

THE THRIFT SHOP DIARY

by Marina Delaney

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



A Maid Asleep (1657) by Johannes Vermeer. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

PART I - Prelude

*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 belonging to Dad. Seeing your name there in black and white felt as if those deep, allegorical words were written for me.

Eventually I reread you. All twelve months, in consecutive order. It did help to relive the ordeal. Never saw it coming, though — the most pivotal year of my life. If nothing else, you're the irrefutable proof. Between January and December you morphed from daily exposition, to nostalgia tour, to mystical adventure ending in Paris! Who would've imagined? Not me. 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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# 1: January - Obsession

The night of the car crash — has it been four months already? — I received a call at two in the morning. Stumbled to my feet and picked up my Blackberry assuming it was spam. Heard a voice, nearly inhuman, on the other end. It was Vick: “Ellie! Wake up! Mom and Dad were in a huge accident. Dad’s dead, Maman’s in the hospital!” Hearing those words, unannounced from the depth of night, felt as if swarms of locusts had been released from the center of my heart. They buzzed through my veins in reckless cross-purpose from the crown of my head to the end of my big toe. Then my knees gave way and I collapsed to the ground.

That single, disquieting event is why I’m keeping you, Diary. You’re my New Year’s resolution. Except, I can’t write 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. Got a bit frantic, never mind the fifteen minutes I’d set aside for you, whacked down to three. No matter. I’m in no shape for introspection. Can you tell? Besides, we’ve got the whole year ahead of us. Three hundred and sixty-four days. Plenty of time to explain what’s happened to me — how, where and why.

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Yesterday’s party is the first we’ve had since the accident. Other than the sparky outlet, the brunch went fine. Roads were clear and nobody cancelled last minute. Must’ve been forty-five people at the house. Plus the four of us. I called the electrician but he can’t come til Monday.

Normally, Cal and I do barbecues in July while Graham and Harriet are away at camp. We have a big flat yard here. Much bigger than at our old house on Ramsey Road, neighbors spitting-distance in every direction. Now we’ve got this custom ranch down a cul-de-sac called Mims Circle. Very private. Too much so. Still miss my Dutch colonial with the creaky floors. Miss my cherry wood bannister too. And the transom window rising like a phoenix above our front door. The up-stretched beech tree by the garage and the boy with the lisp who raked our leaves. What was his name again? Trent? Trevor? Trevor, that’s right.

Anyhow, 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 Thérèse, and sad cousin Rémi. Those dinners were *les bombes*, as Vick would say. Who let Jasper out? Think I see his orange ringtail in the brambles by the woods. He shouldn't be outside when it's this cold. She wigs me out, even long distance. Not Jasper, Vick. 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. Methodically. I can do this. Tomorrow.

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Me, Helen Laura Chase, Methodically

First off, I go by Ellie. I'm married to Robert Chase, but he's nicknamed Cal (long story.) We're Cal and Ellie Chase and we've got two mostly companionable kids and one dubious cat.

Our son Graham is a lanky teen, hair the color of sand, who's moved squarely into the rebel-without-a-cause 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 what's going on with her big brother. As for Jasper, well he's a blind in one eye stray who comes and goes.

We live in Wilton, Massachusetts, a 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 Hollywood movie set -- just I wish we were closer to Boston. Somehow in Wilton I've never had that warm sense of belonging like I did back in Seaport (but that's probably because Seaport's my hometown.) Wilton's alright.

Back in my twenties, I'd been copy-editor for a gourmet magazine in New York City -- not so much because I was interested in epicurean seafood or heirloom hops but because, thanks to my grammarian father, I'd mastered intransitive verbs and dangling past participles. I was hoping to branch out with a promotion to their lifestyle department, but my boss got it instead and I stayed stuck in fancy food, spell checking Vietnamese delicacies and Dublin's hippest ales.

I survived, barely. Then Graham was born and, after a brief stab at working part-time, I became a stay at home mom. 24/7.

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Don't take it personally but I've decided that, unless there's something of special significance, I won't be writing weekends after today. There's too much going on with the kids and with me and Cal. I'll try my best not to skip any other days but I make no promises. Also, I'll write when the spirit strikes, not at any set time (as I'd originally planned.)

Initially, you see, I imagined a diary ought to be one's last undertaking before bed, allowing for the full day's wrap up. But I haven't been able to follow my own guideline, even since January 1st, and I don't plan to tell you, necessarily, the details of my day. You're not a chronicle, really. More 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 sunken sea liner by swimming through the wreckage. Or, more accurately, a psychiatrist learns about a patient by observing her thoughts. You're my confidant and here is our first confidence: I hide your key in a cough drop tin.

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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 actually 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 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 being half-mortal.

Anyhow, Diary -- I mean, Danaë – let me cut to the chase because I've got more issues than *National Geographic*. Issue no.1: I am no longer the person I was before my parents got killed last summer. The passage of time has been healing but I'm not over the accident or their deaths and I've been unable to convey the aching loss to anyone: not to Cal, or Vick, or Chris, or Jenna, or even the bereavement counselor I went to for a time. The grief is entrenched. Like scar

tissue, it doesn't fade away. The only way I can possibly help you understand is by explaining my mother and father -- their life and their death -- from the beginning.

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, Vick has always harbored resentment that I was the favorite. But I swear I wasn't.

My father, Dr. Gerald Teig McBride, was a history professor at the College of Long Island in Haddington, New York, 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 imaginations. It wasn't in my father's vocabulary to pontificate on his opinion.

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 also sported a trim goatee -- a feature which, conjoined with formidable intelligence, fostered in him an authoritative air. Put another way, Gerry McBride was charismatic -- and a looker, at that.

Long Island living suited my father because it provided the means for his scholarly endeavors in French-American relations during World War II and suited my mother because of its proximity to Manhattan. Maman reveled in the unmatched treasures of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and its high-society 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 benefit of being only 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



Thérèse for the month of July. Grand-maman Thérèse 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 just yet. For now what I'll tell you is this: considering it was the Rocky Horror seventies, growing up on Long Island had its advantages.

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Issue no. 2: I have a secret. Don't panic, it's not some dark, deviant, guilty secret. It's actually not that big of a deal. I'm a compulsive thrift-shopper. See? That isn't too dark or deviant - is it? Except, it's a total 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 scary or anything, 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 sweetie thinks I go thrifting when we're on vacation 'antiquing'; or maybe a couple of times during the year when I've got donation bags of my own; or on a lark with Graham and Hattie. He imagines I buy knick knacks — not clothes and essentials. The only other people who know about my thrifting are my sister Vick and my best friend Jenna. But they also believe I go only occasionally for the odd find. The point is this: thrift-shopping may have started out as something I did 'occasionally' but now I go every week, usually twice a week, sometimes more. I buy everything I can secondhand. It's a driving force in my life. It's my crack. It makes me tick. That's the real issue. The act is an out-picturing of my state of mind which can't be summed up in a paragraph.

When we moved to Wilton six years ago, I found solace by thrifting on the sly; since my parents' car crash last August, it's become an obsession. My secret obsession.

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It's ironic, I suppose, that my mother's the one who got me into thrift-shopping 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 and uncompromising about it. In the seventies, when going braless and letting it all hang out was the norm, my mother never wavered from skirts and tucked-in blouses. Nor did she ever veer from brassieres. Nor did she ever wear sneakers. The extent to which my mother detested

sneakers was with a vehemence equaled only to the degree to which she adored jewelry. Sophie 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 kids, Maman took Vick 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. As if grafted on your DNA.

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I've taken to writing in a cushioned armchair in our four-season sunroom. The room overlooks the deck and from here I have a clear view of the bird feeders, plantings, and fencing far beyond. I like to watch the globe thistles as they flower, dry out, die back and re-form again. I like to watch the chickadees bicker and play. This will be our comfy spot and sitting here with you, surrounded by glass, I feel like a pilot getting ready for takeoff!

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

It all began when Cal saw an ad for vice-president of student affairs at Applegate College of Art. A trusted colleague had spotted the listing and encouraged Cal to apply. True confession: *I didn't think Cal was going to get the VP job at ACA.* At the time, he was director of student life at Long Island-Tech and, I presumed, too young to hold an executive position. I figured there was an inside candidate and the 'nationwide search' had been mostly for show. But as the vicissitudes of fate would have it, the committee considered Cal's attributes — his fresh approach, his fluency in the latest technology and his relative youth — as indisputable features. 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, was all over the idea of his son-in-law becoming vice-president of a top notch school at par with Amherst, Smith and Holyoke. Suffice to say, once offered, the position was impossible to pass up. The opportunity, the salary, the prestige were all too tempting to turn down. In retrospect, I should have banned Cal from applying in the first place. Should've told him that I was too rooted in Seaport, that the kids were well-adjusted, that we didn't want to move from our cozy house on Ramsey Road. 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 renege.

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

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Vick 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 Bryce Keller, who works for a rival company down the street, keep their money apart. The McBride-Kellers — or the Mc-K's, that's what I call them — live only a few blocks from the house where we grew up in Seaport.

Something I should mention about Vick is that she likes to play up her Frenchness. She's fond of expressions like *pas possible!* and *quel horreur!* She carries tote bags with graphics by Toulouse-Lautrec. Wears shirts saying *Ooh la la!!* Victoria McBride-Keller wants people to know she's French or ask if she's French. Cal finds her tedious and sometimes so do I.

One time we got into quite the tiff, more shouting match, about Vick. We were still living on Long Island so this is a while back. We'd met the Mc-K's for drinks and my sister was acting particularly *français*, ending her every phrase with '*C'est la vie!*' or worse, '*Merde!*' All the while, she kept retouching her flame-red lipstick and telling anecdotes that went nowhere except

to somehow pump up her ego (or at least that's what my husband thought.) Well, afterwards, Cal -- prefacing nearly every sentence with, "I know she's family" -- went off the handle about Vick. Was he ever amped.

The seat of our disagreement stemmed from whether her actions were self-promoting affectations or authentic expressions of who she is.

"Cal!" I said. "Our mother was French! We went to Paris every year! This is how we were RAISED!"

Cal barked back, "Then how come YOU'RE not like that? How come your brother's not like that? I mean, you two don't go around saying '*C'est la vie*' every other minute. Christ, Ellie. That's not NORMAL."

No, Danaë, it isn't normal. Nor was it for my husband to be so pissed off. Later, I admitted to him that my sister had been a trifle overbearing and we made up. But, in the final analysis, Cal is correct: Ms Victoria's phony *Français* is played to an ear-splitting fault.

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True confession: *Ever since my parents died, ever since the buzzing snatched hold and the earth slipped from under me, I have panic attacks.* In addition to my serial bouts with the blues, there's the existential threat of the locusts flying back. Lately the feeling is hardly perceptible (though ripples of emotional fragility persist.) But other times there's 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 I stay off the meds which dull me out and make me gain weight. Unnatural as it may sound, I prefer to live in a state of low-grade anxiety and thrift shop instead.

The panic attacks are lessening now, but right after the accident, it didn't take much for me to reach my tipping point. I'm telling you this, not because I'm on pins and needles at the moment but in case things spiral out in the future — which, sad to say, we can pretty much bank on.

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

Like many towns across New England, Wilton has a village square and 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. Once a week the store offers Ten-off-Tues, where everything's discounted ten percent, so I make it my business to be there on Tuesdays.

Rae 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; Rae, short and stout. Rae's talkative and ruddy, while the taller Rhoda is a no-nonsense type who wears wire-rimmed bifocals and let her hair go grey. If Rhoda's an ostrich, Rae is a red-faced warbler. Both middle-aged birds smell of wizened patchouli oil. The bargains are worth it, though, and so are they.

We know each other on a first-name basis and, every so often, one or the other will set aside a new arrival she thinks may interest me. Today Rae presented me with a black sequined sash that looked as if Madonna had strolled by and, in a flash of largesse, decided to donate an accessory from her latest concert tour! Rae pulled out the glittery piece from a plastic grocery bag and said, "Get a load of this, Cookie!" Then Rhoda gave a cat-call whistle. These cheeky dames don't exactly stand on ceremony.

The three of us regarded the sash together. I told them it would add pop to a pair of flared black pants I already own. Well worth the three dollars, minus ten percent -- not to mention, trying it on with the slacks at home and getting my recreational fix for the day. SOLD.

Thanked the duo for my buy, blew kisses to them both, and ambled through the dusky-rose door.

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Thrift Shop Obsession Part II/IV

The Salvation Army, County Road 89, Applegate, MA



Applegate's Salvation Army is a 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, including white. On Wednesdays, all tags are fifty percent less than marked, except for one of the colors. Customers learn of the exemption 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, Danaë, but when you divide cut-rate prices in two, you get discounts near criminal.

True confession: *I dress a certain way when I go to the Salvation Army.* I do so in order to blend in better with the clientele. To this end, my appearance might best be described as 'inconspicuous.' I keep a low profile in order not to let on that some of us like slumming it for fun.

So this morning, getting ready for Sally's, I stepped into my camou of dark jeans and a parka and made myself invisible. As always.

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Thursdays I stay home. It's a coping mechanism I learned where the pressure to go out and face the world is lifted. Permission to putter. My day free, the house to myself, I'm ready to sift through more detritus lining the shores of my head. This morning, it's the origins of thrifting that have moored. Shall we follow the tide?

My return to thrift-shopping can be traced, soundly, to when my son Graham started elementary school in Seaport and the demands of dressing him increased substantially. Our first foray in back-to-school shopping signaled the shift. We'd spent hours in the mall amassing a small fortune's worth of shirts, pants and pullovers (the works.) By day's end, I was confident my budding boy was set through spring. But come November, after factoring out tops and bottoms with permanent stains and tears – never mind things gone missing on the playground — I scarcely could string a single outfit together. No exaggeration! Graham'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 be starting all over again next year, and the year after that, and the year after that!

So it was that thrift shops reinstated themselves into my life. I started going to the same two shops that I'd gone to as a child with Maman and Vick — that is, DoOver and the one at the Presbyterian Church. Every so often I'd venture out to Goodwill, though being way out on the Island and having small children of my own, it wasn't a practical option.

As a young mother, life mainly revolved around Seaport village, where things were easy for me to do. My routine fell into a comfortable pattern in which several times a week I'd bring Graham, and later Harriet, over to my parents' house at 103 Eastman Avenue. The grandkids called them 'Pops and So-So', the names Vick's son Simon had lovingly bequeathed them as a tot. Sometimes I'd stay and visit, but mostly Pops and So-So would babysit while I drove into town to pick up diapers and the dry cleaning. It wasn't a jet-set existence, to be sure, but my mother had a genius for elevating even the most mundane activities to equilibrated excellence.

The rest of the week my best friend Jenna and I, having agreed to forgo daycare, watched our first-born children in the quietude of each other's homes. We both became pregnant during those years, experiencing the highs and lows that inevitably come with expecting. Rounding things out, Cal and I socialized with Jenna and her husband Les Vangreen. We also spent a lot of time with the Mc-K's, as the young cousins easily bonded. In sum, everything was organized in a neatly designed rubric.

I don't mean to romanticize my life on Long Island because there were bumps in the road there too. But, engulfed by the familiar, I felt complete in Seaport. And, upon moving to Wilton, I became empty.

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### 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 register up front. Mira-or-Mara isn't necessarily around. There's no additional sales help so you're more or less on your own. That's part of the charm but shopping in a mega barn — it's hard work, and I'm not always game. Especially since the mold there attacks my nose (seems fainter when the space heater's on.)

A rectangular ox of a man, Iggy has an Eastern European accent, which is mostly understandable and rather endearing. And upon closing each purchase – 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.

I remember on my first visit he trotted over, offered me his grizzled 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 in return and replied, “Pleasure to meet you. I'm Ellie.” He must've heard ‘Elya’ and the name stuck.

Iggy appreciates my eye for things; he always lights up at the sight of my purchases. Today, when I brought to the register a stoneware basin, 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 veined marble counter. Iggy simultaneously gave me the parcel, dabbed the cat's nose and said on cue, “Very thank you.” Iggy's my tonic to an unthinking world.

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Cal was all sweetness and light this morning. He gets that way sometimes. 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? For starters, my husband is a Renaissance man. He received his undergraduate degree in biology, minored in art history and has a Masters in arts administration. That may sound like a poor excuse to spout off his resume, but what I'm trying to convey here 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 be a fan of string quartets, but he understands why someone else could be. 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 a class in ethnographic art at Bard College in upstate New York. 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. About mid-flight and hurrying from behind, Cal 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, Cal 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 ringed 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 fizzy form of interaction, flush with romantic possibility, 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 an outfit with mathematical precision. 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 out to see *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.

P.S. This is how it happened that my husband, Robert Chase, came to be known as 'Cal'. Robert Chase, 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, on scholarship, to California's College of Life Sciences. By mid-October, Rob realized

environmental studies was not for him. By February, he realized the west coast was not for him -- though he was equally bent on cutting the cord to 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 Bard College where he could pursue both science and the arts. At Bard, Robert Chase was known as, 'California Rob', as 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 it lasted but two bleak semesters. Eventually 'California Rob' was shortened to 'Cal', even though by then he'd left the floor entirely. When I met him my second year at Bard, Cal was already Cal.

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Revelation: *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 chickadees 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 "Dad's dead, Maman's in the hospital" call and all that's transpired in its wake.

They were coming home from a summer concert featuring famous arias at the Olstead arboretum. The police found the program for 'A Night at the Opera' while searching my mother's purse for I.D. The show had ended about twenty minutes earlier. They were only a few exits in on the Long Island Expressway when their red Mini Cooper slammed into a cinderblock wall at fifty-eight miles an hour.

Dad, who was driving, was killed instantly. The cardiologist later explained that given my father's mature age and high cholesterol he may've had a stroke, causing him to lose control of the car. But his head and body were so compressed from the impact, we never did pinpoint why he ran off the road. Maman was rushed to the hospital where she lived in a coma for seven hideous 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. Three days later, she fell into cardiac arrest and we made the devastating decision to pull the plug. That was on September 3rd.



Two weeks. Two funerals. Thinking back, Danaë, I start to hyperventilate. I am hyperventilating now. Best I get dressed and go to A~B. It's Tuesday.

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Super Salvo shop this morning — the place was hopping. Picked up a box of tea candles, a brand new pair of slipper socks, one lidded Ball jar and a pair of jeans for Hattie that will go great with the lavender tee, flecked with rhinestone studs, I got yesterday at A~B.

The shirt roused a distant memory of mine, dating way back to those early sprees with Maman. I remember her finding a top of the exact same lavender, only this one was silk and sleeveless. It was to be worn under a summer-weight suit and Maman had a white linen one simmering in her closet at home. She had amethyst jewelry in similar shade. My mother was so pleased for having found this blouse. I remember how later in the afternoon she modeled the whole outfit for Dad, Vick, Chris and me. Maman sauntered into the living room, the four of us clumped on the couch, and said only this, “Voilà!” She looked radiant.

I recall too, how she brought out several different necklaces so we could arbitrate on the matter of which one looked best. She also brought out three pairs of shoes so we could mediate on the matter of which 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 decision was easily settled. But if Dad chose a different pendant or pocketbook from the rest of us, my mother deferred to him.

Maman went through this same modeling ritual whether purchasing special garments from department stores or bespoke ensembles 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 found the gem, she'd bought it for the price of a trinket.

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#### Thrift Shop Obsession Part IV/IV

St. Paul's Thrift, Church of St. Paul the Apostle, 9 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 the Apostle, an imposing brick edifice built in 1752. St. Paul's Thrift is in the basement, accessed only through a side door, minimally marked with a canvas awning of Essex green. They're open Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays from nine to three. The schedule, however, is mitigated by a sign pinned to a cork board just inside 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 ordinarily 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 three blue-haired, lips-clamped and disapproving -- nor do I know them by name (the way I know Rae and Rhoda at A~B or Iggy at the Great Barn.) No, at St. Paul's Thrift they treat me as an outsider. Not that they're impolite, only that they pretend not to recognize me whenever I come in. For example, today when I said hello, two feigned distraction while the third -- as if on rotation -- offered a wordless nod, scarcely acknowledging my presence.

Our graceless chemistry has cooled me to St. P.'s. I still stop in once in a while but less often than I used to. Do they treat everyone like me? Their holier-than-thou routine can't be good for business — sure hinders mine.

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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 and my mind has space to breath. It's Friday!

Last week I explained the origins of my thrifting. 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 in size 6 that no longer fits. The garment is in perfectly good condition, mind you, just our dear Lady X has gained a few pounds. She knows, however, there must be someone size 6 who'd positively kill for this skirt. But who? And more to the point, how can she find said party? She can't. And even if she could

(through ebay?) she certainly doesn't wish to play matchmaker. What she'd like, instead, 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 slip of a size 6 – let's call her Lady Y – will see the item, amaze at her luck and buy it on the cheap. The kicker: all proceeds go to a good cause. The added kicker: Lady X is furnished with a receipt to 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, apart from the stigma. Here's where things get sticky. How to put this? Other than antiquing and yard sales, buying secondhand isn't for everyone. Perhaps in the same way that (let's say) canasta, or Swiss chard, or trigonometry 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, I wouldn't volunteer, "Oh, I found the cutest polka-dotted skirt at Goodwill the other day." Just as I wouldn't say, "Next week my brother-in-law gets out of jail." If Vick's husband Bryce were in the state penitentiary – which he absolutely is NOT – I wouldn't tell a soul. Worse, I'd live in mortal dread that some busybody might find out through Google and then the whole town would know!

True confession: *Every so often, I become paranoid a stranger will recognize a coat I'm wearing as something they donated to Another~Boutique.* They'd eye me with disdain and ask, "Is that my jacket?" Then they'd scan the coat for an upturned flap or signature frayed edge while I glaciated, red as a Cherry Belle radish.

Even so, I cannot quit. I'm obsessed. I'm a lifer.

I'm Lady Y.

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Not having a good day, Danaë. Got my panicky nerve knot and I know why. Something happened last summer, maybe a month before the accident, that I haven't yet told you. Was definitely weird. It started with a call from my mother -- that isn't what was weird, we phoned every day. What was different was Maman's uneven voice, as if she'd been crying.

Startled by her tone, 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 mother said she wanted to visit me in Wilton without Dad. She said we needed to talk. My parents always came up together, did practically everything together, so this was way out of the norm. I told her she could come any time, certainly, but Cal and I were about to take the kids for a week on the Cape, after which she and my father were going to Montauk with the Mc-K's. So we set our sights on Labor Day weekend. Maman assured me there was no emergency and early September would work fine. Then came the car wreck and — needless to say — the visit never materialized. Revelation: *It nags me to pieces I'll never know what my mother wanted to say to me in private.*

Cal is the only person besides me (and now you) who knows about my mother's semi-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 (did she welcome the delay?) Truthfully, I'd half-forgotten the call until yesterday, while driving, when the whole conversation came flooding back to me, verbatim. And now it dangles before me like a ripened fig waiting to be plucked.

My mind scrolls through multiple questions. What could Maman have been so upset about? Why drive to Wilton alone? Why not tell Vick or Chris? Did something happen? Was Dad sick? Was she sick? Would it have made a difference, had I gone down to see them right away, talked to Maman, before going on vacation? And, worst of all, could I have prevented their death, had I been more present and not held off our meeting so long?

Of course, these 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 a paragraph, this too is an important piece of my inner turmoil: the mystery of Maman.

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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 had a heart-hammering panic attack after the kids left for school this morning. Ice torments me!

I fret about the roads and skidding into a ditch. I fret about the school bus flipping over with the children unbuckled. I worry about Cal not coming home, a solemn-faced sheriff at my

door in his stead. The possibility of a fatal auto accident with irreversible consequences 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 Rae and Rho; no fortuitous finds. I'm snowbound.

At present, Jasper's dozing, a ginger fur ball at my feet, and my breathing has slowed to the purring rhythm of his. Found a photograph from our Seaport years which I plan to use as a bookmark. The picture is of my parents, with their three little grandchildren, at home on Eastman Avenue. The photo is a candid, taken outside around their patio table with the umbrella closed. My father, on the far right, is seated in profile towards my mom, who sits opposite him on the left. She's fussing with a chubby-cheeked Harriet on her lap. Hattie, in turn, looks out at her brother Graham, 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 Gerry McBride, aka Pops and So-So, in their natural state: at ease, in the moment, loving life.

Revelation: *Other than re-locating to Boca, Barcelona, or the islands of Fiji, there's no stopping the menace that is black ice.*

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Graham 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, at five foot six in stocking feet, our boy looks like he's in high school, acts like it too, and I wonder if we did the right thing.

Graham'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 his headset listening to Kanye West.

In addition to bad posture and tuning us out, Graham has mastered the not so fine art of the short answer. Our son hasn't withdrawn, mind you, just for the most part his conversation is curt. Courteous but curt. Sure. Later. Thanks.

Mostly it doesn't bother me, except for the time when we asked him how his day was and Graham answered, "Dope." My ears pricked but Cal gave me an assuring glance that said, "Relax, Ellie — saying dope doesn't mean smoking dope." Good thing I have my husband to keep things in perspective because I was ready to call the local drug hotline.

Now it's Graham's birthday and I've already been briefed that he wants no part of a celebratory dinner or cake, as is our family custom, as is everyone's family custom. Apparently our boy is still accepting gifts.

When Graham announced his scaled-back birthday plans (and it must've been a few weeks before Christmas) I didn't take the news very well. However, once again, Cal came to the rescue — assuring me this is predictable behavior and, within the context of teenage defiance, small potatoes. Cal said, "Don't overreact. Graham's grades are good, he's got lots of nice friends, 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.

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So far I'd say my New Year's resolution — our writing project — is going by the numbers. I realize, though, that I've forgotten a few things — in the course of our January together — that I would still like you to know. So I've decided, Danaë, that at the end of every month, I'm going to reflect back and tell you things I inadvertently left out. Here are this month's forget-me-nots:

1) My father's deep appreciation for history and the English language continues to have its influence, as I now keep his tome of Shakespeare plays and his old unabridged dictionary on an oak lectern at the entrance of our sunken living room.

2) While studying anthropology at Bard, 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 saying my name, her voice halted midway. "Ell –!" she exclaimed, never completing the second syllable. 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 the blank.

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