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A Not So Fine Line

PEGGY SCHIMMELMAN

The three-year-old budding artist beamed at our open-jawed mother, who shrieked and confiscated his paintbrush before much harm was done, or so she thought. There were floors to mop, potatoes to peel, after-school crackers with peanut butter to put out for the five older kids who would be piling off the school bus any minute. She scrubbed the paint off his cheeks and out of his cottony curls the best she could, but the mess on the front wall of the house ("It's Ol' Rusty's tail, Mama!") would have to wait until my dad got home from work. What did she know about removing paint? That was a man's job, and probably no one would notice anyway.

I saw it the second I stepped down from the bus: that fuzzy diagonal smear of beige paint against the weather-darkened planks of the already shabby house—on the front wall next to the door, for god's sake, in plain sight from the highway where the school bus jammed with our hawkeyed, judgmental peers paused to collect us and drop us off. That nonchalant swipe assaulted my teenage eyes like a flashing, demoralizing neon sign: "White Trash Lives Here." But even before my little brother's spontaneous front porch mural provided a focal point for my adolescent shame, I'd begun to suspect the horrifying truth.

The trail of clues began in the puddle-riddled dirt clearing that served as driveway and open-air repair shop for my dad's various work vehicles and our muffler-deprived, oil-dripping, sporadically functional ten-year-old Ford Fairlane. Then there was the multipurpose front yard: playground, woodpile, doghouse and haphazard tool shed, surrounded by a trampled, decrepit wire fence that made the deer and raccoons chortle as they sauntered past the arthritic, addled mutt, Ol' Rusty, on their way to devastate the randomly tended lettuce and pole beans in our backyard garden.

My brother David rendered his minimalist interpretation of Ol' Rusty's tail only inches from the door that tilted slightly in its ill-fitting frame on the front porch, a concrete slab on which Granny Clampett's rocker would have been right at home wedged between the wringer washing machine and a pile of split kindling for the woodburning stove in the living room. The porch was a fitting entrance to our three-bedroom (if you count the converted utility closet where my brother Wendell slept), no-bath Ozark abode, with its faded linoleum flooring, cracked windowpanes resealed with duct tape, and water-streaked wallpaper in every room despite the dozens of tar patches that dotted the roof. The overall effect, judging by the way strangers would slow their cars as they drove by, was a rustic setting that offered the possibility of a tourist attraction: "Look, George. Could that be the childhood home of Laura Ingalls Wilder?" they might have asked. Or "Oh my, an outhouse. How quaint!"

"Quaint" is an adjective used to describe outhouses by people who have never approached one at four a.m. after trudging through the snow with a flashlight. Ours was a two-seater made of rough two-by-six planks and a tin roof, with plenty of distracting reading material—last season's mail-order catalogues and Uncle Gene's latest hand-me-down *Post Dispatch*—conveniently located not more than twenty feet from the kitchen steps, next to the garden and just behind the cistern from which we drew spider-infested water for cooking, bathing, and yes, drinking.

But I had grown up with these telltale signs of my hillbilly heritage, absorbed and granted them varying degrees of acceptance. I told myself that my dad's Missouri Conservation Department Jeep and various firefighting vehicles lent some respectability to the driveway. Wendell was required to mow the weeds in the front yard regularly during summer, and now and then Dad would dispatch a small platoon of us to relocate Ol' Rusty's poop from the yard to the woods behind the outhouse. And there was nothing shameful about eating squirrels and raccoons to stretch my dad's paycheck, so long as it only happened once or twice a year. Lots of local people did that, I assured myself. They probably just didn't brag about it.

But there was something about that careless swath of beige paint. To my fourteen-year-old mind—e*veryone is looking at me, stop looking at me, why is everyone looking at me*—it propelled my family across a line that separated respectable poor people like most of my friends and relatives from trashy families like the Rothburgers, all eleven of whom lived in a raggedy trailer surrounded by the backwoods junkyard/spare automobile parts business they oversaw.

"Poor David's gonna get it for sure," Wanda worried, after Mom absentmindedly explained the unsightly smear while laying out our snack.

"First time for everything," I said.

David had been a menopause baby, an unexpected bucket of additional financial and child-rearing stress dumped on my already beleaguered parents. But somehow the kid had enchanted my notoriously irascible father. You might attribute that to an age-related drop in testosterone, except that the old man was as cranky as ever with the rest of us.

So supper conversation that evening consisted of Dad ranting about how that mess would never come off and why wasn't my mom watching that boy and why did he bother fixing anything anyway? Didn't he have enough to do without a houseful of kids making more work for him? None of this was directed at David, who chowed down, oblivious, occasionally breaking into

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song, while the rest of us swallowed the blame. None of us dared point out that Dad was the one who had left the lid loose on the two-gallon bucket the day before, after replacing and painting the knobby pine poles that held up the sagging porch roof. He was tired, goldang it. This would just have to wait until the weekend. "Ain't that right, fella?" he said to David.

The weekend came and went, as did the month, followed by excruciating years of chagrin and disappointment as I climbed off the bus each afternoon to find that God had not answered my prayers by striking Dad with the bolt of energy needed to paint the entire house, or at least the front wall. The incriminating factor, as I saw it—the fatal familial flaw that banished us to the other side of the respectability line—was my dad's inability to recognize that splotch as an eyesore worthy of the time it would take to fix it: a mere hour or two on a Saturday afternoon. "Ol' Rusty's Tail" first greeted my mortified eyes in March of my freshman year, and by the time I graduated, everyone in the family except for me had learned not to see it.

At a recent reunion, I asked my sisters if they remembered David's abbreviated plein air effort and how it was never spoken of after that first day.

"I'd forgotten all about that," Wanda said. "It's funny, in retrospect."

"Did you ever wonder what other people thought?" This was risky, but there was courage at the bottom of that second glass of Chardonnay. "White trash, maybe?" *Just joking*, my chuckle implied.

"Hey. We were poor. There's a big difference." Charlotte's flat tone recommended a change of subject.

"A fine line, sometimes," Carolyn said as she opened another bottle. "But oh well."

A not-so-fine line, I thought to myself. A line that's about the width of a paintbrush and the length of Ol' Rusty's tail. And all too visible from the highway, where now and then the school bus, a thousand miles and five decades later, still pauses with its cargo of kids, noses pressed to windows—looking at the yard, looking at the outhouse, looking at that beige stain on the front wall of my home. Looking at me. All of them looking at me. □

ALISON PRINE

Trace

a match dropped on the prairie
a sparrow's claw print in the dirt

just enough water to sip
from two cupped hands

a small shadow when the sun
begins to howl

one hour of Christmas snow
over one stretch of suburban road

a moment of distraction and a key
sinking through a brown river

each instant has an aftermath
sand and pebbles and dust

to choke on forever
in the mind's weary lungs

in my body the tiny seeds
of my future illnesses

without one bright bullet
my loneliness would be less red

GARY J. WHITEHEAD

Horace, I Dream of Watches

windowed thick with sapphire crystals and alive
with hands that sweep around exquisite faces
set in gold or stainless steel cases.
I dream the dream of futile calculations—
the time in Rome or Delhi nocked on gemmy bezels,
the keeping more reliable than ghazals.
Lugs and crowns, escapements and Geneva Seals,
the boaty rotor rocking in a jeweled sea—
these through a skeleton back I see,
like my own bones, my own heart ticking on reserve
until there's nothing left to dress for. Please,
when the main spring's sprung and the gears all seize,
let there be more than Jove's winters to give.
Time may keep. I'll keep time while I live.

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