

LUCY HARPER

Finds 

WHAT MAKES ME STOP

Twelve stalls. Four I stopped at, eight I walked past, and
honestly why. From the other side of the table.

LUCY HARPER FINDS

I go to markets. That is the whole of it. Sunday car boots in a field with the grass still wet, covered markets on a Tuesday morning when it is raining and nobody much is about, the little Saturday ones in town squares, the Christmas ones when they come. I go because I like it. I like finding something nobody else has found yet and I like talking to the person who is selling it.

This is not me telling anyone how to run a business. I have never run a stall in my life and I would probably be terrible at it. What I do have is the other side of the table. I am the woman walking towards you with about three seconds of attention going spare, and in those three seconds I decide whether I am stopping or whether I am carrying on to the next one. Nobody ever tells you what happens in those three seconds, because the people it happens to just walk off.

So here are twelve stalls. Four I stopped at. Eight I did not. I have said honestly why, and for the eight I have said the one small thing that would have got me. None of it costs anything much. Most of it costs nothing at all.

I like all of these people. That is why I am being straight with them.



1. THE BRIC-A-BRAC TABLE, SUNDAY CAR BOOT

Wallpaper table, a bedsheet over it, and everything on it stacked two deep. Cups inside cups. A biscuit tin with the lid on and something rattling in it. A picture frame lying face down under a bundle of tea towels.

I walked on.

Not because there was nothing good on it. There almost certainly was something good on it. But I could not see a single whole object. My eye had nothing to land on, so it did not land, and my feet kept going. A table you have to excavate is a table most people walk past, because rummaging feels like a commitment and I had not committed to anything yet.

One thing: clear the front eighteen inches completely and put four things on it with space around them. Just four. The rest can stay stacked behind. Give me one thing to look at and I will do the rummaging myself.

2. THE PLANT STALL, SATURDAY TOWN SQUARE

Everything in the same black plastic pots, on the ground, in three long rows. The woman was watering at the back and she had lovely stuff, ferns and some little trailing things I would have liked.

I walked on.

It was all at ankle height. To look properly I would have had to crouch down in the middle of a busy walkway with my bag, and I was not going to do that with people behind me. Nothing was at the height where my eyes actually were.

One thing: get one plant up on something. A crate, a stool, an upturned bucket. One good one at chest height where I am already looking, and the rest can stay on the floor. The high one is what makes me stop, and once I have stopped, I will happily crouch.



One plant up on a crate at chest height. The rest can stay on the floor.

3. THE VINTAGE RAIL, COVERED MARKET, WET MORNING

Two rails, packed so tight the hangers would not slide. A cardboard sign taped to the end that said VINTAGE. Behind it a man on his phone who did not look up.

I walked on.

I have got nothing against a phone. It is a long day and I would be on mine too. But the rail was the problem: I could not move a single hanger without a proper shove, and clothes you cannot look at are clothes you cannot buy. Nobody flicks through a rail that fights back.

One thing: take a third of it off and put it in a box underneath, then space out what is left so it slides. You will sell more from two thirds you can look through than three thirds you cannot.

4. THE HONEY AND JAM TABLE, SUNDAY CAR BOOT

Small table, dark green cloth, three tiers made out of what looked like a wooden crate and a couple of bricks. Jars catching the light on the top tier. A little handwritten card by each one saying which was which, and one that said *this one is the one I have on toast*.



The one I stopped at. Height from a crate and two bricks, space around everything, and the light coming through the glass.

I stopped, and I bought.

That card did it. Not the honey, the card. It told me a person had made this and had an opinion about it, and I trust an opinion more than I trust a label.

! [Nine words in biro. This did more than the honey did.] (var/runs/magnet-images/card.png) Then she talked to me about the difference between the two dark ones for about four minutes and I would have bought both if I had had the cash on me.

The tiers mattered too. Height again. Everything catching light instead of lying flat.

5. THE TOOLS TABLE, COVERED MARKET

Trestle table, tools laid out flat and close together, mostly grey and mostly the same length. No prices anywhere. Good tools, I think, from what I could tell.

I walked on.

It looked like one grey object from a distance and I never got close enough to find out it was not. And I did not want to ask what anything cost, because asking means starting a conversation, and starting a conversation

means I might have to buy something to get out of it politely. I know that is my problem and not his. But I am not the only one who does it.

One thing: prices on things, even rough ones. A bit of card and a marker pen. Put a price on and I will pick it up, because now I can look without owing anybody anything.

6. THE SECONDHAND BOOKS, SATURDAY TOWN SQUARE

Boxes on the floor, spines up, the way books always are. Four boxes. All of them mixed together, so a gardening book and a thriller and a book about the war in the same six inches.

I walked on, and I nearly did not, because I do love a book box.

What lost me was that there was no reason to start. With no order at all there is no first box, so there is no beginning, so I am standing there looking at four identical boxes deciding which one to be in. It is a small decision but it was one too many.

One thing: one label on one box. Cookery, or Old Paperbacks, or Everything Under a Pound. It does not have to be a system. It just has to give me somewhere to put my hands first.

7. THE CANDLE MAKER, CHRISTMAS MARKET, EVENING

Little wooden hut, one string of warm lights, and a single candle lit at the front so you could smell it before you got there. Everything else unlit and stacked neat behind. He had a jug of something warm going for himself and the whole thing looked like somewhere you would want to stand for a minute.

I stopped, and I stayed about ten minutes.

The smell was the thing. He had put one lit candle where the air was moving towards the walkway and it did his advertising for him. That is a free thing. That is just knowing where the draught goes.

And the light. Everyone else had those white strip lights and he had the warm ones, and his hut looked like the inside of a house while everything either side looked like a hospital corridor.

8. THE RECORD CRATE, SUNDAY CAR BOOT

Three milk crates on the tailgate of a car, records upright, and a bloke sat in the driver's seat with the door open, facing the other way.

I walked on.

I was going to look. I put my hand out towards the crate and then I did not, because he was turned away and it felt like going through somebody's things while they were not looking. It is a daft feeling but I had it.

One thing: turn the chair. Not to talk to me. Just so I know I am allowed to touch the stock. Facing the crates with a book in your hand does more than facing away with an open sign.

9. THE JEWELLERY CASE, COVERED MARKET

Glass case, everything under it, small pieces on grey velvet. Neat and clean and clearly cared for. The light in there was that flat overhead white.

I walked on.

Under that light the silver looked dull and the stones looked like nothing. It was almost certainly lovely and the room was doing it a disservice. Glass under a strip light gives you glare on the top and shadow underneath and you cannot see through to the thing you are meant to be buying.

One thing: a cheap little clip light or one of those battery ones inside the case, angled down. Silver needs something to catch. In that room, whatever is shining is what gets looked at, and everything else is just furniture.

10. THE POTTERY, SATURDAY TOWN SQUARE

Wooden table, plain, and about nine pieces on it. Only nine. Big spaces between them. Two mugs, a jug, some bowls. Each one turned so you saw the nicest side. A folded sheet of paper propped up that said where the clay came from and how long each piece takes.

I stopped, and I picked things up, which I hardly ever do.

Nine things told me these were worth looking at individually. Ninety things would have told me they were stock. Same pottery, completely different message, and the only difference is what stayed in the van.

The bit about how long each one takes changed the price in my head before I had even seen the price. She did not have to say anything about value. The paper said it for her while she was serving somebody else.

11. THE HOT FOOD VAN, SUNDAY CAR BOOT

Van at the far end, near the exit. Good smells coming off it and a proper queue. Menu on a chalkboard up high on the side of the van.

I walked on, and I was hungry.

I could not read the board from the back of the queue. The writing was small and it was up above head height, so to know what they did I would have had to join a queue for something I could not see. So I did not join it, and I went and got a bag of chips somewhere else that had a board I could read from ten feet away.

One thing: a second board, low down, at the back end of where the queue forms. Same chalk, four items, big letters. People will join a queue for a thing they have decided on. They will not often join one to find out.

12. THE TOY AND GAME BOX, COVERED MARKET

A big box of loose toys, plastic mostly, and boxed games stacked beside it with the boxes facing the wall so you saw only the edges.

I walked on.

The boxes were the shame of it, because a game box front is one of the best looking things there is, all colour and pictures, and every single one was turned away. All I could see was a stack of grey cardboard edges. Meanwhile the loose box was a jumble that a child would love and an adult would not put a hand in.

One thing: turn three boxes to face out and lean them up against the stack. That is it. Thirty seconds and the whole table changes colour.

WHAT KEPT COMING UP

Twelve stalls, and honestly the same handful of things over and over.

Height. Nearly everything I walked past was flat on a table or down on the floor. Nearly everything I stopped at had something raised up where my eyes already were. A crate, a brick, a stool. This is the one that costs nothing and does the most.

Space. The four I stopped at all had fewer things out than the eight I did not. Every time I have thought a stall looked good, it turned out to have less on it. Things need room around them or they stop being things and start being stock.

Light. Warm beats white, and something catching light beats something not. In a covered market on a grey day, whatever is glowing is what gets looked at.

Permission. Prices on things, a face turned towards me, a label on a box. All small ways of saying you are allowed to look, you do not owe me anything. Without that I am working out the social cost of stopping, and quite often I decide it is not worth it and keep walking.

One opinion, written down. The honey card, the pottery paper. A sentence in your own handwriting saying which one you like or how it was made does more than anything printed. It works while you are busy with somebody else, and it makes me think there is a person here rather than a table.

None of this is about having better things. Every one of these stalls had good things on it. It is only about what I could see in the three seconds before I decided, and how easy you made it for me to stop.

I hope some of it is useful. I will see you at the next one.

Thank you for reading. I am at markets most weekends across the South East, and I write up what I find at lucyharperfinds.co.uk. If any of this was useful, or if you think I have got something wrong, I would genuinely like to know.