

BRIGHTER THAN WHITE

**By
Marcy Luikart**

First, they switched the beds and gave me a mattress that crackled with protective plastic as if they forgot to unwrap it. Then they took away the lilac cotton sheets, nearly satin they were so smooth and gave me white ones instead. Easier to bleach I heard someone say. They don't understand that I need color. Monet sunsets, Van Gogh passion and Matisse order. Even a brightly colored mobile with silly characters would do. I want to look at something when I lie in my bed, something other than the water spot on the ceiling that I never bothered to have fixed.

An ugly caregiver washes me. "I want Ivan." I tell her. Ivan is the hospice nurse, the one with the black curls and the tattoo on his forearm that is barely visible beneath his shirt sleeve. I want to trace the design with my fingers. Does he wear the name of his love, or is it some ancient symbol of fertility and devotion or maybe a silly testament to a testosterone filled adolescence.

But she doesn't send for him. "Now there, Mrs. Walsh," she says, "behave yourself." I let myself go limp and heavy. Make her work for it.

Lucy speaks to someone in the next room, I can hear them. They don't bother to whisper. "She was wandering again."

I wasn't wandering I want to shout at them, my purpose as tangible as the lock they put on my door.

Lucy thinks it will be fun for us to clean out the old bureau drawers. I sit at the table with her. Outside the window, I see the ocean and in the distance Santa Cruz Island floats like a castle on the fog. I found the bureau at a garage sale. The wood was dried out and water stained. Harry said to forget it, but I couldn't. That was Harry. He didn't believe in fixing up old things, he always wanted new. But I sanded it, painted it white with green trim, and filled its drawers. The white is faded now, aged, but I do envy it a little; all it needs is a new coat of paint.

Lucy empties the drawer on the table and sorts the bits and pieces. A small beach pebble falls out of a red velvet bag. I pick up it up and throw it at her. I don't want her looking through my life. Here is an unopened electric bill postmarked five years ago. I toss it on the floor.

I unwrap a bundle of cards the children made that I could never throw away. A Mother's Day card from Eric shows a stick figure of a boy and a stick figure of a woman holding hands. It's me. I know because of the dress it wears. We wore dresses back then, fitted bodices that showed off our bust lines and tiny waists. I was proud of my waist. And hats, I was never without a hat.

I pick up a birthday card. It's from Lucy when she was eight years old. Lucy never drew her cards. She always made collages from pictures and words cut out of magazines. On this one she'd cut out the Lucy character from the Peanuts cartoon, and

then she took her own hair, her beautiful red hair with the golden highlights and pasted it onto the cartoon figure. The card says, Happy Birthday Mommy. I look over at her.

Lucy doesn't see the card, instead, she glares at Eric who stands in the doorway. Well, leans may be a better word. He is drunk.

"O Eric for Gods sake it's only 10:00 am." Lucy pushes her chair back. I feel the scratches it leaves in the floor.

Eric looks awful, as old as I look. His skin is pale. No, not pale. Ashen. I now know what ashen means. It is the shade of gray that comes when all that is left of an object is what the fire can't burn.

"How can you come here like this?" They stand nose to nose. She thinks I can't hear her, but I don't need to hear the words. I know what she says. It is what I would have said if I thought it mattered.

I pick up the bag of stones and put them in the pocket of my robe. "I'm a bit tired. Can we finish this later?" I stand up. Eric starts across the room to me but Lucy pushes him out of the way. "You're in no shape..."

"I can manage by myself, thank you." I wish she wouldn't push him. Just like the tire swing that Harry had hung on the old oak. "It's fun, Eric." Lucy would laugh as she ran forward, pushing Eric up, stretching her arms as high as they could go. "See, its fun."

Eric turns to me, "I'm not drunk, Mother, really I'm okay."

"It's alright, dear," I say to Lucy. "He's alright." Eric wraps his hand around my forearm. The smell of stale beer seeps out of his pores, a pungent perfume. My baby, I think. He will always be my sweet baby. The windows are closed and shut up tight.

They say it is so I won't catch a chill, but it smells and I long for fresh air and wind and light. I need light.

"Could you open the blinds?" I ask Eric, but he doesn't. They don't want me to see the dinginess.

"You know, I'm not drunk." Eric says again as he helps me into the bed. I cringe at the sound of the plastic.

"I know baby." He is so thin. He shouldn't be thin, he is a tall man, over six feet but he pulls himself so far inside that he appears to have shrunk. I stroke the sandpaper stubble on my baby's cheek.

Lucy sits next to me in the waiting chair. *Pride and Prejudice* is open in her lap. I don't know why I feel that that is appropriate. A sliver of sunlight angles in through a crack in the curtains. I want to capture the dark and light to paint it, to draw it, keep it like a firefly in a bottle.

"You shouldn't be so hard on Eric, dear."

She dog ears the corner of the page. "I didn't know you were up. Can I get you anything?"

"You can be easier on your brother."

She opens a can of chocolate Ensure and puts a straw in it for me. "Here, have this."

"I'm not hungry," I say but drink it anyway. I miss taste.

"About your brother..."

“It’s not that easy mother,” Lucy says, and I wish I could tell her to go her room until she can be nice.

I am alone. I find the remote control and lower the bed. No one seems to hear the motor that screams out to me. I am used to beds that creak and groan, not whirl and vibrate. I swing my legs around. I am out of breath. I shuffle into the bathroom, close the door, lock it, and let out a deep sigh.

I lean against the sink. I love this room. I run my hand over the cool tile. This was the first one. A blue Delft windmill. Harry and I had eloped. I wanted a honeymoon in Europe. I wanted to see the home of Bruegel, Vermeer, Van Gogh. I wanted to explore the narrow streets in wooden clogs, touch the dykes, walk below sea level. Instead, we ended up in Pella, Iowa during the tulip festival. There is something militant about tulips, straight even rows of perfect primary colors all at attention.

We sat at a café table sharing a chocolate malt, our foreheads touching as we sipped through our individual straws, when Harry asked, “What do you feel about photographs?”

“I’m not sure what you mean?”

“I never take them,” he said.

I wiped a bead of chocolate from the corner of his mouth.

“That’s okay, I can take them.”

“No, I don’t want them. Ever.” He banged his hand down on the table. A spoon fell to the floor.

You discuss certain things with the person you marry. Whether or not you want children, whether you want to live in the city or the country, whether or not you believe in God... I'd never thought to discuss photo albums.

“But Harry...”

He reached over, grabbed my hands, and looked straight into my eyes.

“I'm serious. Believe me I know what I'm talking about. We'll just end up with boxes of pictures that fade and take up space and half the time we won't even remember who was in the picture. And we'd always feel guilty about throwing them away. No, I want a memory room.”

“A memory room?”

“Yes. We'll collect tiles, special tiles. We'll make a room of them.” Then he reached inside his jacket and pulled out a package. “Here's our first,” and he unwrapped the windmill tile.

I sit on the toilet and look at my life.

MrsWalshmotherareyoualrightopenthedooropenthedoor. Their fists and words knock against my memories. They are insistent, they are concerned, they are young.

I push myself up using the railings they had so thoughtfully installed and unlock the door. “I am fine. I am just fine. I only wanted a little privacy.”

Lucy takes my arm and leads me back to bed. “I know, but you could have fallen. Why did you lock the door? If you’d fallen we wouldn’t have known.” She turns an unflattering red when she is upset.

I pat her hand. “Poor Lucy, it’s okay. You know dear, it really is okay.”

Ugly has fluffed the pillows and raised the bed until I’m upright. I should find out her name.

I open the red velvet bag and pour the rocks onto my bed tray. I’d collected them on the beach the day Harry left me.

I had set up my easel on the dry sand. Barely 500 feet from me, a Sea lion balanced on a rock. The waves lapped against the rock washing across the surface as the tide ebbed and flowed. The seal should not have been able to stay on the rock, but it did. It struggled against the water, against the inevitable. It is dying, I thought to myself, it came there to die.

I hadn’t painted anything like that before. I hadn’t painted anything more dramatic than moving shadows and decaying fruit. I wasn’t sure where to begin. No time to think, just paint. Paint the big shapes. The dark rock and the darker life fighting against the swirling water; the sun reflecting off the water, brighter than white, how do I capture brighter than white?

That morning I had had a dream that I killed someone. But the dream wasn’t the killing, the dream was the remembering that I had killed. The remembering that I wasn’t what I thought. That I was not me but someone else, someone I’d forgotten.

When I got home Harry was gone. I wish I had a good picture of him. I cannot carry the bathroom around in my wallet. I cannot ever leave this house. Maybe that was

the point. Lucy tells me he has Alzheimer's now, that he's in a care facility. Maybe if he hadn't left his memories they wouldn't have left him.

I must have dozed. I seem to do that a lot these days. Eric is now in the chair next to me staring at the soundless television. Lucy probably told him not to wake me. But I want them to wake me. I want them to keep me up. I don't want to just disappear. He looks better, showered, clean, not so seedy. I see Lucy's influence. Poor Eric.

I pick up one of the gray pebbles that have so much color when they are near the sea. It is smooth and hard, yet soft. "Will you do something for me?"

"I don't know." He leans forward in his chair. "What is it?"

I hold the stone against my cheek.

"I want to go to the beach."

He doesn't say anything. I wonder what he is thinking. Is he remembering the times we would all pile into the station wagon with plastic buckets and folding chairs? Is he remembering the intricate sand castles and Lucy burying him up to his chin? Is he remembering shivering as the waves knocked him over is he remembering when his sister would pick him up and wrap him in a towel?

"Well?" I ask.

He stands up. "I'll talk to Lucy."

I grab his hand. It is dry and calloused.

"I'll talk to Lucy," he says.

The tide is out, the ocean calm, flat like a lake. I sit on the bench and take off my shoes.

“Leave your shoes on, mother,” Lucy says. “It’s easier to walk.”

I don’t listen to her. I need to feel the sand. I need to feel the hot dryness and the cool wetness in one step. I need to feel. The concrete steps are rough. Lucy and Eric each hold one elbow. I imagine them lifting me, swinging me between them as if I were a small child.

A large pile of rotting seaweed is covered with sand flies.

“I am not a cripple, children. Please let me walk by myself.”

“But mother, the ground is so unsteady here.” They are like mother hens, the two of them.

“Well then find me a stick.”

I lean against Lucy while Eric wanders off and finds a good strong piece of bamboo in the bushes. He hands it to me.

I turn towards the sea and watch a pelican dive for its dinner. Lucy and Eric hover nearby, ready to leap to my aid. I wade into the surf and feel my way through the tide pools. The water is colder than I remember. I have an overwhelming urge to urinate and let my warmth seep into the ocean. Deep purple sea anemones pulsate around me. The rock is closer than I remembered, a smooth flat bench to rest on. I sit down and motion them away.

“Are you sure?” Lucy asks.

I reach out and brush her cheek with my hand. “I love you Lucy.” She leans over and kisses the top of my head. Her breath is sweet. “I know.”

“Now go.” I say. They walk up the beach and find a spot not too far from me. Lucy buries Eric in the dry sand. Some things never change.

I lean forward on the bamboo stick. The sun is warm and the rock cool. In the distance a dog barks as it chases the seagulls down the beach. Just above the surface of the water I see the black head of a sea lion. He watches me. I wave. The surf ebbs and flows around my feet. I feel it suck the sand in and out, as if the whole beach were breathing. I wonder where it will be tomorrow. I stare into the distance. Brighter than white, the sun reflects off the water. I now know how to capture it. My eyes close and I let the stick fall into the sea.

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