



Are doctors charter members of the cult of consumption? I ask this because of a revelation I had last night when attending a journal club meeting at a colleague's home. Judging from the line of cars parked on the street, I figured I had the right address and parked my *circa* 1990 Mazda MPV behind a pristine Jaguar XK. Then I walked to the door, travelling past a new Porsche, a monster Olds Bravada, a couple of pert BMWs, a Mercedes SLK, a Lincoln LS and a Lexus GS. A lot of cars, a lot of initials, a long walk.

The home was gargantuan, far from the modest starter my wife and I had just bought at the other end of town. This was a finisher: marble pillars fronting an enclosed verandah, an immense front lawn with statuary and topiary, cobblestone walkways, a detached three-car garage.

I was awed. How could this be the right place? My colleague had only a few additional years of practice under his belt. Could those years have purchased this? I knocked on the front door. It opened into a sumptuous interior: hardwood floors alternated with ceramic tile; a spiral staircase wound up to the third story; each room had its own decor. The kitchen was open-concept; there my coworkers — all family doctors — gathered. Each of them owned one of the fine automobiles lined up outside. Amid all this opulence, I expected the host's kids (a boy of 10 and a girl of 14 — the entryway had *portraits*) to appear in polo gear, ready to be whisked to the green. But when the girl emerged from her bedroom, she was chewing gum and talking staccato on a cellphone. The boy slunk about with an MP3

player, checking in on us at five-minute intervals to see if the food had arrived.

I was half-expecting a five-course meal in this château until I heard the doorbell ring, followed by footsteps pounding down the stairs and rowdy shouts of "*Food's here!*" The kids reappeared. The host brought into the kitchen five large rectangular boxes: pizza.

The scene was like an all-doctor episode of the Beverly Hillbillies: substitute Granny's grits for a Domino's all-dressed and it'd be a perfect fit. The nouveau riche — expensive cars, well-appointed homes, family portraits — engorging themselves on déclassé pizza. I poke fun, but I must confess that as the evening wore on it was I who felt like the real hillbilly: I didn't drive the kind of car my peers did or live in a house like the one I was standing in. (Although I could identify with the pizza. In my house, pizza is a special treat.) I felt like a poor hick, a second-rate doctor who couldn't afford the trappings of the profession.

I thought about my nice small house near the train tracks in a quiet neighbourhood, and about how a Porsche has probably never been driven down my street. And I told myself: *But I'm happy with that; I don't like ostentation.* Yet why did I excuse myself early in the evening so that none of my colleagues would see my ugly MPV against the elegant fleet outside? Why was I embarrassed by my beat-up van, even though I drive it to the hospital every weekday and park it in one of the spots reserved for doctors? The fact that I drive an old car is no secret.

I guess the difference is that before last night I had never noticed *theirs*.

— Dr. Ursus

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