

*Message Not Sent #6*

You viewed the world in black and white, and punished me for viewing it differently, dealing an impetuous back handed smack before I grew taller than you, looked down at you in the recliner, then you resorted to turning the volume up, allowing the remote to the television to supersede our disagreements, granting Bob Costas or John Madden the final say on the play, on us. You eventually viewed it in grey, too. In the foyer with that Mickey Mouse clock hung on the paneled wall, the TV's light was always grey skimming over you. And I never understood why you kept the clock, but maybe it made you laugh during a commercial for Cialis or Rogaine, or maybe it familiarized time, hid it with an innocuous face to save you from guilt compiled with each tick. I never saw you laugh at the clock.

Time changed when you arrived here, switched from orientating ticks to circuitous strokes. You started with the watercolors. You would dip a wood-handled brush, chipped and stained, into that Yankees mug mom had brought from home. She wanted you to feel comfortable, to stare at the nurses, shuffling around you, like you had stared at us during breakfast, with your back to the television on the cupboards, staring over the brim of your mug, watching us drag our knives across the plates, mumbling about my not finishing the plastic edges of the over-easy eggs. She did not want you to change, and thought the immutable objects of your past would serve as a reminder of continuity, of sameness. Yet here you filled the mug with tap water and swirled the brush in it, watching the waves hit the sides, spilling onto the table, splashing against your knuckles, eventually sinking your entire hand inside. You would lick your fingers when you pulled the paint brush out, laughing. When I was a kid you told me that niggers and spicks drank from the tap. I used to fill my glass from the bathroom sink in the attic and drink it there. Mom bought you the new watercolors because the old ones, she said, had seven

pits of all mixed shades, amalgamated and blotched. She felt sorry watching you cover a thin sheet with indiscernible colors. When she stopped visiting, she called me, said you would need new colors.

You painted with one color each day. You developed a pattern. Mondays were red. On a whim another color often found its way onto the sheet: a purple here, an orange there, appearing only as slight waves, lost in the totality of the image, visible only from a particular angle. I would visit, sit in front of the window but behind you at the table, where you sat with all your friends, the woman with overalls missing a button, the young guy with staples in his head. An acidic scent from the watercolors continually mixed with the smell of cheap citrus soap, pervading the room. The light from outside kept my neck warm, and in the winter the heater behind me did the same. Everyone liked you, patted your shoulders, listened while you waved your hands, gesticulating in ways previously performed in consternation, when Jeter botched the double play, or when the site manager ordered clapboard instead of brick. Now you told jokes. How many Freudians does it take to screw in a light bulb? One for the bulb and the other to hold the penis, I mean ladder, you said. I had never heard you say penis. I never realized you knew who Freud was.

You were the anomaly at the table. The lady with overalls and the scarred guy and intermittent others always played Tic Tack Toe, or Go Fish, engendering rules as they seemed necessary. You painted, keeping your headphones in, listening to Miles Davis and Louie Armstrong and Coltrane. When you caught me in the attic upstairs, drinking water from the tap, listening to *Kind of Blue* while sitting on that crate, you told me that was nigger music. You dragged me by the collar to the dumpster, and watched me throw the records out.

You would paint the whole sheet red, a dry dark red, leaving unfinished borders on the cartridge papers. You circled the brush in the color, nodding your head, hunched over the formica table, biting your lip with your tongue out, then you would gently oscillate the brush on the page, returning to the color every thirty seconds or so. The paint often leaked through, drenched the table, stuck to your forearms and the gown that you insisted on wearing. The nurses said you hated the striped cotton button downs and khakis that lady had brought you, meaning mom, who brought the clothes you had worn ritualistically, the same outfit in every Christmas photo for a decade, the clothes faded from rough tumbles in our dialed washing machine, smelling like the springtime dryer sheets you made us all use, a smell you now detested.

I would sometimes lean over your back, listening to the low saxophone from your headphones, and I watched the blob of color grow on the page, reducing the white to the fringe. You became frustrated. You refrained from a verbal complaint, and instead dunked the brush in the mug, sighing loudly, and looking at a nearby table. Then you would scar the sheet with another color: a swipe of yellow, a fleck of blue. This continuity of the same *ab irato*, mumbling fuckin this, fuckin that, was evidence for your identity, a reassuring and yet disconcerting sameness, where your essential parts were negative, rejecting the external world, and contriving another, inaccessible to others, for yourself. Out of habit, I backed away from the table when I saw you growing upset.

When you finished on Mondays, you held up the paper, which dripped onto the table, and you turned, looked at me, and smiled. I returned the greeting. In one of my classes that semester, an intro class, I asked my students if they thought Rothko's paintings resembled the work of a senile old hag. The students texted, glanced at the slide. A few chuckled. On the original syllabus I had planned to spend two days on Rothko. We spent the rest of the semester on him.

I looked at that red, opaque and swooping, continuing off the page and unto your swollen thumbs, your hairy wrists, trembling and shaking the paper. The fortress of that color was an arrow pillared kingdom of my hatred for you. And I probably should not say that now. It's not the time. But I did. I do. Hate you. I saw you, content with your finished work, presenting it to others at the table who clapped and hopped in their seats. You signed the bottom of it in red. I could not read your name. It blended with the color.

There was that girl I dated, when I lived in the city. She came home with me for Thanksgiving once. She also found you abhorrent when at the kitchen table with Glenn Beck on the TV, you grabbed the turkey cutter from mom, asking if you had to do every fucking thing around here, or something along those lines. You cut your finger, and dripped blood on the stuffing. We returned to Bushwick that afternoon. At night we had a few beers at a scuffed up punk bar, that girl and I, then we went to the apartment. She was angry because I questioned her at the bar, in front of the bartender, saying can you just make a fucking choice already, or something along those lines, before ordering for us both. I drank her beer for her. She said that I was just like you. In the apartment the window next to us was blue from the sulfate light outside. She wore this red lipstick, layered, riddled with bumps, uneven edges, which stuck to straws and cigarettes butts and pillow cases. In the light I could only see her lips, full and oblong, moving in the shadows. When she said that I slapped her. Not hard. With the back of my hand, a tap on the mouth. Her lips disappeared as she hid them with her hands, her sage nails. She had been enamored with clashing colors.

I felt like Ray Liota, or Deniro, one of the Goodfellas, an Italian doing what he knew, a renaissance man, like you and I used to watch together late on school nights, splitting a pint of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia. I almost pinched my index finger and thumb together, shook

them in the air. She punched me in the nose, turned everything red, the blood in my hands, in my mouth, the metallic taste of it, washing my hands in the sink, splashing water on my face and drinking it, the water, but still tasting the blood, smelling it and seeing it on the faucet. She slammed the door when she left. I called you. You asked what I wanted and I asked if you heard about the Red Sox. The Red Sox, you said, you call me at one in the morning to talk about the Red Sox? Fuck the fucking Red Sox, you said.

On Tuesdays you painted with yellow. It was the same routine. I would find you at the table hunched over with a different brush with different bruises and stains on it. You were less organic with your strokes on Tuesdays, more rigid and scientific. You would trace a box with the yellow, use less water, press the bristles up and down, up and down, constructing even geometric blocks of color, spilling less onto yourself, onto the desk. People mumbled and chatted around the room. You listened to the same songs, went from Davis to Coltrane to Armstrong then back, one deterministic loop. You never showed the yellow paintings to anyone, but I espied them over your shoulder. The others at your table, pausing in their finger pointing debates about checkers, tapped you to signal the intrusion of an enigmatic visitor. You would return to the sighing, the heaviness of them, the sighs, lifting the shoulders of your exhausted gown, drumming the table with your brush, not wanting to wet it and lighten the color. Then the page would receive a black sash, a beige dot. A nurse with a red beard would escort me to the visitor's section where I would watch over the brim of a *Car and Driver* as you signed the painting. Then you brought it to the nurse, who smiled and put it in a folder with your name on it. You waved to me before turning away from the main desk.

When I accepted the job here, Shannon asked me if it had anything to do with you. We were at Amherst then, living in a brick Tudor within biking distance from the campus. I said no.

I said I missed the yellows, the sunrises and sunsets at the beaches, the speckles of light against the individual grains of sand. She said that was bullshit. It's my dream job, I said. And she knew the school, knew there might be some truth in that. I asked if she felt comfortable leaving the firm. She said she wasn't sure. She said that I should not expect her to see you, to attend any veal meatballs dinners, to sit and watch a Giants game in the foyer. I said this was not about you.

It was about you. Mom had called me, said she found your box of Raisin Bran in the fridge next to the dill pickle spears that you had always insisted on having and recently stopped eating. She could not find the milk, which she needed for the chocolate panna cotta. Milk had often been disappearing, and an effluvium persisted no matter how often she threw the trash, or scrubbed the toilet bowl. She searched the cupboards, under the sink, in the glass armoire where you kept your mother's china in the dining room, even the washer and dryer. The rancid, curdled smell was only in the kitchen. When she brought out a stepladder, looked behind the TV next to the refrigerator, she found gallons stacked in a line. The milk had turned yellow, clumped into viscous chunks, stuck around past its date of departure. She was worried about you.

Shannon wore a yellow dress the first time you met her. It was a lemon yellow, stopped above her knees, ruffled at the bottom, ovular around her neck and upper shoulders, with blue delphiniums printed on it. We came for Easter, flew on a redeye to your place. I did not tell you that she was African-American. I had not told her about you. On the plane with my head on her shoulder, I said that you were a traditional Italian. She asked me what that meant. I said I was not sure, reclined my seat, and put my jacket over my face. Mom knew.

You were bare-foot when you met us on the porch, in the glass door of the foyer holding a wooden spoon stained with red tomato sauce, and you had one headphone in, the other hanging at your massive stomach, which pressed and expanded against that faded yellow and navy button

down. You always forewarned me about the stomach, said it was a curse of the males in our family, said I needed to prepare myself for it. You would swim every Sunday then ride the stationary bike at the Y to prevent it, but genetics defeated feeble discipline, it seemed. I bought you that iPod, one of the archaic boxy ones for your birthday, but I never knew what you listened to then. The flags, USA and Italian, now torn and frayed, swayed above the doorway as we climbed the steps. I brought a large bag of Rotini from an Italian restaurant near our apartment. Shannon carried a bouquet of sunflowers. You pointed at me with the spoon, asked what that was for. I looked behind me, then down at the bag of rotini. I don't know, I said, I thought you might want to try something different. You shook your head. What, you think I can't pick the right kind of pasta no more, looking at your iPod before sliding it back in the waistband of your shorts. Shannon rubbed my back. I heard mom yelling from the kitchen, asking who you were talking to, but you were fumbling with the iPod, breathing loud enough for me to hear. Every word seemed strenuous, or maybe it was holding all the words you would rather say in, causing your chest to heave and your nostrils to flare. You were impersonal in the most personal circumstances, and I shared that with you, like the stomach, another fault of genetics. At the faculty parties, when I stood alone next to the trashcan with a watered down Manhattan, smiling and looking down as others passed by, I thought of you. I could never say how I felt, because I did not know how you felt. That's not right. Maybe it was the opposite.

Then you looked at Shannon. Thanks, you said, staring down, waddling through the doorway onto the concrete, taking the flowers under your arm. You stopped in the foyer and looked back over your shoulder. Go on now, you said, waving the spoon, I'll tell her you brought them by. You looked at me. Them black girls down the street, you said, your mother always sits outside with them. They bring your mother zucchini flowers in the summer you know. You

shook your head, standing in the shadows of the foyer, a yellow strip of light highlighting your shirt. Come on Ant, you yelled, I'm almost done in here. Shannon had walked back down the steps, over your spoiled yellowed patch of lawn, and stood at the car with her back to me. I ran down there at the same time mom walked out, wearing her Disneyworld apron. I waved at her as we drove away. We never sent you an invitation to the wedding. The cards were yellow, a more golden shade, with blue swirls at the borders, the writing in cursive, hand-signed by us. You would have liked the wedding. Everyone wore white and black.

I brought one of your yellow paintings to mom a week or two ago. She laid in the foyer on your recliner, wearing her Disneyworld apron, watching Anderson Cooper on the TV. The house smelled of bleach. The paint had callused, raised and coagulated on the paper. I could track the movements of the brush, the path of your wrist. And I did it, following your strokes with my finger as I stood there, pausing over the black bubble in the top left corner. I redrew the box. I told her I would frame it, put it on the shelf below the Mickey Mouse clock. She told me to take it home. She did not want it in your house. I brought it to my lecture the next day, put it under the projector, and gave a pop quiz. There was one true or false question, asking whether this was a copy of a Rothko. Fifty percent said yes.

Last Tuesday was different. You painted the sheet pink, a tumultuous heavy-handed pink, which carried off the page, spilled onto the chessboard of your friends, who picked up and left you. You did not notice. You had your music up so loud that the nurse, the one with the beard, walked by twice, asked you to turn it down, and you would for maybe thirty seconds, a minute, then you were back at it, even louder than before, resuming your reckless streaks, dragging your forearm across the page, taking more of the distilled paint with you after every stroke. You listened to *Blue Train* on repeat. You had never used pink before, but it was a consequence of



your preparation. You stood up, clanking the brush in the mug, dripping water onto the linoleum tiles. Sometimes you paced. I smelled Gold Bond powder from somewhere. Then you would pick up the color panel, rub the red as if you were trying to take it all, hoard it all for yourself. Watery lines slid over the color casing. You would bend over the table, sit down after your knees reminded you of their tenuous state, then you swiped at the page, missing sometimes, splashing around. I watched you drink from the Yankees mug and did not attempt to stop you. The mug listed the years that the Yankees had won the World Series. Your back was to me. After you took a gulp, holding the mug close to your body, you shook your head, dipping the paintbrush back in. You still spared the borders, but the center was a matter of streaks, choppy and abrupt, school girl pink, a shade I could have imagined you dressing your daughter in, if you had one. The nurse with the beard tried to take the color panel from you, warned you about disrupting others. He had a yellow flake in the bottom of his beard that resembled a popcorn kernel. I told him to take his lumberjack shit somewhere else. I put my index finger and my thumb together when I said that. He tried to take your iPod, the silver Nano I had bought for you, from the table to turn the volume down. I snatched it from him, shook my hand in his face. Security escorted me off the premises while you signed your name on the page with the headphones dangling against the stomach of your gown.

They called me the next morning. I sat with you at the table, on your left, watched you open the color panel stricken with yesterday's pink phase. You did not bite your lip, nor stick your tongue out. You sat upright, rubbing your thumb against the weathered brush's slope. You did not have your iPod. I asked the leprechaun where he had put it, but he ignored me. Your friends played Monopoly at the table to our right, counting the money, tearing it, passing it back

and forth. There was a fly buzzing toward the fluorescents above us. Someone had closed the blinds, blocking the brownstone buildings nearby.

I had only seen you cry once in my life, when we drove home from church in your orange Chevette, which did not have air conditioning. It was raining outside as we passed the clapboard colonial homes down the frost wedged and potholed street. Everything appeared grey: the upholstery, the roads, the windows, the houses, even you and mom, due to the weather. You and mom were in the front seats, and I sat in back, watching the water splatter against the window. I wanted to make you cry. I thought that when I did not come home for Christmas after my first semester of college that you would cry, sitting in the recliner with a Giants game on the television. I thought mom would tell you of my atheism, and that would make you cry, sitting at the kitchen table, cupping your Yankees mug. I thought that studying art history, receiving a doctorate, would cause you to call me pompous, a waste of a good brain, but of course you did not pay for my education, so maybe you did not have an emotional investment in my life then either. I never saw you cry besides when the Volkswagen van in front of us ran over a Russell terrier as we drove home that day. You wore a yellow and navy button down to mass, but made me wear a tie. You swerved to the side of the road. You went out in the rain to look at the deceased, then returned without wiping water from your balding head as you punched the steering wheel. Fuckin bastards, who the fuck do they think they is doing something like that, then just driving off, you said. You gripped the steering wheel with both hands and cried, a restrained and anxious cry, covering your face with a swollen hand and puffing out your chest. Maybe you did not cry, and the ostensible tears were simply rain drops sliding down your wrinkled cheeks. Mom asked if the dog had a tag. You told her to go check, then drove off before she could remove her seatbelt.

On Wednesdays you painted the sheet green. You were always a man of habit, even with our dinners: veal and angel hair on Sunday, fish-sticks on Monday, meatballs and penne on Tuesday, Chinese takeout on Wednesday, chicken parmesan on Thursday, pizza on Friday, you and mom went to Federal Hill on Saturdays, ate at Venda Ravioli. It is hard for me to think of that you as this you. You talk differently than the old you, that is, you have moved past monosyllables for every response. You stand more upright now. You no longer watch baseball, or wear a Yankees cap on the weekends. I connect this you with the previous you as a result of my memories. But since you no longer remember, maybe that is wrong of me. But then who are you? Someone new, someone I no longer know. Or maybe it is just that I never knew you, in the first place. Even worse, and this is selfish of me, if you are not you any more, then am I still me? Who recognizes us as the same, if neither remembers correctly?

Today, Wednesday, you picked up the panel, barely dunked the brush in the mug, and started crushing the bristles in the black paint. You combined the precision of Tuesday yellows with the organic swoops of Monday reds. You were detached, flicking the brush in the mug only after several swirls where any new color failed to produce. There was not a single falter, no dab of an irrelevant shade. You caught me looking at you one time, during a sigh where you tapped the brush against your wrist. I glanced away toward the front desk, where a member of the security staff ate fried catfish and talked on her phone. You turned toward the other table, asked who I was. Someone asked who you were talking about. The box on the paper looked like charcoal, like a dreary forgotten hand went after the blankness, leaving small pockets of white at the edges to suggest the potential for change. Your face seemed swollen, indented and fatigued from staring down at the page, at the growing lump of coal, multi layered, blocks within blocks, the end of a non-existent beginning.

Last week Shannon and Bobby came with me. It was a Wednesday. We sat at the table with short red chairs on your left, watching you wipe green paint on your neck between breaks in your work. At our table a frantic group of curly haired elders played a board game called “Memory.” You held up the finished product, a dense green block, diagonally streaked, dry in comparison to other work, especially at the edges, where it approached a blue. Bobby had on a Bob the Builder onesie. I wanted him to meet you. You showed him your name at the corner of the painting. That’s your name, you said to him, pointing with the brush. You kissed his forehead. You gave him the painting, which Shannon held. You stared at her, scratching your head. You said, *bella*, then touched her wrist. I had not heard you speak Italian since our fishing trip to Nantucket with your brother, where we rented an algae ridden boat, floated a little off the coast, and hooked slimy bait to the rod. *Mangiamo*, you shouted, throwing the line into the water. We failed to catch a single fish.

Today you forgot your name. You stared at the black block of paint, holding the brush above the page, mouth open, waiting for it to come to you. Black paint formed bubbles on the end of the bristles and dripped. I took your mug in my hands, held it, leaned forward, hunched across my side of the table, trying to psychically transfer it, mumbling the single syllable. You slammed the brush down, ripped the painting in half, then in half again. I took the scraps when I left.

That’s why I am recording this for you. I bought this iPod, a green Nano. I want to tell red-beard to play this for you every day. I had to write it out first, but I couldn’t get it right. Too much color. Too much darkness. With incongruent blotches and streaks. When I went to leave today, you grabbed my wrist, asked how you knew me, where you had seen me before. You were anxious and afraid, as if my judgment was cogent enough to alter the remainder of your life. I

said we were old friends. You asked if you were good to me, as a friend. I said you tried hard. You meant well. But now you have been better. There has been more color. And it's sad now, because it's the negative images that seem brightest when trying to remember you.

I don't think I'll keep any of this. You don't need to know this. Now, you could be anybody. I could be anyone in relation to you. Maybe I'm doing this for me. So I will remember.

Your name is Bobby Scaglomiglio. You are married to Anna Maria Scaglomiglio of fifty two years. You had two children. Your youngest, Elizabeth, died when she was fifteen months. Your oldest, Anthony, visits you every day at 1:30. You have one grandson, Bobby. And a daughter-in-law, Shannon. I'll see you today at 1:30. It is Thursday. On Thursday you paint with purple.