

Unstill Life

A Daughter's Memoir of Art And Love
in the Age of Abstraction

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Chapter 3

My parents had only been in California three years when, in early 1958, my father announced his big news. He had been offered the position of chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern art. “Can you imagine?” He leaned toward my mother, his eyes shining with excitement. “When I fled Germany I never dreamed I’d have such an opportunity.”

Sitting beside him in their blue Studebaker, her hands folded on top of her round pregnant belly, my mother was silent. It was twilight, her favorite time of day, and as they often did at the end of a long, hot Southern California afternoon, they’d driven to the outskirts of Claremont to relax and talk. My one-year-old sister Tanya lay sleeping in the car bed in the backseat. My mother gazed out the window. To the north sprawled Los Angeles, to the south the desert, west was the Pacific Ocean and to the east rose the San Gabriel Mountains. She liked the safe feeling of being held between the mountains and the sea.

“but we have a good life here,” she protested. “Good friends.”
“It’s all I’ve struggled for,” my father said.

My mother, pregnant with me, felt uneasy. To her, Pomona felt like home. For one thing, at Pomona they both had positions on the faculty. Not only did my father chair the art Department and run the college gallery, he had just published his book on German expressionism, and he was becoming well known for introducing cutting-edge shows on the Stieglitz Circle (the group of painters championed by distant cousin Alfred Stieglitz included Georgia O’Keeffe, Arthur Dove and John Marin) and hard-edge painting. even though he hated labels, Dad, along with Los Angeles Times art critic Jules Langsner, had coined the term “hard-edge” to describe the work being done in Los Angeles—flat fields of color separated by clean, sharp lines. My mother taught film studies and wrote. They lived on a tree-lined block in a nice house with a cat named Sybil and one-year-old Tanya. They had been married ten years. If my mother had hoped on her wedding day that she would mature, in many ways she had. She knew how to throw an impromptu cocktail party for sixty, aspring fling for twenty-five and a sit-down dinner for ten (bor-row a few chairs); she’d finished her master’s with honors before they’d left Chicago; she’d published a short story, and a joint article for *Art Digest* on Flemish art with my father; she enjoyed teaching, especially the theatrical aspect of standing in front of the class with a profound or witty comment on her tongue. She was still shy in an unfamiliar crowd, and, as she freely admitted to my father, peculiar. a daydreamer who liked to withdraw into her own writing world, she’d been content in their universe of two, and any intruder—my father had already had a few affairs, which he’d felt compelled to confess—set off her alarm bells.

She'd worried a baby might come between them. but after my father enlisted Doc to help convince Lala that she would indeed love us once we got here she'd relented and become a mother. The kind of mother who never felt comfortable holding a baby in her arms, though she was quite fine when that baby lay on the pale yellow "blankie" spread on the lawn beside her while she wrote. In response to my father's affairs, my mother had wept, felt stone-cold disgust with both his appetite and her own possessive nature, then rationalized a fling of her own.

Now he wanted to uproot them. She sensed that a move to New York into the fast-track art world would prove too enticing a contender for my father's affections, and she tried to dissuade him.

"I don't know if I can see myself in New York," she told him. "What is there for me?"

"Oh, my god, Lala," he said, his finger pointing east, toward their future. "Let me tell you how it was." and he relayed again the story of how, on his recent visit to New York, he'd brazenly walked into MoMa and asked to borrow a Georgia O'Keeffe painting for his small provincial college gallery show on the Stieglitz Circle. That's when Alfred Barr, the legendary director of MoMa, had said to my father, "We should have someone like you here."

"You should," my father had replied.

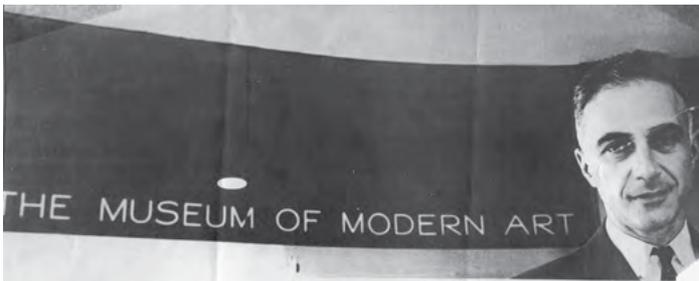
In the car my unconvinced mother said, "I don't know, Pete." but he continued, telling her that along with René d'Harnoncourt, the museum's sophisticated European director, who stood over six and a half feet tall and was a former diplomat and a count, the venerable Alfred Barr and William a. M. burden II, an heir to the Vanderbilt fortune and the president of the board—he, her Pete, would represent MoMa to the world.
To

be part of such a circle of luminaries was both my father's dream and his ambition. "I can't go without you," he said.

How could my mother deny him? even though she had her reservations, she adored him and what she referred to as his big, noble forehead.

Within a month, right after she had given birth to me and before the Stieglitz show opened at Pomona with the Georgia O'Keeffe painting on display, my father's new job was official. He was returning to the city he had first fallen in love with from the deck of *Europa*, the ship that had brought him to America. Barrand d'Harnoncourt had liked the fact that my father had a solid background in art history as well as a passion for new ideas. My father became the youngest curator hired by MoMa. To hear him tell it, he was also the first one who was ever paid a full salary.

as for my mother, she made her peace with the decision, packed up their life and gave Sybil, their tree-climbing cat, to a friend. She still had her doubts. Fidelity was not my father's strongest suit, but he'd promised to be "trustworthy." The next time my father traveled east, my mother wrote him about the



reason she had agreed to the move to New York: *It is an act of faith. And I realize that an act of faith is simply an act of love.*

It's you I love, you know, he replied. All I ask is that you believe in me. We have both come so far.

On a hot September day in 1958, holding the hands of my sister Tanya, my parents boarded an airplane for New York City and my father's new job. However, in their rush to depart, they neglected to remember their one-month-old baby—*me*—wrapped in a traveling blanket and left behind on a chair in the terminal. The plane was called back to the gate. They found me where they had left me, still asleep in my white traveling blanket.

“Weren't we silly, not remembering our baby, but you were so very brave,” they would recount laughingly and repeat for years. I loved this tale of their brief, accidental abandonment. It made me feel strong and resilient, and I liked the image of my parents as brainless characters in a 1930s screwball comedy, leaving their baby at the gate. In fact, my parents were anything but silly. They were just very inattentive, and New York, with its continuous swirl of activity, would only increase their distraction.

It took my mother less than twenty-four hours to be seduced by east Coast glamour and sophistication. In her journal the day after her arrival she wrote:

I am drunk, drunk, drunk on New York and all my worst characteristics are showing. I enter the bathroom across a marble threshold, and in the bedroom we sleep in a king-size bed. First time either one of us has ever slept in one. Or even seen one. Though we have seen the beds of kings. This bed is a savannah. Where are you, Pete? Hold my hand. Thrown over us an exquisite muslin spread on which has been stitched

“D S duP.” For three stories this monogram on sheets (such percale! I could lick it!), bath towels, bath mat, kitchen towels, glassware in the high-ceilinged dining room (I gaze in awe at 12 champagne glasses at a time), the wide silver frame of a wedding picture in the parlor. D S duP, my unknown benefactress, I stand on the lavender urns in your oriental rug and in my hand I hold a family History. Published, yet. Even with a hard cover . . . There she stands in her wedding gown—yards of snowy taffeta—a plain, undistinguished looking girl with her hair parted in the middle and rolled harshly to either side. Oh, Doris du Pont Stilliman Stockly, I could do it so much better. Well, maybe not, but I would sure love to try.

