

there is a line a long one  
saturday at the P is a busy day the saint vincent de paul society thrift shop in cotuit on route 28  
known as the P or the V de P or sometimes the Vatican  
run by the catholic church on route 28 in Cotuit staffed by a very large group of very old women  
St Vincent de Paul was a French priest who died in 1660 then canonized in 1730 he was known for teaching  
the rich to do works of mercy (no easy feat)  
despite my rancor for the church I go almost every saturday sometimes tuesdays too  
for the thrill of the bargain  
the hipness of upcycling the stories in every cast-off  
today is busy everything is half off so there's the line in addition to which  
the lady jamming things up today has a voucher  
meaning she is in a pickle and received a voucher from the church aid society to shop here  
sort of like a gift certificate but for used stuff  
most of us us regulars come here hunting for treasure the cashmere scarf  
the perfect chair for the guest room the vintage table cloth  
most of us shop here for fun  
but the woman jamming up this line has a voucher has a heap of stuff on the counter mostly children's clothes  
by the look of it she has at least an infant and a toddler and a couple school-age kids  
she has jeans and sweatshirts and pajamas and t-shirts and socks and onesies and coats and sweaters and  
sneakers and rainboots also towels and two sheets and even  
a brand-new-still-with-the-tags-on twin size star wars comforter with matching sham  
well-played, voucher lady  
Janet who is 83 is ringing each item in and Peg who is 87 if she's a day is folding and bagging so slowly  
taking time to exclaim over each thing *would you look at that hardly worn at all or isn't that precious?*  
Janet holds up a tiny sweater and declares it a handknit *you pay good money*  
*for that at a craft fair* she says so very slowly excruciatingly really the sale is rung in and bagged with  
many pauses to check the total against the voucher to make sure she doesn't go over  
the man next to me in line sighs loudly at regular intervals and people behind him grumble and shift in the way  
put-upon people in lines do the inconvenience of it all you know the guy next to me mumbles not out of  
earshot *of course she has a voucher* like poor people are the bane of his existence  
like he himself is not waiting in line in a thrift shop to buy a used pair of swim trunks and the woman ahead of  
me looks back at swim trunk dude and rolls her eyes in agreement with him like this poor mother with a  
voucher is totally harshing her saturday morning yard saling thrift-shopping chill  
there is not a single thing for herself on the counter unless you count the threadbare mismatched towels  
she is young too young for four kids thin haggard nails chewed to the cuticle she looks young and old at  
the same time one of those people with their hard life written on their face in their posture she is anxious  
aware of the line behind her aware of her voucher  
but Janet and Peg are in no rush if anything they slow down folding everything just so as if they know  
that no one takes time for this woman all the kids' clothes are lovingly stowed in a gap shopping bag  
all the linens into a ridiculous lily pulitzer tote comforter in an oversized birthday gift bag like it's a present  
they pamper her in a way only old catholic thrift shop ladies know like they are packing her trousseau  
her hope chest  
they mutter over the total checking and rechecking the number and Janet announces at last that there is a  
buck seventy five left over the line knows there is no cash back on vouchers and groans in unison great  
she's gonna have to go back into the shop and pick something else out for one of her 3 or 5 or 11 kids and we're  
gonna hafta wait in this damn line a little longer jesus christ but Peg says *I know just the thing* and bustles  
out from behind the counter and out into the shop for 87 she's pretty fast she

returns in a flash triumphant with a dress like a bridesmaid dress from 1987 a gown really impractical but the color beautiful deep pinky rosy red *this color is perfect for you* Peg says holds it up to the woman and it is indeed perfect the line almost gasps her skin her coloring this dress transforms her Peg says *you would be so lovely in this* like Peg is fairy godmother and tonight is the ball everyone in line holds their breath she tears the ten dollar ticket off the sleeve of the dress and gives Janet an even look *that's a buck seventy-five, Janet* she says Janet nods knowingly they are like the nuns in the sound of music at the end when they take the distributor cap out of the nazis' car *one dollar and seventy five cents it is* Janet says and punches the numbers in Peg folds the dress so carefully and the line is mesmerized one because it is a lesson in the dying art of ball gown folding and two because it is an act of sublime tenderness Peg cannot reach across the counter and touch this woman this complete stranger stroke her hair press her hand to her cheek tell her that in this moment she is cherished in this moment she is a beloved child of god but she can fold this lovely dress so gently tucking the crinoline folding the bow smoothing the sleeves she folds this dress like a sacrament like Jesus washing the feet of the disciples there is a change in the line now a lightening a joy a gladness for this woman a silent cheer that the sale is almost complete for sure but also a shift now for the woman toward the woman the line leans in a little as if the dress or the gesture of the dress the patient slow folding of the dress make eye rolling lady and used swim trunk guy imagine the woman with the voucher as someone else a daughter a sister a mother who loves her children as if by just witnessing Peg fold that dress make us in line impatient us privileged us make inconvenienced us merciful too Janet and Peg finish the sale are all business again they sign off on the voucher and hand over the bags she thanks them sheepishly and starts to leave avoiding eye contact with the line behind her Peg calls after her *don't forget your star wars comforter! that's a prize!* and leans over the counter with the last tote the one that looks like a big present she makes a joke *may the force be with you!* she calls she has no idea