaks* for *fun*. Like Abby Gentry Benson.

When I first meet Abby, she's dressed in a paint-splattered denim work shirt, and she's appalled at what she's wearing: "Can you believe I'm getting interviewed in this!" Luckily, though, she's carrying what she calls her "Unclaimed claim to fame" in a jewelry box inside a Ziplock inside her Louis Vuitton bag. (Clearly, we get each other.)

"Last time I had it appraised, it was 13,376.14€," she says as she slides the sparkling ring onto her finger. Two long, slender diamonds sparkle in the center, surrounded by a box edge of smaller diamonds. "I paid 4,012.84€ for it. Like, years ago. The beauty of this is it's 29 diamonds, I think. The baguettes are unusually large baguettes. That's where the cost is."

The rundown of Abby's Unclaimed purchases is extensive, but hardly exhaustive, she assures me: a big Louis Vuitton suitcase, a small Prada bag, a fox fur coat, two minks, a mink shawl that she keeps on the foot of her bed, a sheared beaver coat, a chinchilla jacket, pearls, pearls and diamonds, platinum and diamonds, bangles, all her son's clothes since he was an "itty-bitty baby."

"Listen," she says the next day, after I ask her to come back decked out in all her favorite Unclaimed pieces for our photographer. "I started looking around in my house, and I mean, all my clothes... everything. *Everything*." Does she shop anywhere else? "Not usually. Really, I don't love Unclaimed Baggage. It's like home away from home to me."

She started shopping at Unclaimed when she was 10 years old, on the day it opened. Her father Judge R.I. Gentry, opened Scottsboro Antiques the same year that Doyle Owens opened UBC. The two men were friends; Gentry even installed UBC's original alarm system.

"Mr. Owens first did bus lines' luggage," Abby recalls. "He would just buy the suitcases and dump them on tables, and we'd go through it."

Abby's father passed away nine years ago. The antique shop, that she now runs, is just a half block down from UBC, so it's not unusual for Abby to come over for lunch, or to see if any exciting new finds have come in, or to chat with her lifelong friends: her ladies at the jewelry counter, the head of security who graduated high school with her ("I graduated high school when I was 12," Abby quips), the cashier who used to babysit her now 21-year-old son.

Abby first met Brenda when their boys were in daycare together, and her cousin Hal has worked at UBC for 30 years. I repeatedly ask Abby if she secretly works for UBC too. She does not.

"Well, the Owens family is like family to me," she says. "And, really I guess, the townspeople of Scottsboro built this, before internet and before anything, it was just word of mouth."

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Mr. Owens — as he's called by Brenda, Abby, and everyone who knows and reveres him, which everyone I meet at UBC — says that founding Unclaimed Baggage Center was a stroke of luck happened "by chance, really."

In 1970, he was working at Jackson County's Foreign Bureau Insurance Company, an agency that mainly catered to farmers. A friend who worked in the baggage tracing department for Trailways bus line called him and presented an opportunity: "He said, 'Let me run something for you. We have usually at least 300 bags a month that for some reason or another, we can't get back to the owner.' He said, 'Get your truck, get up here, and see what you can do.'"

I put a small ad in Scottsboro's local paper that read, "Unclaimed Baggage, open Wednesday night 5 until 8, and Saturday 8 until 12." Husband and wife set the contents of the 110 suitcases out on a few folding tables. And then, about 10 minutes before they planned to open the doors for the first time, Mr. Owens looked out the window.

"I said, 'Come here, let me show you something.' And there was a yard full of people waiting to get in that had their curiosity riled. I called my friend at Trailways and I said, 'I'm coming back with a bigger truck.'"

Now, nearly half a century later, Unclaimed Baggage has contracts with every major domestic airline, plus Amtrak. Originally a side venture for an insurance agent and a school teacher, Unclaimed Baggage has evolved into a viable, newsworthy, unique business that attracts a million visitors a year, according to Abby, Unclaimed's unofficial mascot.

Abby, like everyone who frequents UBC's racks, has no qualms about buying other people's lost stuff. Of the half-bottles of Chanel No. 5 she purchases whenever they're available at Unclaimed she explains, "If you're buying Chanel, I know you're my sister anyway. You know, we're kind of

spirits." The more personal, one-of-a-kind items do give her pause — but in a way that surprises even affects, me.

"One time I bought a sterling baby cup here from like 1925, and it was engraved. It sat here forever. I bought it, just to get it out of the case. And I have a gold charm football that has a monogram on the back, 'Love Henry' or something. I think it's from 1942. And I thought, 'Y'know somebody lost this.' So I look at it as, I'm the caregiver for it."

Because, after a certain point, there's not much that can be done to reunite these items with their people, right?

Abby agrees, but is quick to counter, "There was a class ring I saw here, and I finally got in touch with the person. It had the person's name and the college, and I Googled and contacted the person and finally found him, and I said, 'You know, your ring is at Unclaimed Baggage.'"

Brenda tells me about the Atlanta man who bought a pair of ski boots for his wife that turned out to be the very same pair of ski boots she'd lost on a flight several years earlier (her maiden name inked on the underside of the boots' tongues and all), and about the Montana woman who recognized the brand stamped onto a specialty horse saddle and contacted the artisan to tell her that her leatherwork had been recovered at UBC. Bing Crosby's widow, Kathryn Crosby, was famously reunited with a needlepoint she'd left on a plane that ended up at UBC too. But those cases are extremely rare. Most lost items remain lost, until they're found by someone else.

"It's unclaimed stuff, and whoever owns it next is the caregiver till we're through with it, and then they pass it on."

"I'm sentimental," says Abby, her voice taking on a melancholy tone that's impossible to ignore. "Was that man thinking when he carved this thing? Was his wife saying dinner's ready, or were his kids in trouble or happy, or did he just have a baby or whatever — or did somebody get engaged with some of these rings? There's been wedding dresses lost, all kinds of stuff. But I look at it as, it's unclaimed stuff, and whoever owns it next is the caregiver till we're through with it, and then they pass it on."

"Abby's got a heart like that," says Brenda.

Heart. That's it. That's what I feel when I meet these people, chat with them, hear them catch up with each other, watch them park their cars and smile as they approach the entrance. Abby wants to know what I'm doing for dinner. Eating alone on the road is not unusual, as far as I'm concerned. But Abby is very, very concerned.

"You don't have anyone to eat dinner with?"

Let's talk about God.

I'm Jewish. And like many good Jews, especially Jews with a formal religious education, I get nervous when Christians bring up Christianity. This is not a judgment thing, by any means. It's anxiety — the anxiety of feeling out of place for not believing.

My all-time favorite joke is a riff between Michael Ian Black and Michael Showalter (full disclosure: my favorite former employers) on their gone-too-soon Comedy Central show *Stella*

Showalter: I know there's something out there, but I don't know if I wanna call it "God."

Black: Okay, 'cause, like, I believe in God...

Showalter: Right.

Black: ...But I don't know that I think God is some guy on a throne with a long white beard.

Showalter: Right. Like, to me, God is, like, it could be anything. It could be like...

Black: Literally, it could be this table.

Showalter: It could be — totally be this table. *It is the table.*

I love that joke. Part of the reason I love that joke is that it pretty perfectly sums up a lot of my Jewish-ish angst of being raised in a religion that encourages questions, but offers little to nothing in the way of answers. Questions beget more questions. It's hard to believe when half the time you have no idea what your liturgy is talking about, and the other half you feel unnerved by it

Blind faith is extremely rare in Judaism. My guess is that a lot of rabbis and cantors do feel it, but I don't know many lay Jews who believe as fiercely in God's existence as, say, Pat Gray, whose favorite purchase at Unclaimed Baggage, in her 10 years of working here, is the Christian devotional book she studies every night. Or as sincerely as Abby Gentry Benson, who invites me to see *War Room*, a recently released movie about the power of prayer, with her. Or as completely as Julia's family.

"Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders," goes the chorus to **one of the songs** performed at Julia's memorial. "Let me walk upon the waters / Wherever you would call me / Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander / And my faith will be made stronger / In the presence of my Savior."

In the church, at Julia's memorial, I didn't know what to make of that. Where my trust is without borders? Why should I trust so freely? In what? And how?

There's that cliché of losing everything and finding faith. Well, it's a cliché because it's true. Loss, cataclysmic loss, changes you.

Salesperson Amanda Burt has only worked at Unclaimed Baggage for just over a year, a relative newcomer in these parts: "I'm happy. They gave me a job when I really, really needed it." When Brenda shrugs off the credit, citing that Amanda is a sweetheart, Amanda's cheeks turn pink as she interjects, "Y'all just bring it out in me!"

For as many employees that are thankful for the job, there are as many others who could easily work somewhere else, but choose not to.

Six hours, and many, many conversations, later, UBC's head of security — who would prefer to remain anonymous, lest his cover be blown — echoes that gratitude: "I couldn't get a job in the town." He's now been at UBC for 10 years. Jean Holcomb drives 60 miles each way to work at Unclaimed Baggage, something she's done for 22 years. Amanda, too, commutes two hours a day.

There's a pattern here. For as many employees that are thankful for the job, there are as many others who could easily work somewhere else, but choose not to. They're loyal. And that same dedication can be found in customers who make ritualized visits to Unclaimed Baggage as a

Scottsboro doesn't have a lot of handicapped stores, so I always take him here."

Unclaimed Baggage will hold its annual Ski Sale on November 7. This will be the event's 35th year. It's what Brenda calls their "Black Friday" — customers camp outside overnight to score major deals on snow and ski equipment, as well as high-quality outerwear. Last year between 3,000 and 4,000 flocked to shop the sale. But as with so much else at UBC, it's not just about shopping. It's about the experience, and the camaraderie.

"This is very much a regional event that people come in for," says Brenda. "They've gotten very crafty, and will hang hammocks between the concrete columns. Last couple years we started ordering pizza for them and roasting s'mores, and they'll bring their big screen TVs." It sounds like tailgating, I say. "That's exactly what it is!" She's delighted. "It's a Ski Sale tailgate!"

Abby says that last year she and her son stayed after the sale was over to help clean up. I say that was nice of them, considering that they're not employees of the store. She furrows her brow and shakes her head and has this look all over her, the look that says "c'mon," without needing to

actually say the words, and I realize that being an employee or not being an employee is so besides the point. How could she *not* stay to help clean up?

Let's be clear: the Ski Sale is a for-profit venture. Unclaimed Baggage is a private, for-profit company. If money is found in any of the bags that come into the center for processing, that money becomes the property of Unclaimed Baggage. But those windfalls, along with regular donations of goods, funds, and time, allow Unclaimed Baggage to give back. Remember, over 50 percent of what comes into UBC is either donated, recycled, or thrown away, and the company tries to err on the side of donation.

"We call it our Reclaimed for Good program," says Brenda. "What was once lost is now reclaimed for good."

Donations include, but are not limited to eyeglasses and sunglasses to Lion's Club International; painted luggage for foster children through Luv Luggage; pallets of supplies for medical missions through Samaritan's Purse; stuffed animals and blankets to local animal shelters; clothes to Salvation Army, Ronald McDonald House, and local homeless shelters; and medical supplies like nebulizers, wheelchairs, walkers, and oxygen machines to a Georgia-based non-profit.

Brenda spots a woman pushing two oversized, hard-cased wheeled suitcases towards the exit, and runs to flag her down. She introduces me to Karen Walker, who, along with her husband, will be leading her 10th annual mission trip to Ecuador. UBC publicizes much of its Reclaimed for Good program, but this donation is comparatively much smaller than most. All Unclaimed giving this trip is the aforementioned pair of large, hard plastic suitcases; but according to Karen, the donation is huge.

"We call it our Reclaimed for Good program. What was once lost is now reclaimed for good."

"Oh they are very gracious," she says. "Because we don't bring these suitcases back. We donate them to the ministry over there." Karen and her husband belong to Agape Baptist here in Scottsboro, and are making the trip on their church's behalf with International Church Plante. They are allowed to take two 50-pound suitcases into Ecuador, and they pack them full of vitamins, medicines, eyeglasses, gloves, and school supplies. They do take some Bibles too, says Karen, but she adds that the emphasis is on setting up the medical clinics, because the water quality in Ecuador is so poor. "If we have any extra supplies that are left over, they're able to be

whicis.

Karen says that she and her husband considered visiting other countries in need, but the relationships they've formed in Ecuador are as close as kin. "The first year I went, Sara, one of our helpers, she's Ecuadorian, she was 16 years old, and now she's 26. In 10 years, we've seen her marry, have children, and she named her little one, the one that was born while we were over there four years ago, they named him after our son, Caleb. So it's like going home. We think, well, we might go somewhere else, but our heart is in Ecuador." Karen and her husband head overseas on October 16th.

And in a strange bit of coincidence, October 16th is the date for another charity event, one that is particularly close to Brenda's heart: Couture for a Cure, a fashion show timed to Breast Cancer Awareness Month. "That's my baby," says Brenda. All models in the fashion show are cancer fighters and survivors who will sport high-end pink items that have come through UBC and all money raised will go to Scottsboro's local patient assistance fund for breast cancer patients. Last year, a woman took her wig off on the runway; this year's luncheon surpassed its \$8,917.42 fundraising goal two weeks ahead of the event date.

"We try to run the business as Christians should, as believers should, and give credit to the Lord for the blessings and the progress of the company."

The fashion show is a decade old, but the Reclaimed for Good program is hardly new. Charity has been a part of Unclaimed Baggage's company manifesto from day one.

"They're just the sweetest, very strong Christian family," Abby says of the Owenses. We're not even talking about charity at this point. This is how she explains the palpable familial atmosphere that pervades the entire Unclaimed Baggage experience.

It's also how Mr. Owens himself explains it when I ask him the same question.

"Well, number one, is that we're Christians," he says. "And we're believers, and we try to run the business as Christians should, as believers should, and give credit to the Lord for the blessings and the progress of the company."

In the months since Julia has passed, I've felt empty and hollow, enraged and bitter and ugly, hopeless. Everything, all of it swims together in a sickening soup, and I never know what's going to come up and out in a wholly unpleasant way.

For those who loved her, there is no step-program to wade our way through. There are no separated stages of grief. We fall, and we get up, because we have to, and sometimes we lay

"I keep dancing," has become our collective motto. Julia had the song lyric tattooed on her foot. The girl loved **Robyn**.

When she first got that tattoo, I teased her. "Jewels, are you *always* going to love that song? Because that tattoo is, y'know, permanent."

"Yeah!" she said, and she bounced her shoulder a little as she said it, her go-to, playful half-shimmy. "Duh. It's Robyn!"

Now her mom, both sisters, a bunch of her cousins, aunts, and several friends are tattooed with "I keep dancing" too. It means something new now, something essential.

None of us ever imagined we'd tattoo ourselves. I, for one, am afraid of needles. But now her mom has "Ecc. 3:4" in block print ("A time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance..."), her brother has "Revelation 21:4" in script ("There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain..."), her cousin has her initials, and I have a wireframe jewel on my wrist, for 1 Jewels. When I'm at my lowest, when it's a down day, my husband reminds me, "Get your power from your gemstone." It works. It's not lost on me how this is one totem that, barring some insane accident that ends with me losing my right arm, I can never lose.

Then there's that thing that I can't put my finger on, but I feel it whenever I share a Julia

dream, that we heard a string of her favorite songs on the radio, that we danced all night. I feel it whenever I'm with her family, who flew to Austin to surprise me for my birthday in August. I feel euphoric. I feel like I'm home. I feel like Julia's with us.

At Lake Mead, we sang The Beatles' "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da."

"Life goes on!" Julia's dad shouted, a wide boomerang of a smile on his face and tears in his eyes. We were all crying at that point. Laughing and crying and hollering at the top of our lungs because if we didn't holler the world would've surely crushed us. And I feel like now, I might've felt then, maybe a moment of... God?

Later, on Kol Nidre, I'll **live-stream a service** from Central Synagogue in New York to my home in Texas. I did the same last year, but my participation via satellite was rote, more out of obligation than any spiritual desire. I have zero memory of last year's sermon. This year's, however, makes me sit at rapt attention, astonished that a rabbi I have zero personal relationship with is able to articulate all the mumbo-jumbo (or, as my people call it, *mishigas*)

running through my brain these past several weeks. Rabbi Angela Buchdahl speaks, in her white robe and crimson striped *tallit*:

I asked a classroom full of Jewish adults, 'How many of you believe in God?' and there were only a few tentative hands. But when I asked for a time people had felt a divine presence of some kind, every hand went up. Everyone could name or describe a sacred moment where a transcendent presence felt undeniable. We've each had sacred moments where something makes us marvel. Chokes us up. We stop thinking and just feel. These moments take us beyond ourselves and connect us to something much bigger. It's not that God endows us with these experiences. God *is* these experiences. God can be as simple as a moment you can't describe. And just as hard.

So here I am, in Alabama, at the Unclaimed Baggage Center, overcome with wanting to know: when I lost, what did I find? There's no way that pre-July me, a perpetual pessimist, could stand in a store full of strangers' lost things and fixate so hard on how fortunate those who find these treasures are.

What do we find when we lose?

Brenda leads me to the collection of wedding dresses in a separate room that houses formal wear.

"You hope it's after the wedding and not before," she says. I ask her how she's able to separate from thinking about that, from wondering who lost this stunning, pristine Vera Wang gown. She tells me about an employee who bought her wedding dress and two flower girls' dresses here. None of the dresses needed alterations; they all fit perfectly.

"You're still buying somebody else's item," Brenda adds. "And then you realize, that this dress is going to make somebody's dream come true, for a fraction of the price. That's how you can feel better about it. It's going to make a difference. Whether it's glasses that are donated, or a wedding dress that's bought, it's going to make a difference in somebody's life."

There's joy not only in the discovery, but in the ability to give lost items a second chance — to make loss not feel so hopeless, so meaningless, so permanent. "Well, I used to have a saying," says Mr. Owens. "'It's too good to be through.' That's something, isn't it. That's something I've always kind of laughed about, and it's pretty true."

Let's face it: I'm in a vulnerable spot. But Mr. Owens is, more or less, preaching gospel to me at this point. He has no idea, I don't think. "It's too good to be through." I mean, that's life, isn't it? Life is awesome. Life goes on. And I replay in my mind the countless times I've felt waves of gratitude since July, even as waves of despair crashed over me too. I lost my best friend; I found her entire family.

I'm thinking about my July, when Mr. Owens mentions his. He lost his wife on July 4th. They'

"I come in about three times each day, come up in the morning, get a cup of coffee, and most of the time I eat lunch here, and then on into the afternoon I come back in here. It's lonesome around the house, there. So I get out, I come up here, and I meet friends, meet a lot of new customers, and a lot of the old customers." I tell him I'm so sorry for his loss; it feels like I'm offering the hollowest bit of nothing. But what else is there? "Yes," he says. "It's like losing an arm and a leg."

I know that when most people say they had a religious experience in a store, they mean something entirely different than what I'm about to say. But, go with me here: I found God at Unclaimed Baggage.

I found God the day Julia died, and I've found God every day since. I feel God in the people I love most deeply, and I feel God in the people I've just met. For the first time in my life, someone told me he's a believer, and I not only believe that he believes, I believe what he believes — that something grander than us, more merciful than us exists always beyond our reach. When we

lose what truly is most precious, someone, *something* is waiting to be their steward, and ours too.

We take care of each other. That's all we can do.

I drive back to Huntsville International Airport at 5:30 in the morning. It's still pitch black out flip on the radio. Lo: It's Praise Radio, 90.1 FM. (I could not make this up if I tried.)

The DJ says the station is noncommercial and listener-supported, a blend of "inspirational Christian, light urban gospel, and adult contemporary," and I quickly find that the playlist is peppered with some scripture. Normally, I'd change it. This morning, **I listen**.

You keep on blessing me

Over and over again

You woke me up this morning, started me on my way

You gave me strength to make, to make it through another day

The sun starts to break through the clouds and lighten the gray-blue sky. Did this radio DJ tin this specific song with the sunrise at 6:07 a.m.? If so, bravo. There's static on the radio, and C cuts in and out intermittently, but I'm determined to hear this through.

You keep on blessing me

Over and over again

Over and over again

It's not the most brilliant sunrise. I've seen those before, but it's too cloudy today.

And clouds are okay. I'm good with clouds, too. ■

Editor: Julia Rubin



