

Excerpted from Chapter 1: No Regrets

I stood in the wings of a large lecture hall in Chicago in 1958. I was seven years old. My breath quickened against the cinched sash of the smocked dress Gram had bought me for the occasion. As I watched my father at the podium, he stood tall, with a broad smile across his face. Then he turned quickly to find me, and I noticed his tie was askew. Earlier, in our hotel room, he'd asked me to straighten it. "You do it, Gretch," he'd said, but just before heading to the lectern, he'd leaned over to kiss my cheek where I stood off stage, and now, seeing it askew, I thought I must have jostled it off-center when he had.

In the stage lights, his oxford shirt was nearly blinding. He smiled out at a thousand fans and gave a wave with his right hand, taking in the admiration. When the applause quieted, he called me out to introduce me. I ran across the wide stage, knowing I wouldn't slip in my shiny black shoes because Mom had scratched their soles on the sidewalk that morning.

My father was good on any stage—in a big city hall; in a university auditorium; in our living room in Hanover, New Hampshire; or on a rocky beach on Penobscot Bay, Maine, where we summered. He read his poems slowly and well, he told funny and prophetic poem-stories, and he shared his family with his audience.

Now, at his side, I stood straight like him, shoulders back, and beamed in the light of his praise, taking in the feel of fame, thinking it was real, and that it might even have something to do with me.

In 1991, I was forty years old, recently divorced, with two children—seventeen and twelve—and running a young executive consulting and coaching company just starting to show promise.

I stared out the window above my desk at a double row of tall pine trees, the same species that circled my childhood home across town. They were my focus when I lifted my strained eyes from looking into one of 147 boxes of letters, books, and other documents that made up my father's literary archives at Dartmouth College, in Hanover. It was a sunny Monday morning, and the collection was being held in a nondescript steel storage building a few miles south of campus.

Friends were surprised I was spending my Monday mornings in a building we'd driven by a hundred times and never noticed. With a large overhead door facing a side street for loading and unloading, the warehouse had only a few windows, one of which I could look out of on the woods. The boxes were in storage while the college built its new Rauner Special Collections Library, my father having made this donation to his alma mater several years prior when he and my mother moved into a retirement facility north of town.

Phillip Cronenwett, then librarian for the college, enthused about the gift and his high interest was infectious. He described a treasure trove that included letters to and from nearly every notable writer of the twentieth century. Dad hadn't been surprised when I'd told him I was interested in reading through his letters; he assumed everyone would be.

My father's literary career spanned eight decades. He wrote his first poem in 1919, in Austin, Minnesota, when he was fifteen years old, and scribbled out his last around 2000, when he was ninety-six. As poet-in-residence at Dartmouth, he taught generations of creative writing students through four decades. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1966 and the National Book Award in 1997. He was inducted into the inner circle of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1982. He served as New Hampshire poet laureate for five years and as US poet laureate at the Library of Congress under Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy.

What was unusual about this collection of more than fifty-five thousand letters, Phil told me, was that, unlike most writers who keep correspondence they've received, my father had kept carbon copies of every letter he'd written to the authors as well. Contained within the boxes were decades-long epistolary conversations between famous writers as they celebrated and bemoaned their literary lives. With permission from my older brother, Dikkon, executor of our father's literary estate, Phil offered me a desk under a window and an opportunity to peruse the boxes in any way I chose.

My father, never known for tidiness, had organized the boxes well. Each was labeled by year and stuffed with folders arranged alphabetically, by author. I could pluck a handful of letters to and from Robert Lowell, say, in August 1962, after he; his wife, Elizabeth Hardwick; Dad; and I had spent an afternoon on Dad's boat, *Rêve*. Or I could pull my father's correspondence with Anne Sexton in 1967, the year she won her Pulitzer and I met her at our house in Hanover.

The boxes spoke to who Dad was as a literary person; he corresponded with dozens—perhaps hundreds—of writers, friends, editors, critics, and publishers, as they did with him. Through that correspondence, he served as glue between large swaths of writers. As a little curly-headed girl, I'd watched him write some of those letters, his shoulders muscled forward as he typed on his Smith Corona in his study while I knelt on his desk, peering into its guts. I loved the sound of black ink smacking white vellum and the syncopation of the little hammers as his fingers flew across his keyboard, ending each line with a solid *thwap* of the return bar. I noticed how he typed on his #10 envelopes, addresses marked to important editors, since the letters were headed to New York and London. I marveled at how he could grip one of his teeth-grooved pipe stems between his canines while simultaneously telling me who was coming for dinner that

night. Sometimes I'd get antsy and stand on the desk in my bare feet to gain stature, before bending over and practically falling into the typewriter, blood rushing to my head, making me feel giddy. "Okay, Gretch," Dad would then chuckle, "I can't very well finish this letter with your head in my way."

Now, I was looking at his letters with the eye of a woman, a woman who had both adored her father and been betrayed by him. My back tensed, my neck strained, and my brow complained as hours flew by. Furrowed with concentration, I blew dust off old pages and removed rusty paper clips from the original letters of Robert Frost, W. H. Auden, Archibald MacLeish, and Wallace Stevens. I'd spent my early life inhabiting the poetic periphery of these men, tugging at their pant legs for attention. I had no idea how many days or months I'd have to be in the world of Dad's letters, as I had no plan, just a lot to learn. On my first day in the storage facility, I'd set aside eight hours and got through three cartons. With 144 to go, I couldn't see out to a finish line.

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