

## PAINTING OVER STAINS

### I.

I'm stumbling and worn from a controlled blood loss. It pays thirty dollars and a glass of orange juice, enough money for hamburger, buns, tomatoes and bananas to last a few days. I'll have to choose between a bottle of cheap wine and fuel for the camp stove. I'm not quite out of fuel. I trade my room in the motor lodge for painting and drywall, general maintenance. It seems that no jobs exist for an ex-navy E-3 who was honorably discharged after a year. I couldn't handle endless hours on the ocean living in quarters the size of a coffin. Now I wonder if maybe I should have tried harder to hang in there, but my mind was slipping, like now.

I've done about all I can with the motel. It's pristine, for what it is. My conscience won't let me work any slower. Down the road the bridge is out and the river is flooded. The bottle of wine smoothes out the ripples in my brain but empties my pockets. My old Chevy sits outside my room gathering dust; tags expired, inspection out in two more months. It would run if it had gas. I could sell it for a few hundred if I could find the title. I may need to sleep in it soon.

### II.

The painting is finished. The grounds are spotless. "We need the room back," he says. He's sorry, he says. I hand him the key. "Good luck," he says and looks away. "I'll pick up the car later," I say. "Cool," he says. I walk toward the blood center again. The water has receded. Men in hard hats and orange vests are cleaning up the debris. I begin to pitch in for something to do. A fat man leaning on a shovel motions toward me so I walk over.

"Where's your hard hat?" he asks.

"I don't have one," I say.

""You're supposed to have one."

I look up. There's nothing overhead. "I'm just helping for something to do," I say.

He looks at me as if I were some alien life form. "OSHA regs," he says.

"I'll get one if you give me a job."

"We only hire temps."

"I can be a temp."

" We go through an agency. They do drug tests and background checks."

I look around at his crew then look back at him as if he were space junk. "Which agency?" I ask.

"Hargrove," he says.

"I'm on their list," I say, "but they never tested me or called me about a job."

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Paul Thorndale" I say.

"If someone quits I'll ask for you," he says.

"Aren't you going to write my name down?"

"I'll remember," he says. I go back to picking up debris. "You have to leave," he says.

### III.

The nights are getting chilly. I'm thankful that my Chevy is so old it has a front bench seat. My clothes, stove and few other belongings fill the back. After buying a quarter tank of gas, I have enough blood money left to do laundry so I clean up and shave in the bathroom of the washateria. I look okay, a little loose around the edges. Tomorrow I'll try to find work again.

### IV.

I'm in the parking lot of the Home Depot when the sun comes up. A guy with a bent nose and jowls pulls up in a crew cab pickup. He's looking for painters, eight dollars an hour. He hires me. I climb in the cab. It smells like stale cigars and sour beer. "You speak Spanish?" he asks.

"*Muy poquito*," I joke. He pulls around behind the store where three Hispanic guys wait. Two are young but one is old enough to be my grandfather. They jump in the bed of the truck before it comes to a complete stop, the two young guys grabbing gramps by both arms.

"What's your name?" bent nose asks.

"Paul," I respond. He asks me about my experience. "Just got out of the Navy," I say. "We painted anything that we didn't have to kill first." It was a joke but apparently bent nose didn't get it. Sometimes lately I feel like a refugee from an alien invasion. He tells me his name is Buddy. I doubt it but it makes no difference as long as he pays cash. We drive across town to an old neighborhood that seems to be experiencing gentrification where we stop at a single story frame house. Buddy pulls a metal sign from the back seat and plants it in the yard. It says Buddy's Painting and Drywall and has a phone number. He hands out paint scrapers and paper particle masks. "Wear them, the exterior tested positive for lead," he says, like it was an infection. He

unloads a 5 gallon water jug and leaves. We get to work. The sun is low in the sky when he shows up to retrieve us. My elbows, shoulders and back feel demolished. I have blisters on my fingers and palms that have long since burst. He gives me three twenties and a ten. He gives Gramps a roll of bills. I had already determined that my three *compadres* were a familial unit. He gives us all a ride back to the Home Depot.

My car is gone. I go straight to the customer service counter. I have to throw a fit and a few items from the general area before I find someone who knows what's going on. "We had it towed," he states, "company policy. The tags were out, probably wouldn't have noticed if you hadn't parked at the edge of the lot."

"I was trying to leave the closer spaces for your customers," I say.

"Sorry," he says and hands me a card for the towing company.

"Can I use your courtesy phone?"

"Customers only," he says. I consider homicide but decide to walk away. Although the store is full of potential weapons, he is much larger than me and who knows what he has stashed behind that counter.

V.

Across the interstate from Homer's I find a convenience store with a working pay phone. The ten dollar bill is transformed into a bottle of cheap wine and a handful of quarters. "How much to bail out the old Impala?" I ask the wrecker guy, trying to maintain a jovial demeanor.

A gruff voice replies, "Ninety bucks, if you pick it up by midnight."

"I can't be there 'til tomorrow," I say.

"One hundred twenty, tomorrow," he says and hangs up. I find the address of the towing company on a map stuck to the wall inside the store. It's not quite five miles away. I can walk that, I'm thinking.

"You can't have that wine open in here," the kid behind the counter says. I hold the bottle straight out with my left hand and screw the lid on with my right. "You know what I mean," the kid says. "Get the fuck out before I call the law." I start toward him. He cowers against the back wall. I lean on the counter, my body bent at the waist. "Kiss my ass!" I turn and walk out the door, waving goodbye with one expressive middle finger.

## VI.

The juniper tree behind the Home Depot blocks the final rays of the sun while the grape loosens the tight coils and spurs creative contemplation. There's an abundance of cardboard available. I enter Homer's and spend a few of the quarters on a fat permanent marker. My sign says: "GET THIS HOMELESS BUM OUT OF TOWN! I need 50 more bucks to get my car out of hock!" Okay, maybe I lie a little. I'm not going anywhere soon but the sign works. Three hours on the street corner and I have another 60 bucks and I have yet to be seen by anyone I know. I start walking.

## VII.

I never would have thought I would be so happy to be driving the old Chevy. I still have a few bucks in my pocket. Back at Home Depot I find a spot right in the middle of the parking lot, windshield facing east. Crack of dawn and I'm up looking for Buddy. About 8:30 he shows up,

hung over as hell. I had received a couple of offers for painting gigs but I wanted to talk to Buddy. Most of the guys supposedly still looking for work really aren't. They either want too much money or they're obviously junkies. "How about this?" I ask Buddy. "You give me ten bucks an hour. I'll follow you to the jobsite and you won't have to bring me back. Come by and pay us at the end of the day and I'll bring the other guys back too." He looks at me sideways then looks around at the deadbeats gathered around his truck. "I'll make sure the job gets done," I say. I didn't know if I could pull it off but figured I had nothing to lose.

### VIII.

It's three days later and I'm some kind of foreman I guess. I'm getting my ten an hour and I'm running the spray rig. It's me and the same three guys almost every day. If we need an extra I let Gramps pick somebody he knows. It's worked well so far. Buddy sits in his truck drinking beer and listening to sports on his satellite radio. Sometimes he splits for a few hours. Once in a while he gets out and stumbles around the jobsite pointing out this or that faux pas. We're starting another house tomorrow. It will be Friday. When we finish cleaning up the jobsite, Buddy collects from the homeowner. He gives me a hundred dollar bonus when he pays the day labor. I have 400 dollars in cash. I've been hanging on to it, sleeping in the car. Tonight I'm going back to the motel and see if I can work a weekly rate on a room.

### IX.

Friday morning I'm at Homer's, showered, shaved and wearing clean clothes. I round up my regular guys and we share a box of donuts I picked up. It's 9 a.m. and still no sign of Buddy. The two younger guys take other work. I'm down to Gramps and some underage kid that's been hanging close. Buddy rolls up at about 9:45. He hands me a card with an address on it and gives

me directions, says he'll meet us later. He smells worse than I did yesterday. There's a woman in the truck with him who's young enough to be his daughter. I'm pretty sure she's not. She looks rougher than he does.

We get to the house and unload our tools. "Where's Buddy?" the homeowner asks.

"He'll be by later," I say. "He had some business to take care of."

"He was supposed to be here."

"I don't know what to tell you. We're here, ready to go." The homeowner paces a couple of times around the yard, looking between me and the house. I wait.

"Okay," he says, "let me know as soon as he gets here."

We get to work. The homeowner comes out periodically to observe. It's almost 3 p.m. before Buddy shows up. He's had a shower but he's still wearing the same clothes. At least he's alone. The homeowner is out the door before the truck stops. We keep working but I'm trying to hear what's going on. It ain't pretty, but the energy winds down and they reach some agreement. Buddy calls us over. "Let's knock off for today, meet here Monday with the whole crew." He gives us each 50 bucks. "It's all I've got on me," he says. "I'll hook y'all up on Monday. Cool?" What could we say? I give the guys a ride back to Homer's, trying to appease them as we go. Truthfully, I'm concerned. I pick up a six pack and go chill at the motel. I plan on spending most of the weekend in bed.

X.

There's 100 channels on the cable TV and nothing worth watching. I swear this mattress was more comfortable a couple of days ago. It's Saturday afternoon and I'm antsy, not a good sign.

When I get like this I usually get stupid. I decide to hedge my bets. I pay for an extra week at the motel, fill up the Chevy and stop by the A&P. I buy some fruit and three microwave entrees, all that will fit in the freezer of the minifridge.. A jumbo pack of jerky, some peanut butter cheese crackers and a twelve pack of PBR finish off the tab. By the time I get back to my room I've got less than 50 bucks left. Seriously, how much trouble can I get in for 40 dollars?

## XI.

Fishing. That would be a good way to spend a Sunday. I don't have a pole or tackle. I figure when I get my own apartment and a thousand bucks in the bank I'll call my parents and let them know I'm okay, because, then, I really will be. My dad used to take me fishing, largemouth bass. He had the cool boat, fish finder, all the bells and whistles. I never really understood the fascination. Now I miss that. I'd give my left nut to be out on the lake with him right now, stalking the stripers.

Just to get out of the room I decide to take a stroll down by the river. I see people jogging on the path, older folks, with their grandkids, feeding stale bread to the ducks. There are a few homeless guys, nobody I know, sitting under the bridge passing the bottle. No one is fishing. Finally, I see a guy about my age showing his son how to catch perch. They have a couple of cane poles and some red wigglers. Whenever they catch one they throw it back.

## XII.

I made it through the weekend unscathed. I'm here at Homer's at the butt crack of dawn, donuts in hand. After Friday it's going to be tough to round up my crew. They show, so before they have a chance to ask questions, I pile them in the Chevy and head for the jobsite. Just for good measure I run through a drive-thru and get everyone coffee. This better pay off. I'm cutting

deep into my last 40 bucks. We get to the house at 7:45 and unload our tools. I tell the guys that we aren't going to start until Buddy shows up. He shows at ten after eight. He's jumpy but clean. He talks to the homeowner then unloads the paint and spray rig into the owner's garage. It's at least a day before we will be ready for these but I reckon it's a show for the homeowner, whatever works. He makes a big production of giving the two guys from Friday a fifty dollar bill each, then slips me a C-note. While we work he spends the morning cleaning up every little scrap we drop and eyeballing our every move. I know this is for the homeowner's benefit but it's making the crew nervous. About eleven, I tell him it might be better if he goes to pick up a bucket of fried chicken. He agrees, even gives me props for the idea. After lunch he leaves and we're busting ass. By 4:30 we're prepped, spot primed and ready to start laying on the color. No Buddy. He shows up at 5:15 with a wad of cash, pays us off and says he'll meet us here tomorrow at eight. I'm feeling better about this. I drop the crew off at Homer's. Everybody is cutting up and trash talking. It feels good.

### XIII.

The guys are waiting by the Home Depot driveway at 7:45. I don't even have to pull into the parking lot. We get drive-thru coffee and still make the jobsite by ten after eight. Buddy isn't there. At a quarter to nine there's still no Buddy. I decide to step up. I check with the homeowner to make sure which color goes where then assign duties. The young kid will follow me around and knock down any runs as I lay on the base. The "*familia*" will hand paint the trim. It's a midsized suburban house but 6 hours in we appear to be done. We decide to take a late lunch while it dries, come back and see if it needs any touch-up. Buddy is still a no-show. The job looks good. It takes maybe an hour to knock out the touch-ups, clean the spray rig and load out.

No Buddy, we wait. It's 4:45 and I have to do something. When I knock on the homeowner's door the wife answers.

"We're all done. Y'all want to check it out?"

"My husband's not home but I'll take a look." she says. She walks around the house then stands by the curb. "It's beautiful," she says, though her expression shows that she isn't sure exactly what to look for.

"Can I use your phone to call my boss? I need to get my guys paid." About then an SUV pulls into the driveway but it isn't Buddy.

"There's Lou, my husband," the wife says. "I'm sure it will be okay to use the phone."

The husband jumps out and strolls around the yard. He's all smiles. "Prettiest house on the block. You guys finished?"

"Yes, sir," I answer. "You can have the leftover paint. There's not much but it might come in handy if you get a scratch."

"Great," he says. "Where's Buddy? I need to get you guys the balance."

"I need to call him. I was hoping to use your phone."

"Sure, come on in. Can I get your guys a beer or something?" At the word "beer" they break into grins.

"Seems like a good plan to me," I say. "Thanks." Lou distributes the beers while I dig out Buddy's business card and dial the phone. His cell goes straight to the message so I take a gamble and dial the office number. A woman answers.

"Is Buddy there?" I ask.

"No!" She is clearly not a happy person.

"I need to reach him. We're finished with this job on Primrose." The line falls silent. "Hello?"

"Shit!" the woman on the phone exclaims. "Just a minute." A few eternal seconds of silence then, "Buddy is indisposed. Do you know where we live?"

I'm beginning to understand that I must be chatting with Buddy's wife. "No," I say, "but I need to get my guys paid and the homeowner is ready to settle up."

"Let me talk to him." I hand the phone to Lou. After a bit Lou hands the phone back to me. "Lou's going to give you the balance. Pay your crew then come to 408 Pocahontas. You know where that is?"

"I've got a map." The phone goes dead. I turn back to Lou. He has a stack of bills.

I walk out of the house with 1400 dollars in my pocket, the most cash I've seen at one time in months, maybe years. The crew is leaning against my car finishing off the six pack. Two couples are standing out front while about a half dozen rug rats cavort on the lawn. The adults don't seem to care. They're admiring the house. One couple and the man from the other couple approach me.

"Nice work," the lone guy says. "Think y'all could make mine look that good? It's the second from the corner down there, the brown one."

"Maybe, if you're not married to brown," I joke. His smile makes me guess he isn't.

"Do you have a card?" he asks.

"Not me but I'll get your number and have the boss give you a call."

"You're not the boss?"

"Nope. I'm just the guy that makes the magic."

"Well, either way, I'd like a bid for you to paint my house."

"Us, too," the woman from the couple says. She hands me a business card for some web design and advertising firm. "You guys do commercial interiors?"

"Paint's paint," I grin. "I've done a lot of interior work." Okay, it was the interior of ships, but still.

"Good, we need our house done, but we're moving our offices to a larger space in a couple of months."

"We'll get back to you." I got the crew loaded up. I'm pretty sure this accidental sales job is going to work into a little bonus when I tell Buddy.

#### XIV.

I'm sitting in Buddy's kitchen across the table from a tall Hispanic woman. Even with anger oozing out of every pore she's still drop dead gorgeous; liquid brown eyes burn between high cheekbones, voluptuous lips that demand attention and the blackest straightest hair hanging to her shoulders. I'm beginning to get the picture.

"Solicitation, third strike. He's going to be out of circulation for a while." She's biting the words as they leave her mouth. I'm trying to figure out why he would cheat on this goddess while imagining my immediate future swirling down the toilet.

"That sucks," I say. "I got him leads on three more jobs."

"Do them yourself. He'll be in state jail for at least three years. I'm done with him. I'm going out to the west coast and I don't plan to leave a forwarding address."

I count out ten of the 100 dollar bills and slide them across the table. She looks at me as if I have a pair of noses. "I don't want his damn money. As far as I'm concerned his shit is just baggage." She takes one of the bills and shoves the others back toward me. "I tell you what, I just sold you his business, truck, equipment, leads, the whole fucking nine yards. The son of a bitch set me up with power of attorney last time this happened. Dumb ass, serves him right! Let me find the truck title. Here's the fucker's phone. You'll probably find that about half of his contacts are hookers. Want a beer?"

"Sure," I say. I feel like I might have lost consciousness and stumbled into a surreal dream. "Are you sure you want to do this?" I ask.

She looks me over, brings a hand up to her hip and drops it back. She looks me dead in the eye until my blood temperature elevates a couple of degrees. "Yeah, you seem like a nice enough guy and I damn sure want to be rid of Buddy."

"You could sell his stuff for a lot of cash," I say.

"Not tonight I couldn't. I'm gone tomorrow." She completes the paperwork, puts his ledgers and rolodex in a box, gives me the contact info for his phone company and a signed blank check on his bank account. After she drives me to the impound lot to pick up the truck, she follows me to my hotel to drop it off then takes me back to her house to pick up my car.

"Thanks so much, I'm astounded," I say. "There's no way I could make this up to you."

"Sure there is," she says. "Stay the night."

I have no illusions about this going anywhere. I know, for her, it's about revenge. I'm adaptable. I'll do my best to make the revenge as sweet as possible.