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In The Dark

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Abstract

She woke up on the livingroom floor in her painting clothes. The air was saturated with paint and she caught her breath to breathe in shallowly. But her lungs didn't seem to be getting enough air. She breathed deeper and the paint odor burned inside her nose and then her lungs...

*Winner of the 1980
Will C. Jumper Grant-in-Aid*

IN THE DARK

*by
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She woke up on the livingroom floor in her painting clothes. The air was saturated with paint and she caught her breath to breathe in shallowly. But her lungs didn't seem to be getting enough air. She breathed deeper and the paint odor burned inside her nose and then her lungs.

She sat up and looked at her arms. The veins were green. There weren't blue, they were green. And she stared at the veins until she saw that her whole arm had turned green.

Why? What happened? And then she remembered. It was that can. That can of paint last night had warned her that adequate ventilation was needed in applying this type of paint. So she had opened the windows. Opened the windows and the doors and painted the shower white.

It was such a hard thing to do. The paint had been so powerful in smell. And the paint was of a strange consistency so that it dried while she was brushing it on. It dried so fast that she had to forget about using a brush and used a roller instead. And the smell. Obnoxiously powerful. Sharp, but at the same time, thick. The smell was so thick that she could barely breathe through it. It had given her a headache; then a stomachache. But she kept painting, because she had to finish. She had to get done painting. She just had to because no one else would do it for her.

And when she had heard her heart pounding, pounding slowly and loudly, trying to get her to stop for fresh air, she had felt sure she was going to be sick. But she had kept on painting. And when she finally did finish the shower, she had run from the bathroom and turned on the fan and sat in front of it.

But the fan didn't help. It blew the paint smell right in her face and past her lungs and into her stomach. And then her head had felt light. What if I die, she had thought. But she wasn't ready for death, and walked outside and sat on the porch steps, allowing the fresh air to draw inside of her. She

breathed in deeply, and exhaled the paint fumes. She felt her head become lighter. Light like a balloon and ready to float off her shoulders.

It had been three o'clock in the morning when she ran up and down the street to clean out her nose and her lungs. But she could still smell it. The smell seemed to be coming at her from the night air. Strong. It was in the hair inside her nose. It was caked throughout her nasal passages. She walked inside and blew her nose and sat in front of the fan.

And while the fan moved the air around her, she lit up a cigarette. Each time she inhaled, she could taste the paint filling up inside her throat. She stubbed the cigarette out and opened a can of pop. Cool as it slid down her throat.

Got to get busy again. No one else will do it. She had picked up her paint brush and begun painting the inside of a closet white. This time she was using different paint, and the smell wasn't so bad. But because she had been painting since eight the morning before, her arms were tired.

Her weak arm muscles had forced her to transfer the brush from one hand to another, resting her elbows on the closet shelf for support.

She decided that when the closet was finished, she would lie down for a nap. A short nap to rest her eyes which didn't want to stay open. Her eyes drooped just like the paint brush drooped when her arms gave out from the weight of holding the brush to the wall inside the closet.

She had pulled a sleeping bag out of her car and unrolled it on the wooden floor amongst the paint cans and the rolling pan and the cigarette butts and the fan.

And she had slept until the light crept into the window, high enough to shine on her. It warmed up her paint-caked arms and gave a blessing to her sore nostrils. And she told herself to wake up. That it was time to get up, but her mind hadn't wanted to.

Now she was finally awake, and her arms were green. She was sure she was going to die. She'd never heard of anyone turning green first, but what else could it be?

She lay back down to go to sleep, but was afraid that she might die in her sleep, and got up. She looked in the mirror.

Her heart stopped. Even her face had turned green. Not as green as her arms, but it was green. How could this have happened to her?

She tried to comb her hair. But she couldn't stand to look at her face in the mirror. Too ugly.

She grabbed her key from the hook and got into the car. She drove down the street with shaking hands and lit a cigarette after the fifth match. Her head started floating. She looked down at her green arms and then at her face in the rearview mirror. She pushed the accelerator down harder.

I don't want to die. I guess I shouldn't have painted so long last night.

The car turned into a short lane and stopped in front of a red brick apartment building. She saw herself getting closer to it and rang the doorbell.

"Hi! What brings you here this time of the day?" Rosey said.

No answer.

"Well you sure are full of paint. I'll bet you're painting it white. Are you almost done?"

"I came over to see if I could take a shower." She didn't notice how awful I look. She didn't say I looked terrible. She didn't tell me I better not work so hard. Can't she see how green I am?

Rosey was leading her to the bathroom now, pointing to the towels hanging on the rack, and then walked out and shut the door.

Can't she see I'm about to die? Can't she see how awful I feel? She looked in the mirror again. How could anyone not see it, she wondered.

Undressed, she stepped under the spraying nozzle of the shower and began to cry. The tears mingled with the warm water and flowed over her body and out the drain. No sympathy. She didn't show any sympathy. And I'm about to die.

She stepped out of the shower now, and reached for one of the towels Rosey had pointed at. They were cold. She put her paint clothes on again and looked back into the mirror. Her face wasn't green anymore. Just pale. Now she couldn't show Rosey how sick she felt. And Rosey wouldn't notice it on

her own. Just like Rosey hadn't noticed when she had brought some make-up and made herself beautiful. Rosey hadn't said a word.

So, she had moved out and gotten her own apartment. And now this. Rosey didn't notice she had turned ugly and was about to die.

When she walked out of the bathroom, Rosey was standing by the kitchen and started saying something about going to church.

"Hey, what's the matter? Whatcha crying about? Was the shower that bad? Cold water?"

"Rosey, I was all green. My arms and my face were all green. And I got a lot uglier. And I feel so tired now that I can hardly think. But what if I had died?"

"Hey. You aren't going to die. You just imagined that. You must have worked too late last night. What time did you go to sleep?"

"I just feel horrible," she said. "I didn't get much sleep at all. And now I have to get busy painting again." And I really don't want to turn ugly.

Rosey just stood and looked at her as she walked out the door.

"Thanks for the shower," she called over her shoulder.

She doesn't care about me, she thought. She couldn't care less if I die. Well, I'm not going to. And I'm not ugly anymore. And I'm going to finish painting and I'm going to get it all done. When people come to visit, they'll say how tough it must have been to paint the whole place by myself, and how beautiful I've become. And I'll gracefully accept the compliments.

She went home and painted. She painted every board and every closet and cupboard. She painted it all white. And when she finally got done two days later, she cleaned up the place. She threw away the paint brushes and the newspapers and the cigarette butts. And scrubbed the floor. And it all looked so much better.

Just wait till everyone sees how much work I did in here.

And she washed her hair and brushed her teeth.

She laid the carpet and arranged the furniture and bought some plants. She unpacked all of the boxes and hung

up all of her clothes. She washed the windows and fitted the curtains. And she looked in the mirror.

Just wait till they see me and this place, she would say when she lay down to sleep at night.

Rosey stopped by one day and asked if they could go out to dinner together.

“You probably want to get away from this tiny place anyway.”

“But Rosey, look how much work I did in here.” And she pushed back her hair so Rosey could see her lovely face.

“I know, dear, that’s why I think you should get away. Rest for a while. Relax.”

But she hadn’t gone with Rosey. They would have had nothing to talk about. And besides, she had to clean the apartment and think of new things to do to make the apartment look better. She had to make it look nice so that people would be dropping by all the time to sit in this apartment and talk. And she would entertain them and serve them cheese and crackers. And then they would admire her apartment. And she would smile beautifully.

Well, she had to let them know they were welcome first. She decided she would throw a party. It would be a nice party. Everyone would get dressed up and she’d serve expensive wine. She’d invite ten of her best friends and there would be an even number of men and women. And she would serve snacks for them to eat. No. She would serve cauliflower with dip. And breaded mushrooms and ham salad sandwiches, quartered.

She put on some classical music and plucked her eyebrows and dimmed the lights. Then she lit a cigarette to pass the time. She sat in the chair by the kitchen and smoked and listened to the music while her eyes danced around the room.

She was interrupted by voices at the door and the sound of the doorbell. Her heart stopped. She had forgotten to draw one of the curtains all of the way shut and the mellow light from the room was escaping outside. The light was supposed to stay inside and flow smoothly around the room in time with music, slowly forming over the painted walls, and the hanging plants and the curtains.

It was her apartment and she couldn’t allow the light to

escape from the window.

She slid out of her chair and crawled to the window. She reached her hand slowly upward, and shyly gripped the bottom edge of the curtain. She couldn't let anyone outside see the light escaping.

The doorbell rang again. She had to get the curtain shut. Keep the light inside. Keep it rolling around the livingroom.

She pulled at the curtain from the bottom edge and tried to close it. It was stuck at the top. The doorbell rang. Her heart beat faster, louder. She crawled to the stereo and turned it way down because it had suddenly gotten too loud. So loud that someone might hear it outside.

Then she slithered back to the curtain and tugged at it again from below. Still caught. Well, there's only one way to stop that light, she thought. She crawled beside the wall, over to the floor lamp and slowly reached her hand out to pull the chain.

The doorbell rang. Her heart was louder now. Trying to jump out of her chest. In time with the loud music. Someone might hear it. She crawled along the wall, back to the stereo and flipped off the switch. Then back along the wall, inching her way along till she got to the bedroom door. Only when she was well inside did she dare stand up. She raced to the bed and climbed inside the covers. She could still hear her heart. She could feel it. It was making her head move back and forth, and the veins were pulsing in her forehead.

She shut her eyes and listened for the voices outside. She heard them grow farther away. A car started up. She breathed out a deep sigh. Next time she'd have to make sure everything was in place before anyone came. But it wouldn't be for a while. she'd have to build some shelves and buy a larger couch and rearrange the furniture. She got up and turned on a desk lamp so she could write herself a note. She had to buy another plant, and a few more ashtrays and get some wine to serve. She glanced in the mirror. She'd have to buy some more make-up too.

Yes, she decided it would probably be a while before she was ready for company.

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