

JOAN MITCHELL IN QUARANTINE

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I didn't know the quarantine was getting to me until one day I woke up and discovered that the legendary 20th century American abstract expressionist painter, Joan Mitchell, who died in 1992, had become my roommate.

On that first morning, I found her sitting at my kitchen table reading one of the *New Yorker* magazines I had rescued from the recycling bin. Joan's cigarette was burning a hole at the edge of the table. At first I didn't know it was Joan Mitchell the painter because my entire attention was locked on her cigarette. I hadn't smoked in almost 20 years. Now, suddenly, I felt an overwhelming urge for a quick puff. And why not? Covid 19 had made a joke of everyone's health. But as if reading my mind, Joan Mitchell looked up and slapped my hand away. "Get the fuck away from my cigarette," she said.

Being myself a painter, I recognized Joan Mitchell right away. Shoulder length brown hair, bangs down to her eyebrows, large puffy eyes, and paint spatters all over her clothes. "Someone should make coffee," she added before returning to her magazine. Knowing I had made a bad first impression by trying to steal her cigarette, I was as quiet as possible as I boiled the water, took down cups, and measured the Costco coffee into the French press. But inside, I was torn. Should I tell her that I recognized her and that I had once gotten money from her foundation? Or should I play it cool and pretend she's just a regular person who had broken into my apartment during the pandemic?

“Black,” she said, breaking into my thoughts. Mmm, I said to myself, her needs seem simple enough, and it was that thought that released a bubble of excitement, which began to grow inside me. The great Joan Mitchell was sitting at my kitchen table. A painter whose work I had tried to copy for years. I would be a fool to complain about it or even question how she got here.

I gingerly sat down at the opposite end of the table. Not wanting to make her uncomfortable by talking just yet, I casually looked around at my apartment. It was then I noticed that Joan had somehow brought into the living area a couple of large worktables filled with brushes and cans of paints, had moved the couch to a windowless corner, and, where my bookshelf used to be, had stapled two large unpainted canvases to the wall. There were other canvases scattered throughout the room. The rest of my other furniture seemed to be missing.

I wanted to ask her specifically about the bookshelf because it had contained some of my favorite and very expensive learning how to draw books. But by then Joan had lit another cigarette, and, with that vague distracted look on her face that I grew to be familiar with, had already started heading toward one of the worktables.

In the sink I found what would be the pattern of my roommate life with Joan Mitchell. Dirty breakfast dishes, a frying pan she had used to fry up my last two eggs, and two cigarette butts ground into a piece of half-eaten toast. There were smears of oil paint along the counter, an opened case of scotch on the floor, and in the refrigerator a dozen cartons of strawberry flavored yogurt and a packet of dried lentils. Well, at least she had brought some groceries.

What was also good was that she never tried to take over the bedroom ... or, more importantly, make my bed disappear. She didn't do much to my bathroom either, except paint my shower curtain black and park a salt shaker on the vanity. Joan brushed her teeth with salt.

I had been in self-quarantine for about two months, but with Joan's appearance, I found a new kind of isolation, one tinged with so much beauty, it made me breathless.

Soon we settled into a kind of accommodating cohabitation, me buying groceries, cleaning the house, making dinner, emptying the garbage, refilling the salt shaker, and staying out of her way. She in charge of always having a lit cigarette between her fingers and painting.

She didn't like me watching her paint. Which in the beginning was fine as I didn't want her in the bedroom watching me draw a sleeping duck from one of my few remaining learning how to draw books. But eventually I found out that Joan loved lentil soup, so I made pot after pot. This allowed me to watch her paint from my vantage point in the kitchen. She'd wander around her worktables, mixing paint, abandoning paint, staying still, pulsating. She was like an uneasy dark cloud. Until suddenly she would rise to scratch something out in charcoal on the canvases that she had stapled to the wall. Then a pause or a longer pause, then suddenly she was quickly throwing paint onto the canvas, using anything at hand, brushes, rags, even smearing the paint with her own hands. She'd step back and forth as if in a trance, totally focused and other worldly. To keep myself in the kitchen so I could watch her, I had to keep her interested in the lentil soups I made. Every day I tried something new—lentils and peanut butter soup, lentils and orange marmalade soup, lentils and pineapple soup. Often whenever I made an especially winning combination of lentil soup, Joan became a perfect dinner companion. She'd let me have some of her scotch, which she drank steadily during the day, and she'd sit and talk—her voice like a car sliding over a gravel pit.

“De Kooning—nice paintings, but what an asshole.” “Rothko—not much of an asshole.” “Franz Kline—asshole except you couldn't say it to his face.” I asked her if the virus influenced her work. “What virus?” she replied, downing a throat of scotch. “You paint too?” she asked. “Kind of,” I replied, not wanting to admit that I was anywhere near doing what she did. “Don't be an idiot,” she said. And with that, she got up from the table and returned to her painting area.

She was like a painting herself—her clothes, which she never changed, always seemed different because they were always spattered with whatever colors she was using that day. Sometimes she was covered in yellow, and she moved through the apartment like a sun. Sometimes drenched in lavender and blue, she was a rain-filled ocean ebbing and tiding in the small atmosphere of the three rooms we circumnavigated. Sometimes she'd be enveloped in red as bright as anger, and she wouldn't eat any soup and just drank and painted, drank and painted.

But every now and then, she was gentle and gave me advice about painting. One time after an especially adventurous lentil and Fig Newton soup, Joan Mitchell told me, "No one has to see what you see in your work. When it's finished, a painting is just a painting. It's the vitality of doing the work. That's what is important." I nodded my head sagely, wondering how her advice would relate to my sleeping duck drawing. Another time, after a second helping of lentil and potato chip soup, she said, "Motion should sit still. Lines can't just float in space. You must translate the nature of substance into the nature of memory." Most times I hardly understood what she was talking about, but you know, it didn't matter. I just loved the way her words washed over me, like turpentine, burning my skin with little fires of meaning.

Other days it was like living with a peregrine falcon. Her brown eyes leisurely examined everything in sight, while still focused on her canvas. Yet sometimes her eyes seemed to go inward, analyzing something inside herself as if she were her own landscape. And when she'd finally locate her prey—that fleeing memory—she would become immediately unstilled and pounce on her painting like a predator, clawing at the canvas, attacking it, her black wings unfurling, beating the closed-in air of the apartment, until it became this tempest that sucked every color from some unknown part of the universe, spilling its hued blood against the canvas over and over again with a hunter's joy.

On those days, she was wild, and I would have to run into my bedroom and close the door, until the rage was over. Even then, I wouldn't come out till morning, thinking that for tonight's dinner, Joan would just have to make do with strawberry yogurt.

I don't know how long we were together as roommates. When you are isolated from the world, and Joan's kind of isolation had become mine as well, days don't mean as much as moments of the day. I spent most of my moments watching her, trying to understand how does a person become who they are. And what if—and this is my own special fear—what if becoming who you are is not the same as becoming who you want to be. How does one stay true to becoming who you want to be? How did Joan Mitchell do that? Throughout her stay, I had to lean on metaphors to describe her—a falcon, an uneasy cloud, a tempest. All of these things carry around them their own type of isolation. One night, I dreamt of flying. Below me on the ground were tiny letters of the alphabet grazing like cows.

I couldn't wait to tell this to Joan when I woke up. But when I got out of bed, I knew right away. The fog of nicotine was missing from the air. I left the bedroom. No salt shaker in the bathroom. No dirty dishes in the sink. My bookshelf back in its proper place. I hadn't realized how sad my pieces of furniture were until I saw them returned to their dumpy places in my living area. The yogurt was gone, but there was still some leftover lentil gazpacho. I poured it into a glass and sat down at the table. It was then I saw the note, scrawled on the paint-stained paper. "Awaken desire," Joan had written.