

## JOAN MITCHELL IN QUARANTINE

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1725 words

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.

## BOOZE

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1054 words

Whenever my parents gave birthday parties for me or my sisters and brothers, my grandmother did the cooking, my mother cleaned the house, and my father, when everything was ready, would plunk down in the center of the white tablecloth a big bottle of Four Roses whiskey.

The men usually drank at one end of the table, while the women, wives, girlfriends, old lady friends of my grandmother, set the table – fried chicken, beef curry, mashed turnips, dirty rice, cucumber salad—sometimes having to push the men’s glasses out of the way to make way for plates. We kids ran around laughing, grabbing candy out of the candy dishes, making general annoyances of ourselves because it was a kid’s birthday, and everyone was in a good mood. After the food, my grandmother, perspiring with pleasure at its reception, brought in the big store-bought cake. Everyone gathered around for photos—grinning faces in shades of black and brown, friends, relatives, two sides of the same family, Dayak and West Indian, worlds apart living in a neighborhood that was a world apart.

The last photo flash and the smell of burnt birthday candles were the signals for my young aunt to call everyone into the living room at the other end of the house. Turning up the volume of the record player, she unleashed the La Playa Sextet or Tito Puente - music, which beat like what your heart would beat like, if you let it. Most everyone would follow, taking their drinks with them as the rhythm of the horns and the conga drums enticed them, and the living room filling with bodies dancing and swaying, not stopping even when my grandmother, who preferred her sexual innuendo in calypso, sneaked in a record: *“Oh, mister, don’t touch me tomato, touch me pumpkin or me potato, but for goodness’ sake don’t touch me tomato.”*

We kids would giggle knowing that the words were somehow naughty, while we spilled soda on the rug, trampled on the potato chips, and accidentally broke most of the birthday presents. But we always kept an ear out for the deep male rumbling at the other end of the house, the dining room, where my father and his friends would be cracking open a second bottle of Roses while

the West Indian men in the living room are moving their hips like a rolling wave, taking into their arms my aunt, her friends, and other men's wives, whom the alcohol has also made brave. The air radiates with a humid mist of heavy perfume, and the men's faces are shiny with sweat as they crack ice cubes in their teeth. They take off their jackets and ties and squeeze the women who keep joking that their garters are pulled so tightly on their nylons, they're forced to dance on their tiptoes.

Me and the other kids would run from the living room moist with the humidity of flirtation, conga drums and whiskey, through the inbetween room of my grandmother's bedroom ripe with the smell of mothballs and oval pictures of the long dead, into the dining room which was now warming with the rising anger of the men. Hiding behind chairs, we watch them downing their shots, the whites of their eyes, including my father's, getting redder, their voices, which had been polite and speaking in Dusun, the tribal language of their Borneo boyhood, now sliding and slurring, cursing in English over past insults, and laughing in the way men laugh just before they hit things.

It was so exciting. Like being allowed into a special universe where we could crave violence, crave sex, crave them so deeply in our bodies without knowing exactly what we were craving. The only thing we knew for sure, and we were breathless for it, was that we didn't want to miss a moment of whatever was going to happen. Because something always happened. A drunken Borneo husband on the way to the bathroom would catch his wife dancing too close to a West Indian guy. Or someone wouldn't like the way he was being looked at. Or someone else would drunkenly grab the tablecloth to stand up, causing everything on it to come crashing to the floor. A joke ... a friendly touch ... the wrong word. And then, without warning ... people pulling people off other people. A woman kicking. Others leaving in disgust then turning back into the house after being taunted by someone at the window. Fights breaking out on the stoop. The music would still be loud. Over it, people shouted, laughed, cheered. Someone would try to be reasonable. A jealous girlfriend slamming a door. My aunt lighting a cigarette with another man's lighter. My father, his eyes red, throwing punches at friends, enemies, my mother. The birthday cake would fly out the window. Dishes broke. Glasses fell. My grandmother would scream and have to be calmed down.

But nobody ever called the cops ... even when a knife flashed in someone's hands. Then a second knife. Not the partygoers, not the neighbors, not anyone. No cop car with sirens. No banging on the door. No hauling off to jail. Our neighborhood was Black and poor. But that wasn't the only reason. No one trusted the cops. They were white and stupid and like animals with their nightsticks. Or else they were like the government. Always asking questions. Where do you come from? Why are you standing there? Who do you think you are? Like the people from welfare when you had to hide the new radio when they came to see if you were still poor enough. Like the priest who had to be lied to. Or the boss you had to bow to. Or anyone and everyone whom you had to be invisible with.

So there was really no need for any stupid cops. Because after a while, the booze would run out. The rage would dry up. And everyone would just go home. My grandmother would sleep with my mother. My father would stumble his way to a cot in the basement. My sisters and brothers would curl up tired and satisfied on the couches. And I, I would sit alone at the dining room table, pouring warm Pepsi into one used shot glass after another, swallowing the tinges of leftover Four Roses, hoping that whatever was trapped inside me would be released.



## Christina Maile

### SKIN

The gravel road cuts through the skin of the jungle taking us from the port city at the edge of the Caribbean to a grand 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial house standing alone in a clearing of gardenias and palms. As the car tires crunch against the cocoa bean shells of the driveway, my husband and I see that the glorious sight from afar is, on closer inspection, crumbling. Rotting wood scars the white porticos, steps are broken, columns are buttressed with plywood, the wide verandah is sagging. Yet the house with its colonial decay still commands the space. As does the woman who rises from the verandah to greet us. She is tall, straight backed, almost youthfully thin, dressed in an old-fashioned filmy white dress that covers her arms and legs. Like the house, up close she is very old, her porcelain powdered skin broken by cracks and lines. Yet her blue eyes are friendly and her accent lilting, as she welcomes us into her family home. “We have only begun to rent rooms to our island’s visitors,” she says. “You are our first!”

She glides along the central hallway of the dark cool house, pointing out the rooms that long ago must have entertained dozens of guests. The ballroom, the morning room, the library, the parlor, the dining room. But what we see is only the aging skin of the house—peeling wallpaper, water-stained ceilings, threadbare rugs. The furniture is oppressive mahogany, much of it missing if you take in the patches of darker color on the floors. In some rooms, the pieces are covered with linen sheets. The dim light filtering through the thin curtains gives these rooms the aspect of a gray turbulent sea.

“My father hunted in Kenya,” she says, throwing open the doors of the lounge, now inhabited only by the tattered skins of tiger and antelope and zebra. We end at the back verandah overlooking a lush garden. In the tangle of trees beyond, Miss Ellen’s voice softens. “Over there were once my family’s coffee fields—they stretched as far as the eye could see.”

“Benjamin,” she calls out. “Our guests have arrived. Isn’t that wonderful?”

The man in the garden rises, removes his gardening apron and walks stiffly toward us. It is so surprising that he is dressed so formally in a white shirt, vest, dress pants. “Yes.” He smiles at the woman standing above him on the verandah. “That is wonderful.”

The receipt that Miss Ellen has given us for our night’s lodging is beautifully handwritten, cursive and formal. The stair banister is a silk scarf under my hand as my husband and I follow Benjamin to our room. Another couple arrives, and Miss Ellen goes to meet them. Our room is crowded with armoires and marble-topped dressers. The bed in the center is as big as a sailing ship. Vines have crawled over the tiny balcony and twisted themselves around the French doors so tightly that they can no longer close. Through the open doors, the rumble of birds and insects tells us how close our room is to the large heavily leafed trees that surround the back of the house. Benjamin has told us we are free to roam the house, and that there is lemonade and cake in the dining room. But my husband is tired after a day at the beach, too many beers, and the long drive. He collapses on the bed. Next door, I find that the water in the bathtub is lukewarm, but it is so calming to be in such a beautiful room with its ornate plumbing and mosaic tiles.

Eventually, I make my way back down the stairs. The new couple are arguing in their room. Lights have been turned on. Wall sconces. Floor lamps. But the light is weak. The shadows seem as solid as furniture. The house smells of lemon oil and dead leaves. There is a radio playing music somewhere.

In the dining room, the lemonade is warm, and the cake is cold. Still, I take a glass and a slice. I see Benjamin and Ellen moving about in a distant room. It might be the kitchen, the light is so warm there. Everywhere I look I see both the past and the present—rectangular patches revealing walls stripped of paintings, glass china cabinets empty of china, shelves filled with nothing. In their stead, there are decades of photos, cotillions of them, populating the tables and mantles. So tarnished are their silver and mirrored frames, it’s as if the frames themselves had taken on the burden of getting old so that the photos inside would remain forever young.

Among the crowds of complacent white men and women, I catch glimpses of a young, unlined Miss Ellen in her white frocks and parasols. Waving from a car. Sitting on a horse. Playing

croquet. Luncheons and teas. And every now and then, accidentally, a young Benjamin in his servant livery, always in the background, carrying a tray, opening a door. Occasionally, though, the unknown photographer has caught a moment: Miss Ellen looking at Benjamin when she should have been looking at the camera. Benjamin looking at her, when he should have stepped back. From the intensity of their gazes, and the society of their skin, they have always been apart and together.

Back in our room, I turn off the bedside light my husband left on. The walls are now moonlit, and I close my eyes. Breezes edged with earth and feathers flow through the open windows, drifting over my skin. But sometime in the night, something awakens me. It is not the breeze. The touch is harsher. It's not my husband's hand either, which is usually rough and moist. There are skittering sounds everywhere. I roll up and turn on the light to a nightmare or a dream. But I know it is neither, because I could never have imagined the long, thin lizards climbing the curtains, as they are doing now. Nor the moths suddenly circling the light, their giant wings crackling in the air. How would I have known about birds with such large eyes flying back and forth through the French doors, perching on the heavy dresser mirror, snapping their beaks. Or that insects could burst from the floral wallpaper, flutter around me, landing on chairs, on chests, on the bed. And under the bed, something is thrashing. I want to run, but the floor has become a moving iridescent carpet. I try to wake my husband, but the beer has knocked him out. We are skin against skin, but often we have nothing in common.

I cover myself in sheets like the furniture downstairs. But I don't seem to matter. So absorbed is everything in themselves—in their hunting and swallowing, their beaks and tongues, their gaping appetites beneath their blossom eyes, their pummeling wings, their cathedral legs. In this stifling and decrepit room, something is happening, beautiful and murderous.

Wrapped tightly in my cocoon of sheets, ignored by everything, I am beginning to enjoy the invasion. I think of the coffee plantation owner who built this grand house to house this room and the other grand rooms. What would he have thought if he had known that the skin he should have been most afraid of was not black like Benjamin's, but iridescent and scaled, feathered, carapaced in glossy dots, veined and leafy, swollen in damp amphibian green. These skins that

have taken over his house have crept and swarmed into these rooms, opening them to rain and heat, digesting this house little by little inside their tiny secret mouths.

Eventually, the night and their hunger must have faded for I must have fallen asleep. My husband pushes me awake: “Aren’t you warm under all that?” I want to tell him about the skins, and the birds and lizards and how our bed was like a ship inside a jungle. But there’s nothing left in the room for him to believe.

The other couple is already in the dining room when we arrive for breakfast. They are silent. The table is laid with delicate chinaware, silverware gleams dully, the napkins thick. All of it too grand to serve the tiny fried egg accompanied by a single piece of dry toast. A little pot of marmalade stands next to a glass container from which Miss Ellen pours us instant coffee.

“Please take a turn in the gardens,” she says. “They are Benjamin’s pride and joy.” We do—they are intricate with flowers and vegetables, but we cannot stay because my husband wants to get an early start.

Miss Ellen is waiting for us in the driveway. “Please come again, and tell your friends.” She bends and gathers up from the driveway some of its crushed cocoa bean shells. She takes my hand and pours them into my palm. “A souvenir of your stay.” The skin of the shells is a soft glowing brown.

Benjamin steps out onto the verandah. Miss Ellen smiles up at him. “They enjoyed seeing your gardens. And they loved the house.” From his height above, Benjamin nods to us and Miss Ellen. “It’s a wonderful house,” he replies, his hands on the railing, his gaze traveling over the driveway, the gardens, the jungle beyond, all that is in his sight ... all that he possesses.

**HANAHAKI**

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**665 words**

Behind me the farm. Hilly. Range fencing crisscrossing fields of alizarin crimson and green azurite. The crackling yellow blue sky makes me feel I'm inside a medieval painting. From the farm, there is a path through a forest and then the harbor. The water is a dark denim blue with threads of white in the late afternoon light.

I stand at the burnished shore wanting to live my life as a farmer. Grow garlic and tomatoes, milk the cows, ride the tractor, and wave every morning to the two horses grazing on the hill. No worries about where the next idea for a painting would come from, or the next story. I would never have to make clever small talk to people while waiting for the elevator. Instead, I would have pancakes every morning, and a big shaggy dog would follow me into the barn. He would lay in the shade of the door while I built my canoe.

But though I loved that farm, the farm didn't love me. It didn't ask me to stay. It let me go. And so once again during that summer in Maine, I could feel my lungs slowly fill with flowers and the petals bursting from my mouth whenever I spoke. I knew right away what this was, this ailment which has plagued me all my life – a terrible love for someone who will never love me in return.

In the beginning, the doctors told me that although it was persistent, it was a mild case. The initial symptom is a slight cough caused by the tendrils of longing and hope that start to flourish at the back of my throat. One day, the first petal unfolds on my tongue. Softly. Bitterly. In the weeks that follow, pining for what will never be mine, I begin to sputter and cough, my lungs slowly congesting with the flowers born of my longing. It is hard to eat. I cannot sleep. Petals constantly expel from my mouth. I am covered in them. I try to hold myself together in the company of others, silent and nodding in agreement to whatever they say. But sometimes the pressure of loving and not being loved causes the petals to become multitudes, filling my lungs

and throat, spewing from my mouth like a thunder. And before I can tighten my lips, clamp my teeth, I cough, and flowers by the thousands explode from my mouth, embroidering the air in a storm of blossoms.

Thank god, you and no one else can see them, these petals floating in the air between us .... honeysuckle, peony, jasmine, snapdragon, hibiscus, roses. You come and go completely oblivious to the garden that trails you. Through the years, I have managed to suppress my hopes and longings, the terrible ease that causes me to fall in love. Most people think I am unusually subject to colds or to the flu. My constant coughing at times is really unbearable. Sometimes I wish I had a cat or a dog so I can say I am allergic.

But I have grown older, and you have caused the worst symptoms. My doctors now say that although my lungs have become weakened over time, I would have survived if it were not for you making me breathless. Soon, they say, the congestion of flowers in my lungs will be unsupportable, and I will be asphyxiated.

But there is a solution. An operation. Somewhat like removing tonsils or an appendix. The doctors assure me that because of their experience with countless successful surgeries, there is only one side effect. And that is, by removing the tumor that causes the flowers of unrequited love to grow, removes from me forever the ability to love.

Oh, to be with you, alone, on a canoe traveling over the denim blue water, beneath the crackling yellow blue sky, your fingers trailing on the white thread of waves, glittering in the sun.