

RED PAINT

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*She stood in the centre of the floor, deaf to everything around her. Sounds had no meaning, they were garbled and disjointed, alien noises that she simply couldn't understand. Only colours mattered. The floor around her feet, for example, was a deep crimson that flowed to her shoes and lapped against their ebony blackness. The walls, the blank impassive walls, flashed a pale blue, on and off, on and off. She was waiting, waiting for her husband. They would go home, together. But until he came, she could look at the colours . . .*

'How long have we been here now?' he asked impatiently, looking down the length of the queue.

She looked at him, a soft, comfortable love in her eyes but a slim

almost mocking smile on her face. That was Alistair, her man of action. His hair might have greyed since Brighton, and there was less of it to grey now, but his nature had not changed one iota. He was in his element when barking orders at soldiers and fending off some alien invasion or another. But leave him hanging around in a room and he soon began climbing up the walls. Will I ever get him to really relax? Doris wondered as she looked her wristwatch.

‘Ten minutes.’

Her husband harrumphed sullenly, turning his attention to the cashier who was their goal. She smiled to herself and pulled out her account card again, turning it over in her hands. Doris doubted if she would ever get used to all the technological minimalism that abounded nowadays - she could remember the days when withdrawing money from a bank required a thick sheath of papers, numerous forms of identification and a contract signed in blood. Now all she needed was one card. She supposed it was progress, but the convenience it produced was marred by the paranoia she had about losing the card. After all, there was a lot of money in their account, in the main provided by a grateful military on the understanding that Alistair never wrote his memoirs.

‘Can’t they hurry it up?’ Alistair grumbled.

‘Put them all on a charge,’ Doris mocked lovingly.

Her husband chuckled good-naturedly and let her take his arm. She pressed herself to it.

‘Court marshal,’ he threatened cheerfully, ‘summary execution.’

‘You can wait outside if you want.’

‘No,’ he shook his head resolutely, ‘this is our anniversary and we’ll spend it together. Even if we have to spend all day in this damned bank!’

Doris smiled and held his arm tighter. Yes, it was their anniversary, although sometimes Doris had thought they wouldn’t make it to any milestone figure. Not because they didn’t love each other -they did, deeply - but because of an insignificant looking man called the Doctor. He had the ability to attract mortal danger and draw Alistair into it - every time Doris heard that he was back, she feared it would be the last time she saw her husband alive. But, somehow, he made it through each adventure alive.

Doris hardly paid any attention when the door behind her swung open, after all people came into banks all the time. She noticed when Alistair tensed in her grip and a woman screamed behind her. She turned to see three masked figures pushing their way through the queues, each one holding in their hands a sawn-off shotgun.

‘Ev’rybody on the floor!’ the biggest man ordered while one of his fellows forced the cashier to relinquish bundles of money.

‘Nobody move an’ you’ll get out of this alive, okay?’ his nervous sounding partner added.

Doris prayed he wasn’t lying and quickly dropped to the floor. Only when she realised that her husband hadn’t done the same did she dare to look up. Her heart froze.

‘Alistair!’

‘It’s alright, Doris,’ he reassured, pacing slowly towards the nervous gunman, ‘he won’t shoot. Will you?’

‘Stay where you are!’ he ordered, his voice and his shotgun shaking.

Doris wished she shared her husband’s confidence. Fear made her heart beat noisily in her breast, a beat that increased tempo with every step Alistair took towards the gun barrel. She began to pray.

‘I’ll shoot!’ stuttered the gunman. Alistair closed in. ‘I will!’

Alistair, for God’s sake lie down! For my sake!

‘Will you?’ asked Alistair’s crisp, military tones, ‘why don’t you put the gun down? Before somebody gets hurt.’

The robber’s shaking finger tensed on the trigger. Doris shut her eyes tight against the sight.

‘The gun. Please.’

There was a lengthy silence, and Doris opened her eyes. For a heart-stopping moment it looked like the gunman would pull the trigger, but finally the barrel dropped.

‘I . . . I can’t!’

Relief flooded Doris with tears of joy, which overflowed down her face in torrents. Alistair was alive, he was . . .

‘Well I can!’ barked the first gunman, punctuating his words with a dreadful thunderclap.

Doris looked up at her husband, and he looked down at her. His hand searched for his chest. It found only a red, ragged hole.

*She stood in the centre of the bank’s tiled floor, unaware that the banshee wailing came from her own mouth. All that mattered were the*

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*colours. Red paint lapped at her black shoes, but she was unaware that in the middle of the pool of paint was her husband's body, his chest - his life - gone. It wasn't a colour, you see. It wasn't important. Only the colours were important.*

*The colours filled her mind, and the blue light took her home, alone.*