



Paint-Prep

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Taping the walls, laying down drop cloths, shaking, stirring, that's not the kind of prep I mean.

It's the joyous anticipation of plunging your brush into color, stroking over canvas, plunging again, stroking with abandon. It's preparing yourself to make masterpieces, even though you have to remember a few things to create what you intended, like putting the lightest lights next to the darkest darks, if you want the highlights to shine. Just like life, light and dark can be manipulated.

The young father paces from the entry of his new mid-century apartment, past the half step of his kitchen, past the table shoved against one wall and the hard, green couch, to the railing of the balcony with one chair and a charcoal grill. He halts and caresses the slick glass of his scotch bottle, lifts, swigs, then turns to re-pace. This path, with the whiskey in his right hand, leaves the left free to knock hard as he passes the bedroom where his drugged wife sleeps. He can slap the laundry room wall where the baby girl wails in her crib tucked opposite washer and dryer, then lift the lid of the bathroom toilet by the entry to piss before he swigs and swivels again. To the balcony once more, the bottle lightweight, vicious knocks on the wall leaving dents.

An addled rant begins. "Stop it. Stop it. I hurt, I need to sleep, the pills aren't working, be quiet, I hurt," the new mother cries.

He reaches into his waistband at the back of his wilted undershirt, pulls out the pistol, and fires up. Sound waves crack open. A burnt cowhide smell fills the space. Then a brief, shushing release as popcorn ceiling rains to the linoleum.

Now the baby is retching with sobs far beyond capacity for air.

The mother stands wobbly, clutching the pill bottle, rubbing the slick plastic, yelling, "Stop being so loud, damnit, get me some water to take my pill, and pick up that baby for God's sake, did you shoot, did you really shoot the ceiling, pick up that baby or I will call the police."

He picks up the baby, patting her back with a sure hard rhythm, walking, singing gruffly, softly in French, "*Sur le pont d'Avignon, L'on y danse.*" Until the police come to arrest him, and I am put in bed with my mother. This is the dance we do, round and around and under the bridge. "*Sur le pont d'Avignon L'on y danse tout en rond.*" I still sweetly remember the words and the tune to that little French song, and I remember him holding me just that once.

Now, there is a tan brick home, two parents, two children, even two cars. A lot of

things he can't do, even more, she won't, but he does know how to make money. There is a hall to pace down, three bedrooms, a softer green couch, and another baby girl—a good, quiet one. The mother holds this baby, kissing her wispy, blond curls, giving her the requisite eight hugs a day. She strokes gently over this child's blue eyes that look nothing like her father's; while she hisses and spits at the other.

With my dark eyes, my sparked, stubborn intellect, I hiss, and I spit right back. If she's had few pills and can catch me, she grabs at my hair, slaps at my face. Fast enough mostly, to climb the mimosa in our backyard, until she and my sister sleep once more. If he's home, I'm faster. Caught by him means the belt, with a wide silver buckle that can slip out of his hands. Then my bare and skinny-kid legs are bloody and bruised. While the new-bruise purple is pretty, the red of the blood purely bright, both turn colors of green, yellow, and black that aren't so pleasing to my artistic eyes. Oh yes, I do paint with whatever I can find even then. When I'm older, when the weather is cold, I'm grounded to my room for days, or months if school's out. If I've planned well and saved money I've earned from helping neighbors, I have paints, papers, and brushes with me alone in my room. So, then, I'm happy. The brushes dip into water from my small bathroom sink; they tickle the paint and stroke the paper with pure tenderness. They cuddle my heart with their beauty, hiding safely as love-mounds under my bed.

The three stay together as life marches on. Tolerating alcoholism, addiction, and the baby's inability to launch, they take turns at vacations. His money buys prolonging treatments at worldwide clinics. The tan brick house is enough with one child's room now the man's sleep-in den. I don't stay with them or even in touch, but leave. I am too cautious to want a new family. Young enough not to tolerate compromise, I promise instead to be happy with friends. I am delighted to chat with whomever I meet. I get hugs and give them abounding to the children in my art therapy class.

Then the world is hit with a promiscuous virus, and I am locked in my room again.

Because of past tutelage, I am prepared. Paints are here to touch and to stroke. Papers form tall elevations of love. Yet, when isolation goes past the three months I endured as a child, my courage flags, my spirits deflate. Colors look muddled and dreary, then it rains. The shushing release of sound reminds as a clean, sweet smell erases. It is dark outside, so I strip and stand in the merciful pouring. These drops caress naked skin. By thousands and thousands per minute, they come, they caress, and they bless. I feel better.

Because of lessons learned early, I can endure. Because I am gifted bright mountains of love, I know how to hope.

