

Dandelions

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The whole place is grey. I can't stand it. We live on the fifth floor with a sorry view of the grey block opposite us. The only colour I see is in my room. My mum agreed to buy me spray paint last year, but it took negotiation. Anyway, I promised to repaint the walls if we needed to – even though I know I never could. I started with just the wall at the foot of my bed and then the one behind it; the other two followed. I left the ceiling for last, and I planned out a fresco. The room was like my own miniature Sistine Chapel. There's a warm smile and kind eyes, tangled up in letters and snakes and arms, and I feel safe with them watching over me.

Colour is missing from the rest of the flat though. There's colour missing from the entire complex. I've been thinking about it a lot recently. Each morning I see elevator doors slide open to the same grey frowns. They wear them like they're part of an unspoken dress code, and I match them to blend in. When I look at them I imagine their faces lightening a little at the sight of something colourful and beautiful. I want to paint a mural.

I know there's enough paint leftover from my room. The cans are sitting in a canvas tote bag that hangs on the door. The image of lift doors sliding open into a wall of colour has been painted in my mind for weeks.

Tonight the tote bag is over my shoulder. It's lighter than when I carried it into my room, and I'm nervous as I catch the lift down to the ground floor. The doors slide open to reveal an empty canvas: A grey wall. I put the bag down and start thinking about what I could paint. I feel the wall; smooth concrete, and imagine a huge smile to greet the frowns in the lift like the one on my ceiling. Painting the many different flowers missing from the patchy grass we call a courtyard. An image of Ra carrying the sun so that even on grey cloudy days people see something warm. All these images are already in my sketchbook. I've been thinking about it a lot recently. I reach into my bag and grab chalk to begin an outline - but just before I make my first mark I hear the lift door slide open again behind me.

A rough voice: "Hey kid! What are you doing?"

I drop the chalk. I turn around and see the old man in the faded tan overcoat. His eyebrows are creased with concern. He always wears that coat. One time, when I was a kid, he shouted at me for planting dandelions in the court yard. I'd spent the entire walk home picking them from the side of the road. Before he has a chance to say anything else I run for

the stairs. He's too old to chase me - especially up stairs. Even so, I get up to the second floor before I stop to catch my breath. I realise that I've left my paint and my notebook, my two most important possessions, on the floor like an idiot. I feel silly as I walk back down to grab them, but when I walk out of the stairwell the old man is gone, my tote bag as well. The only things left are my stick of chalk and a grey lifeless wall.

I didn't sleep well that night. What had he done with my stuff? Probably thrown it out, or maybe he'd keep it and use it as evidence; report me to the police for vandalism. I didn't know but I hated that old man. I felt like crying. I woke up in a terrible mood and I didn't eat breakfast.

I didn't need to put on a frown when I got into the lift. There were only two people in there. A short man carried a brief case and wore tiny square glasses. They made his eyes look tiny, but you could still see a vacant disinterested look in them. Beside him there was Mrs. Dumas, her husband was French. They invited us over for dinner once. The table was polite, but mostly silent. I don't think she likes me - or Mr. Dumas, for that matter.

The lift shuddered to a stop again on the third floor. The doors reveal the old man. He was wearing that same coat. I avoided his eyes and shrunk into the corner of the lift, but he came and stood right beside me. The coat stank of cigarettes.

There was silence except for the whine of the lift until we reached the ground floor. The small man with the brief case and Mrs. Dumas filed out, but the old man shuffled and stalled in front of the wall. I hurriedly walked off to the right, but he spoke and I turned around.

"Those are some lovely sketches, mate," he said. His voice was softer than the night before.

"I think you could really make something of this wall."

I was surprised.

"You should use real paint, though. It'd look a lot nicer."

"I don't have any. What did you do to my stuff?"

"I'll go grab it for you," he had an amused grin on his face "And we can sort the paint out later. Come with me."

We caught the lift back up to the third floor. He had a coughing fit loud enough to drown out the whine on the way up. He shuffled to his door, twisted a key, and it opened into the same grey apartment as mine – except it wasn't grey. His walls were painted a soft yellow and there were pot plants everywhere. He would've had to spend most of his days shuffling around to water all of them. On his coffee table, next to a cluttered ash tray, sat my canvas bag. I ran over to grab it before he had a chance to change his mind.

"Come back this afternoon. I'll head over to the paint store now and pick some up for you."

I thanked him, but I didn't know what else to say, so I headed home. I mostly forgot about the old man, although he was nicer than I'd initially thought. I thought, instead, about how nice my mural would look with the vibrant colours of real paint - and about the smiles I might see on peoples' faces when they saw it.

I went to the third floor again that afternoon, but the old man didn't respond when I knocked on his door. It was a bit disappointing, but I figured he might be taking a nap. I went back that night to check, but again he didn't answer so I started working on it without him. I sat for a couple of hours drawing lupins and tulips, in chalk. I wasn't even painting yet but it all just seemed to flow. As I was drawing some daffodils I heard a siren getting closer. It made me feel uneasy. Paramedics arrived a few minutes later and called the lift. I got up and asked:

"What's happened? Why are you here?"

"A lady phoned to say the man she always checks on hasn't come to open his door all day. Apparently his cough has been getting worse and worse in the last couple of weeks. We're just going to see him."

I knew it was the old man. I followed them up to the apartment but they wouldn't let me come in.

When he died in hospital someone came to tell us he'd left a gift for me in his apartment and that they had the key. Stacked on his couch were tins of paint, with every different colour I'd need.

I felt numb thinking about the mural, and how few words I'd spoken to the old man. Every interaction seemed to carry more weight now that he was gone. I'd disliked him for years just

because he didn't want me planting weeds in the courtyard. I'd brushed his kindness aside because I was so excited to get my bag back and paint, and now I wouldn't have a way to repay it. Except through the mural.

I used chalk to outline the rest of the mural on the wall. I had my design memorised, but I decided to check my sketches anyway. Ra is hard to draw. I opened it up, but saw that Ra was no longer there. Instead it was an arm, similar looking to mine, alongside an old and weathered looking one that could only be the old mans. They were drawn over a smudge that was once Ra; working together to hold up the sun. At the bottom he'd written "Paint some dandelions for me."

I didn't leave the wall until it was finished. I wanted to write that it was in memory of the old man or something, but it hit me that I never found out his name. I left it unsigned.

The next morning the lift doors opened on the fifth floor to the same grey frowns, but I didn't put one on. When the lift reached the ground and the doors slid open I thought I saw the hint of a smile on Mrs. Dumas' face.