



The Necklace: Thirteen Women and the Experiment That Transformed Their Lives

By Cheryl Jarvis

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The true story of thirteen women who took a risk on an expensive diamond necklace and, in the process, changed not only themselves but a community.

Four years ago, in Ventura, California, Jonell McLain saw a diamond necklace in a local jewelry store display window. The necklace aroused desire first, then a provocative question: Why are personal luxuries so plentiful yet accessible to so few? What if we shared what we desired? Several weeks, dozens of phone calls, and a leap of faith later, Jonell bought the necklace with twelve other women, with the goal of sharing it.

Part charm, part metaphor, part mirror, the necklace weaves in and out of each woman's life, reflecting her past, defining her present, making promises for her future. Lending sparkle in surprising and unexpected ways, the necklace comes to mean something dramatically different to each of the thirteen women.

With vastly dissimilar histories and lives, the women show us how they transcended their individual personalities and politics to join together in an uncommon journey. What started as a quirky social experiment became something far richer and deeper, as the women transformed a symbol of exclusivity into a symbol of inclusiveness. They discovered that sharing the necklace among themselves was only the beginning; The more they shared with others, the more profound this experience—and experiment—became.

Original, resonant, and beautifully told, this book is an inspiring story about a necklace that became greater than the sum of its links, and about thirteen ordinary women who understood the power of possibility, who touched the lives of a community, and who together created one extraordinary experience.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Inspirational . . . The best way to honor the book’s principles is to share your copy with a friend.”—*New York Times*

“**The Necklace** is a fascinating journey into thirteen women’s lives. Sweet and touching, it also manages to make you think about what really matters in life.”—Kathie Lee Gifford

“Original and beautifully crafted . . . How this piece of jewelry transformed the lives of the participants is the subject of a highly readable book that is part memoir, part metaphor and all charm.”—*Tucson Citizen*

“This moving book profiles a remarkable social experiment, where friendships and beliefs are uncovered and found to be just as strong as the stones being passed from neck to neck.”—*Redbook*

“[A] must-have book . . . **The Necklace** could as easily have been titled *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Diamonds*.”—*New York Daily News*

“A feel-good and thought-provoking book.”—*BookPage*

“A gem of a story sparkles under **The Necklace**.”—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

From the Trade Paperback edition.

About the Author

Cheryl Jarvis is a journalist, essayist, and author who's written for the *Wall Street Journal*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, and *Reader's Digest*. Her book *The Marriage Sabbatical: The Journey that Brings You Home* sparked a debate in major media around the world from the BBC to the *New Yorker* to Oprah. A former TV producer and magazine and newspaper editor, she has taught writing at the University of Southern California and at Washington University and Webster University in St. Louis.

Pam Ward found her true calling reading books for the blind and physically handicapped for the Library of Congress' Talking Books program. The fact that she can work with Blackstone Audio from the beauty of the mountains of Southern Oregon is an unexpected bonus. Her audiobook narration has won two AudioFile Earphones Awards.

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CHAPTER ONE

Jonell McLain, The Visionary

Making an idea happen

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Jonell McLain was sitting at her desk looking at the piles of paper surrounding her, struggling not to feel overwhelmed. She wondered why she could never clear her desk, never cross off the forty-five tasks on her to-do list. Were there always forty-five things on that list? It sure seemed so. She felt like Sisyphus, the king in the Greek legend who was condemned to push the same rock up a mountain, over and over. Some days she felt like all she accomplished was moving piles. Some papers she could swear she moved a hundred times. Part of the problem was that she was full of ideas, so she was continually adding projects to the list. Executing them, well, that was a skill she hadn't yet mastered.

Today, the list didn't make her queasy as it often did. She'd just finished a deal on a house and so was feeling the high that real estate agents feel when they finally receive their big commission checks. This one represented three months of work and emotional exhaustion. People bought homes when they were undergoing major life transitions, so naturally they were on edge. The shock of prices on the West Coast made those buyers moving to California especially anxious. Because the work was so stressful, Jonell always rewarded herself after each closing.

She hadn't decided what to buy herself this time, so she headed to the mall just to buy her clients a box of See's candy, part of the gift basket she'd have welcoming them to their new home.

The Pacific View Mall was the only mall in Ventura, a California beach town sixty miles north of Los Angeles. Jonell moved her wiry frame quickly through the dusty-pink shopping enclave, stopping only to glance in the window of Van Gundy & Sons, a decades-old, family-owned jewelry store, the Tiffany's of Ventura. Usually Jonell's glances were as quick as her strides, but this time she stopped. She stared.

In the center display case a diamond necklace glittered against black velvet. A few years earlier she'd searched unsuccessfully for a simple rhinestone necklace to wear to a formal event. Now here it was, the exact one she'd had in mind. She recognized the style as the necklace version of the tennis bracelet, so dubbed after tennis champion Chris Evert lost her diamond bracelet during the 1987 U.S. Open and stopped the match to search for it. The diamonds were strung in a single strand all the way to the clasp, the center diamond the largest, the two closest to the clasp the smallest. The gradations were minuscule, the effect breathtaking.

But this was Van Gundy's. There was no way this necklace was made of rhinestones.

Jonell rarely wore good jewelry, though she owned her share of it—diamond wedding rings from two husbands, 14-karat-gold earrings, pricey watches. Luxury jewelry was something else. Hmm, she thought, wonder what a really expensive piece of jewelry looks like up close? What it would feel like to wear something so lovely and extravagant?

On a whim she entered the store. "Could I see the necklace in the window?" she asked nonchalantly, as if she did this every day.

She reached up to touch the delicate gold chain she wore. Back in 1972 a boyfriend had given her this necklace with the peace symbol pendant, and in 2003, at the start of the war in Iraq, she'd put it on again.

She placed the diamond stunner over her old gold charm. It was, she thought, simply exquisite—and exquisitely simple.

She took a breath, and as she breathed out, she asked the price.

“Thirty-seven thousand dollars.”

Jonell couldn’t stop the gasp. All she could think was Who buys a thirty-seven-thousand-dollar necklace?

She looked in the mirror again. She couldn’t help but think about the choices she’d made in her life, the ones that guaranteed she could never afford a necklace like this. She thought about how different her life might have been if she’d married a wealthy man or invested herself more in a career. If she’d worked harder, maybe she could have generated the kind of money that would enable her to indulge in this kind of luxury. In the end, none of this mattered, not really. In a world overflowing with need, the idea of owning a thirty-seven-thousand-dollar necklace was morally indefensible to Jonell, who’d mentored disadvantaged kids for six years. Lost in these thoughts, she heard only snippets of the saleswoman’s description: 118 diamonds . . . brilliant-cut . . . mined from nonconflict areas . . . 15.24 carats.

Fifteen carats sounded ostentatious and Jonell didn’t like ostentation. She appraised it again. There was nothing ostentatious about this necklace. The diamonds were so small, just right for her five-foot-two-inch frame, yet circling clear around her neck they felt substantial. What was magnetic was their radiance. She’d never seen diamonds shimmer like these.

Jonell hesitated to take off the necklace. After admiring it another minute, she laid it back on the counter and thanked the saleswoman for her time.

Over the next three weeks Jonell was surprised how often she thought about the diamond necklace. When she was back at the mall with her eighty-six-year-old mother, Jonell noticed the necklace still in the window. “Mom, I want to show you something,” she said, excitedly leading her mother into the store as if she were seven and heading for her first Barbie. “Mom, try it on.” Her mother’s eyes widened as she clicked the clasp. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered. Jonell’s mother knew quality, so her admiration told Jonell that the design was classic, timeless.

When Jonell peeled her eyes away from the diamonds brightening her mother’s neck, she glanced at the tag: twenty-two thousand dollars. On the counter, an ad announced a sale in which the store would take bids on any item of jewelry on display.

Jonell remembered being thirty and in need of a respite. Burned out from her job as a speech therapist in Santa Cruz and weary of her long-term boyfriend, she’d gone to New York City to live with her best friend from senior year at the University of Southern California. Jonell witnessed her roommate washing her face with Perrier. She saw her wrap herself in a full-length lynx coat. That’s when Jonell took stock of her own chances for such luxuries. They were slim to nil. That reality aroused not envy but curiosity: Why was personal luxury accessible to so few? After six months, Jonell left New York to return to her native California, but the question had never left her. Now it loomed large again.

Why is it, she wondered, that we can stand shoulder to shoulder to enjoy sumptuous masterpieces in art museums? That whole crowds can admire magnificent landscapes together in national parks? Why can’t we share personal luxuries the same way?

And an idea was born: "I could wear a luxury item if I bought it with other women," she thought. "No one woman needs to have a fifteen- carat diamond necklace all the time. But"—and here she paused for the clincher—"wouldn't it be delightful to have one every now and then?

"I can't spend twenty-two thousand dollars on myself, but I can spend one thousand. . . . A thousand dollars would not be out of line for most of my friends. . . . If I could convince only eleven women to go in with me, I could bid twelve thousand. . . . It's already come down fifteen thousand. Why not another ten?"

Jonell started making calls to friends and colleagues. She talked to women in her walking group and investment club. Women she'd met at seminars, parties, charity events. Most of the women she approached said no. No money. No time. No interest in diamonds. The responses fired off rapidly: "A formula for disaster. Everyone will fight over it." "What's the point of buying diamonds?" "I can get a better deal at the jewelry mart." "You'll never get twelve women to get along." "If I'm going to spend a thousand dollars, I want something just for myself."

Even her mother fired off a round: "You'll lose friends over this."

Some comments unsettled Jonell, filling her with self-doubt. Some spurred her to argue. Some she ignored. But she stayed fixed on her goal. She went back to women who'd said no. She asked new women. In two months she had a group of seven. Close enough, she decided. By the time her Visa bill would arrive, she'd have found the rest.

three generations of Van Gundy men were in the store the Saturday of the sale: Kent Van Gundy, age eighty, who'd started the business in 1957 and was now retired; Tom Van Gundy, fifty-four, his son, who'd taken over the business; and Sean, twenty-nine, his grandson, who now managed the store.

Tom says he'll never forget that day. Sean won't forget it either. These women were different from the ones the Van Gundys usually encounter. So many women who come into jewelry stores aren't happy, says Sean. Their eyes are anxious, their faces tense. Some are in tears. They're lonely and looking for someone to talk to. Something's missing in their lives, and they're looking to fill the empty spaces. These women rushed into the store smiling, eager to be there shortly after the doors opened to beat any competing bidders. Jonell showed the necklace to the four who came with her, two who'd said yes to her proposition, two who'd said no but didn't want to miss the fun. Mary Karrh, a head taller than Jonell, found herself so far removed from her daily life as an accountant that her expression was one of wonder. If she'd had any fears about what she'd committed her money to, they disappeared when she was face-to-face with the ...

Users Review

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