

All the Colors

By Sandra Bazzarelli

WHY WE LIKE IT: *In this sensitively written reverie with its bittersweet notes and nostalgic key a woman reflects upon the men in her life in a quest for self-reckoning. The first person present singular POV creates a sense of intimacy and we feel she is talking to us in confidence, as a friend. Characters rise vividly from the page: fleshed out, three-dimensional people we know in our own life. A wry, self-deprecating humour wends its way through the capable prose and adagio colourations make the ironic ending all the more poignant. Quote: Then he'd held up his vanilla cone and made a declaration. "This is you," he'd said. "Unadventurous, boring and predictable." To that I'd responded, "Isn't vanilla what you ordered?" And our favourite line: 'He comes home a little bit later than I do when he comes home to my home. 'Gasp!*

The painting arrives and I'm anxious right up until I pull it out of its box. The back of the frame immediately falls out and slides back down into the broken pieces of Styrofoam that rise with static and stick to everything including my eyelashes. I catch the painting before it too slides out. The metal tabs that have been holding it in place have not survived the journey the way the smell of cigarette smoke has. Not only will I have to fix the frame, I'll have to wash it in vinegar and air it out. Or just throw it away and have the painting reframed. I am angry about this. So angry that I barely look at the painting before I set it aside to contend with its frame. This is not how I wanted it.

He comes home a little bit later than I do when he comes home to my home. I live alone but allow him to stay overnight. He only stays over one night a week because his overnight stays cost him money that he has never volunteered to pay. I won't pay for him. If he wants to visit me he can fork over the \$35 parking fee. So he does. He says he doesn't mind but then he never stays over more than once a week, which is fine with me. I don't enjoy having him around anyway. He isn't smart. He doesn't put ice in warm soda. He sleeps all weird and he wears white socks with black sneakers.

The concierge at the front desk calls. He's here. I tell the concierge to let him come up even though the thought had occurred to me to not answer the phone at all. I could have pretended I'm not home, but I'd stopped at the grocery store earlier so there's an extra piece of chicken that I don't want to eat myself. I could eat it myself; I just don't want to. He can eat it.

It smells like smoke in here, he says. Do you smoke now? Yes, I say. I've smoked for fifteen years straight since last week. He's confused. It's the painting, I say. He doesn't get it. It looks like a lot of colors swimming around, but that's all he can tell me about it. He doesn't understand why I like it because he didn't finish college. This is what he says when he doesn't understand something. As if his finishing college would have made him a smart person in every way that he isn't, which is all of them. He would offer to cook, but he didn't finish college so he doesn't know how. He would read a book about WWII or write more than happy birthday on birthday cards, but he didn't finish college. The truth is he never even started college. The truth is he barely finished high school. But I let him lie to me because he has nothing better to say. At least the lies require some creativity.

It is clear that I don't really like this guy. The guy I actually did like didn't like me very much in the end though, so I just went along with this idiot because, at the very least, he looks good standing next to me in pictures. All of them are selfies, however, because I don't want to introduce him to my friends and family because they might ask him a question like, When you mix yellow and blue together, what color do you get? And then he'd tell them that he didn't finish college. Selfies also work because it's just our faces. I don't do full-length mirror selfies with him. No one on Instagram will ever see the white socks and black sneakers unless I do full-length mirror selfies or exist among other people who can take pictures of the two of us from head to toe. So I don't.

The guy I actually did like did finish college, but that's not why I liked him. I liked him because he made me feel like I was really beautiful, which is a terrible thing to have to admit to yourself when you've tried to present yourself as a woman who doesn't care about that. Look at my forehead. It moves! Look at my lips. They don't quack! I'm practically a feminist hero for keeping this face of mine this face of mine. He also made me feel special, mind you. Like there was something within me that mattered in a way that made everyone else matter more.

He was smart, yes, but he didn't look good standing next to me in pictures. I didn't mind though. Not enough to not post carefully curated pictures of us together. Still, after some time together, it turned out he didn't like all of me either. I was, apparently and according to his practiced judgment, a snob. I didn't want to sit on the hood of his car parked outside an ice-cream shop, you see. The hood was hot and dirty and my skirt was thin and too short to protect my undercarriage, so I stood while he sat. I'm not a snob, I'd said. A snob wouldn't have gotten into this car at all, never mind sat on the hood of it. For someone who isn't a snob, he'd said, you sure

do know how one thinks. Then he'd held up his vanilla cone and made a declaration. This is you, he'd said. Unadventurous, boring, and predictable. To that I'd responded, Isn't vanilla what you ordered?

We dated for another month after that, but it wasn't good anymore. I knew that. He liked the sound of my voice, the way I walked, but how my wallet and checkbook matched? He hated me for it. Soon enough he'd grown chattier with all the hostesses, bartenders, and servers. Where were they from? He loved their blue hair. Their pointy red nails. Their piercings. Their green forked tongue tattoos that licked their earlobes. They were creative people who matched his vibe. So he'd leave me behind at every table to go smoke outside with one of the many interchangeable nonconformists. As it happens, he had a sixth sense for people with talent...and cigarettes. And for women who could only be described as vanilla until they consciously and vigorously rainbow sprinkled themselves into obvious obscurity.

He asks, Where are you planning on hanging those colors? The painting, I say. In my office, over my desk. He tells me that's cool and takes off his pants. He's always trying to hang them in my closet, but I never allow him. He reminds me that I have extra hangers and plenty of room, but I take his pants from him and drape them over the chair in my bedroom. This is fine. He doesn't get angry. He never does. He just moves on to his next almost thought. His body is good, but I don't really turn him on just by standing there in front of him. That's another difference.

When he sleeps next to me, I don't sleep. He twitches like he's short-circuiting and I don't care enough about him to wonder if maybe he's dying of something. It's 3 AM and I'm awake. That's the only thing I care about, until I remember the painting. The frame that I had bathed in vinegar and left to air out on my terrace is still there. Outside I mostly smell the vinegar, but still the funk of cigarette smoke lingers. I leave the frame where it is and head back inside. On my desk, propped up against the wall, is the painting. It also smells like smoke, but only like a wisp of it now. I hold it in my hands and look at it so that I can actually see it. It's beautiful. Really beautiful. All the colors swirling unpredictably. Hard and soft. This is you, he'd said, unveiling the painting to me in his studio on our fourth date. This is you.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This is the story that emerges when you buy an expensive piece of art online only to have it arrive in a degraded state. You start to think about all the other things that contribute to the degradation of something beautiful and find yourself drawing parallels between art and love. In the same way you can restore a painting, you can restore the artist's*

intention by reminding yourself that to appreciate the inspiration behind it. And inspiration is nearly always borne out of some form of love.

BIO: Sandra Bazzarelli is a singer/songwriter and writing instructor from Bergen County, New Jersey who earned her B.A. in literature-writing from Columbia University and her M.A. in Teaching and Learning from NYU. Some of her creative writing has been published in such literary journals as Quarto, Jersey Devil Press, Instigatorzine, Mad Swirl, amphibi.us, Clapboard House and Cease, Cows.