

# 1

Anthea told me she went to the bathrooms in the basement, by the cinema, when she needed to cry at work. Joanna recommended the stairwell behind the librarian's office. I just sat silently at my desk, staring hard at my computer screen, rubbing my eyes as if they were smarting from all the data entry.

I was lucky to be here, checking measurements and shining the sentences that would appear on object labels. The open-plan offices felt like a new-age monastery; we showed our devotion through our long hours and low salaries, our gratitude and obsession with our work euphemistically called *attention to detail* in all the job advertisements. These offices were almost always silent save the soft clatter of our keyboards and the occasional ring of the elevator doors opening when somebody left for the galleries filled with bright, white light, where the crowds gathered to take photographs of endlessly reproduced images, paying homage to our gods, to modernism.

I wanted to stay, forever, because of the paintings. I wanted to stay forever because of Frank O'Hara, who worked as a curator

and wrote poems on his lunch breaks, and Grace Hartigan, his friend and mine, who was the only woman included in *The New American Painting*, organised by the museum in 1958. I could see Grace as my friend only because I worked here, researching her relationship to the museum. She had died when I was twenty-one; I had first encountered her name in an *Artforum* obituary.

*In another year I shall be thirty*, she wrote in 1951. *Time to begin to fulfill the 'promise'.*

I was about to turn thirty. I didn't know how this had happened. The century had gradually grown teenage and I was an adult, remembering the period when we'd all calculated time by adding up the years before and after the turn of the millennium. The time since seemed to have vanished, disappearing into a rush of cities and museums and schools and universities and aeroplanes that blurred and abstracted the earth, creating neat frames for chaos.

I was on a short-term contract at the museum, with a half-forgotten PhD and no meaningful publications or exhibitions to my name. I googled myself, sometimes, and found only a journalist covering events for a paper in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I wasn't sure I had achieved anything beyond having left Australia, where I'd first studied art history through slides projected in a darkened lecture theatre. I had not yet fulfilled my promise, if I had any, but I had fulfilled that undergraduate dream, wandering through the canon of modern art each morning before the museum opened. I had not fulfilled my promise, but I could forget my past and future in this cerebral space; I could lose myself to looking.

It was winter. I went to work, hung my coat on the coat-hanger beside my cubicle and hoped for a blizzard that would blanket the sculpture garden with snow. Robert sent out applications

for tenure-track jobs and postdoctoral fellowships quickly and without anguish, formatted chapters of his PhD as articles and sent these to academic journals. On weekends I walked west to the Whitney Museum or caught the subway to exhibitions uptown. Robert cycled around Manhattan, restless, and made plans for warmer weather. In the evenings, we met for dinner in small restaurants with short menus.

I liked winter. It was restful. We had spent too much of the previous summer in the Hudson Valley, visiting Robert's family, attending weddings and hiking almost every weekend. I had been surprised to find summer weekends so busy in New York. I hadn't realised that Robert knew so many people who were getting married and I hadn't expected to be invited alongside him. I saw weddings as something academic; they were the subject of Grace Hartigan's paintings, made in the 1950s, or an essay topic for an undergraduate in gender studies, not an event in twenty-first century life. There was a certain type of American on the East Coast, though, who still closed their twenties with an expensive wedding.

The weddings were almost always outdoor, dogged by professional photographers who refused to direct people. These photographers rarely bothered with most guests, gravitating to those who already seemed like stars, with their own inbuilt flash, with moisturised skin that caught the light in a particular way. The world beyond became a mess of gloaming colours, yellow lights and white flowers blurring into a charcoal sky. It seemed, that year, that nobody wanted much depth of field in photography. Everybody wanted reality as it was felt, not seen. Everybody wanted their weddings softened, shown as dreams.

'That's not how I work. I'm documenting,' these photographers said, when elderly relatives asked if they might get some

nice shots of the youngest grandson before he spilt his orange juice on his shirt. They lowered their cameras and turned away, disappointed, when guests tried to arrange themselves into meaningful clusters, smiling.

I wasn't one of the people that the photographers circled. I spent the weddings wishing myself invisible, flinching at questions. I was always asked where I was from, what I was doing in New York.

'I have a two-year fellowship,' I said. 'At MoMA.'

'You're so lucky,' cooed strangers.

'Yes,' I said, usually.

I knew that it would be rude, disingenuous, to refute this idea. I hated, though, the ways in which luckiness flattened out everything, acknowledging neither my own achievements nor the cruel indifference of the institution itself, which asked absolute allegiance whilst offering precarity and little acknowledgement. I felt as if I were searching for a sign that my work was valuable, that I had a future which extended beyond my contract's end, and coming up always with the universe's indifference, with the hard facts of probability. I was lucky; the dice had rolled and I had landed at MoMA, but I knew that that didn't say anything about the past or the future, that – every modernist knew at least one line from Mallarmé – a roll of the dice would never abolish chance.

I remembered, each time an acquaintance or stranger told me that I was lucky, my first day at the museum, on which a woman from Human Resources had told the four fellows that we had been chosen from over a thousand applicants. This had been the first of many moments in which the institution said, under the guise of compliment, that we were disposable. There was not a line of people waiting to replace us so much as a crowd,

clamouring. HR, of course, had negotiated the best employment deals for their own department; they had open-ended contracts and left each day after only eight hours in their offices.

‘What will you do afterward?’ somebody would ask.

I was trying not to think about this question. I was Australian, so I would have to persuade any potential employer to sponsor a visa. I had a PhD, but every job – or at least every arts job in New York – seemed to require more than this and I lacked both academic publications and managerial experience. I was overqualified, in the minds of many, yet I barely scraped the minimum requirements for most jobs.

I didn’t like weddings, or at least the weddings that summer, because I was always asked about life after MoMA, if I’d be getting married or going home.

I saw my friends at these events, occasionally, but they had questions, too. In Cold Spring, Lucy, who had been an undergraduate with Robert before graduate school with me and who worked, now, at the Metropolitan Museum, pulled me aside and pushed a glass of wine into my hands.

‘So,’ Lucy said. ‘Robert. How long has it been now?’

‘Um,’ I said. ‘Five years?’

‘I know this sounds a bit cheesy,’ Lucy said. ‘But is he the one?’

It felt, sometimes, as if friends learnt how to make small talk from films that failed the Bechdel test. I suspected Lucy had asked about Robert because she wanted to avoid talking about her own employment anxieties; she was on a two-year contract and had applied for dozens of jobs with no luck, despite having

chosen the Met from five fellowship offers two years ago. It was strange, I thought, that we accepted a curatorial job was a rare thing, precious and unlikely, and yet still believed, when asking after relationships, some sort of permanence might be possible, might not be too much to ask in the romantic realm.

I couldn't, remembering summer from the end of winter, distinguish one wedding from another. It seemed as if every bride had worn white, as if every bride had married a groom, as if every group of girls awaiting a toss of flowers had encouraged the same nudge from an elderly woman, the same *could-be-you* comment even as I skirted the ritual. I could recall neither rain nor yellowed grass. How was it that not even one September wedding had been marred by flash floods?

There were always groups of older men gathered around Robert.

'What kind of pack are you carrying?'

'Osprey Exos. Internal frame, about fifty litres.'

'I'll tell you what: it was tougher in our day. Huge packs. None of this ultra-light shit.'

'I'll bet,' said Robert.

Robert had an easy, Ivy League confidence about him, which I envied and sometimes resented. Robert knew that he would secure a job, but for him a job was simply something that facilitated hiking and reading – in more ways than one, as he had written his dissertation on narrative structure in texts about walking.

'And what comes after that?' somebody would ask.

Robert wasn't afraid of questions about the future. I lived in fear of the pace at which I had to flip the pages of my calendar, while Robert planned everything in advance. He had known for years, since before we met, that he would spend the summer after

he finished his PhD on the Appalachian Trail. He had told me this very early in our relationship, before it was really a relationship. Robert's desires never seemed to fluctuate but followed a neat plan.

'Maybe the Continental Divide,' he said. 'But I'll have to see. Depends where I'm working.'

'What about Sophia?' somebody sometimes asked.

'She doesn't mind hiking,' he said. 'Still trying to get her onto long-distance, though.'

The older men would look over at me, as if sizing up my potential, and laugh.

I envied the wedding photographers, who could use their cameras as an excuse, as a tool to mediate everything and everyone. I thought about the way in which a photographer might focus the camera on Lucy, capturing each strand of hair in sharp focus, blonde and glowing against the shadows of the indistinct trees behind her. I considered the way in which a photographer might use the flash, freezing Lucy mid-question, smiling, and yet also capturing, with the longer exposure, the motion of the dancers nearby and the shudder of the fairy lights in the branches above. I saw photographs like this, that winter, when everybody who had been married in summer uploaded albums to Facebook.

I spent a lot of time, at the Museum of Modern Art, thinking about what *modern* meant. In staff meetings, we spoke about modernity as a central concern guiding acquisitions, exhibition proposals, educational programs and interactions with journalists. It seemed to be the only interest that connected our separate and often antagonistic departments. We all wanted to be modern.

We began with the assumption that there were three central ways of being modern. It was possible to be modern simply by having been born into or produced by the world that came after the Industrial Revolution. It could be a matter of style, of pushing forward into the future, of being avant-garde. In some cases, *modern* just meant *new*. We usually went further, though, borrowing vaguer and more poetic definitions from Friedrich Schiller and Charles Baudelaire. *Modernity is the disenchantment of the world*, I thought, often, paraphrasing Max Weber in my mind. My fellowship focused on researching the museum's own history, so I was never far from the word.

In 1944, the museum had held an exhibition entitled *Are Clothes Modern?* It was a question that couldn't really be answered, more seductive than analytical. Somebody, upstairs, in Architecture and Design, was planning a sequel, tentatively titled *Is Fashion Modern?* I started to pose almost everything as a question that followed this formula. *Are Clothes Modern?* became *Are houses modern?* and *Are children modern?* *Is travel modern?* *Are rats modern?* It could be a prompt for serious contemplation or a joke, but it was always with me, a frame through which I considered the world. I thought about the question and I thought about the many definitions for *modern*, and I thought of myself, again and again, because there was no way of avoiding the obvious question: *was I modern?*

Grace Hartigan, on whom my research focused, was known as an abstract expressionist, but her strongest paintings weren't abstract but representational. *Grand Street Brides*, her most famous painting, resembled a portrait of European royalty

filtered through the mid-century neon that might advertise a candy shop. Grace had painted a group of six women, or dress-makers' dummies, facing forward against a dark grey backdrop, slabs of white, pink, turquoise and yellow colliding with one another beneath sharp black lines that ballooned outward below the waist. It was clear that these were figures posed in a window, perhaps prostitutes or mannequins, dressed in silks and tulle, and yet the lines were so spare and the colours so lavish that I felt, each time I looked at it, astonished that Grace had managed this balance without rendering everything illegible. *Grand Street Brides* seemed like evidence that ghosts had existed in the 1950s; it seemed like an antidote to images of suburban families.

I found it hard to approach Grace's work intellectually, though I'd been hired to do so. I spoke and wrote of her as *a woman who played a significant role in a movement often described as 'masculine'*, as being *unique in her ability to combine the techniques of abstract expressionism with imagery drawn from a range of historical sources*, but at night, lying in bed on the Lower East Side, I felt a strange combination of exhilaration and fear, as if the figures in *Grand Street Brides* might spill from the painting into my subconscious, as if I expected to be haunted by Grace's bright pageant girls with hollow cheeks and eyes like scratches. I spoke about the painting to Robert, sometimes, but he fell asleep easily and was never eager to continue conversations after I turned off the lights.

Robert, when it wasn't late at night, asked questions about Grace Hartigan in the same way that I had skimmed Henry David Thoreau and Annie Dillard's books to humour him. We were interested in the same areas, generally, but approached them in different ways. Robert was fascinated by wilderness, by what lay beyond the city, and I was always reading about modern art,

modern life, about creative people who had come to New York to make sense of the times in which they were living. Robert approached everything with scholarly detachment, picking apart narrative construction, while I looked for artists with whom I might fall in love, following desire, not reason. The city had swollen, in the 1950s, with artists and writers, with potential; Robert saw this as the past, while I saw it as history, as mythology, as the foundation of contemporary life. I wondered if other couples had conversations like our own, messy with references to cultural figures with whom the other person wasn't familiar and culminating, often, in furious judgements about New York City. We agreed that New York was modernity's centre, but argued about whether the air we breathed was full of utopian dreams or just automobile exhaust and rotting garbage, about when or whether we might leave.

Grand Street was no longer a bridal thoroughfare; the Lower East Side streets were lined with greengrocers, poorly regulated bus companies and millennial-pink cafés. There was one store, though, with a window of dresses that reminded me of Grace Hartigan's painting. Behind the mannequins, shadows gathered like layers of grey paint, obscuring the interior. I walked past, often, on the way to the subway and glanced curiously at the door. I was never sure if it was open and I did not want to try it, to open myself up to the presumption that I was engaged or that I wanted to be. This store was compelling in a gothic way, appearing almost abandoned, save that the dresses on the mannequins switched occasionally.

On the Sunday before Robert flew to Georgia, we went to an event at an art space in Brooklyn. There was an artist using a laser to write names on bowls of rice and an astronomy club in the garden; I looked through a telescope and saw a planet but wasn't sure which one. I fell in love, upstairs, with a scrap of newspaper reporting on Robert Smithson's *Island of Broken Glass*, a project cancelled after protests by environmentalists. The short article had been pinned on a wall, presumably as inspiration, by an artist creating an installation which itself wasn't yet finished. I wondered if the most beautiful artworks were always the ones that I couldn't see – projects cancelled or not yet realised – and if the best thing an artist could do was conjure an image that could be embellished by the imagination. Robert, more environmentalist than artist, frowned slightly at the article, but said nothing.

We went around the corner for dinner and Robert commented on the chill in the air; it still felt like February, though it was March. It was strange to think that winter would segue into spring so soon, that it already felt like spring in Georgia. I was still hoping for a second blizzard, for a chance to wear the gumboots I'd bought only at the end of January.

'Do you mind that I'll be gone for five months?' Robert asked.

'I don't believe in relationships where one has to ask permission,' I replied.

'I'm not asking for permission,' he said. 'I'm just asking if you mind. I want to know how you feel. You could still come, too, if you wanted.'

He had already asked and I had already declined. I couldn't and wouldn't leave the museum before my contract finished. I wasn't really interested in spending five months in the forest, looking at the ground so as to avoid tripping on rocks and roots,

instead of looking at painting and photography indoors, on flat surfaces. Robert had told me that most people expected that it would be the physical difficulty that made it hard to hike the Appalachian Trail, but it was rather a feat of psychological endurance centred upon repetition.

Robert made it sound as if this were somehow noble, but silently I translated this into my own words: it was hard to hike the Appalachian Trail because the Appalachian Trail was boring. It was 2,190 miles of trees and more mountain summits than anybody bothered to count. It would take three months to get through the Louvre if one spent thirty seconds looking at each painting, per popular wisdom, but art historians knew that that wasn't the way to approach art, with a timer and a goal, emerging exhausted, having seen everything but appreciated only the first few rooms. I would, we had decided, join Robert for a few days here and there, taking trips on long weekends when possible.

'You know I can't come,' I said. 'I have work. And you're leaving tomorrow. It's nice, anyway, that we have separate lives. It's healthier.'

He nodded, though I wasn't sure he really agreed, and then we drank more wine and ordered tiramisu for dessert and then coffee martinis and I laughed at how unhealthy it seemed, getting drunk two days before hiking the Appalachian Trail, and Robert told me that I had the wrong idea about hiking, anyway, and then I said something about art and he said something about love and we smiled at one another across the table as if we'd been dating for three months, not six years, and then suddenly Robert asked me to marry him and I, without thinking, said 'yes'.