

WET PAINT

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Who knew that purple was such a dangerous color?

It all started when my wife grew bored with white kitchen walls. I arrived home from work on a sweltering August day to find color samples strewn across the kitchen counter. Before I could decipher their significance, Margaret's car pulled into the driveway.

I walked out to greet her, beer in hand. She struggled with two gallon pails of paint. I bent forward to kiss her and she drew back.

"I could use a little help." Eyebrows sharp enough to cut flesh arched over her eyes.

I flushed and looked in vain for a place to set my beer down. I reached for the pails and a splash of beer spilled from the tilted bottle. Margaret pulled her white pump away in the nick of time. She shot me an evil look. "I've got these," she said. "Get the rest out of the trunk."

I trotted to the open trunk. Two more gallon cans crouched within. As I carried them to the house, Margaret triggered the remote for the garage and I had to duck as the door came down.

The cans swung at my side, sloshing, stirring. One of the lids made a popping sound and dimpled upward in the heat. It was silly to imagine that something was trying to get out.

I had planned on working in the garden the next day, but Margaret was up early, dragging the kitchen table into the din-

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ing room and laying tarps. When she got a bug in her head you either got out of her way or got run down.

She almost flashed me a good morning smile. "Bring the paint in, will you? And start stirring it." She surveyed my groggy, pajama draped form with her efficient top to bottom gaze. "You can have some coffee first, if you want."

Sharon was Margaret's younger sister. It was my misfortune that she had married a much more successful man -- success being measured by his annual salary. Since he worked nearly every minute in an effort to humiliate me and every other man on the planet, Sharon was often at our house.

"It's purple," Sharon said. Few people I knew could inject such contempt in so few words.

"It's Raspberry Beret," Margaret said. I could imagine her cheek muscles twitching as she clenched her jaws, but I didn't dare to look away from the wall that I was spreading paint across.

Sharon came and stood next to me, examining my work with a jaundiced eye. Her only reply to my wife was to take a long swallow from her orange juice and vodka.

I glanced at what little we had left to do. "I think you bought too much paint."

Margaret whipped her head up to look at me. For a brief instant her eyes showed uncertainty, vulnerability, fear that she had made a mistake. For a brief instant I saw the girl I had married.

Her eyes turned flinty and she swept her gaze across the kitchen. She saw things differently from me. "It's going to need a second coat."

Sharon was right. It was purple. The innocuous name Raspberry Beret did nothing to prepare you for how hideously purple it was.

Margaret never wavered. She took in her new kitchen with pride. She had once more remade the world to match her vision, and all was good.

We had two cats, Guy and Molly, gray-striped tabbies from the same litter. I suspected they were prince and princess ex-

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iled from some distant cat empire. I should say my wife had two cats, since she brought them with her into the marriage. But they both showed me a modicum of affection, however diffident, that my wife had long since forgotten how to give and receive.

From the day we painted, the cats refused to enter the kitchen. Even the sound of the electric can opener could not entice them into the purple room. Weren't cats colorblind? Or was that only dogs?

After the first day, I saw that they would starve if I didn't move their bowls into the utility room. They followed me, scampering past the kitchen door like their tails were on fire.

Late at night, as I lay in bed, I heard the familiar sounds of the cats racing through the house, pursuing each other and wrestling. I imagined I could see dark shadows spreading across the ceiling. My dreams were purple.

Four nights later, Guy disappeared.

I lay in bed like any other night, staring at the shadowed ceiling. Margaret's sleep was troubled. Usually she slept like a stone, but that night she tossed about as her slumbering body searched for a comfortable position.

The cats romped and tumbled. I was on the verge of falling asleep when Guy let out a deep throaty growl of pure menace that rose up the scale to a shrill cry of pain.

I leapt out of bed before I had even woken up. Margaret sat up with a cry. As I dashed into the living room, her aggrieved voice followed me. "What are you doing?"

I switched on the light to find Molly standing in the center of the room, her tail erect, the fur on her back bristling. She let out a piteous cry, a moan of unending misery.

Margaret came into the room. "Molly, what's wrong?" She went to the agitated cat and bent to pick her up. Molly flattened herself to the ground, her ears pinned back against her head, one forepaw raised to attack, mouth stretched in a primal snarl of warning. Margaret thought better of comforting her.

I switched on the light in the hall. I called Guy's name. Our tom was not showing himself. Molly's desperate moans of grief continued to pierce the air. At the end of the hall I glimpsed one short wall of deep purple.

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I turned away from the kitchen and into the guest bedroom. "Guy?" I called. I went through all the rooms of the house including, eventually, the kitchen. Guy was nowhere to be found.

"Come back to bed," Margaret said. She stood in the hall, hugging herself, her lips trembling. The air conditioning usually didn't make the house so cold. "He's hiding."

Margaret was right. Something had scared both cats. Guy would show his puss in the morning. We went back to bed. Lying still, side by side in the dark, miles separated us on that queen-sized bed.

Molly wouldn't shut up until Margaret got up and threw a glass of water on her.

Guy didn't turn up the next morning, even though I opened a can of tuna in place of the regular cat food. I didn't have time for a finicky act. I had to get to work.

I spent a good chunk of that evening searching every room in the house. I looked behind and under every piece of furniture. I shuffled through every closet. I poked past the spider webs under the basement stairs. In the kitchen, surrounded by purple, I opened every cabinet.

I did find something that I never told Margaret about. In an obscure corner of the kitchen, just above the floor molding, I found a tuft of cat fur the size of a fingerprint dried into the purple paint. This was not a tumbleweed of fur that had been shed and ended up stuck to the wall. A patch of skin and dried blood held the mass together.

I took a tissue and tugged it loose from the wall. I expected fine cat hairs to stay imbedded in the paint, but the finish was smooth to the touch. The wall seemed to mock me. A vague sadness for Guy swept through my heart.

I buried the wad of tissue in the garbage can and retreated, purple at my back, dogging my footsteps.

It rained hard Friday night. The constant patter of fat raindrops was a poor replacement for the patter of feline paws. The frenzied activity outside was contrasted sharply by the intent silence within the house. The only sound was the slow muttering of the color purple.