

10/27/04

Dear Margaret---

We so enjoyed visiting your world in Crockett. It was great to catch up with you and hear stories about what is going on in your life. I know that both Bruce and I left fully satiated and inspired. Seems like everything you touch you magically alter. Alchemy, I believe.

Your painting has been watching over us now while we eat. Her gaze seems to change daily. Each time I look at her, I see something new: a sense of the landscape, a new ray in the golden background. She reminds Bruce of a religious icon, while I can't help but to imagine her as a contemporary viking. If not viking, a serious explorer. That is what I enjoy so much about your work---you elevate an ordinary person. What a lovely gift. Thank you, thank you.

For some reason I have been mulling over the story you shared with us about your sister and finding the raincoat that she had sewn at a local thrift store. How did it arrive there? Now I can't remember whether you said that the raincoat (with its eccentrically sewn gingham lining) was in a nearby or distant thrift store. I like to imagine that coat being passed on from your sister to a friend. Or no: maybe her collection of handmade clothes were donated to one thrift store upon her death. And the coat was purchased, on a whim, by a casual shopper. Thinking at the time that it was just the most perfect item, she realized when she got home that the coat was a bit too showy. Or maybe she wore that coat through one or two or three rainy seasons. Being capricious, she shifted through her wardrobe and decided it was time to pass on the coat. She donated it to another thrift store, and somehow the coat traveled from body to store, collector to donator, until it arrived in the store for you to find. Was it years after her passing that you found the coat? Did you decide to buy it? Or did you just finger the lining, remember your sister, and leave the coat for the next deserving soul?

While I was waiting for the bus on Saturday morning, a neighbor relayed a similar story of thrift store discovery. I was dressed for the dank weather: dark wool sweater, dark wool pants. My neighbor stopped when I waved at him to first reprimand me and then offer his hello. He was dismayed at my choice of attire; what I was wearing would render me invisible. He donned an electric green jersey that was illuminated by the soggy light. I complimented him on his jersey. He beamed and explained that he had purchased this excellent shirt at Clausen House (our neighborhood thrift store and treasure trove) for only four bucks. Then he continued on (this is his story): You know Pele? Well, when I was about ten or so, I went to see him play. After the game, I went down to the field to get his autograph. By the time it was my turn, he had run out of paper. So he took off his own jersey, signed it, and gave it to me! I was so lucky. Then my mother, sometime later when we were getting ready to move, went through my stuff and got rid of Pele's soccer jersey. I was really mad! That shirt was important to me. Well, twenty years later, I am shopping at Clausen House. Where it used to be, on the corner down there, not where it is now. And I found my jersey there...I couldn't believe it! I asked the lady, you know, how much is this shirt. She shrugged and said two dollars. I said, ok, I'll take it. That shirt is worth a lot of money! I couldn't believe that I found it again. I am never letting go of that shirt. Hey, you never know what you will find at the thrift store.

The synchronicity of these two tales have been winding through my mind.

Clausen House is one of my favorite places to visit. In fact, I enjoy purusing through most thrift stores. They are like a rambunctious cultural museum: loud, chaotic, clambering. Two weeks ago we went to Clausen House.

I had spied a little treasure: no price tag adorned its bottom. I thought I would see how much it cost. I usually visit Clausen House once a month or so. Not too often, but just enough to catch the circulation of goods. My visits are thematically guided: sometimes I will scan only the shirts, then only the jeans; the tablecloths, piled high, I slowly pick through (I have found delightfully hand-embroidered napkins and table runners); on to dish wares, where I systematically gaze up and down, down and up the shelves. I often leave empty handed. But once in awhile, I spy the most perfect item: I do feel like I have won, that it is my lucky day, because for less than five dollars I can adopt the precious glass or dish or napkin or sweater or...In my giddiness, I wonder why has someone decided to part with this amazing item, only to realize that for cosmic reasons beyond my control, I was meant to be united with this treasure.

Anyway, this white glass dish, a rectangular affair on a proud little stem, was mine for 75 cents. I also purchased, for twenty-five cents, a book whose cover proclaimed simply "Mastery". That day happened to be the "all items 50% off" day. There is no schedule to these half off days; random as the Russian roulette. I decided to take advantage of this random 'sale'; I broke away from my usually systematic habit and pulled some pants to try. (Clausen House recently installed a make-shift changing room, a short cubby next to the bulging bookshelves. You have to take care to pull the curtain all the way across lest someone benefits from an impromptu peep.) As I was standing in this little room, thinking about which pair of pants to test first, I was caught in the small drama that was unfolding in the store. I took the opportunity of partial hiding to simply listen. There was this one woman whose liquid monologue seemed to splash upon every shopper's selections. For the most part she was gushingly positive and emphasized that each person had found exactly what he or she was meant to find that day, that moment, among the store's piles. Interspersed with these endorsements, she would quote some philosopher or writer, as if to give her statements further validity. Her commentary was profound.

I adore adopting the cast-off: the markings of prior ownership add a particular and necessary patina to the item. And because I rarely spend more than ten dollars there (and that sizable sum would garner me several choice treasures), I sense in this form of exchange a responsibility for care-taking, rather than callous commodification.

Since my return from Norway, I have had this nagging feeling that my neighborhood, and our American culture, lacks appropriate modes for historic commemoration. We do have museums, but these institutions don't reflect the detail of mundane locality. How much time must pass before something becomes a relic or is 'museum-worthy'? Is history necessarily contained in antiquity? There is something wonderfully reassuring about seeing yourself reflected in the contents of history, to understand the origins of your lineage, to make sense of the contemporary. It is now becoming clear to me, that in some very unscientific manner, thrift stores are the mirrors of our culture. Banal as I say this, even obvious. But until now, I have not thought of thrift stores in this way.

I remember my first thrift store purchase. I was in high school. I had taken to cutting school and going into New York City, either with friends or on my own, to wander around the art museums in mid-town and the shops in village. I found a shirt, or a shirt found me. It was a cotton button-down, buttery soft through wear but not worn-out. Deep blue with ultra thin black stripes. I was very pleased with my find and upon returning home, was eager to share my discovery with my mother. We often shared clothes; our tastes were tangential. Clearly, I remember her expression of distaste as I modeled my purchase: How could I think of wearing something that had shrouded a stranger's body? That concern hadn't occurred to me. I had found a beautiful

shirt. My discovery endowed the shirt with a new life, a new set of experiences as it encased my body.

Oddly enough, it is my mother's distaste that actually piqued my fascination with thrift stores. I kept going back for more. These stores are filled with tid-bits of history: even the air inside of a thrift store is laden. The clues are there, some more visible than others. Sometimes a forgotten business card in the back pocket, other times it is simply my imagination that carries me to the memories locked into the weave of fabric, the crunchy dust in the crevices.

In Norway I spent most of my time in museums. Nothing too grand, mostly intimate affairs run by people who had a personal connection to the museum's collections. The first museum I visited was in a small town outside of Trondheim (the third largest Norwegian city). I had noticed a curious advertisement for a community museum housed in a former train station. I asked several people about this site, whether it was worthwhile to visit. No one had heard of it before. So I decided I must see this place. I had time for a mysterious adventure. I arrived by bus with only 15 minutes to spare: the museum would close at 3 pm. Fortunately, as I was curious about the museum, the woman who ran the museum was curious about me. Why had I come there? What was I doing in Norway to begin with? I sensed that this spot was not a usual tourist destination even though it was advertised in a brochure printed in five different languages. The building was warm and effused the aroma of fresh waffles. I was given a personally guided tour of the museum; it remained open until all of my immediate questions were answered. It was as if I were walking through someone's home, or perhaps their well-organized attic or basement. My guide, Ranelle, had stories about all of the objects contained in the two buildings: she told me about her life as a child. She grew up in this town and all of the things in the museum were donated by the community. The building was in a way dedicated to the community's collective and personal memory. Though this was a public place and I had to pay admission, the atmosphere was indeed intimate. Ranelle explained the unfamiliar household items. One that gave her a chuckle and reverie was a big old wash tub. She remembered that on Sundays, her siblings all took turns taking a bath. First, when the water was the hottest, the eldest cleansed. And then down the line, through to the baby. She had 7 or 8 siblings. She told me how they then dressed in their finest clothes for church. It was hard to keep the dresses clean! Her mother made all of their clothes; nothing was thrown away. Dresses were made out of flour sacks or whatever was available.

While she lamented the passing of time, she did admit that life is easier for her than it had been for her mother. Electricity brought the refrigerator, the washing machine: chores could be completed with greater speed and less physical exertion. At the same time, though, she felt that people now, young people that is, don't understand or care about history so much. Time moves more quickly: less time for stories, less interest in preservation. Actually, my experience in Lofoten proved this theory to be incorrect. Many of the younger people I met with held a fascination with history, especially with the intersection between the supernatural and the past (ghosts...).

In a way thrift stores represent a luxury: they exist because people have surplus goods with which to dispense. A revolving door of dependency on both the donator and the purchaser. Our neighborhood thrift store is like a docent-less community museum. Transitory artifacts abound. Their value is determined in small part by the price (which doesn't truly reflect the objects inherent worth) and in large part by desire.

I like to visit thrift stores in other communities. I had thought that thrift stores would abound in Bulgaria. A vague assumption. Actually, most of the thrift stores that I found were filled with clothes from Germany. This was a

big selling point and was well-advertised on the store-front. That, and the fact that clothes were sold by the kilo. These thrift stores didn't interest me as much as the impromptu kiosks (no more than a table really) that people set up in one area of the city by the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. One friend of my mine called this area something like the market place of the dead. She believed that all of the items had been in a way stolen from people who had recently passed away. You could find a smattering of history here, in no particular order: the guy selling fur hats was next to the woman selling religious icons, who was next to the couple selling communist relics. Accordions, guns, knives, old clocks, jewels, tchotchkes...it was all there. Most of the hawkers spoke English and were ready to make a ridiculous deal with the tourist in town for only a day or two. Authentic antiques, wink, wink. It was educational for me, and a surprise for the them when I, in Bulgarian, balked at their prices. I had many conversations with the sellers but never made a purchase there. Untrustworthy. Or simply bad luck.

Each Sophia apartment I lived in and for that matter, visited, was actually where I found this sense of the community museum. Not so much a community as a family museum. Places filled with living artifacts. People saved what they could.

2001: the apartment I found and lived in embodied this qualities. I was put in touch with the cousin of my friend's friend, Valentin. He had two apartments that he was willing to rent for three months. (I was working in Bulgaria for only 3 months that year.) The first, the one considered to be more desirable, was a new flat outside of the city center. It had central heat, a steel front door and a newly renovated bathroom. Unfortunately, there was no phone, no stove, and no direct way to walk from the building to public transportation. He would gladly provide me with a Bunsen burner, good enough to make coffee on, in leu (sp) of a stove. And as long as I walked in the daylight, I would have no trouble crossing the muddy paths from the four lane road, over the hill and across the railroad tracks to the building. I opted for the second choice apartment located in the city center. I was warned against living here because Valentin's mother had recently died in the apartment. I was told that there were ghosts there. I initially scoffed at the notion. After living there for several days, I quickly became acquainted with the ghosts. Friendly tricksters. They took a towel and my flip flops. Very strange choice. They knocked on the front door at the wee morning hours. They scurried in the front hall.

He told me that the apartment would have to be cleaned before I moved in. We went to take a look at the place. I thought, how bad could it be? I can manage with a little bit of historic grim. Walking through the front door made me dizzy. There was a narrow passage of about 14 inches, a channel through the deep sea of stuff. Piled two, three, four feet high on every available surface, was historic shit. It was as if he could not bare to part with even a candy wrapper. But there was a phone, central heat, and a washing machine. He told me that he would have the place ready for me in a week. Every few days I would call Valentin and he would tell me that it would be ready in a few days. After waiting nearly two weeks and the apartment was still not ready, I decided that I would have to help him excavate.

Much of what we scooped up and stashed in plastic bags and boxes was shoved into a middle room that was 'unavailable' for me to use. Valentin was visibly embarrassed by the condition of the flat: I tried to hide my disgust as I piled junk into boxes, garbage into bags. Valentin could only watch me. He could not work or clean. The worst was when I found a pile of clothes, most likely his mother's. Heavy stockings and underwear. Touching the rough fabric made my skin crawl. I could tell that Valentin was a sad soul.

In a way I was fascinated by the historic residue. After the floor had been cleared, I decided that I would not clean any surfaces. I used only one pot to cook with, a cup, a plate, a saucer. Valentin's mother had been well-prepared: the shelves were stocked with every manner of home-canned vegetable: glistening tomatoes and peppers, golden honey, nearly aromatic cabbage. He took all of these jars with him. These jars were of the most value and an American could not be trusted with them. I used to sneak into the 'unavailable' room with its teetering piles of books, framed photos, boxes brimming with every imaginable sort of miscellany. I can't remember when the ghosts started with their trickery; I think it might have been after I initiated my forays into this forbidden room. I made sure to right every thing I explored, though I am sure that Valentin would never have noticed.

Even though the ghosts caused me no harm, they did frighten me. The only way that I could make peace with them was by acknowledging their work. I made historic portraits of the flat, to recognize the years of fingers touching various surfaces.

I never knew that Viola was a superstitious person. At her memorial, a number of people spoke of her theories about luck. My favorite one was Squeak's. She came on to the podium carrying an ugly blue and white delft plate. Squeak and Viola had manner conversations about how unhappy Squeak was with her job. (She was teaching at UC Davis and the commute was grinding). So Viola had found a set of china plates at some thrift store. The plates were painted with scenes from the UC Berkeley campus. They were really ugly plates. But every time that Squeak and Viola ate together (which was often), they rubbed the plates for good luck as per Viola's instructions. And if others joined them for dinner, they too had to rub the plates for good luck, no matter if there was food on the plate or not. Rub, rub, rub the magic plates. And five years later, Squeak had a teaching position at UC Berkeley. This is how Viola took care of her family. You know she was not alone.

The other day, as I was thumbing for someone's phone number, I noticed Viola's address in my roledex. I have left it there. It seems only right. How can I throw it away? Her chuckle still echoes in my mind.

Margaret, I feel quite remiss in sending you this letter so long after our wonderful visit. Please accept my apologies. I hope that you are doing well. And if you have time, I would love to hear from you, by letter.

With love,
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{Images to send with the email letter: sketch from Viola's memorial service, photos of Clausen house, sign from museum of history of Sofia, museums in Norway, apartment portraits}