Whistler

Ann Patchett

BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

1

Old guy," my husband said in a low voice, his lips touching my ear. "Near the exit sign."

"Stop it." The joke itself was old as rocks.

Jonathan raised his eyebrows. "I'm serious. He kept looking at you in the ticket line. Then he followed us through Medieval Art, and now he's just standing there. Do you see him? He looks at you whenever you're not looking."

"Everyone cuts through Medieval," I said. "It doesn't constitute stalking." We were in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, New York.

"I didn't say stalking."

It wasn't crowded by the standards of the Met, no blockbuster Van Gogh exhibit or Costume Institute to gum things up. If you took the time to notice the people around you, chances were you'd see some of them again in a different wing. "That guy?" I asked, tipping my head slightly in the direction of a tall, thin man who looked like a French film star—black jeans, loose black curls.

My husband straightened up. "Could you take me seriously for one minute?"

Why did the French guy imply a lack of seriousness? I didn't ask. Jonathan was leaving tomorrow for what might be a long

trip, and I had just posted grades for the end of the school year. We decided to make use of the city, have a nice day. "I'm taking you seriously."

"Okay, let's go up a floor and see what happens."

"We just got here." I liked the American Wing, the Tiffany glass and baseball cards, that tragic bust of Lincoln.

"We'll come right back." He started walking in the direction of Armor again, that dimly lit hall of schoolchildren staring at swords and shields. A shiver of gladness passed through me because they were not my schoolchildren and it was not my field trip.

"A suit of armor could weigh more than sixty pounds," the teacher said as we passed, reading her facts off a display card, though the children were plenty old enough to read. The boys would all be picturing themselves going into battle with a mace and the girls would be thinking about the burdened horses that had to carry both the men and their armor.

"Still with us?" I asked Jonathan.

He looked without looking. Either he was making the whole thing up or he would have been a brilliant spy. "Yes."

We picked up speed in Medieval Art. Jonathan hates how fast I walk and will often stop to let me sail on past without noticing he is no longer with me, but in Medieval Art, he set the pace. I guess the old guy hung in there because when we got to the Grand Staircase, Jonathan asked me if I'd taken a jealous lover.

"Funny," I said, and up we went.

"If he follows us to Modern and Contemporary, we'll know."

"What will we know?" I set my stair-climbing pace to his, mindful of his knee.

"That he's in love with you," Jonathan said generously. "That old guys can't get enough of you."

It was not the first time I'd regretted having told him this. In my defense, I only said it once and that was decades ago, never thinking that one day we'd be married and he would hold on to the information like a souvenir postcard from another era. My husband had taken me as his date to a hospital board dinner more than twenty years ago when the head of general surgery all but climbed across the table to sit beside me. He then proceeded to tell me his every thought, about the emergency appendectomy he had performed before arriving, about what the food on our plates was doing to our livers, about starlight. When finally the evening was over, Jonathan apologized in the valet line. "I have no idea what that was about," he said.

I knew what it was about, but it was stupid of me to say it to Jonathan: Old guys love me. They had always loved me. I never experienced a flicker of interest from a man my own age, but show me a man ten or fifteen years older, twenty years older, and he'd be pulling me aside to tell me he couldn't remember the last time he felt this way. I meant to be funny, but Jonathan received my explanation as permission. There in the valet line he took me in his arms and kissed me as his car was pulling up, the headlights dousing us in white light. He was forty-seven to my thirty then, as he was seventy to my fifty-three now.

At the top of the museum's marble stairs we took a left, bypassing Drawings and Prints and heading straight to Modern and Contemporary. For this I gave my husband credit. People don't come to the second floor and skip Drawings and Prints unless they have an agenda. I, for one, never went to Modern and Contemporary at the Met because there were other places in this city

to go if modern and contemporary was what I was after, but there it was, a monumental slab of granite into which two horses had been chiseled. Or maybe it wasn't two horses so much as it was one horse and its ghost. It was the only piece in the room, affixed to the wall across from a bank of windows overlooking Central Park. We had come so far from those flat-faced angels and their gilded halos, proffered lilies and velvet gowns. "Who *is* this?" I asked my husband.

"There he is," Jonathan said, and for a second I thought he meant the artist.

Not the artist but an old man, visibly winded from the significant distance we had traveled. He walked into the room where we were and then, seeing us seeing him, immediately walked away.

"Oh," I said to Jonathan.

"Yes," he said.

I went to the wall, knowing better than to put my hands on art and wanting to do exactly that. *Two Horses*, Charles Ray, Chicago-born, 1953.

"Do you know who he is?" my husband asked. He still wasn't talking about art.

I shook my head.

"What do you want to do?"

"Do?" I asked. *Are you seeing this?*

"You can't tell me you aren't interested."

I wasn't interested in a stranger's attention, nor was I troubled by it. Men rarely understood this. "How do you know he isn't looking at you?" I asked. "Did you think about that? Maybe you went to school together." But wait, I didn't mean that. It sounded unkind. The man was clearly older than Jonathan. The old man was older than my old man.

"It isn't me," my husband said.

"Okay then, it's me. We're not going to invite him for dinner."

"You don't have any curiosity?"

I had plenty of curiosity, but I wasn't curious about this. My dear dead father, whom I had seen not nearly enough of in his life, gave me one piece of advice that I have found endlessly useful: If you don't want to engage with someone, don't engage, by which he meant don't smack the side of the car that cuts you off at the crosswalk because the person in the car might have a gun. Don't think you get to say your piece and then walk away. That's what I was thinking when Jonathan left to follow the man who had followed me there. Not that Jonathan was angry; it wasn't that at all. He meant to start a conversation with a stranger.

I wanted to think about nothing but those horses, but the distraction of my absent husband proved powerful. Jonathan was gone and then he was still gone. When I became annoyed, I went to find him.

There they were, the two of them tucked in a corner of the next gallery. Jonathan was talking, and the man, who wore a navy blazer and pink collared shirt, gray slacks, looked up at him, nodding. His hair was thick and straight and very white, and his glasses were tortoise and round, topped by a noticeable pair of eyebrows. When he saw me crossing the room, he touched my husband's arm and my husband turned and smiled at me, a smile that said, You're never going to believe this.

"You're never going to believe this," he said.

"Okay," I said, and then I said hello to the man.

He nodded at me as if he wanted to speak and could not speak. His obvious mortification made me feel tenderly towards him. I

know, I wanted to say to this stranger in regard to my husband, he does this sometimes.

"This is your stepfather," Jonathan said.

I looked at the man, and then at Jonathan. Of course it was not my stepfather. Lucas Ekker lived outside of Boston in a large house with my mother.

"Keep going back. One more stepfather," Jonathan said, watching me work.

"I'm sorry," Eddie Triplett said.

All of this transpired quietly; no one turned to watch life's drama unpacked in the gallery, but still I made a sound. I put my hand to my mouth to stop it, but it had already gotten away from me. It was his voice, Eddie Triplett's voice coming out of this old man's mouth. "Eddie."

"I didn't mean to chase you," he said.

"He thought he saw your mother," my husband said.

Eddie shook his head. "I knew it wasn't your mother."

"At first," Jonathan said. "When he first saw you. Look, you're crying. Daphne never cries," he said to Eddie. "I can count on one hand the number of times." He cut himself off to take the handkerchief out of his pocket and hand it to me.

"Duck," Eddie said, his voice full of sorrow.

And with that I bowed my head and covered my face. I hadn't known there was something in me to break, but there it was and break it did. I stepped into an open crack in time and fell backwards. It was not a few tears. Jonathan put his arm around my shoulder, understanding none of it but knowing the big reveal should not have come here, in front of art. "What do you say the three of us go to the Dining Room and get a glass of water, a cup of tea?"

Did I nod? It didn't matter. I said nothing as my husband

guided us out of Modern and Contemporary, Eddie Triplett following along. I remembered Eddie Triplett as a taller man, but that's because I had been quite small at the time of our acquaintance. I hadn't seen him in more than forty years, almost forty-five. Eddie Triplett walked behind us now, wanting to die. How did I know this? Because I wanted to die myself, and our hearts were forever stitched together, mine and Eddie's.

The Dining Room was more or less above us. Jonathan knew where the elevators were and led us there, in part to make things easier for me and in part because his bad knee got worse the more he used it. The three of us stepped into that empty mechanical box, and as the doors slid shut, my crying abruptly ceased, as if I had wrestled back into place that part of myself that had come unstuck. I blew my nose gently on Jonathan's handkerchief and looked at Eddie. How had it never occurred to me that an elevator was so much like a car pointing up? An elevator car. "Remind you of anything?" I asked.

"*See the US*-A *in your Chev-ro*-let," he sang quietly, his eyes watching the illuminated numbers above the door.

And that made me laugh so abruptly it came out more like a bark.

"I missed the joke," Jonathan said.

"At one time that was your wife's favorite song," Eddie said.

The doors opened. We had only gone two floors. "This is the strangest sensation," I said.

"What is?" Jonathan was still holding my arm. I could tell he was starting to worry about me.

"A stranger hunting you down in the Met," Eddie said, answering for me. "I didn't even know why I was following you at first. Well, you do look like your mother."

"I don't look like my mother." My mother, like my sister, has real beauty, the kind that did not succumb to time.

"You do," Jonathan said with some reluctance. He wasn't fond of my mother, who was so fond of him.

Eddie agreed. "You've got her height, her confidence, the way you walk is like your mother."

"There's the laugh, too," Jonathan said.

"I don't laugh like my mother," I said.

Eddie shook his head. "Doesn't matter. I didn't think I was following your mother. Your mother is my age." He stopped himself, struck by a thought. "Is your mother still—"

"Very much."

He nodded. "Good, good. All I can say is that I knew you were someone I knew and I couldn't quite remember where I knew you from. One gets to be a certain age and this happens. By the time I was following you up the stairs, I had the terrible thought that you might be a famous actress or a soprano and I was pursuing you. I didn't know you'd seen me. I think of myself as blending in with the crowd."

"Believe me," I said. "I never would have seen you."

"I saw you," Jonathan said.

I tilted my head in the direction of my husband. "He's more aware of his surroundings than I am."

"Good for you," Eddie said. "That's how we manage in the city. Do the two of you live here?"

"Westchester," I said.

"Bronxville," Jonathan said, getting specific. We were in line for a table. He gave his name to the hostess.

"That's the dream," Eddie said. "See some trees and grass first thing in the morning. See a squirrel, fill the bird feeders, drive a

car. I always thought the day would come when I would leave, but I never left. I tell myself I have to live here. I go out a lot at night."

"Now that you're retired?" Jonathan asked. Now that Jonathan was retired, he thought everyone should retire. He thought I should retire.

But Eddie disappointed him. "No, no. Not retired in the least. I went to the office this morning right on schedule, but when I got there, they were doing some sort of work on a water main, no idea what it was. They'd shut the tap off for the whole building, sent everyone home, or I should say sent everyone home who was there in the first place. The young people prefer being remote. They like to work in bed with their dogs. But for me, no water means a free day. I thought, When's the last time I went to the Met? It was a whim. I came on a whim."

Eddie Triplett was the same age as my mother, and my mother was seventy-six. That much I knew.

"What do you do?" my husband asked, which saved me having to ask the question.

Eddie was an editor at Random House.

People make romantic reference to their own leaping hearts, but at that moment I would say my heart leapt. He was still an editor. He made a game of it when my sister and I were children. He'd say, "When the kids at school ask you what your stepfather does, what do you tell them?"

"Eddie's an *edi*tor!" we'd scream.

He said the junior editors were all called Eddie, unless they were women, in which case they were called Edie, and the senior editors were either Ed or Edwina, and the guy at the tip-top of the heap who was known as the chief, he was an Edward.

Unfortunately there was no woman at the top of the heap. He said it would be our job to try to change that. Eddie and my mother both worked at Houghton Mifflin publishers in Boston—that's where they'd met—he in editorial, of course, given his name, and she in publicity, given her propensity for talking on the phone and throwing parties. When she sent Eddie packing, she insisted that he leave not only our house and our family, but his job as well.

"I'm not going to work every day to see my ex-husband in the break room," she said.

But didn't that punishment far exceed the crime, whatever the crime had been? "You can't do that! You can't make him quit his *job*!" Where would someone thrown out of the profession he was named for ever find work? At the time, I didn't understand that there was more than one publishing house in the country. I thought all books came from Houghton Mifflin.

Did I say this to my mother or only think it? In the way of all children, I believed the fault for their divorce was mine, though in this case I really was to blame. The past had happened such a long time ago, and while I wasn't square on the details, it seemed we had all come out fine.

The hostess took us to our table, and Jonathan and I both ordered a cup of breakfast tea and a slice of almond cake to share.

Eddie looked at the menu for another beat, then looked at us. "Would you mind very much if I had a glass of wine? It really has been a morning."

We didn't mind at all. Neither of us offered to join him, but we agreed that it had been a morning. Looking around the Dining Room, it appeared that fully half of the customers were having a glass of wine to deal with their mornings as well. Eddie ordered Chardonnay.

Eddie Triplett, sitting across the table, smiled at me. I could remember how painfully I had missed him when he left, but how long did that missing last? A year? Two years? Did Eddie Triplett ever cross my mind in high school? Did I wonder what had become of him after I left for college? "Tell me everything," I said, because everything was what I wanted.

"I came to New York after Boston and got a job at Simon & Schuster, which turned out to be a better job than the one I had at Houghton. And I liked living in the city, so I thank your mother for that. I stayed at S&S for five years and then I moved to Random House, which proved to be the terminal stop."

"When will you retire?" Jonathan asked, bringing the conversation back to his favorite topic. He didn't like to see a man older than himself still working because then he had to question his choices.

"When I show up at my office one morning and find its contents packed into boxes. What do you do?" It was clear that Jonathan wanted him to ask.

"Health care. I was in hospital administration." Jonathan then told him the name of the hospital.

"I had a stent there once, almost three years ago," Eddie said, as if he were talking about a restaurant that served good fish. "In and out the same day. Excellent staff."

Jonathan beamed. He thanked him. "I've always been proud of the work we did in cardiac care."

"So you liked the job but you retired?"

Jonathan nodded. "It was a reorganization in advance of the hospital being sold. The senior staff got an excellent package."

"Oh, the packages. They do their best to get the old guys out of there. What about you?" he said, turning. Each time he looked at me, he brightened. "Tell me you're a writer."

I had promised him the night of the accident, we had promised each other, we would both be writers. We would write books and dedicate them to one another. Now I told him I was not, which was fine. I wasn't bound by a promise my nine-year-old self had made. I told him I taught English at a girls' prep school. He asked me which one and I told him.

"Never too late," he said.

"It is, actually."

"Daphne teaches creative writing, though," Jonathan said. "Every girl in school wants to take Mrs. Fuller's creative writing class." I knew he was trying to tell Eddie that I was more than I appeared to be, but the explanation came across as thin and sad.

"Mrs. Fuller?"

"That's me." I refilled our teacups from the little white pot. "I took Jonathan's name."

It was Eddie's name I'd wanted as a child—Daphne Triplett—a true and forgotten fact recovered from where? The teacup? Daphne Triplett would have been a vast improvement for one Daphne Zabriskie. My mother said my father, however uninvolved, would never stand for it, and I shouldn't ask him because it would be hurtful. Of course she was right. Still, I printed this true name on the flyleaf of every book I owned, the Nancy Drews and *Charlotte's Web*: "This book belongs to Daphne Triplett." I planned to use it as my pen name. I told Eddie all of this while we were hanging sideways in the car, and he said, "Nom de plume." He said everything was more convincing when you said it in French.

"Did you marry again?" I asked. Was there a Mrs. Triplett now? He wasn't wearing a ring, which meant exactly nothing.