

"Murder at Eastern Columbia" is two novels in one -- both taking place in 1931 downtown Los Angeles. Here, the main character's alter ego talks about pawn shops and what they mean to him.

---

*I've spent a lot of time in pawn shops and pretty much hated every minute. I used them myself once in a while, of course; I visited them on occasion for help with a case: but every time I hated it. Every one of them held captive so many happy memories and told of so many desperate people and their desperate times.*

*I would look through the window at a set of shiny new golf clubs and wonder at their story. Had they been a gift from a loving wife to a deserving husband? Had she smiled with delight when he opened the box and figured out what was inside? Had he leapt to his feet and given her a big, thankful kiss? Had he told her how much he loved them and would think of her every time he played?*

*What happened between those happy times and now, when they sat here, covered with dust, unused and unloved? What happened to make the man pawn them? What had he said to his wife when discussing the state their finances had fallen into? Did she cry when he suggested the clubs? Did she admonish him to keep them, telling him that somehow "everything would turn out all right"? Did he lift his hand and wipe from her face the lone tear that had started to fall, smile at her and say "as long as we're together, everything will turn out all right"? Did she give his hand a squeeze, acknowledging that he was right, telling him that they were just "things" anyway? Did the money from the clubs save their house, or their car, or the life of their child who had come down with a pimple that turned out to be infected? Or did the money come too little and too late to save the house, the car, the kid?*

*I never knew the answers to those questions. That made them haunt me even more. It made me hate pawn shops more than that. I didn't want to see all the detritus of so many lives and have to always wonder what was behind each piece that sat there with a sad price tag on it. What was the price of happiness? I don't know; but I can tell you for sure it was more than the amount scribbled on the yellowing card propped up against the small velvet-lined box that held two gold wedding rings.*