

Topics

Price Nostalgia

The Cost of Shoes

Not so many years ago, there was a series of two-picture magazine ads for men's shoes. Readers were challenged to distinguish the shoe on the left, the "expensive, hand-crafted Italian original," from the mass-produced imitation on the right. We noticed another magazine ad for men's shoes the other day and it gave us a jolt. In the old ads, it was the original that cost \$135. Now it is the knock-off.

We are, like most people, inured by now to inflation's specific surprises, knowing that it costs three dimes, not one nickel, to call the Bronx, or that it costs \$15 to pay for what used to be a \$5 parking ticket. With the rise in mortgage interest rates to 10 percent, heaven only knows the price of what was once idealized as "the \$100,000 house."

What we are not inured to is the sense of not knowing what *anything* costs anymore. We find ourselves indulging in what might be called price nostalgia; our longing is not for cheaper prices but for known prices. It seems to us that something economically and psychologically important is lost when people start losing track of how much it costs to buy a bottle of

milk, or whether the price for a pair of shoes is exorbitant, or only high. Without an informal framework of known relative prices, moorings slip and it is then that inflation seems truly invincible.

Finger-Lickin' Good

In no place is price nostalgia now more fitting than at the Monopoly board. To be charged a mere \$2 rent for landing on Mediterranean Avenue has always seemed quaint. The new Neiman-Marcus Christmas catalog offers a refinement that makes the game seem even more antique: Monopoly sets made of chocolate. There is dark chocolate for the board, lighter milk chocolate for the title deeds, winter-green for the houses and cinnamon for the hotels. Price: \$600.

It's an outrage. Proper Monopoly can, arguably, teach children thrift, and the virtue of investment. But \$600 to buy the board? Why, that's as much in real money as it costs to land on Connecticut Avenue with a hotel. The lessons conveyed by this variation are invidious: that, yes, there is always a Sugar Daddy; that the tax bite is not the only kind; and, worst, that it is im-

possible to do business with clean hands.

Back to the Cave

The ultimate hallowed spot, according to Neiman-Marcus, is a hole in the side of a mountain. The store's His-and-Her supergift this year is a pair of natural stone caves in Colorado fitted up as giant safe-deposit vaults. They are equipped with steel doors and multiple alarms, where the lucky recipients can stash away the extravagant gifts they received in other years, along with the bullion and the Renoirs.

However outrageous other Neiman-Marcus ideas for Christmas gifts have been — from His-and-Her windmills to solid gold bathtubs — this one marks an end of the line. The supergifts have always signaled pure, overreaching, big-spending pleasure. But this year, the big gift is not about pleasure at all. It is about security, about locking things up. When it comes to the point that people can no longer flaunt it or consume it but have to guard it, the spirit of Texas giving has gone awry. What Neiman-Marcus seems to be saying is, a solemn, safe and rather dull Christmas to us all.