

A Love Story in a Thrift Store

By Jesse Fulton

Thrift Faire: Rockland, Maine

I remember us in some thrift store on that road trip up to Maine roughly two months into the relationship. Thrift Faire, I think it was? Both of us lived too far to go home for fall break like all of our friends had done, but you told me you still wanted to plan something special for us to do too. You planned the whole road trip like it was a gift to me. To us. On the way back from that perfect weekend of snuggling and stargazing in the bed of your truck, I saw the Thrift Faire sign and knew we had to go.

I wanted a souvenir from my first fall break with you, and thrifting was kind of our thing. We met in a thrift store by chance only two weeks into our freshman year and it felt like an instant connection. Three dates later you were inviting me to come with you to an 80s themed party after dinner to meet your friends. Since I had nothing to wear, we went back to that shop where we met. A week later we went back again to get costumes for a jungle themed party and after that it just felt like it was becoming something special to us, you know? So when I saw the Thrift Faire sign, it felt like it was meant to be.

We wandered the aisles with fingers filing through cotton sweaters like freshly printed pages of a love story just beginning. Softly. Tenderly. We considered every garment genuinely - trusting we'd find a treasure or two if we *really* looked. Being thorough with our browsing was important to us both. You, especially, never wanted to miss a single thing. You were a diligent thrifter. I was mostly just a curious one. Obviously I didn't want to miss anything good either, but at a certain point whenever we went shopping, I'd find myself not looking at the clothes at all. I knew I would never find a single article of clothing as captivating as you.

The way your brown eyes squinch when you're sifting through shirts, or the way your mouth curls when you've found something with potential. Your meticulous attention to detail always showed on your face. I could always spot it the moment it started. You never knew what you were looking for, but when you saw it, you'd see so much more than what things were. You saw what they could be. You noticed details I never would have even thought to look for - whether we were thrift shopping, people watching, museum wandering, you just saw the world differently. My brain never worked like that. I'd just stand back and watch you with amazement like a little kid at a magic show, wishing I could see the world through your eyes for just a day.

I didn't know what I was looking for either that day in Maine, but I knew how to find beauty in mundanity. And when I saw that simple looking, rose colored t-shirt in some pile by the fitting rooms in the back, I knew it was for me. I dug it out from torn jeans and embroidered socks and held it high for you to see. You turned your head from the jean jacket you were trying on in the mirror, and smiled through your skepticism to ask "Are you sure you want that? It looks a little... well-loved..."

"I don't mind that one bit. Sure the color looks faded and the collar a little stretched... but its still such a gorgeous shade of deep red, and plus you need to feel how soft it is! Feel this!" I brought the shirt over to you as an offer to touch, and you gently ran your fingers across the fabric.

"Okay okay, Billy Mays. No need to sell me on it." You joked at how hard I was trying to convince you- I just wanted you to see it how I saw it! You continued: "I'll support you and your choices, even when I don't understand them. How much is it?"

"No tag on it," I replied. "But I'm in love." Your face poorly hid your doubts, but I knew then and there I'd be taking it home with me no matter the price. You responded with a smile and

a shrug, and to this day I'm still not sure if that was love, indifference, or both. Regardless, I could tell you were supportive as long as it made me happy. Even at the register when they asked for \$20, you showed no hint of protest as you opened your wallet and offered to buy it for me. They put my shirt in a paper bag with your jean jacket and it was done before I could even object.

“That was so sweet of you. I wasn't expecting you to buy this FOR me, you really didn't have to do that!” I thanked you as we left the store. You still had your wallet out, double checking that all of the bills were in the right place according to their value and all of the cards were sorted by alphabetical order. That meticulous attention to detail didn't stop when we left the store. It never stopped. It was pretty adorable to watch.

“Of course I did! I had to buy you something after I dragged you around the store for six laps- you were ready to go by lap three and I made you stay and check with me one more time.” I could tell something was up because you seemed a little anxious. Your lips were pressed together tight and your movements were fast and sharp. You wouldn't look at me. You almost looked panicked even? Like whatever thought this all spurred was something too honest to admit in the moment.

“Aww thank you, you really are too cute! But truly I would have done another seven laps with you if you had asked. I don't mind!” I wanted to reassure you I wasn't going anywhere just because you took your time shopping.

“Really? Are you sure?” You finally turned to see me nodding furiously as I ducked into your passenger seat. “Wow, thanks...That's really... I'm just not used to that I guess.” You relaxed a little. As we drove away from the store, your mood got more and more joyous.

When we crossed state lines on our way back to Rhode Island that night, you told me you loved me for the first time. I could see you were thinking about saying it because of the way your eyes stopped blinking for a minute. You bit your lip and waited for my response. What you didn't know was that I had already been tracing the words lightly into your hand throughout the whole car ride home already. I said it back and we both smiled. We rode back to our freshman college dorm in silent bliss, soaking up the happy feeling of finding something so beautiful and rare. I leaned my head on the car window and fell asleep smiling at the falling leaves outside. They looked especially pretty that evening.

Angel Exchange: Santa Fe, New Mexico

I remember that thrift store in Santa Fe where we went shopping before some pool party in your hometown. I think it was at your Aunt Jane's place with all of your cousins and their friends- I remember I was nervous about meeting the extended family all for the first time. You always reassured me that they were nice and harmless people even if their views and priorities were a little frightening. Our luggage got lost on the flight out that year, and while you had a couple tee shirts still hanging in your childhood bedroom, you vetoed any suggestion that we might resort to your high school gym clothes no matter how dire the circumstances. That was fine with me because I knew what that meant: time for us to thrift! Summer was just beginning and I was down for a little adventure before I met everybody. I'd be more confident in a brand new outfit anyway.

You took us to Angel Exchange in your mom's old Ford Explorer - no AC, but you said the long drive would be worth it when I saw the place. It used to be your favorite shop in high school. But even with the window's down and an ice pack on my neck, the heat was brutal

beyond description. Our bodies were drenched in Summer sweat by the time we got there and the nerves of meeting your family was really starting to weigh on me. By the end of the half hour car ride there, I was already dreaming about how soon we could go back to your parents' place. I didn't say anything though because I knew it was special to you.

When we got inside, we ravaged every clothing rack in search of inspiration without much luck. You checked every aisle at least five times that day, but it felt like more. By round three of the shop, I had given up and decided to settle for a boring blue tank top and black board shorts- but "settling" had never been a word in your vocabulary. You bought pieces that you loved, that you felt good in. If you tried something on and didn't like how it fit around the shoulders or didn't like how the fabric felt when you posed a certain way, then it was never going to be worth settling for. Even at a second hand price.

I waited for the familiar facial expression that signaled you'd found your gem, yet the harder you searched the more disappointed you seemed. There was no smirk of thought. There was no spark in your eye, just a watery glaze of frustration that seemed ready to break into full on tears. You left empty handed that day. While that wasn't rare for you, something about this particular lack of finds seemed to strike a nerve. I could tell that it upset you by the way you slammed the car door shut behind you as we left.

"Are you sure you didn't want that purple tank top we saw? I know you don't usually like tank tops, but I thought that was a really good color for you!" The hot leather seat was sticky against my thighs and the summer air sat heavy in my lungs, but I didn't mind being a little uncomfortable in that moment. I could see how hard you were trying not to cry and that was more concerning to me than any amount of chafing would ever be. I know it felt overwhelming but we'd make it work somehow, I just had to help you see that.

“If I wear a tank top, my family will say something about my arms.” You stared out the driver seat window to hide the sadness behind your determination for perfection. “They always have something to say. They love to point out my flaws.”

“If they’re going to say something rude no matter what, does it matter what you wear then?” I asked genuinely. I thought this would help to point this out. It did not.

“Yes, it matters. Everything matters in my family. What clothes you’re wearing or not wearing, how much food you’re eating or not eating, the grades you’re getting- all of it.” You got short with me. That was the first time in a whole eighteen months of dating that you’d gotten short with me. “My family has really high expectations and-”

“That’s not fair though. You can’t always meet everybody’s expectations, and that is okay” I promised you. I meant it.

“Okay well I have expectations too.” Silence. I couldn’t refute that. Should I have asked you to lower your expectations? I couldn’t. Your mind was special, who was I to try and limit it? Obviously I didn’t like that you were so hard on yourself, but I didn’t want to get in the way of your plans or goals. When you envisioned your life a certain way, I knew it was an inevitable reality you were going to make happen one way or another. “I can take us to the mall and we can get something there but it’s 20 minutes away and we’re supposed to be at my cousins’ in 30.”

“Okay, so we’ll just be a little late. It’s a party! No one will mind.” I tried to be reassuring as best as I could, but I could tell you were on edge the whole night. You found a swimsuit in Pacsun that you really liked and then from Abercrombie you bought a plain white crew neck. We only checked those two stores which was the fastest I’d ever seen you shop. But even after we bought outfits for the pool party, even after we got to your Aunt’s, you still seemed solidified in your stress and despair. Something was stirring in your brain, but it wasn’t anything nice.

It broke my heart to see you so downspirited and so affected. And it didn't help when your Aunt Jane started interrogating me- we could both tell she was probing to see if I was good enough for this family. Your leg bounced anxiously in your seat the whole night as if everyone was wondering why you had settled. You never settle. Your anxiety gave me anxiety because I couldn't tell if you were feeling like you'd settled for the clothes or you were feeling like you'd settled for me. The questions grew in my brain like a tumor the doctors swore was benign. Did I meet your family's high expectations? Did I meet yours? What if I didn't?

I needed to rationalize in my own brain what was making you upset so that I could help make it all better. To be honest, I think I felt guilty at my inability to comfort you that day. I just didn't know what to say. It didn't seem like a big deal to me because I felt we still could have had a fun time dressed like farm animals, but I know your brain is so different from mine. I felt like I had failed as a boyfriend by not being able to lift your spirit and I wondered the rest of the trip if maybe there was some specific detail or moment that I missed? I just wish I could've shown you through my eyes how cute you looked in your Pacsun swim trunks.

When your cousin started bringing out his guns to show off, I had had enough and asked you to drive us home. You promised me he never would have shot it at anyone, and that everything really was okay, but I was just too uncomfortable to stay there. Guns and alcohol are never a good mix, no matter how careful or experienced the gun owner is. You didn't seem all that sad about leaving a little early which was in total contrast to your reaction to us arriving late. That car ride home felt like we had somehow switched roles and suddenly I was the one who needed all of the comforting. I think you were secretly just as glad to get out of there as I was, but you feigned normality as you told your cousin his new gun was cool and thanked Aunt Jane for having us. I could hardly speak on our way out; I was so afraid. I'd never seen a gun in

person like that and something about it really spooked me. I'll never know how you felt so okay around your cousin's firearms. The only thing that calmed me afterwards was hearing you sing along to Beyonce's old albums. By the time "Love on Top" came on, you had me giggling and singing along. I'll never forget how nice it was to be taken care of and how good it felt that night to be loved by you.

Goodwill: Providence, Rhode Island

I remember going to Goodwill after we first moved in together for our senior year of college. We were about to enter our fourth fall together as a couple and I still loved you like it was the first - only deeper now. We rolled up to the Goodwill with a list in hand that read: lamp, blankets, rug, picture frames, etc. We were in search of any cute decor on a budget. In my free hand, I took yours and swung it as we walked through the parking lot with a toddler-like energy. I was so excited about it all. I was excited about the weather outside, I was excited about living with you, I was excited about senior year. I was excited about holding your hand. I was excited about all of the "first"s and all of the "last"s that were coming our way.

The automatic doors slid open to reveal the treasure trove of second hand goods. We followed our tunnel vision straight to the back - past the sweatshirts, the faded jeans, and the books. We didn't even do a full tour of the store that day, I remember. We knew what we wanted. We had a mission.

"Ooh I like this one!" I grabbed the picture frame off the shelf. It was wooden and plain. Simple. Light.

"Really? That's like the most boring one they have I feel like. Look at this set of three over here, babe." You walked past me with little interest in the frame I was holding.

“Yeah, I like those too!” I lied. They were a little gaudy for my taste with its silver floral detailing over a glossy black base. It felt so pristine and precise. Crisp. You could see every edge, not an imperfection in sight. I wondered: who would donate these? And why? I pictured someone in their late 30s who had a steady, well paying job and a wife, and the next 10 years planned out in advance. I imagined their wedding photos taken by a close family friend sitting in these frames for half a decade before the happy couple decided to redo the living room and donate all of the old stuff. We hadn’t even taken the frames home and I was already getting excited thinking about redoing the living room with you someday too.

I would probably never pay attention to the frames again once it held our favorite frozen memories. “What’s the price tag looking like?”

“Twenty two bucks a piece. So sixty six in total?” I was surprised at how casually you admitted that as if I should have been expecting it.

“Honestly, babe, this wood one is only 8 bucks-”

“C’mon, don’t do that. I really like these frames and the silver is gonna match really well with that side table I ordered!” I still don’t know if you were begging or informing me, but either way I could see your mind was made up. You had a vision for our apartment. Every muscle in your face seemed relaxed. You weren’t even begging to see the rest of the store before coming to any decisions.

“Okay...” I caved. I smiled at you and shrugged in the most loving way I could, but I think you could read my face just as well as I could read yours. You put them back on the shelf.

“Let’s get them!” I insisted.

“No it’s fine we can get the wooden one. It’s fine.” Though you were clearly not fine. Your eyes defocused and stared into space. You were thinking and I could tell you were starting

to think faster and faster. Was it anger? Frustration? I wondered what my face was revealing about my thoughts. Could you sense my love or did it come off as indifference? Could you tell how badly I wanted you to be happy?

“No, no, no! Let’s grab them. You’re right, it’ll go great with the side table” I doubled down. You stared at me blankly.

“I can tell you hate them. I want the picture frames to be right for both of us. We can find the right one-”

I interrupted you, “These are the right ones. I swear. Once they’re holding pictures of us, will it even matter what the frames look like anyway?”

“Of course it does, what do you mean? Everything depends on how you frame it. Everything. So it needs to be framed right.” With every word you spoke, it was becoming clearer to me that something deeper was going on in that mind of yours.

“What is ‘right’ though? There is no wrong or right when it comes to decorating, baby, it’s just whatever we want it to be!” I wanted you to know that as long as I was with you, everything was already right as they could be.

“Things are right when you know they’re right. And if we aren’t sure that we’ve found the right frames, then how can we find the right rug? How do we find the right lamp? And if the whole apartment feels wrong, then living with you is going to feel wrong, and I’m going to feel wrong-” you started to spiral. “You’re probably thinking there’s something wrong with me right now, aren’t you?”

“Of course not, baby. Nothing’s wrong with you.” I knew you’d never believe me, but I was prepared to say it as many times as I had to until you did. I’d been doing this for four whole

years. You turned away from me and put your head in your hands. “Nothing’s wrong, baby. Nothing, I promise”

“Are you sure you want to live with me?” You whispered through choking back tears. “I know I can be a lot- I know I am- especially when it comes to planning and decisions and- and- I just want to be perfect for you. I want everything to be perfect for you.”

“You are perfect to me. If anything else in life is perfect too, then that’s an added bonus- but you are perfect to me already. That’s more than enough for me. You are more than enough for me.” I meant every word.

“But what if I’m always like this? What if I never feel good enough? Because I don’t think I will-” I put a hand on your shoulder and kissed the back of your neck.

“You are already good enough. You are enough. Just as you are right this second.” Upon my saying this, you turned around and began to heave into my shoulder.

“I’ve never been enough for anyone. Not for my family, not for my last boyfriend, not for myself. I take too long everywhere I go. I can’t make decisions. I have to remake my bed three times every morning to get it perfect or my whole day is thrown off.” Every word spilled out of your mouth like vomit. “You shouldn’t be with me. You can find so much better, I don’t deserve-”

I shut you up with a kiss. “Listen to me. Hey hey, listen. You care so much about everything feeling right, well this feels right. The frames could be wrong, the rug could be wrong, it could all go wrong- and this would still feel right. I love you.” Beyonce’s “Love on Top” came on the loudspeaker with perfect timing. We stood in the fluorescent lights of Goodwill crying together while holding one another. I wish I could have given you the eyes right out of my

head to let you see your own perfection from my point of view. You were, are, and always would be enough for me.

Goodwill: Providence, Rhode Island

I remember waking up this morning thinking that something felt off. I couldn't describe it. It just felt like something bad was coming, just this innate gut feeling I had. But without a real reason to justify it, I had no choice but to shake it off and go about my day. You had already left for class by the time I got up, so I took my time with my morning routine dragging out each step of preparing for my day. I put on an old, rose colored T shirt and a pair of jeans, and I was about to leave when I got an email.

Class canceled today. Professor was having a family emergency. It couldn't have been more perfect. I had no class and you wouldn't be back for a few more hours, which meant I finally had time to go shopping for your birthday presents. The weird feeling in my stomach from this morning almost disappeared, but I was able to ignore it as I drove back to Goodwill. It'd been a week since we last went and I'd been wanting to buy you those frames you liked, but I hadn't had the chance.

When I walked in the store, it wasn't all that crowded. "Love on Top" was playing again and I thought about our memories laughing and singing in the car. I B-lined straight to the back where the frames were, fingers crossed that everyone else in Providence had found them as ugly as I did. It took me a minute and then bingo! They'd been moved to the back of the shelf, but I was diligent enough to find them. You'd have been proud, I thought to myself. The frames weren't even as bad as I'd remembered them honestly. I browsed a bit further, trying to see if I could find you another gift somewhere here or if any of the clothes caught my eye for myself. I

sifted through sweater after sweater like fragile pages at the end of an old love story hoping one would feel right for my guy. I was trying to find something good, but after only a few laps of the store I had to give up. I already had the best find there was anyway. You. Nothing could ever feel that right.

I got to checkout. I paid and everything and I was almost out of the store. I almost made it. But there are some things in life you can't plan for. The sound of gun shots went off and people started screaming. I had flashbacks to the night you reassured me in the car after that pool party. "Guns aren't that scary," you had told me. I snapped back to reality. I promise you I tried to run for the door, but I tripped over someone's dropped bag and a shopping cart rolled right into the back of my head. I'd only been down for a few seconds when I picked my throbbing head back up and saw him for the first time. The man with the gun. He was firing at random, carelessly into the crowds of people trying to escape. The bullets came so fast it was like the shooter was intent on killing shoppers as quickly as possible, like he had somewhere to be.

He turned his head around and I had nowhere to hide. All I could do was play dead and pray. The black and silver frames had escaped the bag and shattered on the floor around me in the chaos. In one of the shards that had landed near my face I could see myself in the glass reflection and I tried to picture you with me to calm myself. I kept my eyes focused on the glass reflection trying hard not to look at the grizzly scene beyond. Knowing this might be the end of it all, I did something I had never done before: I prayed.

I prayed the bullets would stop. I prayed the gunman would stop. I prayed I could see you again. I prayed I could hold you one more time. I prayed I could tell you "I love you, I love you, I love you". I prayed that you already knew that regardless.

I prayed that if something happened to me, you'd be okay. I prayed you'd be able to see yourself through my eyes somehow. To see life through my eyes. I prayed you'd learn to find beauty in mundanity- in plain faded t shirts and falling leaves outside car windows. I prayed you'd learn that things are never as easy as 'wrong' or 'right'. I prayed you'd let go of those unfair expectations you held yourself to, but I prayed you'd never begin to settle for less than all of the amazing things you deserve in life.

The first bullet ripped into my left side. The pain was beyond any I'd ever known. I saw the blood drenching my rose colored t-shirt causing the fabric to cling to my abdomen. It was the shirt I bought back in Maine that day we first said I love you. It was so soft. The second bullet hit my shoulder and I didn't feel pain at all anymore. My body was beyond pain.

I knew it was the end for me. I knew I'd lost too much blood already to be saved, I could feel it all over the floor. I knew help was on the way, but I knew it'd come too late. So I just laid in the pool of blood and held the wound on my stomach, and I tried to think happy thoughts. Happy thoughts. That day four years ago in Maine. The leaves. The quiet. The look of relief on your face when I said I loved you too. I found my favorite shirt that day. I found my favorite person too.

I closed my eyes and saw you smiling at me from the front seat of your truck. I traced the words "I love you" into my palm and wondered if you felt it. When you finally hear the news, I hope you know I meant it.