

## Paint

When Dr. Richard Walker went up to the podium during the Morbidity and Mortality Conference at Stanford Cancer Center, his first time presenting since getting married four months ago, he had no idea what he was going to say. He ran his hand through his dark hair, cleared his throat, and looked at the room—a stadium filled with the many blank faces of his colleagues. During moments like these, he forgot his many years of work in research and operating rooms, and simply thought about painting. As he stared at the fleshy tumor in Leo Carter’s stomach on the screen, he was struck by its gentleness. It reminded him of the jellyfish that he had seen on the beach on the shore of the Seto Inland Sea, where he had spent his belated honeymoon a few weeks ago. He had kneeled down next to the jellyfish and almost reached out and touched its flaccid body with his hand. It looked like a fallen cloud, a ream of cotton candy, a wrinkled pillowcase. It was the softest thing in the world.

“Leo Carter, a twenty-eight year old Caucasian man, came to the Emergency Room vomiting blood on August 3rd of this year. He was immediately scheduled for an endoscopy, which was conducted by Dr. Farrah Konjuli, a third-year resident in the Gastroenterology Department,” Richard said as he listened to the echo of his voice into the microphone. Dr. Konjuli had biopsied the wrong part of Leo’s stomach lining, delaying his diagnosis of cancer for months. He was kept in observation, but later discharged, until he returned to the Emergency Room in constant pain. Richard had immediately been paged to the ER, and as he walked through the hallway, watching the fluorescent lights overhead bleed together, he knew it was cancer.

In a week, the stage III stomach cancer had metastasized to Leo’s colon, and became stage IV. Richard clicked through screen after screen and showed how he was able to perform

immediate surgery in order to remove part of Leo's stomach. As he flipped through the images in the conference room, Richard thought about Room 402—its dim light, the hum of the heater, the buzz of the IV machine. Leo was sitting up, flipping through pages of a book. "You need this more than I do, Doc," he said, tearing a page from the book and folding it into a neat square, his freckled skin surprisingly pale under the light. "Don't look at me like that, Doc. It's my book. I can tear a page out if I want. We'll say this is your belated wedding gift." He laughed then, clutching his stomach when he realized how painful it was. Leo's wife, a blond petite woman who looked much too refined for Leo, shook her head and put her hand on his.

"Take it easy," Richard told him. "Without a stomach, things are going to be difficult for a while."

"You know something? It's possible to survive even with the removal of the stomach, the spleen, around seventy-five percent of the liver, eighty percent of both intestines, one kidney, one lung, and virtually every organ from the pelvic area. Read it on the Internet. Just a little bit of trivia. You'd feel like hell, but I imagine—you could still paint."

Richard flipped through the report on Leo's status post-surgery and told him that he shouldn't give up on his art. He would paint again. After leaving, Richard had unfolded the paper and seen the image of a drawing of a beer bottle with a naked woman inside. She was on her knees, her right arm pointing up, her mouth open, calling for help. On the left side it said, "Since you can't get her out anyway, the thing to do is to throw out the whole thing." Leo later told him that the drawing by Ron Pettibon was *complete genius*.

"Why didn't you remove his entire stomach when you found the tumor?" Dr. McNuri asked after Richard finished his presentation. "That seems like the thing that should have been done to begin with."

Richard had no response to this. He removed pieces of stomachs every day, knowing that this may never stop the cancer from spreading. The fact that Leo had stomach cancer at twenty-eight years of age was shocking. He had been a marathon runner. *The healthiest man in the world...* his wife told Richard once. Leo planned to live for fifty more years, have three kids, five dogs, and an art museum. “And don’t worry, Doc, I’ll remember you,” Leo had told him.

“I just don’t understand, Dr. Walker. You’ve certainly practiced for a number of years, and we all know that you know what you’re doing. There’s no question about that. Maybe it’s just with all the changes in your personal life, or something with the way your team assessed the patient to begin with—the new resident, perhaps—there are still so many questions—things that need to be answered *before* the malpractice suit begins.” Dr. McNuri flipped through his notes and cleared his throat.

Richard heard the muffled laughter and shifted his weight. He felt like he was about to pledge a fraternity. When he had come back from his belated honeymoon in Japan two weeks ago, he had found Leo’s case to be more complicated than it was before he left. His colleagues told him marriage was an adjustment, and he agreed. But now, four months later, it was as though everything he knew had started to fall away.

“Just walk us through it one more time, Dr. Walker. When you received the case, what are the things you knew?”

Later, Richard would tell himself it was part of a dream. It was real and the furthest thing from it. It was the way he knew his own name, but couldn’t believe it belonged to him. It was the curve of his wife’s back, pulled away from his arm, because he didn’t know how to touch her. Richard could lay out Leo’s details one by one—a series of complicated names like the tubes of oil paint he kept in a drawer inside his workroom or the names of the tribal African head

masks that had been given for his wedding that now filled the walls of his condo with their strange expressions. At times, they reminded him of a strange video he had seen in high school about the Middle Passage—faces contorted in pain, languages jumbled in resistance to their journey. “But, the important thing is that they got here,” his teacher had said. “We mustn’t forget *that*.”

Richard’s wife didn’t want any part of the land her ancestors could be from, she explained to him, as he hung one mask after the other on the walls of their new home. There was the chance that they hadn’t come from West Africa at all. What then? And there were origins of Leo’s cancer that Richard stumbled through in front of Dr. McNuri, which he never even considered.

The whole conference reminded Richard of the time he had interned in a clinic outside of Tokyo, his motherland, but the place he didn’t know the language to be inside of. His Japanese was choppy and lacked the fluidity that the rest of the residents had. He was an imposter, a sad remake—lost, like now. It was the Middle Passage all over again—a trapped underwater journey one made in chains—the certainty of death, the openness of pain. Yet, there was the inevitability of solution, Richard knew, to every problem. As he read his notes, he began to search again.

At night, Renita dreamed of hands.

The hands were many. They were white, black, shadowed. They were thick, rough, and strong. The hands dug at her, pushing her skin, pulling her clothes. The hands took her strength. The hands chained her, tried to take her back to Africa, where they accused her of coming from. The hands became rocks, beat her head into a table, beat her rib cage, cracked her bones, fractured her jaw. The white hands were paper, soaking her blood, smearing her blood all over

her skin. Her insides became origami shapes, contortions of the hands. The hands became scissors, ripping her clothes, tearing the colors, cutting her skin. Rock, paper, scissors. Over and over.

She never guessed the right one...if only her hands could be the rock before the scissors or the paper before the rock, but she never guessed fast enough: her own hands couldn't save her. The hands were all over her became the music she lived by, the beat she walked to, even in the dream. The hands pushed on her arms. The hands held her legs, forced her to spill open, mixing colors. Black, white, red. The hands jamming into her mouth, poking at her eyes, gouging them, swelling them. Her head ducking down under the weight of the hands, the hands gripping her neck. Black, white, red. Those fingers opened her skin. Fingerprints, sticky fingerprints all over. The hands were everywhere: they covered her, everywhere, they moved upon her, everywhere. The hands splitting her open, touching her insides, ripping her insides, folding her inside out, touching...

She awoke, vomiting everywhere. She felt her body shaking. She was too out of control to be that ashamed of her tears, of her vomit all over the clean sheets. It had been years ago...and still...these dreams. There was the shadow of men—the white men and the dark man that Renita tried to tell herself wasn't African. There was the chill of winter—and she was taken back to that apartment in the Southside of Chicago. It was her brother's place and he had thrown the party—all college students could attend. Renita rubbed the side of her temples, trying to find the face of the man—the one from Burundi—the one who spoke another language the entire time he stayed inside of her.

Renita felt Richard's hands rubbing her shoulders, pulling her to him, heard his whispers that it was okay, that he would clean everything up, that she was safe. She then ducked her head, rested her arms on her knees, and again, tried to believe.

In the morning, while Renita showered, Richard studied the African head masks and stretched his legs across the sofa. They were displayed across the main wall of the living room; four strange faces. *Like children*, he thought with a smile. The Congo and Baule masks seemed angry. The Bantu mask seemed lost, broken, and sad. The Bundu was filled with an angry happiness. *People think these will protect us?* He laughed at this thought, finding it ironic that they received five tribal masks and only one set of chopsticks, the chopsticks being from his sister.

“What do you expect?” His mother had asked him when he told her about the masks. “You’re with an African-American. Her culture has to be represented in one form or another. Ours is *subtle*.”

His mother was a Japanese-American woman, and had been married twice, both times to white men. Her parents had warned her about the “different values” that the men possessed. Their white skin meant they couldn’t understand her or respect her values. “You love whom you love,” his mother always told him.

On their honeymoon, Richard had been impressed by the respect Renita had for his Japanese culture. They walked miles on that trip; the October chill in the humid air froze the sweat to their skin and stopped at a street booth and bought purple octopus. The chef took the octopus out of the aquarium and cut directly under its eyes while the octopus thrashed. He cut its purple tentacles in small pieces, placing them on a plate for them to try. “Itadakimasu!” The

chef said, *Bon appétit!* When Renita tried to get Richard to try it, he hesitated. “Kirai desu,” he had said to the chef, stumbling over the words to tell him he didn’t like the octopus. Renita had laughed, telling him that she was more Japanese than he ever could be.

Renita liked the way the pink maguro shined as she cut it underneath the dim lights of the sushi bar. She was careful with the knife, cutting the fish at just the right angle to reveal perfect white lines in its flesh. She shredded the *diakon* next, the Chinese white radish, then added the pickled ginger and wasabi to the plate before handing it to the server. Her sister, Martine, had laughed when she told her that she was going to school to become a sushi chef. At first, Martine had thought she was joking, and had questioned her ethnic loyalty. Renita had tried many times to form words about sushi, about what the poetry of the careful cuts did for her, what beauty came out of the mutilated parts of the fish, but she knew it was useless.

Renita’s skin contrasted with the skin of her co-workers, contrasted with the darker skin of her sister and brother in family photographs, contrasted with the pale skin of her husband. Many of the sushi chefs were Asian, some were White. She was the only African-American woman who worked at the restaurant, the only one who had ever worked at the restaurant. There was a running joke about that, a joke that she only caught bits and pieces of. She understood the absurdity, and yet, she couldn’t pull away from the simplicity of sushi.

Earlier that morning, she had received another late wedding gift, which she had hoped were Japanese dishes. Instead, it was another mask. She didn’t know why they continued to get the masks, but she decided that she didn’t care. After the first one, she told Richard that they wouldn’t need to worry about going on a trip to Africa to explore the museums like he had wanted—they were starting one in the middle of California—full of authentic artifacts.

“It’s not the same,” Richard told her. “Don’t you want to see where these were made? We could find your roots.”

Renita hadn’t answered. She had friends back in Chicago who swore they didn’t have a drop of slavery in their veins. Their ancestors came from Sudan or Kenya or Somalia—not places of slavery. “It’s about roots,” Martine said once on the phone. She was planning her own pilgrimage to the Western coast of Africa and she wanted Renita to go with her. *Roots*. It sounded like horticulture or a fancy cut Renita would make with a fish.

As Renita rolled the sushi, she felt relaxed. Splitting each fish calmed her as she concentrated on the skill to filet a fish without touching its internal organs. She loved the beauty from her cuts.

Splitting the belly open, the smell always reached Richard’s nostrils through the paper mask and brought a wave of nausea. In order to control his own urge to vomit, he thought of something soothing. At first, he thought of touching Renita. He thought of her rushing to him with the same excitement that Leo’s wife had when he was confined to a hospital bed. Even in his mind, he couldn’t see Renita ever doing that. He thought of the way she listened to him and the love that formed within him over the years that they had dated—the way he had tried to impress her with his art.

Inevitably—he returned to thinking of painting in bright colors, radiant oil reds, oranges, and yellows. This worked because surgery for him often felt like painting. It was quiet, deliberate, and with even the most careful strokes, he created the most abstract pieces. He remembered a professor during his second year of medical school who had told him that surgery was, in many ways, a form of art. Professor Ekins had the same passion for his surgical



instruments that many painters had for their brushes. “And what better canvas to work on?” He had often asked the class. “The human body is *phenomenal*.”

Now, in the clean, metallic room, his body covered in plastic, Richard made a careful incision in his patient’s abdomen. After the incision was made, the patient became flashes of color. The vertical incision was placed below the breastbone to the navel. *Perylene red*. After the skin was cut, Richard sealed it with a LAP protector. He placed a surgical glove over the protector, and through the glove, he touched the stomach and small intestine. He was careful, barely holding the soft, wet organs. He used the scalpel to cut the stomach from the esophagus and small intestine. The resident helped clamp the end of the esophagus after Richard removed the stomach. Richard placed the gray organ in a metallic basin, heard the subtle thud. He then attached the end of the small intestine to the esophagus, having the resident assist. More hands brought a series of stitches, cuts, and fusions. Richard watched the colors under the gloved hands. *The human body is phenomenal. Transparent orange. Raw sienna.*

“Maybe you should go back to painting,” Renita had told him on their first date, after he gave her a small watercolor. It was a faded landscape—an attempt at conceiving the Bay. The figures were penned in—dark and hazy—and the sky was a myriad of yellows, oranges, and blues. Renita had taken the piece, tracing the figures with her left index finger, holding it like it was the most valuable thing in the world. Richard wondered if he ever could go back...it seemed so far away. The colors bleeding together were never the result of a finished piece. Everything in his eyes was always in progress.

“Why do you want to know?” The therapist asked Renita. “You can barely recall what the other men said—and that was in English. Why does this keep coming up for you?”

“I’m not sure,” she had started. “It seemed like it was something important. The way he said it—it just seemed so full of...urgency. It was like he was telling me something he never told anyone. It was the furthest thing from rage.”

Once, she had thought it was a dream. She had held herself against the bodies of the white men, ignoring the way they yelled in her ear, spit racial epithets on her face, the man from Burundi trailing behind. She closed her eyes and imagined floating down the longest river in the world. The therapist would say later that this was normal. He would hold a clipboard and tell Renita to describe everything she remembered—to try to step back into the disassociated scene. There was the man from Burundi, the strange dialect that he whispered in her ear, the way his skin bled into hers, the light moons of his fingernails.

“Try to recall something peaceful when these memories come up,” the therapist said, nodding.

Renita squinted against the sliver of sun that came through the window, and thought of her bedroom. Glass bottles of perfume sat on the window ledge. The morning sun passed through the blue glass bottle of Angel, the purple of Bvlgari. The colors were a kaleidoscope of Richard’s failed attempts to understand her. She stared at the bottles—the gold Cartier, the blush Chanel, the peach Trésor, the pink Givenchy. She had opened the boxes, feeling the hardness of each bottle, and set them on the window ledge. She never even smelled them.

She smelled men everywhere, felt their hands all over her body, felt the sweat from their brows as it fell upon her face. She saw the darkness of the man—the way he whispered *Africa* in a language she couldn’t understand. She heard the words, the sounds he once whispered in her ear. That man from Burundi talked to her like he knew her.

Those words defined her, and yet, she could never say them. *Write them down: write until the words disappear*, the therapist repeated. *Write until it disappears*. Yet, when Renita looked at the blank sheet of paper, the man's words wouldn't come. She couldn't even imagine it, like the therapist had suggested. She tried to write a letter of what he had called her and it wouldn't form: it was a small black line like part of a paper chain, illegible to anyone who saw it.

"Of course we have to keep them; you don't get rid of wedding presents. You keep *everything*. Everyone knows that," Renita told Richard when she called him with the news of the mask. The mask was long and narrow with a leaf carved in the middle of its forehead. There was a softness in the mask she had not noticed in the others. This mask seemed *to know*.

"Okay—keep it. But...we may have to start looking for a new condo. I don't think we have enough wall space. We'll figure it out when I get home...maybe three more hours of charting."

Renita breathed in, wishing that he could be home sooner. She squinted a little at the mask, trying to make out what he was thinking. Unlike the others, this mask had a genuine beauty—a strange ornateness—that separated him from the others. She could hear the sounds of the busy hospital in the background. It sounded particularly chaotic.

"What happened with that conference you were presenting at?" Renita asked, suddenly remembering the source of Richard's longer shifts.

"Uh...I'm still working on it...trying to find what else went wrong. There's definitely going to be a malpractice suit—"

"What if his wife doesn't care? Things happen—he had cancer—then—"

"*She cares*. There were plenty of errors— things that shouldn't have been overlooked—"

Renita listened, not knowing what to say. She felt far away from Richard's world. If she cut a fish in the wrong way, she could simply start over. Even when she had once messed up on the mai dai, imported from the Seto Inland Sea, costing over two-hundred and fifty dollars a piece, she was able to salvage her mistake.

"We do have a predicament with these masks, though," he said.

"Why is that?"

"I don't know...it seems strange that we keep getting them. One or two, I can see...but five? *Five?*"

Renita had taken the Baule mask, from her uncle, and immediately traced the outline of the carved eyes. It was made of stoneware, which Richard thought was interesting. He opened the laptop, immediately searching for its story. He consulted with museums and art history majors at the university. Later, as he sat in bed, he told her that it was fired in a kiln in Tucson, Arizona. "*Tucson*. Seriously, what are people thinking trying to pass *this* off as authentic?" He had been thoroughly disgusted that this mask, the most colorful one, the one he had identified as being from Congo, enhanced with symbols of Tsaye beliefs, used in rituals of Kidumu, was in fact fired in a desert nearby.

Renita found his annoyance amusing. He had such a sense of culture and connection to his own ancestors. He knew the names of his great aunts and uncles and the hardships they had faced during times of war. He knew what they did to survive, how they buried the chopsticks made of the finest wood in hopes that they would some time find them again. She wondered what it would be like to feel that connection with Africa.

"Does this mask look *authentic?*" Richard asked.

“I don’t know how to tell...I mean, it *looks* African, and...I kind of like this one,” Renita admitted. “He has a personality.”

Later, Richard had to agree—the fifth mask was his favorite. The Enyita Long Mask was different from the others, made in a borderland in Eastern Africa—Somalia or Sudan. Richard traced his wire earrings with his fingers before hanging him in the bedroom, assuring Renita that it was the proper place.

“Why?” She asked.

“You’ll want to hear this one when I get back from work,” he said, trying out Leo’s tactic of building suspense. “I searched all night and found all about his origins.” He tapped the hammer into the wall again, making sure the nail could fit the hanging strap.

Later, at work, Richard noticed how the smell of Leo’s blood from his surgery stayed, even though it was done months ago, and Richard felt the shadow of the gloves on his hands no matter whom he was operating on. As he changed out of his scrubs in the locker room, he thought of the fifth mask again. He thought about Leo, who would find it amusing to learn what the mask stood for.

Richard would laugh then and tell Leo that they named all of their masks—Joseph, Max, Mark, Josephine—their children. Then, he would ask Leo what he thought the mask should be named—an omen of honor for the lastborn. There were certain things that had to happen in order to have children, and Richard was sure that it may be years before those things happened again. He thought of the Morbidity and Mortality Conference, and how doctors would learn from their mistakes. He thought about the same conference with his relationship—as though he

could find a solution to the problem. He would take Renita from that apartment in Southside Chicago. He would stop before those boot prints impressed the snow on the patio.

As he folded his scrubs into his bag and left the locker room, he saw Leo's wife waiting by the Admissions Desk. Her blond hair was pulled back and she looked completely together for someone who had just lost her husband. She was bent over, signing documents, when he called her name.

"Dr. Walker—" She began, holding her hand out to him. "I was actually hoping to run into you." Richard stopped, ran his hand through his hair. The hospital had advised him to limit contact with her, only answering the most basic questions. He knew she had hired a lawyer.

"Mrs. Carter, how are you?"

She smiled a little, looked him up and down, and laughed a little. "You surely *must* have an idea of how I am. It's all a transition right now. I was just getting some copies of records—getting the reports from that conference you had a few days ago. But, uh...the reason I was hoping to see you was to give you...my husband wanted you to have this. You know Leo. He was always giving something."

She passed a paper bag to Richard. He shook his head and tried to refuse the gift.

"Take it, Dr. Walker. Leo wanted you to have it." Her voice sounded commanding and strong. "Leo said that it *handled* color well..."

Richard opened the paper bag and stared at the paintbrush. He stumbled through words of thanks, wishing again that he knew Japanese. Anything was safer than being understood. Then, he remembered the last conversation he had ever had with Leo. Leo had been sitting up in the bed, coming off of morphine, eating out of a tube, and still arguing with Richard about artistic expression.

“Yeah, but what color would she be?” Leo asked. “My wife is *purple*, man. And yes, it has to do with lots of things—mainly being amorous and—” He had laughed then, clutching his stomach from the pain. “Think about it. What color would your wife *be*?”

Richard closed his eyes and searched for the first color he would paint on a canvas. He thought about the poetic sensibility his mother said the Japanese were blessed with and the careful way that Renita used chopsticks. He thought about the way she folded all the wrapping paper from the wedding gifts. He thought about the way she pulled him away from the jellyfish on the shore of the sea. “Be careful,” she had warned him. “Even though it’s not moving, it’s still deadly.” He thought of her clean earth smell that he breathed in when she let him be close to her. He thought of all the love he possessed and how she filled so much for him, even without touch. Then, he knew.

He saw her as orange—the Renita who he had fallen for years ago. In the beginning, there were many conversations about Africa. There was the openness of origins, the desire to understand something about their colors, their love. The orange would let him inside her. He saw the orange everywhere—the color of the scrub on a patient’s skin right before the incision was made, the fluid drained from a spliced intestine, the flashing light on an IV machine. Orange was the color of the cones in the parking lot, the color of the flares when a helicopter landed. He saw it everywhere, even in the dark eyeliner around Mrs. Carter’s eyes. Mrs. Carter smiled a little before telling him she had to leave.

The night was warm and still. Richard pulled the bedroom window open and unrolled his scrubs from his body. Renita sat on the bed, her legs folded underneath her.

“It’s going to court,” Richard admitted. “Dr. McNuri called on my way home.”

“They do *know* that he had cancer, right? You couldn’t have stopped it—I mean—they *know* this—” Renita stopped, biting her lip in frustration.

“We’ll see...maybe we’ll move, go to Alaska—become ice fishermen. No one would look for us there—people hate the cold.”

Richard fell into bed and closed his eyes, forgetting the many hours he had been awake, the days that ran together in his state of necessary madness. At that moment, he would do anything to forget the image of Mrs. Carter. He thought of how he had insisted Leo would paint again. “Don’t give up,” Richard told him. “The mind is a powerful tool against cancer.”

Renita pointed to the mask on the wall. “He looks good in here.”

Richard smiled a little. “He makes me want to go there—you know? I really want to *see* it. I bet the art out there is amazing.”

Renita waited, trying to form the words on her tongue. She wished again that he could read her mind, that he could find a way to be inside of her. Then, she breathed. “I don’t want to go to Africa.”

Richard searched for a way to answer her. “I know...the time isn’t right. We can wait. This case and the Morbidity and Mortality Conference findings...all of this is going to put my time back, anyway. Quit listening to your sister...we would have a better time going by ourselves.”

“No. That’s not what I mean.”

“Well...what then? It’s not like this is in the immediate future.”

“No. I mean...”



Richard closed his eyes, smelled his wife's skin as he moved closer to her. At that moment, he told himself that it was a part of a dream—something not quite formed—a glob of paint on an abstract painting, the colored perfume bottles.

“I don't know how to go there. I'll just see the man—I'll hear those words—I always felt like he was trying to take me there. I can't do it...there's just something lost...and...” Richard pulled her closer, her body shaking as he stroked her back, whispering *I know, I know. Ai shiteru, Ai shiteru*. He leaned in closer to her and whispered the language of his mother—the words she told him to never forget. He listened to the wind outside for a time, feeling the lines inside of Renita's palm. “We can wait,” he decided. “It could make us free.”

“Maybe,” Renita agreed. Then, she remembered. “What is the mask? You said you would tell me.”

“The timing might not be right.”

“It's okay,” she decided.

“Okay? Well—get this—he stands for an orgasm.”

“No way.”

“Seriously, the ‘O’ represents this intimacy that is only experienced through lovers. Something deeper than sex,” Richard rubbed her back, touched her shoulder.

“Seriously, Richard, your hands smell like hospital soap.” He inched closer as she pushed his hands away from her. He smelled his hands and again, despite the orange-smelling soap, there was Leo.

“You should let me paint you,” he whispered into her neck, wanting to try Leo's brush out. At that moment, he would do anything to bring Leo back, to redeem himself through color.

He felt her pull away again before telling him that she doesn't do portraits. "No...I mean, let me paint you...your skin."

"What?" She laughed at this idea.

"Let me paint your skin."

"I don't think so. I'm tired...let's just go to bed. We're both exhausted."

"C'mon, we have the mask...the *orgasmic* mask. It's going to change our karma. Seriously. I'll just paint your skin. Trust me, Renita. *Trust me.*"

"I don't know..."

"It's just paint. Just paint on skin."

"Paint's toxic. Plus...I really am tired."

He pulled her closer. "There is non-toxic paint. Get the ones with the black caps. C'mon...Renita...it's just paint. I won't do anything, promise. *Trust me.*"

She sat up in bed slowly, pushed his arm away from her. "Okay, but I get to pick the color." Richard motioned for her to hurry. He lay in bed, stared at the ceiling, and imagined the poetry he would paint on his wife's skin, and then carefully removed Leo's brush from the bag on the nightstand.

"It's green," he said as Renita threw the tube of oil paint to him. "It's Permanent Green Light...the color of the first shoots of spring. Good choice," he admitted, not knowing how to say that he never would have guessed that color. There were many things he didn't know about his wife, he decided. But, there were many things he did.

Richard helped her undress, and as she lay on the bed, he painted a design on her skin. He drew circles on her legs, cautioned her to stop moving. "It tickles..." She laughed as he stared at her. He saw her laugh, and he painted how it felt. He colored blotches of paint on her

arms, the drops getting on the sheets. The shimmer of the paint showed her pores, the light hair on her stomach. He saw her skin, every line, every pore. As the paint dried, her skin appeared clearer, closer. He painted a line on her leg, watched her skin soften, watched the fingerprints disappear. “Kireidesu,” he whispered the line that Renita had said when she saw the Seto Inland Sea. *It's beautiful.* In his mind, he imagined his abstract piece hanging in Leo Carter's museum being viewed by millions.

Renita felt the strokes of the brush paint wild ravines down her rib cage. She felt Richard's hands, soft and warm like sand under the desert sun. Richard saw his wife's skin through the light green paint, shadowed where the paint hadn't touched her. He traced her rib cage, breastbone, navel. She felt his fingertips tracing the wells those hands once carved. She felt the moisture of the paint, and imagined her body floating. She thought of the many contrasting colors of skin on those distant ships, the ones Martine had told her never to forget. She took Richard then, her skin touched his, their hands interlocked. Richard only felt his wife's hand on his skin, caressing his face, her lips on his, her hands guiding him as he painted.

