

# The Marvelous Mark

by Jermaine Reed, MFA

**The dash of green** seems too focused and deliberate, opposed to the birthmark on my face. The mark is shaped like a fallen leaf and bleeds down my throat to my collarbone. It is the distraction that disrupts my every first impression. I don't think about it often, only when I see green or when I awake or go to bed.

"Tell me a wonderful story through your painting," the instructor had said two days ago. He smiles, but only when his is down. Whenever he speaks, his eyes linger a bit longer on me, begging me to walk him through my painful past.

Now, my stool angles forward beneath me, paint dripping from my brush, staining the hardwood floor. My nosy landlord regularly invites herself into my apartment under the guise of collecting rent. She'll explode. My lip catches between my teeth, while I consciously decide to let the paint do what it wants.

The green splatters of paint on the floor strike me. I don't know what it is, but I see something, feel something. A dot here, a drip there.

My mind's eye sketches up an image of a small, frail girl on a play yard. Light catches the salty streams lining her cheeks, and her skirt flutters above her bleeding, skinned knee. The smell of burned flesh dangles on the summer air.

"Why are you so ugly," the big girl says, her shadow swallowing the smaller girl. It is not a question but an accusation. Chuckles escape the other kids, while they point at the girl on the ground.

I am simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. My heart breaks because there is nothing I can do to help the girl. She is simply a memory, a moment passed. She sobs, alone in her shell.

More paint splatters to the floor. It falls in slow motion, spattering into a dozen dots. I dip the brush again, this time into a darker green and let it descend to where it may. It is out of my control.

Now there is an older girl dominating my vision. There is no one in the gym room other than him and her. Her hazel eyes shimmer above the horizon of creased bags beneath them.

His head is down, turned in the opposite direction. Not once has he met her gaze. The large space now seems smaller, overcrowded with uncomfortable thoughts, drained of oxygen by the anticipation of unwelcome news.

"I don't understand why we can't tell anyone we're together," she says to him, voice crackling. I stand behind them on the bleachers, a silent, invisible observer.

His football jacket hugs his sculpted frame. He sighs and shakes his head. "It's probably better if we didn't see each other anymore."

The words are a dagger-shaped eulogy, plunged into her soul. The air rushes from her lungs, whistling a terrible tune through the wounds. A million words rattle in

her head, but she can't piece them together. She is not the chocolate. She is the torn wrapper floating in the wind. I weep for her.

It is two weeks later, and his musky scent doused in cologne accosts her in the hallway. A cheerleader wraps her arms around his, as they wobble along. The cheerleader rolls her eyes at the girl and proceeds to place a gagging finger down her throat. The girl with the mark bites her lip, dies on the inside.

As the red paint marks the floor, it overlaps some of the green. The colors are separate but together, on the brink of blossoming into yellow. They are unexpected partners, clandestinely building something of which I know not. I am just a witness.

The colors know my secrets. They know me. They bring to life pieces of me that I have tried for years to tuck away. I want to stop the paint from dripping because my landlord's voice will shake the walls when she sees. Yet I have lost control. I dip my brush in yellow.

And so, the colors leak, and I envision a girl who smiles for the first time in a while. She has landed an interview with a company even "Forbes" can't stop writing about. Everyone wants to intern there. She has stood in the mirror for days answering why she's the best fit for the job.

The man's eyes roam over her frame, as she walks into the office. He leans back and nods to the chair in front of his desk. His hair is a perfectly manicured lawn of black, opposed his bright, smooth face. Fresh lemon and coffee perfume the air.

He nods as he looks over her resume. She bites her lip and shakes her leg in anticipation. Each time she thinks he's about to say something, he seals his lips. Finally, he lifts his head.

"Tell me about yourself," he says to her, but the question is directed to the side of her face. As she speaks, she notices his blank nodding, how he is preoccupied with her mark. Her words become a warm stutter of embarrassment. She stops talking, and a few seconds pass. He shakes his head, but he's not there.

I want to hold her hand, but I am hopeless. She chews her lip, and I take a small step from the corner of the room. I stop. There are no words of encouragement to offer.

"Sure, sure," he says. He promises to give her a call back. She receives not even an email.

The colorful wood beckons me, compels me to continue. Separately, the colors on the hardwood make no sense. Together, they are an abstract image of everything I am.

Although I have none, the smell of coffee tingles my nose. My mind travels to the time I first met my instructor. He is a man with a boyish face, young for a teacher. The dark, strong coffee in his cup is at odds with who he is, reserved and mellow.

We are in his classroom. Technically, it is his basement. He makes a grand gesture that isn't so grand, tells me that this is where his classes take place. His smile is genuine, though.

“I paint, but I’m no great artist,” I say, pushing back the strand of hair that has harassed me all day.

His hand on my forearm is soft, warm. It relaxes me. “There’s a great artist in everyone, including you.” He is the only one who sees not my birthmark but me. For a split second, I believe I can create art.

The paint on the floor does not feel like art. It is not complete. I do not feel like an artist. Yet the drying colors articulate what I have been unable to.

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As the instructor evaluates my painting, my heart thuds against my ribcage. It is just him and me here in his basement. He paces back and forth, hand tucked beneath his chin. He is a mad scientist, challenged by what he beholds.

“This paint does not belong on this hardwood,” he says, thoughtfully. “It is out of place.”

My stomach flips, and I regret having had the square of wood sawed from the floor. I bite my lip and know my landlord will lose it. How could I had been so stupid?

“It isn’t finished.” The words choke from my throat but from the soul of the ten-year-old schoolgirl pushed down on the playground all those years ago.

He turns to me, a glossy sincerity in his eyes. “It is marvelous,” he says. “It shouldn’t be, but it is.”

The smile radiates throughout my entire being. I am suddenly aware that I can’t recall the last time I smiled. The instructor uses technical terms, art phrases, that I am unfamiliar with. I attempt to curb my excitement. I trace my hand over the birthmark. It is a part of me. It is marvelous. It shouldn’t be, but it is.

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