

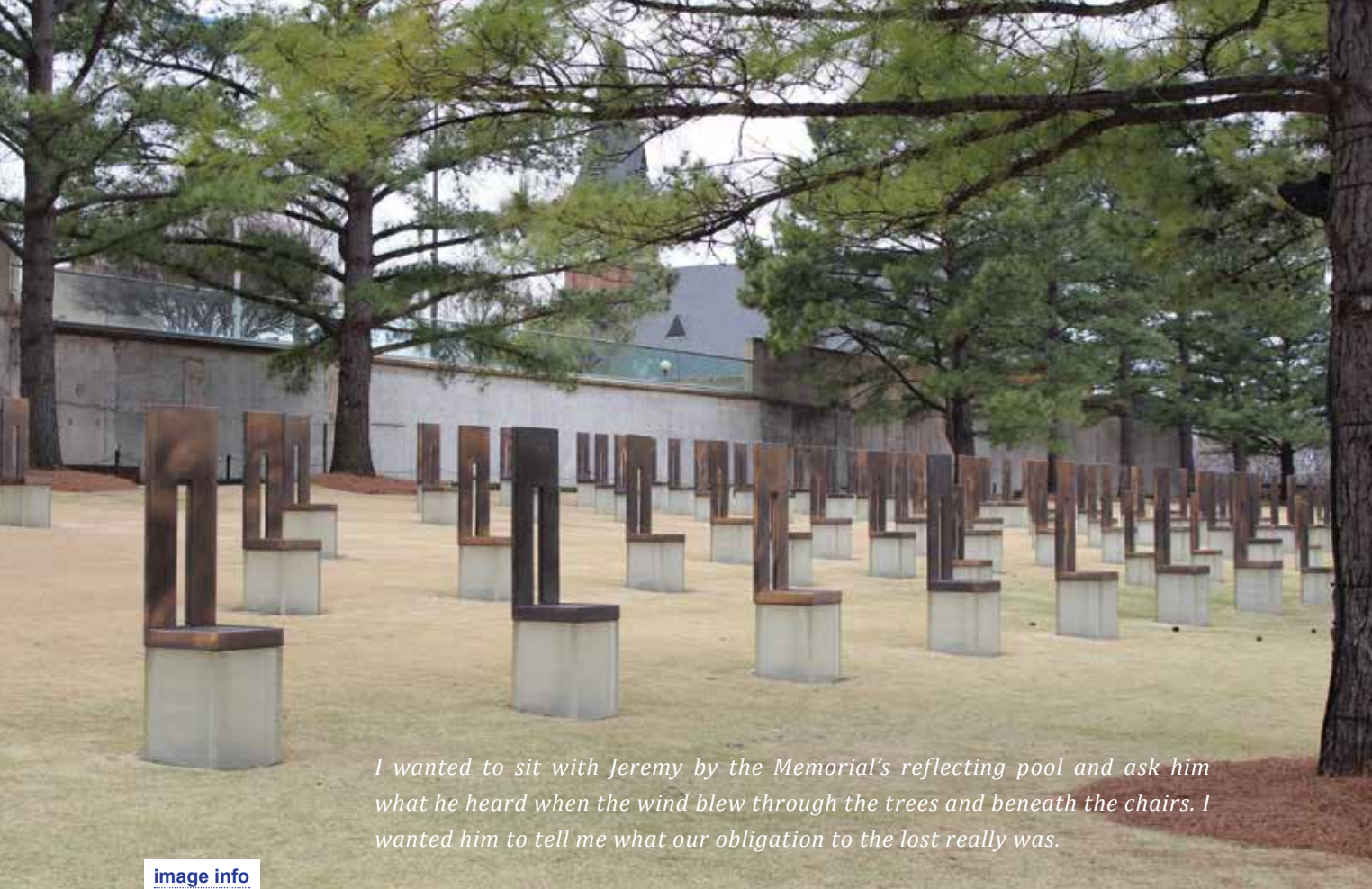


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OBLIGATIONS TO THE LOST

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I don't paint things. I only paint the difference between things. —Henri Matisse

I'D PICKED THE PERFECT MORNING TO VISIT the Matisse exhibit at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art. A few older women wandered around the museum lobby, but for the most part, it looked like I would have Matisse to myself.

I entered the exhibit to find two men standing tall in the center of the room like animals do when they are unfamiliar with the terrain. One man was extremely thin, the other normal-sized.

Both were dressed in black and white. I could tell right away they weren't from Oklahoma.

They turned and faced *Still Life with a Book*. I walked over and stood beside them. Without saying a word, they stared at the painting for no more than thirty seconds, then walked in unison around the corner. I leaned over hoping to see where they were going.

"Ma'am," a tall, solid woman in a navy blazer said. "Please watch the lines on the floor."

Black tape had been placed on the floor as a barrier to keep patrons like me at least two feet away from the art. A toenail's length of my

shoe had crept across the line. Only in bowling and Oklahoma would this be an infraction, but I moved my foot back anyway.

"Thank you," navy-blazer whispered. "You only have to stand behind the line in front of the unglassed art."

"So I can stick my nose on the glassed art?"

"No, ma'am," the woman said, looking around the room as if trying to locate back-up.

"I was kidding," I said. "I just didn't see the lines at first."

She gave me a smile surely reserved for unstable people. When I turned the corner, an older woman who had been watching the incident unfold said, "I didn't find her remark funny a'tall."

Jeremy would not find my remark funny either. But he had taken the job in Oklahoma City without consulting me first, and I was not amused by that a'tall.

"It's for our future," he'd said in a voice that implied that nothing I could possibly say could trump our future.

Jeremy would have walked away from me as soon as navy-blazer-lady pointed out my vagabond foot. Later he would say, "Why do you instigate? This is not Seattle. Irony is not a thing here."

I left the room featuring Matisse's early works in search of the men I'd seen earlier. I spotted them standing in front of *Loretta with a Cup of Coffee*. There was a tension between them as they stood side by side. I sensed the backs of their hands wanting to touch like the metal balls on strings where you pull one back and it sets the others in motion.

I sat on a bench hoping it looked like I was taking a break instead of snooping. The older member of the couple wore a natty linen suit. Had he been from Oklahoma, he would have known not to wear white in the summertime

when the dried-out red earth could easily mark him. The back of the linen suit was wrinkled. Linen is a bad friend in hot weather.

Beneath the white linen suit, the man wore a black shirt. There was a sheen to the fabric, so it might have been linen as well. The buttons on the shirt ended at mid-chest. Perhaps in the evening, wherever he was from, he felt free to walk around bare chested in his white linen suit, but in this place, he wore another black shirt, perhaps a tank, to hide his chest.

The whole ensemble seemed rather complicated, but I could tell by the way he moved in front of the glassed art that he liked the way his reflection looked back at him.

What didn't work was the beret sitting upon his presumably bald head. It was too heavy for the breezy white linen look. It had been designed to keep the head warm rather than keep the look stylish. It made me think the man came from a city like Denver or St. Louis, rather than a coastal place like Los Angeles or Miami where a hat like his would end up in a Ross Dress-for-Less.

I would never tell Jeremy about the beret or the suit. Such talk would have him clucking his tongue like an old grandmother at Bingo, telling me, "You spend too much time in everyone else's head, Anna. Spend more time in your own."

At night, while we shared dinner, he would try to divert my current interests by schooling me about unexamined lives and roads less traveled as if he were a parent trying to guide a child through life. Sometimes he used his fork to stab at the air while he made a point. It made me want to stick my palm through the tines and say, "Examine this." I had taken the same philosophy classes he had. I was not unaware.

I didn't arrive in Oklahoma City a difficult person. The first night in our downtown apartment, I tried to be game. After the movers left, I took two lawn chairs I'd purchased that morning at Target and

wedged them onto the small patio facing the freeway. I called Jeremy out to sit with me and have a drink. He sat, as always, too far forward in his chair, like he was an emergency responder ready to jump into action. His inability to rest in place struck me as a personality defect. In a few minutes, we both tired of the noise and the wind and went inside to finish our drinks.

That night a strong gust of wind blew our cheap chairs somewhere never to be found. I did not replace them and the patio became a repository for plants on their last legs. With the chairs blown away and our houseplants dying because I either cared for them too much or too little, the apartment felt slightly cursed.

I had never felt anything other than lucky before we moved to Oklahoma. With a degree in hand, I was ready to mount a ladder and climb. But then there was Jeremy—and this gap year on our way to the future—and the Oklahoma malaise that seemed to rock me like a second mother. The first day Jeremy went to work, I made a list of things to do in the city. On top of the list was the Oklahoma City Memorial.

Most mornings, after Jeremy left for work, I drove to the Memorial. There were one hundred and sixty-eight seats in the Field of Empty Chairs, representing one hundred and sixty-eight lost lives. I had only touched ninety-three chairs so far, read ninety-three names. While I touched each chair I sucked on the name like a life saver and tried to feel what had been lost. The sound of a bird crying out or a car honking could bring me to my knees when I considered how alive my own ears were.

Jeremy and I never examined this part of my life over dinner.

I wanted to sit with Jeremy by the Memorial's reflecting pool and ask him what he heard when the wind blew through the trees and beneath the chairs. I wanted him to tell me what our obligation to the lost really was.

He refused to come to the Memorial with me. "If this is your city, be a part of it," I told him. "This is a layover, Anna. A stop toward our future."

"But you have to see the chairs," I said. "When the lights go on in the evening, it's as if they float in the air."

"You shouldn't be there at dark."

You shouldn't be there, I heard.

I took a sleeve of crackers out of my purse, then put it back when I realized how much noise the cellophane made. The older man looked over his shoulder at me, then quickly back to Loretta. His eyes were the most intense color of blue, like a photograph of a sea you know you'll never visit.

The younger man looked to be twenty-four or twenty-five years old. Whenever the young one stopped at a painting, he'd clasp his hands behind his back, bend forward from the waist, and bounce slightly. With his sharp, skinny face and pointy nose, he looked like those fake birds perched on the edge of a glass pretending to bob for water.

The older man said something to the younger one and pointed to the other room.

With the older man out of sight, the young one walked among the paintings quickly, no longer stopping to bob and engage. His movements were tense, jerky, and haunted, like a person who does not like to eat. In front of Picasso's big nude, *Femme Couchée Sur un Divan Bleu*, he pulled out his phone and pointed it straight at the boobs.

I got up to look for the older man while the skinny one was taking pictures of the nude woman's painted crotch. I figured I'd let him explore the nether regions while he can.

In the other room, the older man watched to see if his companion was watching him. When he was sure he could not be seen, he pulled out a pair of silver-rimmed glasses and quickly

put them on so he could read about the art. He leaned so far into the painting that his nose crossed the lines on the floor, but navy blazer was not around to check this violation.

"That memorial is making you depressed," Jeremy said at least once a week or more.

"It's not the Memorial," I said. "It's this place. It weighs on you. The Trail of Tears ended here. It's why the soil is blood red."

"For God's sake," Jeremy said. "Read up on your history. The trail's end was nowhere near here."

"Blood flows, Jeremy."

He sat across the table from me, palms up, like he was reading a book.

"Just find a temporary job, Anna. Find some friends. Stop torturing yourself with a past you were never a part of."

"But I'm here now," I said, after he left the room. "I'm part of this now."

In the afternoons, I read Native American memoirs.

"Listen to this," I said to Jeremy. "This is from Linda Hogan. 'There are ways in, journeys to the center of life, through time; through air, matter, dream and thought. The ways are not always mapped or charted, but sometimes being lost, if there is such a thing, is the sweetest place to be.'"

"I envy the time you have, Anna," Jeremy said, pushing back his chair. "It's a shame, really, that you squander it."

"I'm not squandering anything," I said.

He sighed.

The sigh made me sad for all Jeremy lost when we moved to Oklahoma City. He'd brought with him a girl who had been fun and clever and light. Now he saw her, saw me, as a squanderer of time. All he could hope for was the future. A future, I now knew, not everyone would get.

I stood in front of a painting while the men

sat next to each other on a bench. They both sat comfortably, as if they planned to stay put a while. It was nice, really, seeing how much the couple in the museum wanted to please each other. The young one looked at art the way he thought he should; the other tried to cover the fact that he was growing old. It was a perverse adaptation of the O. Henry story. These two might not make it to their future together, but I was astonished at how lovely it was to see a couple making the most of their present. One day something would happen—an affair, a fight, boredom—but in the aftermath, they could remember the kindness of the everyday.

The everyday. At the Oklahoma City Memorial there is an exhibit. Part of the exhibit shows an office chair—an ordinary office chair that someone had been sitting in the morning of the explosion. Had everyone that day thought kindness would wait?

Kindness, I will tell Jeremy, is not for my future.

Outside a late summer rain was beginning to fall. Soon the heavy red dust would turn to solid red mud and become sticky, rusty clay. The substance could suck you right into the earth.

I might just let it suck me in. I might stay in Oklahoma and memorize all the names of those who never sat in the chairs that floated in the night. I will sit in each chair. I will sit in the pain. I will be the weight of the missing.

Once, Jeremy and I had it all planned out, but neither of us had any way of knowing how deeply the ancient voices would touch me. We had no way of predicting how examined a life I planned to live. Before we came to Oklahoma and our patio chairs blew away, I had no idea how lightly we held the earth.

When I got to my car, it was covered in a layer of red dirt. But I knew better than to spray the windshield with water. I'd already learned what happens when you mess with red earth. ❖