

THE THRIFT SHOP DIARY

A Novel

By

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*To Adelia and Gilda, my sisters, my Muses, with all my love.*

## **PART I - Prelude**

**January, February, March, April**

Now lies the Earth all Danaë to the stars,  
And all thy heart lies open unto me.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson,  
“The Princess”

Just happened upon those lines, Danaë, in a poetry book which belonged to Dad. Seeing your name there in black and white made me feel as if those words were written for me.

Eventually I reread you. All twelve months. In consecutive order. Guess that helped -- reliving the most pivotal year of my life. Never saw it coming. Not even a little. If nothing else, you are the proof. Between January and December you morphed from daily exposition, to nostalgia tour, to mystical adventure ending in Paris! In some ways, you never really were a diary.

That said, I wonder, Danaë, this: Even though I never saw it coming -- did you?

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# January - Obsession

Thursday, January 1st

Dear Diary,

The night of the car crash – has it been a year and a half already? -- I received a call at two in the morning. Picked up the phone assuming it was a wrong number. Heard a voice, nearly inhuman, on the other end. It was Vic: "Catey! Wake up! Mom and Dad were in a huge accident! Daddy's dead! Maman's in the hospital!" Hearing those words, unannounced in the depth of night, felt as if swarms of killer bees had been released from the center of my heart. They buzzed through my veins in reckless cross-purpose from the top of my head to the end of my big toe. Like the pins and needles when your foot falls asleep, except everywhere plus sound, fear, and dread.

That single, disquieting event is why I'm keeping you, Diary: you're my New Year's resolution. Except, I can't talk now, on account of the brunch Cal and I are hosting in a few hours. <We're crazed> Actually, he's not crazed, only me. I've got cotton head, and bed head, and it's snowing like mad. Plus the outlet by the toaster blew sparks and I had to move the coffee bar. The fifteen minutes set aside for writing in you got whacked down to three. <No matter> I'm in no shape for heavy introspection. Can you tell? Besides, we've got the whole year ahead of us. Three hundred and sixty-four days. That's plenty of time to talk things through. — Yours, Catey  
P.S. Do I wear black today or should we look more up?

~

Friday, Jan. 2<sup>nd</sup>

Dear Diary,

Yesterday's party is the first we've had in a while. Got frantic with the electrical issue (it was the breaker). I'm much better now. The brunch went fine. Roads were clear and no one called to say they couldn't come. Must've been thirty-forty people at the house. I'm zonked.

Normally Cal and I do barbecues in July while George and Harriet are away at camp. We have a big flat yard here. Much bigger than at our old house on Ramsey Road with neighbors spitting-distance in every direction. Now we've got this custom ranch on a cul de sac called

Mims Circle. Very private. Too much so. Still miss my old Dutch colonial with the creaky floors -- even if the place was way small. Miss my cherry wood bannister too. And the boy with the lisp who raked our leaves. What was his name again? Trent? Trevor? Trevor, that's right.

Anyway, one thing's certain, BBQ's in summer are a lot simpler than brunch buffets on New Year's morning, which are a lot easier than formal suppers, what Maman used to love. She and Dad. Whether on Long Island or in Paris. Especially with the Lévêques, Grand-maman Élise, and sad cousin Rémi. Those dinners were *les bombes*, as Vic would say. Who let Jasper out? Think I see his ringtail through the trees. He shouldn't be outside when it's this cold. She wigs me out, even long distance. Not Jasper, Vic. Oh no! I'm getting way ahead of myself. I have so much to tell you. No more rambling. Best to approach things in order. <Scientifically> I can do this:

#### Me Now

Who: I am Catherine Avril Hanson; I go by 'Catey'. I'm married to Robert Hanson, but he's nicknamed 'Cal' (long story). We're Catey and Cal Hanson and we've got two kids and one cat. Our son George is a lanky teen, with hair the color of cedar, who's moved squarely into the too-cool-for-school stage of adolescence. The older he gets the more he's Cal's clone. Harriet is a spunky third-grader with bottle-brown eyes and a gap between her teeth who doesn't get her big brother. As for Jasper, well he's a mottled stray who comes and goes.

Where: We live in Wilton, Massachusetts, a rural suburb of Applegate, which is a lot like all the other college towns in Hampshire County: gentrified, scenic, and crawling with students nine months out of the year. It's okay. Don't get me wrong -- the landscape is incredible and the village of Wilton looks like a movie set -- just sometimes I wish we either in Boston or in the middle of the Berkshires. In Wilton I've always felt estranged -- never given me that warm sense of belonging like I had back in Seaport (but that's probably because Seaport's my hometown). Wilton's alright.

What: Cal's vice president of student affairs at Applegate College of Art (ACA, for short). Before then, he'd been director of student life at Long Island-Tech. I used to be the copy-editor for a gourmet magazine in New York, not so much because I was interested in epicurean seafood and heirloom hops but because I'd mastered intransitive verbs and dangling past

participles. Yum! I was hoping to branch out with a promotion to their lifestyle mag, but the guy under me got it instead so I stayed in fancy food -- spell checking Vietnamese delicacies and Dublin's hippest ales. <I survived> Then George was born and so began my career as a stay-at-home mom. 24/7. That's me now. —Yours, Catey

~

Saturday, Jan. 3<sup>rd</sup>

Dear Diary,

### Who Are You?

Your name is Danaë. I'm naming you her because she's my absolute favorite heroine of Greek legends. Growing up, Maman used to tell me a classical myth every night at bedtime. The story of Danaë is the one I always asked for. She's not a goddess. No, Danaë's claim to stardom is being impregnated by Zeus through means of golden rain. That's her trademark -- being showered with magically fortified gold. I'm still in love with that image. The kicker: she gives birth to Perseus whose accolades include slaying the monstrous Medusa; building the mythical foundation for all twelve Olympians; and being memorialized as a constellation. <Not bad for a bastard son>

Anyhow, Diary -- I mean, Danaë -- what I'm here to write about can't be summed up in a paragraph. Or even twenty paragraphs. I've got more issues than *National Geographic*. Issue no. 1: I am no longer the same person I was before my parents got killed sixteen months ago. The passage of time has been healing but I'm not over the accident or their death and I've been unable to convey the aching loss to anyone: not Cal, or Vic, or Chris, or Tonya, or even the bereavement counselor I went to for a time. The grief is too entrenched. It doesn't leave. The only way I can possibly help you understand is by explaining my mom and dad -- the core of my life story -- methodically, from the beginning ...

### Me Then

My mother, Sophie Avril McBride, a graduate of the Sorbonne, moved from Paris to New York in the late 1950's as an interpreter to the United Nations. She stopped working there after she married Dad and became pregnant with Victoria Anne. I was born a few years later; then

came Christopher Neil. Because, of the three of us, I was closest to Maman, my sister has always harbored resentment I was the favorite. But I swear I wasn't.

My father, Dr. Jeremy A. McBride, was a history professor at the College of Long Island in Haddington, NY., a reverse-traffic commute from Seaport, where we lived. My parents met at a lecture at Columbia University about France under Nazi occupation. Dad was there because he was writing his doctoral thesis on Nazi-occupied France. Maman was there because she lived through it.

Dr. McBride took life as it came, though not without a healthy dose of skepticism. He championed civil rights, egalitarianism, Jungian psychology, fair trade, Pragmatism, Feminism, and democratic rule. He was also an ardent atheist. Dad subscribed vehemently to the notion that God is a figment of our collective, over-active, narcissistic imagination. This was a point of view which, so far as he was concerned, warranted no further discussion. It wasn't in my father's vocabulary to preach, convert, or insist on his opinion. My own belief is that tangential research he'd conducted on the Holocaust drove Dad to the inexorable conclusion: there's no supreme anything.

Despite his lack of faith, my father had a chainless manner in his speech and countenance which made him loads of fun; he was a free spirit. He was also tall -- a physical feature which, conjoined with formidable intelligence, fostered in him an authoritative air. Put another way, Jerry McBride was charismatic -- and a looker, at that.

Long Island living suited my father because it provided the means for his scholarly endeavors in modern French politics and my mother because of its proximity to Manhattan. My parents took the LIRR into the city a lot. Maman reveled in the treasures of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and its neighbor, The Frick. She marveled at how those two museums alone housed eight Vermeers when there were only something like thirty-five in the whole wide world!

Seaport had the added advantage of being less than an hour's car ride from Kennedy Airport. This suited us all, since every summer the McBride family flew to Paris to visit my grandmother Élise. Grand-maman lived in an apartment at 29 rue de Clouet in the 17<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement. My mother always made a second trip in February to be with her at home, just the two of them. I have much more to say about Paris, but I can't get into it now. For now, what

I'll tell you is this: considering it was the Rocky Horror seventies, growing up on Long Island wasn't that bad. — Yours, Catey

~

Sunday, Jan. 4<sup>th</sup>

Dear Danaë,

Don't take it personally but I've decided that, unless there's something of special significance, I won't be writing on Sundays anymore. This'll be our day off. Also, I'm forgoing a set time to write – a decision which didn't come lightly.

Initially I'd reasoned a diary entry ought to be one's last undertaking before bed – allowing for a full day's wrap up. But I haven't been able to follow my own guideline, even since Thursday, and I don't plan to tell you the details of my day. You're not a chronicle, really. More like a depository. Your assigned role is to listen as I sort through the jetsam churning round in my head. Perhaps in the same way a marine archeologist learns about a drowned sea liner by studying its wreckage, or, more accurately, the way a psychiatrist learns about a patient by analyzing her thoughts. You're my confidant.

What I'll do, then, is bring you out each day (barring Sunday) when the spirit strikes. Or when time allows. As a matter of fact, since I keep you on my nightstand next to a digital clock, I'll jot down the time from here on in. It is now 1:27pm. Oh! I need to pick up Harriet from gymnastics. — Yours, Catey

P.S. I've nicknamed you, D. and myself, C.

P.P.S. Hid your key in a tin of mints. *Gotta go!!*

~

Monday, Jan. 5<sup>th</sup>, 9:56am

Dear D.,

Issue no. 2: I have a secret. Don't panic, it's not a deep, dark, dangerous secret. It's actually not that big of a deal: I'm a compulsive thrift-shopper. See? That isn't too deep or dark. Except, it's an absolute obsession for me. I buy much of my clothes -- and it gets worse -- I buy

much of my kids' clothes, in thrift stores. Buy lots of other things secondhand too. Like I said, this isn't much of a secret, but I still feel super awkward about it and I'll explain why.

Cal knows I thrift-shop but he believes I do so only now and then. My hubby thinks I go thrifting when we're on vacation 'antiquing', and maybe a couple of times more during the year when I've got donation bags of my own or on a lark with George and Harriet. The only other people who know, besides Cal & co., are my sister Vic and my best friend Tonya. But they also believe I go only occasionally. The point: thrift-shopping is definitely not something I do 'occasionally'. I go every week, usually twice a week, sometimes more. Thrifting is a driving force in my life. It's my crack. It makes me tick. That's the real issue. The act is a manifestation of my state of mind, which has to do with what can't be summed up in twenty paragraphs. When I moved to Wilton, I found solace by thrifting on the sly and now (along with my not so terrible secret) I find solace by writing in you. — Yours, C.

~

Tuesday, Jan. 6<sup>th</sup>, 8:42am.

Dear D.,

Good morning. Glad I've told you a little something about my late mother Sophie, because she's the one who got me into thrift-shopping – my obsession -- in the first place. The best way I can describe Maman is that she was of another era -- the era when men were dashing and women looked like Rita Hayworth. Put another way, Maman was glamorous. She always looked ready for a photo shoot. In the seventies, when going braless and letting it all hang out was the norm, my mother never wavered from skirts and blouses. Nor did she ever veer from wearing a brassiere. Nor did she ever wear sneakers. The extent to which my mom detested sneakers was with a vehemence equaled only to the degree to which she adored jewelry. Sophie Avril McBride was bejeweled every day of her life, as if an edict of her religion.

My mother was into thrifting, though with nowhere near the same intensity as me. She loved to uncover the kinds of unique items one only ever finds used. When we were children, Maman would take Vic and me to the two thrift stores in Seaport which, thirty-five years later, are still there. The one our mother preferred, DoOver, is run by the Women's Support Center. The other is attached to the First Presbyterian Church.

We thrifted a few times a year. I'm not certain if Maman ever went without us. I don't believe she did. Mostly we looked for things for her. That was our stated objective. We learned the emotional high which comes from finding something great, by pure chance, for almost no money. I guess when you grow up sharing a fun activity with your mom, it becomes part of who you are. It's pretty much laminated onto your DNA. — Yours, C.

~

Wednesday, Jan. 7<sup>th</sup>, 8:31 am

Dear D.,

I've taken to writing in a cushioned armchair in my four-season sunroom. The room overlooks our deck and from here I have a clear view of the bird feeders, and plantings, and fencing far beyond. I like to watch the globe thistles as they flower, dry out, die back, and reform again. They're mostly gone now. I call this my comfy spot and, sitting here with you, surrounded by glass, I feel like a pilot getting ready for takeoff.

Where shall we go this capital morning? What say, you and I travel back to what led me from our darling Dutch Colonial on the south shore of Long Island to this sprawling ranch outside a hamlet in New England I now call home.

Revelation: *I didn't think Cal was going to get the VP job at Applegate College of Art seven years ago.* I assumed he was too young to hold an executive position (he was exactly forty). Cal doesn't know this, but I figured there was an inside candidate. However, as the vicissitudes of fate would have it, the search committee considered Cal's relative youth a feature, and he'd spearheaded a project at Long Island-Tech that mirrored ACA's newly-ratified mission. His recommendations were sterling. The job was in the bag.

My father, who was the one who'd encouraged Cal to pursue a career in academia since the day we got engaged (and who'd been instrumental in securing him the directorship at LI-Tech), was all over the idea of his son-in-law becoming vice-president in a top notch school at par with Amherst, Smith, and Holyoke. Suffice to say, once offered, the position was impossible to turn down. The opportunity, the salary, the prestige were all too tempting to pass up. In retrospect, I should have banned Cal from applying in the first place. Should've told him that I was rooted in Seaport, that the kids were well-adjusted, that we didn't want to move from our

house on Ramsey Road, even if too small. But since I hadn't taken the prospect of him getting the job seriously -- nodding along with the process every step of the way -- by the time the deal was sealed, I couldn't possibly renege.

I remember when Cal was in Applegate being interviewed for the second of three rounds, my mother said with practiced omniscience: "Catey, the secret to a good marriage is love." At the time her pronouncement felt self-evident. But now I realize -- in as much as marriage requires buckets of effort -- Maman's prognostication was right: no one could possibly stand the strictures of wedded life were it not for the abiding power of love. — Yours, C.

~

Thursday, Jan. 8<sup>th</sup>, 9:32pm

Dear D.,

Vic once told me the secret to a good marriage is keeping separate checking accounts. <She would> For the record, Cal and I have all our money combined. I guess my sister, who's a sales rep for a Euro-decorating company in New York City, and her husband Bill Keller, who works for a rival company down the street, keep their money apart. The Mc-K's -- that's what I call them -- live in Seaport, a few blocks from the house where we grew up.

Something I may as well mention about Vic is that, in as much as our mother was born in France, she likes to play up her Frenchness. She's fond of expressions like *pas possible!* and *quel horreur!* <And not ironically> She carries tote bags with graphics of the Eiffel Tower. Wears shirts saying *Ooh la la!!* Victoria A. McBride-Keller wants people to know she's French or ask if she's French. Cal finds her tedious and sometimes, Danaë, so do I. — Yours, C.

~

Friday, Jan. 9<sup>th</sup>, 8:21am

Dear D.,

Telling you about Vic last night reminded me of a time when Cal and I got into a tiff, maybe more shouting match, about her. We were still living on Long Island. We met the Mc-K's for drinks and my sister was acting particularly *français*. She kept ending her phrases with '*C'est la vie!*' or worse, '*Merde!*', and she kept touching up her flame-red lipstick, while telling

anecdotes that went nowhere except to somehow pump up her ego and enhance her Frenchability (or at least my husband thought so). Anyway, afterwards, Cal -- prefacing nearly every sentence with: "I know she's family ..." -- went off the handle about Vic. Was he was ever amped.

The seat of our disagreement stemmed from whether or not her actions were self-promoting affectations or authentic expressions of who she is. An excerpt:

ME [*agitated*]. Cal! Our mother was French! We went to Paris every year! This is how we were RAISED!

CAL. Then how come YOU'RE not like that? How come your BROTHER'S not like that? I mean, Chris doesn't go around saying "*C'est la vie*" every other minute. CHRIST! That's not NORMAL.

No, D., it isn't normal. Nor was it for my husband to be so pissed off. Eventually he simmered down and we agreed to disagree. Later, I admitted Vic had been a trifle overbearing. But Cal's right: Victoria A. McBride-Keller is just too phony-French. — Yours, C.

~

Saturday, Jan. 10<sup>th</sup>, 7:33am

Dear D.,

On Saturdays when everyone sleeps in, I get to have my first cup of coffee without the pressure cooker of getting George and Harriet on the school bus. It's a penance having to put the kids on the bus, first thing, Monday through Friday. Usually by this time the kids are out the door. Unless they're not, which means they're late and I have to drive them in. <Not today> It's the weekend.

My tribe still safe in bed, I've got time to sift through the detritus washing up on the shores of my scrambled head. This morning seems to be mostly about the origins of my thrifting. Let's follow the tide ...

The obsession, I'd say, can be soundly traced to when George started elementary school in Seaport and the demands of dressing increased substantially. I remember the first time we went school shopping. Spent hours in the stores amassing a small fortune's worth of shirts, pants, and pullovers. <The works> By day's end, I was confident our budding boy was set through

spring. But come November, after factoring out tops and bottoms with permanent stains and tears – not to mention things that went missing on the playground — I could barely string a single outfit together. No exaggeration. George’s wardrobe had whittled down to nothing. Was I going to have to buy him new clothing every three months? Who could afford that? Children GROW. I’d have to start all over again next year, and the year after that, and the year after that!

So it was that thrift shops reasserted themselves into my life. I started going to the same two shops I’d gone to as a child with Vic and Maman. Every so often I’d venture out to the Salvation Army, though being way out on the Island and having small children of my own, Sally’s wasn’t a very practical option.

As a young mother, life mainly revolved around Seaport village where things were easy to do. My routine fell into a comfortable pattern in which several times a week I’d bring George, and later Harriet, over to my parents’ house. The grandkids called them ‘Pops and So-So’, the names Vic’s son Simon had given them as a tot. Sometimes I’d stay and visit, other times Pops and So-So would babysit while I drove into town to pick up diapers, organic yogurt, and the dry cleaning. It wasn’t a jet-setting existence, to be sure, but my mother had a genius for elevating even the most mundane activities to equilibrated excellence. And whenever the air got too stuffy, Dad punctured it with down to earth suggestions. In response to my mother’s puff pastries and course cut orange marmalade, he might say: “Next time, Sophe, get Oreos.” Or he’d keep sensitively silent and take the kids out to play ball.

The rest of the week my best friend Tonya and I, having together agreed to forgo daycare, watched our first-born children at each other’s homes. We both became pregnant during those years, experiencing the highs and lows that inevitably come with expecting. Eventually, Tonya’s eldest Laurelai (and a year later George) started kindergarten — a metered synergy that added layers of liveliness to our already full schedules. Rounding things out, Cal and I socialized with Tony – that’s what she goes by -- and her husband Lou Vangreen. We also spent a lot of time with the Mc-K’s, as our young children so easily bonded. In sum, everything was organized into a neatly designed rubric.

I don't mean to romanticize my life on Long Island because there were bumps in the road there too. Just, I had it all going on in Seaport. I was complete. But when we moved to Wilton, I became empty. — Yours, C.

~

Monday, Jan. 12<sup>th</sup>, 1:16pm

Dear D.,

True confession: *Ever since my parents died, ever since the stinging body episode where the buzzing takes over and the earth slips from under me, I have panic attacks.* In addition to the void inside, I tear up easily and fear the killer bees will fly back. Lately the feeling is barely perceptible (though ripples of emotional fragility persist). But other times it manifests as an unruly knot in my stomach that refuses to untie. And every so often, my nerves give out in a full blown attack where the swarming returns, my throat chokes, and I have to take pills my doctor prescribed the week I came home from the funerals. Most of the time, though, I stay off the meds which dull me out and make me gain weight. I prefer to live in a state of low-grade anxiety and thrift shop instead.

The panic attacks don't happen as often anymore, but for the first ten months after the accident, it didn't take much for me to hit my tipping point. Now the rush of nerves is triggered by random events, especially if the telephone rings at odd hours. The other day when the electrician called at dawn to say he wouldn't arrive 'til noon, I near lost it.

I'm telling you all this, not because I'm feeling particularly on edge today but in case things spiral out in the future, which, sad to say, D., we can pretty much bank on. — Yours, C.

~

Tuesday, Jan. 13<sup>th</sup>, 8:28pm

Thrift Shop Obsession: Part I/IV

Another~Boutique, 22 E. Main St., Wilton, MA

Like many towns across New England, Wilton has a village square and a wide thoroughfare lined on either side with shingled stores. On Main Street, pinched between the establishments of a Korean acupuncturist and an antiquarian barber, stands a narrow shop --

Another~Boutique -- painted white with dusky-rose trim. I don't know why they put a squiggly mark between the words, 'Another' and 'Boutique', but that's how it's spelled.

Another~Boutique is owned and operated by the Pediatric Autism Foundation aka PAF. Once a week the store offers 'Ten-off-Tues', where everything's discounted ten percent. I make it my business to be there Tuesdays.

Ricky and Rhoda work the shop. They're a lesbian couple who are, as a pair, something of a study in contrast. Rhoda is tall and gangly; Ricky, short and stout. Ricky's talkative and ruddy, while the taller Rhoda is a no-nonsense type who wears metal-rimmed bifocals and let her hair go grey. If Rhoda's an ostrich, Ricky is a Red-faced Warbler. Both birds wear patchouli oil which seriously stinks up the store. <No matter> The bargains are well worth the smelly hippy dippy and so are they.

We know each other on a first-name basis and every so often, one of them will set aside a new arrival she thinks may interest me. Today Ricky presented me with a sequined sash I eventually bought. She pulled it out of a grocery bag from her desk drawer and said: "Wait'll you see this." We regarded the piece together. Told her the sash would add pop to a pair of slacks I already own. Well worth the three dollars, minus ten percent -- not to mention, trying it on with the pants at home and getting my recreational fix for the day.

Thanked Ricky for the sash, blew kisses to them both, and made my way out the dusky-rose door. What a prefect way to introduce you to Another~Boutique. I so love it there. —  
Yours, C.

~

Wednesday, Jan. 14<sup>th</sup>, 10:20am

### Thrift Shop Obsession: Part II/IV

The Salvation Army, County Rd. 89, Applegate, MA

Applegate's Salvation Army is a large free-standing building, totally nondescript, that's set way back from the road owing to a massive parking lot which is never more than a quarter full. I try not to miss a Wednesday at Sally's because it's 'Family Day' and everything's half-off.

Family Day works like this: every item has a price tag in one of five colors -- blue, pink, yellow, green, or white. All the tags are fifty percent less than marked, except for one of those

hues. Customers learn of the exemption color upon arrival, due to a large sign clipped to an easel stating, for example:

ALL ITEMS ½ OFF

EXCEPT YELLOW

There's also a picture of the color, I guess in case you can't read English. Family Day is a shopping bonanza. Not to lend light to the sun, but when you divide cut-rate prices in two, you get discounts near criminal. Bye-bye, D. Tis Wednesday. — Yours, C.

~

Thursday, Jan. 15<sup>th</sup>, 9:08am

Dear D.,

Super Salvo-shop yesterday! Way above average! The place was hopping! Picked up a bunch of never-opened holiday misfires and a light lavender tank for Harriet. The top roused a distant memory of mine, dating back to those early sprees with Maman, where she found a blouse of the exact same lavender, only silk and sleeveless. It was to be worn under a summer-weight suit and my mom had a white linen ensemble waiting in the wings of her closet at home. She had amethyst jewelry in similar shade. My mother was so pleased for having found this shirt. I remember how later in the afternoon she modeled the whole outfit for me, Dad, Vic and Chris. Maman sauntered into our living room, the four of us scrunched on the couch at attention, and said only this: "Voilà!" She looked radiant.

I recall too, how she brought out three different necklaces so we could arbitrate on the matter of which one looked best. She also brought out two pairs of shoes so we could mediate on which pair of shoes looked best. The shoes, in turn, coordinated with their own purse, so the intricacies of our decision-making made for fervid debate.

My father's preferences trumped the kids'. This was a given. If we were all in agreement, then the matter was settled. But if Dad chose a different pendant or pocketbook from the rest of us, my mother always deferred to him. She'd go: "Jerry, *mon amour*, you win."

Maman went through this same modeling ritual whether purchasing special garments from department stores or haute couture from Paris. Never though, with the same degree of self-

satisfaction as when she bought something special, like the silk lavender blouse, from a thrift store. She hadn't just bought it, she had, against the odds, found it. —Yours, C.

~

Friday, Jan. 16<sup>th</sup>, 7:48am

### Thrift Shop Obsession: Part III/IV

Great Barn Secondhand Store, Tibbets Lane, Deerborn, MA

About once a month on Fridays, and today is that Friday, I take a forty-minute drive north of Wilton to the Great Barn Secondhand Store. The Great Barn is housed in a gigantic horse barn and rarely disappoints. The place is owned by Iggy and his wife -- whose name is either 'Mira' or 'Mara'. Iggy and Mira-or-Mara are from the Ukraine. How this old Slavic couple wound up running a thrift store out of a gabled barn in Deerborn, Massachusetts, I have no clue. But by all indications, they've had it a while. Iggy runs the cash register up front. Mira-or-Mara isn't necessarily around. There's no additional sales help so once there you're pretty much on your own. That's part of its charm but shopping in a mega barn is hard work, and I'm not always game. Especially since the mold there attacks my nose!

Iggy has a heavy Eastern European accent, which is mostly understandable and rather endearing, and upon closing each purchase – no matter whether a rattan trivet for sixty cents or rattan chair for sixty dollars – I can count on him for these three words: “Very thank you.” Iggy is da best. — Yours, C.

~

Saturday, Jan. 17<sup>th</sup>, 8:47am

Dear D.,

Since moving to the country, I make breakfast for the family on Saturday mornings. Yours Truly rustles up scrambled eggs, hash browns, and bacon on a six-burner gas range. Don't think I ever once cooked those things together when we lived in Seaport. On Long Island, if you feel like having a griddle breakfast with meat and potatoes, you go to a diner. Here in Wilton, I prepare the heart attack myself with everyone at-the-ready to chow down. Especially mid-winter. — Yours, C.

~

Monday, Jan. 19<sup>th</sup>, 10:36am

Dear D.,

Cal was all sweetness and light this morning. He gets that way some times. Just not usually Monday mornings. “How’s my blanket-stealer?” That’s what he kept saying. Then he tickled me around the ear, or waist. Poured me coffee too. I told him we need to raise the thermostat at night. Wasn’t long after, he kissed me quick and left for work.

Cal. How to describe him? I should start by telling you that my husband is a Renaissance man. He received his undergraduate degree in biology, but minored in art history, and has a Masters in arts administration. That may sounds like I’m spouting off his resume, but what I’m trying to convey is that Cal is d-i-m-e-n-s-i-o-n-a-l. On the one hand, he’s practical, left-brained, and scientifically-inclined, on the other, he’s read Tolstoy, Wharton, and Hemingway. His favorite poet is Gertrude Stein. Favorite painter, Amedeo Modigliani. Cal may not enjoy opera, but he understands why someone else would. He also understands why fiber-optic technology allows transmission at higher bandwidths. I love him for all that.

The first time I ever spoke to my future husband we were taking Ethnographic Art at the University of Connecticut. I was a sophomore, enrolled in the course as a requirement for my anthropology major; he, a junior taking it for his minor. One day after class we found ourselves exiting the building from the same stairwell and he asked me about the homework. I later learned he’d staged our ‘chance encounter’ and well knew the difference between tribal and caste societies.

We walked out the building and stood under a tree and, after my explanation, he talked about the poetry and aerodynamics of falling leaves. He wasn’t trying to impress me with his brainy eloquence, mind you. Those remarks Cal hadn’t premeditated. He was merely responding to the maple leaves of autumn fluttering around us. Nevertheless, he adroitly managed to heighten my awareness of the proximity between our bodies – standing right on the borderline of my personal space. He also managed to slip in how he liked the way I had my hair, which I’d self-consciously tucked behind my ears. I thought him really cute. <Still do>

We didn't talk very long; Cal had to get to another class. Nevertheless, that pre-romance interaction made me look forward to ETHNART 201 in a way I hadn't before. The following week I remember soliciting my roommate Kiki Sikdar to help me pick out a sweater. I recall too, brushing my hair right before entering the lecture hall, though it was weeks before we'd talk again. Turns out, it took a while for Cal to figure out his next move, which was asking me on a date to see the new release of *Indiana Jones Temple of Doom*. That night, over popcorn-at-the-movies, we fell in like, and eventually over pretzels, beer, and *The Sun also Rises*, we fell in love. Naturally. — Yours, C.

~

Tuesday, Jan. 20<sup>th</sup>, 10:02am

#### Addendum

This is how it happened that my husband, Robert J. Hanson, came to be called, 'Cal'. Robert J. Hanson, an only child, was born and raised in Leona, Nebraska, by his parents, Warren and Dale. Everyone in Leona called him 'Rob'. As a senior in high school, Rob decided he wanted to major in environmental studies. He also wanted to move to the west coast. So Rob enrolled at California's College of Life Sciences in Shasta County. Soon after, Rob realized environmental studies was not for him. He also realized the west coast was not for him -- though he was equally bent on disengaging from the heartland of his youth.

So Rob took a year off to find himself and then went on to try the east coast by transferring to the University of Connecticut. Where he switched majors. At UConn, Robert J. Hanson was known as, 'California Rob', since there were already two Robs on his dormitory floor. He was known by this name, even though he was born and raised in the state of Nebraska, and even though his stint in California had been less than successful, and despite the fact that he'd barely lasted two semesters. Eventually 'California Rob' was shortened to 'Cal', even though by then he'd left for another floor. When I met him my second year at UConn, Cal was already Cal. — Yours, C.

~

Wednesday, Jan. 21<sup>st</sup>, 8:50am

Dear D.,

I shop in thrift stores because it calms my nerves, and also because I like to save money (not because I have to save money) and sometimes I feel sorry for the people around me who aren't so lucky. True confession: *I dress a certain way when I go to the Salvation Army.* I do so in order to blend in with the rest of the clientele. To this end, my appearance might best be described as 'inconspicuous'. I keep a low profile to hide the fact that I'm there mostly for the enjoyment, in case I run into someone who's there entirely out of need (which describes a fair number of customers). I try not to let on that, while some may not have a choice about shopping secondhand, others like slumming it for fun. So this morning, getting ready for Sally's, I wore blue jeans and a parka and made myself invisible. Like always. — Yours, C.

~

Thursday, Jan. 22<sup>nd</sup>, 11:12am

#### Thrift Shop Obsession: Part IV/IV

St. Paul's Thrift, Church of St. Paul, Jane Street, Wilton, MA

If you walk down Main Street from Another~Boutique toward the village square, and make a left at the fire hydrant, you'll find yourself on Jane Street. And if you continue up Jane about fifteen paces and look across the road, you'll be facing the Church of St. Paul, an imposing brick edifice built in 1833. St. Paul's Thrift is in the basement, accessed only through a side door that's minimally marked with Essex green awning. They're open Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday from 9-3, but their schedule is mitigated by a sign pinned to a cork board that reads: Hours of Operation Subject to Volunteer Availability. In other words, it's hit or miss at St. P.'s.

The church thrift shop is my least favorite of the four I normally go to, and not because of the inventory, which is usually alright. Used to think my antipathy owed to the ping of white noise leaking from the florescent bulbs or the pong of ammonia reeking from the shelves. Now I know it's the church-ladies who mind the shop.

There are three women who volunteer there. I still can't tell them apart -- all purse-lipped and blue haired -- nor do I know them by name (the way I know Ricky and Rhoda at A~B or Iggy at the Great Barn). No, at St. Paul's Thrift, they're not friendly. At all. The church bluebells treat me with unmistakable aloofness. It's not that they aren't polite, it's that they pretend not to recognize me whenever I enter the store. For example, today when I said 'hello', two feigned

distraction while the third – as if on rotation – offered a wordless nod that scarcely acknowledged my presence. They irk me.

Revelation: *The church-ladies are uppity, self-righteous snobs.* I believe they have collectively determined I'm beneath them because, in their view, I'm an outsider who thrift-shops too often. I bug them as much as they do me. The strained chemistry between us has made me less willing to go to St. P.'s. I still stop in once in a while but far less than I used to. Their holier-than-thou routine can't be good for business. Sure hinders mine. — Yours, C.

P.S. I wish things were different.

~

Friday, Jan. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1:41pm

Dear D.,

The last several months, I've begun to come to terms with the death of my mother and father. A dusting of snow has settled over our yard. I've accepted my parents' demise. The sparrows are pecking like mad at the suet. What I haven't come to terms with is the trauma of their death. I'm still haunted by the 'Wake up! Daddy's dead!' call and all that transpired in its wake.

We learned from the police that they were coming home from a concert at the Olstead arboretum. It was the end of August. The autopsy report stated that my father had a stroke which caused him to lose control of the car. They slammed into a cinderblock wall on the Long Island Expressway. Dad was killed instantly. Maman was rushed to the hospital where she lived in a coma for nine days. Seeing her in the ICU, black and blue beyond recognition, was a living hell. The doctors said her chances were slim but I refused to lose hope. We all wanted her to revive in time for Dad's funeral. We ended up burying him while she was still hooked to machines. Five days later she went into cardiac arrest and we pulled the plug.

Two weeks. Two funerals. Even today, going back to that lurid time, I start hyperventilating. Like I am now. — Yours, C.

~

Saturday, Jan. 24<sup>th</sup>, 2:19pm

Dear D.,

My sunroom faces west which means in the afternoon, unless it's overcast, the space is bright and warm. Today the sun is out, my chores are done, George and Harriet are with friends, Cal's in town, and my mind has space to breath. It's the weekend.

A couple of Saturdays ago I explained the origins of my thrifting obsession. Do you remember Back-to-school? <No matter if you don't> Today I'd like to follow that thread by explaining how the thrift shop system works. And how it doesn't.

Say, there's a woman – we'll call her Lady X -- who owns a skirt. She's had it, now, a season or three, but the skirt no longer fits. The garment is in perfectly okay condition, mind you, just Lady X has gained a few pounds. She knows, however, that there must be someone Size 6 who would love this skirt. But who? And more to the point, how can she find said party? <She can't> And even if she could (through Facebook?) she doesn't wish to play matchmaker. What she'd like is for the skirt to find a new owner, hassle-free.

Thrifts shops are a ready solution for Lady X. All she needs do is bring her skirt to the store – no questions asked, no strings attached. The thrift shop, in turn, makes her item available so that, sooner or later, that someone Size 6 – let's call her Lady Y – will see the item, amaze at her luck, and buy the item for cheap. The kicker: most likely, all proceeds will go to a good cause. The added kicker: Lady X is furnished a receipt so she can write off her donation. In short, the thrift shop paradigm is a neat little structure. It's practical. It makes sense. I believe in it. It's perfect.

Perfect – that is, except for the stigma. Here's where things get sticky. How to put this? Other than antiquing and yard sales, buying secondhand is generally not talked about and it's not for everyone. Perhaps in the same way that (let's say) gambling, or golf, or sushi isn't for everyone, neither is thrifting. It is not the type of information one purposely weaves into a conversation, the way (let's say) one might a Scandinavian cruise. For example, attending a ladies' luncheon at the local historical society, I would never volunteer: "Oh, I found the cutest pair of shorts at Goodwill yesterday." Just as I wouldn't utter: "Next week my brother-in-law gets out of jail." If Vic's husband Bill were in the state penitentiary – which he absolutely is not!

– I wouldn't tell a soul. And furthermore, I'd live in mortal dread that people might find out. Through Google or something.

True confession: *Every so often, I become paranoid someone I know will recognize a coat I'm wearing as something they donated to Another~Boutique in Wilton.* They'd look at me incredulously and ask: "Is that my jacket?" Then they'd scan the raiment for tell-tale signs like an upturned flap or signature frayed edge. I'd glaciare. I'd be caught red-handed. Even so, I cannot quit. I'm obsessed. I'm a lifer. Revelation: *I'm Lady Y.* — Yours, C.

~

Monday, Jan. 26<sup>th</sup>, 12:33pm

Dear D.,

Not having a good day. Got the nerve knot and I know why. There's something I've been putting off telling you. Occurred the summer preceding the accident. Maybe two, three months. Was definitely weird. It started with a call from my mother -- that isn't what's weird-- we phoned every day. What was unusual was Maman's tone of voice. My impression was that she'd been crying. I asked if everything was alright and she said yes it was. I was almost prepared to believe her — were it not for the fact that in the next breath my mom said she wanted to visit me in Wilton without Dad. My parents always came up together so this was way out of the norm. I told her she could come any time, certainly, but Cal and I were on our way to the Cape for vacation, after which she and my father were going to Montauk with the Mc-K's. So we set our sights on the fall when the leaf colors peaked. My mother assured me there was no urgency. Then came the car wreck and — needless to say — Maman's visit never materialized. Revelation: *It nags me to pieces I'll never know what she wanted to say to me in private.*

Cal is the only person besides me (and now you) who knows about my mother's mysterious call. I told him about it that same day, and we wondered, naturally, what could be going on, but reasoned the matter would be disclosed in due time. There was no rush. Truthfully, I'd almost forgotten the call until last August around the first anniversary of their deaths. I was driving out to the Great Barn in Deerborn when the whole conversation came flooding back verbatim. And ever since, it dangles before me like a ripened fig waiting to be plucked. My mind scrolls through multiple questions: what could Maman have been crying about? Why would she

want to drive all the way to Wilton to see me? Why not tell Vic or Chris? Was there something wrong? Were they okay? The questions are unanswerable, and I suppose a moot point. But in so far as I'm trying to write down all the things that can't be summed up in twenty paragraphs, this is an important piece of my inner turmoil: the mystery of Maman. — Yours, C.

~

Tuesday, Jan. 27<sup>th</sup>, 9:28am

Dear D.,

True Confession: *I have a pathological fear of black ice*. I know this has little to do with anything but it's sleeting outside and I'm a little shaky. I had a panic attack earlier and my heart rate has yet to level. Ice torments me. I fret about the roads and skidding into a ditch. I fret about the school bus flipping over. I'm consumed with visions of Cal not coming home and a solemn-faced sheriff showing up at my door. The real possibility of a fatal automobile accident with devastating results has permanently invaded my subconscious. Arctic weather sure doesn't help.

The pickle of it is, when I was growing up, I don't remember there ever being 'black ice'. I mean, when did the skid-evil start? Did we just not call it that? Does it have to do with global warming? Today I'm having a hard time moving passed the wintry mix that hasn't let up since seven this morning. They'll be no Ten-off-Tues at Another~Boutique; no Rick & Rho; no fortuitous finds. I'm snowbound. Other than re-locating to Boca, Barcelona, or the islands of Fiji, there's nothing to stop the menace that is black ice. — Yours, C.

~

Wednesday, Jan. 28<sup>th</sup>, 2:14pm

Dear D.,

Jasper's dozing, a fur ball at my feet, and I've been in sentimental mood all day. I'm sitting in my comfy chair under a rickshaw blanket, admiring a photograph from our Seaport years. It's of my parents with their three young grandchildren at home. The photo is a candid, taken outside around their patio table. My father, on the far right, is turned in profile towards my mom, who is seated opposite him on the left. She's fussing with baby Harriet, who sits, legs splayed, on her lap. Harriet, in turn, looks out at her brother George, who's watching his cousin

Simon, who's facing away from the camera towards my dad. Their gazes run counter-clockwise, forming a kind of family ellipse.

Don't know why I brought my camera over that particular day. Can't remember taking any pictures. Maybe this is why the photograph is so dear to me. It captures Sophie and Jerry McBride (aka Pops and So-So) in their natural state: at ease, in the moment, loving life. —  
Yours, C.

~

Thursday, Jan. 29<sup>th</sup>, 2:39pm

Dear D.,

George turns fifteen today. Hard to fathom, really. Our son is a year older than most all the other kids in eighth grade because, an eternity ago (before Harriet was even born) Cal and I made the decision to delay registering him for school. At the time we didn't feel we had much choice. Now our boy looks like he's in high school, acts like it too, and I wonder if we did the right thing.

George's rebel-without-a-cause stage, which took seed sometime during the past year, has sallied forth uninterrupted ever since. Were I to guess what my son might be doing this very second, I'd say he's likely in a classroom slouching. Were it after school, I'd say slouching with a headset on. In addition to bad posture and tuning us out, George has mastered the not-so-fine-art of the short answer. He hasn't withdrawn, thankfully, just for the most part his conversation is curt. Courteous but curt. <Least, he's courteous>

Now it's George's birthday, and I've already been briefed that he wants no part of a celebratory dinner or cake, as is our family custom. Apparently our son is still accepting gifts. He's "down with that".

When George told me about his non-birthday plans (and it must've been a few weeks before Christmas) I didn't take the news very well. But Cal has assured me this is predictable behavior and, within the context of teenage defiance, small potatoes. Cal went: "Don't overreact. George's grades are good, he's got lots of nice friends, he's never been in serious trouble, and he plays baseball." Good thing I have my husband to keep things in perspective because I was ready to call a shrink. — Yours, C.

~

Friday, Jan. 30<sup>th</sup>, 2:52pm

Dear D.,

Just got back from the Great Barn Secondhand Store. The mildew wasn't too bad. Seems fainter when the space heater's on.

I like the Great Barn, especially the owner. I remember after my first few visits he trotted over to me, offered his hand, and said plainly: "I Iggy." His voice was raspy. He was carrying a ukulele by its neck. His shirt had faded to a delicate shade of lime. I gave him my hand and replied: "Pleasure to meet you. I'm Catherine." Not certain why I identified myself as 'Catherine' rather than 'Catey' — must've instinctively concluded that, given his accent, Catherine's a universal name he'd know. Iggy calls me, 'Katarin', with a very hard **K**.

Ig appreciates my eye for things; he always lights up at the sight of my purchases. Today, when I brought a stoneware basin to the register, he tapped the ceramic with one finger and said: "This good." Then, humming, he wrapped the vessel. As I wrote him a check, one of the barn cats pounced from a platform rocker onto the marble counter. Iggy simultaneously gave me the package, dabbed the cat's nose, and said on cue: "Very thank you." You're Welcome. — C.

~

Saturday, Jan. 31<sup>st</sup>, 5:55pm

Dear D.,

So far I'd say my New Year's resolution — our writing project, our road to recovery — is going great! Our first month together is already up and I haven't come close to running out of things to tell you. Truthfully Danaë, you're never far from my thoughts. Some days I can't even wait to write.

One thing that's occurred to me is I forgot a few things — in the course of my January entries — that I need you to know. So I've decided that on the last day of every month, I'm going to reflect back and give you more of the jetsam knocking about in my head.

Here are this month's forget-me-nots:

- 1) My father had a deep appreciation for the English language and I guess it's rubbed off on me because I keep a hefty volume of Shakespeare's plays and an unabridged Webster's dictionary on an oak lectern standing right at the entrance of our sunken living room. I love looking up obscure words and trying to use them in a sentence.
- 2) While studying anthropology at UConn, I seriously considered going to graduate school for archeology. True confession: *Part of my inspiration came from seeing Indiana Jones with Cal*.
- 3) Regarding Maman's mystery phone call: The way I knew my mother had been crying was in uttering my name, her voice halted midway: "Cate –!", she exclaimed – never completing the second syllable. Radio silence. There remains in that open note, a vexing potency, a metaphor for the words she wanted to say but never did. I have a pressing desire to fill in that blank.

