

Antique White

The door is four feet from the bed. There's no handle. A shape has been chipped away a foot from the left side, a foot and a half from the top that looks like Great Britain. The island anyway. The room has been repainted so many times that the colour underneath is the same as the rest of the door and the walls, minus a few years of solitary confinement. That turns everything grey. The walls themselves have never been white. I can tell because the ceiling is white. The ceiling is like a washed plate draining next to the sink - the walls the inside of a mug on top of it, just as clean but stained ever so slightly by years of consoling cups of tea. My walls had never shared such luxuries but I was sure they had never been white. Not beige, not cream, not mushroom, and not white. Fucking walls. Three years I had been staring at these walls and I still couldn't pick the colour. I'd even made up my own colours; buttermilk, Thai napkin, yellowing ivory - you know, the colour you find on really old pianos or elderly ladies' teeth - but none of these answered the question, quenched the thirst, sated the fire. The times I spent gazing around my prison, looking to wash it from my sight with antidotes of colour, the pale blue of the chipped toilet seat, the green floor - forest green, British racing green, green green. Nothing worked. Everything was infected by the off white walls. Fucking walls. I began to sing. I don't know why - whenever I think about these walls I sing.

“Oh brothers who live on when we are dead
Let not your noble hearts against us harden,
And smile not when the noose shall claim our head
A silly secret smile to ease your burden,
Nor rail against us now you see us broken
Nor...”

“...Nor...”

Nor something. It was a song from a long time ago - a musical I was in half a lifetime back - and now I couldn't remember the rest of the verse. I love the way it sounds, I sing it over and over, not knowing what else there could possibly be to warn them all against. I guess it's like the walls. I stare at them over and over and still can't name the colour. Or the rest of the song.

“Nor what?”

And just like that, the wall spoke to me. Three years and twelve days and the wall whose colour I can't name is asking me for the rest of the words to a song I can't remember. Seventh circle of Hell or some shit.

“Dunno.”

“At's a pity. Got it in me head now.”

And just like that my isolation was shattered. The man behind the wall had a voice, a mind, a presence. I had a friend. I couldn't tell him this however, and the silence resumed its prevailing position. I spent all night with that voice in my head, wondering about its owner. Who was he? Why was he here? How long had he been there? Surely not from the start, silent and listening. Nor a recent addition because my song had imprinted itself on his brain. I thought of so many things to say, to ask, but in the morning I said nothing. I was reading.

“A wealthy man pushed his car into a hotel, and instantly became poor.”

I thought. I creased the already dog-eared page and placed it on the bed beside me.

“What the fuck?”

“A wealthy man pushed his car into a hotel and instantly became poor.”

I stood up and I smiled. A riddle. Perfect. I knew the next thing I said had to be the answer. And the answer had to be right. I said nothing. A wealthy man. Pushing his car. A hotel, poor. Fuck. Wealthy man, pushing a car. Hotel. Becomes poor. Wealthy man. Car. Hotel. Poor. A wealthy man becomes poor after pushing his car into a hotel. Hotel? Into a hotel? I lay on my bed with my right arm hanging off the edge, knuckles just brushing the cool green floor. I stared into the white ceiling. The silence revealed no clues. In my head told the story. A rich man. His car breaks down. The nearest exit is a hotel. Hazards blinking, he sticks an arm and a leg out his car door. Lucky someone didn't swipe his door, really. He wheels the car inch by inch. Cars fly past

laughing - some slow as they feel the impulse to stop, then speed up as they suppress it. He rounds the curb. Safe. Hotel - the sign flashes: No vacancy. Ironic. No I guess that's not irony. He parks manually and walks into the lobby. A phone. But who to call? He feels his jacket pocket, empty. Nothing with which to reward anyone with. Ahah! ATM in the corner. I can afford the fine this once, he thinks. Insert card. He inserts his card. Pin. Ok. Money. Fifty should suffice. Ok. No receipt thanks. The screen blinks. I'm sorry, I know you were rich, but now, due to circumstances beyond your control, you are now poor. Sorry for any inconveniences this might have caused. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. *Fuck*. So maybe he was never rich? Hotel? Hotels...hotel? And in a flash I had it. No reason, no inspiration, it just came to me.

"He's playing Monopoly."

I said it loudly and clearly, testing my voice. Silence. Celebratory silence. I was right, we both knew it. Now it was my turn. This was harder. I don't know any riddles. I don't even know any good jokes. Again I stared at the white ceiling. Why is the sky blue? Obvious, stupid, stupid. I berated myself for even considering such a juvenile puzzle. Small particles floated through my eyesight. I followed them. Meandering across the ceiling, circling, then drifting down the walls - those fucking walls. The walls!

"What colour are the walls?"

There was no silence, not even a pause.

"Antique white."

"If they are the same as mine anyway."

And that was it. Antique white. The walls had their colour. The man, just a wall away had changed my world, named, completed my small captive world. I loved this man. To him I owed my life. I was almost teary. His turn.

"What are you in for?"

Hah. Wow. I returned to earth. With a bump I let myself fall back onto the bed.

“Grievous bodily harm. I beat a guy to death. Faggot.”

We laughed. It seemed like the natural thing to do.

I had just bought her those shoes. Those bright red shoes. She was so happy. She put them on her little feet and wouldn't take them off until I promised she could wear them to school in the morning. She didn't smile much anymore, but now it seemed her innocent smiles would shimmer forever. That night she slept well for the first time since her mother died, and at breakfast I was still bathing in her excited glow. I kissed her cheek and she walked to the end of the drive. She stopped and turned to me.

“Thank you for the shoes daddy. They're beautiful.”

“So are you darling. Have a good day at school.”

Have a good day at school. Have a good day at school. They rang me at 12 and asked me why she wasn't in class. I couldn't understand. She is at school, I said. I called the cops. They spoke to me all day. I only remember the fog. And playing the scene over and over. Thank you for the shoes daddy, they're beautiful. Thank you... daddy. I didn't say much to the cops. I knew who it was but I wasn't going to tell them. I was going to get to him first. The man next door moved in years ago. He watched her. Stood and watched her. He had grey hair and cold dead eyes and he had taken my girl. I walked across when it got dark and vaulted up the stairs. The door was unlocked but I wished it wasn't. I wanted to break it down. He was sitting on the couch, watching the telly. I didn't let him get up. I don't even remember asking him any questions. I knew she was dead and I knew he had taken her. My fists rained down on flesh and blood, then blood and bone. He bled life and I lit a cigarette while I watched. Someone called the cops. He was dead and she was gone. Silence. My turn. Again.

“What about you? What are you in for?”

Again he answered without pause for a thought.

“Raped a girl. An killed her.”

“She had these real cute... tiny, red shoes.”