
HOME IMPROVEMENT

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Smokestack Ash

I grew up watching paint dry. Jungle Trail, Oat Straw, Basic Khaki, Morocco Red, Preservation Plum—every spectrum of the color wheel has made an appearance on the walls we declare home. No matter how long or short its stay, color became our sixth member. And the heavy catalogue books that held the uncountable shades became my mother's favorite child.

To her, painting is a sport—a marathon of trial to avoid error. The overwhelming possibilities keep her awake well into the night while she flips through books of rainbow. She squints at her test squares against walls at different levels of light. The calm and relaxed greens prompt screaming-matches and sudden fits of hysteric tears. The somber, natural beiges threaten divorce. And the day that her yellowed-white sensible sneakers and blue tattered, oversized Butler T-shirt—both streaked with years of paint—make their way down from her closet is the same day her family slinks away, making space for the relationship that is my mom and her colors.

The process takes months, beginning by meticulously picking out the perfect color. She has a three-step system: shade, tint, and temperature. During any of her projects, we witness rectangular color samples stuck in random nooks of the house, and taped in rows along walls—an army of tints that are so similar, an untrained eye could

not see where one color stops and another begins. But to her, the dividing line is glaring. And the single drop of white or black or red or blue that alters these colors is the slight amount that occupies her nightmares, haunted by the idea that all of this is permanent.

I spent the majority of my childhood in the house my family moved into a year before I was born, and it was in that house that my mother's obsession flourished. She tolerated the past residents' wallpaper, musty drapes, and stomped-on carpets before she was able to slowly begin making the house her own. My dad knocked down the north-facing wall to add on a larger garage, a laundry room, office, and bathroom once my siblings and I were all able to walk and entertain—though not the wisest choice, as each of us explored the construction zone and received injuries that would be our permanent scars of the remodel. Mine is on my toe from stepping on a nail, holding the memory of my holding up building progress while my tears soaked into the plywood and the dishwater blond hair I inherited from my mother.

Gradually, the existing structure fell victim to my mother's eye. She only installed new carpet in the addition, but what she lacked in fresh fabric, she gained in fake hardwood and a faux marble entryway. New cabinets were installed, which she adored. New countertops were set, which she hated. She ripped into the navy wallpaper in the dining room, replacing it with clean strokes of lust-filled burgundy. She slashed the purple wallpaper in the bathroom and covered over the musty white bedrooms. She experimented with dark green accent walls in the living room.

She combed over that house, piece-by-piece. New furniture trickled in, rooms were rearranged, and the fresh-paint smell was constant. But not once did she ever claim that house as perfect.

Electric Sunshine

We alternate Thanksgivings and Christmases between my father's family in the hometown he never left, and my mother's family in her hometown—a small riverside community in North Dakota

that worships Lewis and Clark. It became tradition to spend the Christmas Eves we were in North Dakota with my aunt and her family in her suburban home eating their “famous” chicken wings and chili, awaiting the wrapping paper warzone.

As my aunt’s kids gradually moved on, she and my uncle started their own remodeling. In the time between my family’s visits, the rooms of that house evolved and square footage accumulated. The abrasive, masculine blue theme I had grown accustomed to slowly mellowed out, making way for an established melody of sandy tones in a house that used to barely hold the entire family. Now it has a room just for a Baby Grand piano.

I was a high school freshman during the first Christmas Eve after the addition, and my aunt gave my mother a tour, with my grandmother at their heels. I studied the trio from my claimed spot on the leather couch, braiding my bright yellow hair as I observed. I watched my mom brush her fingers along the walls while she commented on the texture and the color’s congruence with the shag carpet.

“Did you paint this yourself?” my mom asked.

My aunt chuckled. “No way, we hired painters for the whole house.”

“They did such a nice job,” my grandma commented. “Don’t you think so, Connie?”

My mom looked at my grandma, and then glanced over the walls. I didn’t have to be next to her to tell that she was looking closely at the corners and edges, searching for mistakes and remnants of an accidental collision of brush and ceiling. None of those things would be there. I knew because I had looked for them myself.

“They did,” my mom eventually answered.

Red Hot Rhythm

A large, framed family photograph we took when I was 16 is perched atop my parents’ entertainment center. I look at it every time I go home. All three kids are aligned behind our parents. The entire family is smiling and relaxed, my sister’s arm leaning on our

father's right shoulder, my mother's hand on his left. The scene looks natural.

But the reality isn't natural. The day of the photo, my brother was laughing obnoxiously, as he always did. My sister stood there quietly, making sure her hair was parted exactly right. And then there was me, in the middle. While trying to ignore my brother's comments and my sister's chatter, I tugged at the clothes I was forced to wear and positioned myself so I was nearly hidden by my father's head.

My mother was facing us until the last second of every shot, doing a final check of her wardrobe selection. She had the pieces laid out on her bed for weeks to match up the turquoises and browns and burnt oranges that her family would wear. We were a perfect blend of the peace and love of the blue, and the optimism and enthusiasm of the orange. The only anomaly was the glint of unnatural apple red atop my head, standing out like a stoplight during rush hour.

After a few test shots, my mother darted behind the camera to see if she needed to make any adjustments. She glanced at me and noted offhandedly how much nicer my smile had become, less strained and toothy. And for one beat, my heart dropped in anger while springing up in joy, the emotions colliding and leaving an ache.

From the moment I was pulled into this world by my feet, I didn't match. Backwards, upside-down, and breathless for fifteen seconds, I was not the model birth. I was not my brother before me, a blond-haired, blue-eyed, perfect bundle of joy. And I was not my sister after me, who nearly fell onto the floor of the Emergency Waiting Room. I was the one who left the hospital with physical souvenirs from my roller-coaster ride through the birth canal—ears that didn't match, ballerina ankles, and claustrophobia. I was difficult.

As I grew up, I felt my mom's eyes—trained with years of distinguishing right from wrong—zero in on me. My mother knew how to study, select, perfect. Anything less than flawless needed to change. When it came to who I had the potential to be, she often flipped through her book of remodeling possibilities and picked her favorites. But she was stuck with the one she had—a room she could

never paint, no matter how much she wanted to. A whole book of colors she could merely look at, never own. But being immobilized never

stopped her from trying.

I practiced that smile to myself until I had the muscles it required memorized, so within the split second it took for the camera to capture a moment, I could smile for her how she liked it best—jaw unclenched, tongue pushed to the roof of my mouth, heart burning.

Warm Mocha

Buying a 1970s farmhouse when I started high school was both my mother's greatest dream and most stressful nightmare. This building was her chance to gut and remodel layer-by-layer to match her vision. Pyramids of paint cans piled as she perfected the art of complimenting and placing accent colors. She textured all the walls the way she had always envied in other homes. She finally had carpet from a decade that didn't hold her birth year, and countertops that she moderately enjoyed.

My high school graduation was my mom's chance to show off all of her improvements. In a lull between guests, I checked my appearance in the mirror in the deep burgundy entryway. I pulled my fingers through my curled brunette tresses, placing the stray strands back into position while I noticed my grandmother sitting at the same table I had left her at hours earlier. She sat still, silently sipping her fifteenth cup of coffee as she watched us. In those eyes was familiar calculation.

My mother had given my grandmother the grand tour of the dream home when she arrived the day before. Mom anxiously shuffled her around every room, using the voice she used only in my grandmother's presence. I observed my mother quietly from the sidelines—she hung around a room just a beat too long, waiting for words that would never come.

The tour ended in the basement. "I just continued the same color from the stairwell down here—it seemed to flow a lot better than

doing something different. And we're going to be putting a bathroom over there," she said, eagerly pointing out the far corner near the entrance to the crawl space. "Someday," she tacked on.

Grandma nodded, and repeated the only thing she had said the entire tour, "Mhm, very nice."

The corner of Mom's mouth twitched downward, working to stay expressionless while she ushered everyone back upstairs.

Gold

That "someday" basement bathroom was constructed the summer after my freshman year of college, the same year my mother was suddenly a prisoner of her own body. For months she nursed a series of health complications that often left her immobile. Her back cried, her thighs tore, and her knees buckled. Her sole position of comfort was lying atop her exercise ball while she worked to convince us of wild diagnoses.

Painting was impossible, though this didn't stop her from trying. She only surrendered upon my arrival in May—a pair of able hands with nothing to do for the next three months, exposing her limitations.

"What color did you pick? Tan?" I asked, a stab at the rest of the basement's recurring color scheme—tan, lighter tan, and beige. But she would never refer to them as such; they were probably Pacific Beach, Prairie Dog Brown, and Camel's Hump.

"No," she replied, ignoring my sass. "An off-white called—"

"She kept debating between splotches that I swore were the same," my father interjected.

"They were so different," she shot back. "Some were warmer, some were cooler. It's so subtle that it makes it hard to pick the right one, especially with the blue linens. Vanilla Custard is my best shot."

"Sounds white," I muttered under my breath.

She took me down to the basement to coach me through her step-by-step pristine painting method, starting me off with a primer. Even though it was a brand new room, she insisted that the texture material on the walls was yellowish and needed to be primed. I had

a laundry list of precautions—always cover the floor with a blanket or a towel, go around the corners and edges with a brush before the roller, watch out for the toilet hookups and exposed light, don't get paint on anything wooden. Although I was holding the paintbrush, I felt her grasp around my wrist, untrusting. I felt her when I didn't have the floor completely covered, I felt her when I got paint on the toilet hookups, and I felt her in the closet. The closet was too large for such a small bathroom, yet too tiny for a person to comfortably paint in. I painted myself into a trap, unable to turn, bend, or reach without scraping some part of my body along wet paint.

My mom came down to watch when I got to the second coat of Vanilla Custard. "I'm not really sure about this color anymore," she said, squinting at my strokes. "It looks too cool. Kind of blue."

I bit my tongue. I shouldn't have been surprised; she would doubt any color selection halfway into the first coat. We still don't talk about *The Actual Mistake of 2007*—the only time she completely changed her color after she had already started.

She sighed, either at her decision or at my lack of response, and continued to watch me roll on the paint. The roller—where most painters allow themselves some freedom—is just as meticulous. Up, down, and repeat until the surface is entirely covered. There cannot be one drop out of place, one nick, a skewed stroke, or a mere hint of a missed spot.

"The second coat is always the worst," she commented. "You can't tell where you've been."

But she didn't hate the second coat as much as she let on. Applying the coat is arduous, but the difficulty is a sign she's succeeded. The near inability to distinguish where she has and hasn't painted means she can no longer tell where these walls have been before her brush touched the surface.

My dad took me down to the finished bathroom once he put in the toilet and vanity, and my mom had arranged her towels and curtains. With everything in place, it was hard to imagine that the bathroom wasn't always there, just like this.

“Wow,” I said. “It looks amazing.”

“It does,” he agreed. “But—,” he started.

“But.”

“She thinks it clashes with the white in the shower curtain and the threading on the towels,” he sighed.

“I would really like to know where she gets this stuff.”

“She knows what she’s doing. Even if she doesn’t think so,” he said. “She always gets it right, she just has to go through her process to get there.”

I nodded, hardly listening. I was busy taking in all of the things about my parents’ new bathroom that my mom would eventually notice, like she always does. The light fixture she picked was matted in a way that made the bulbs inside glow like lit icicles. The rays vibrated off the walls, bringing out its cool tones and making the small room seem larger. The beams of color found their home in the shower curtain and towels, the various shades of cobalt within them mixing with the accents of brown and tan, becoming the perfect supporting colors in the harmony. The Vanilla Custard screamed happiness, purity, and sincerity. It was impossible to remember the space as an empty cube made of sheetrock.

This color did for this room what color does—covers up anything from old, shabby chairs and ugly, overbearing walls, to the white nicks and dirt in our fingernails. A tin pail of thick paste that we can alter however we choose gives us the chance to make something beautiful. Fresh, clean, and—for a moment—completely untouched. The selection is a process of learning who we are, searching through a plethora of paint splotches and tears for that one that cries out our name. And we can keep remodeling and repainting and nitpicking and fixing, but out of all of those ridiculous paint names, none are titled “The Perfect Color.” Defining what that color is and giving it a hex code is impossible. No matter how many words we speak for it, or however many affirmations we seek, everything falls on what the color says for itself. The subtle notes that bring the variety of tones and temperatures and feelings together make a song, blending into the walls and furniture

that are the background of our lives and becoming our soundtrack. One of those unbroken compositions where we can't tell where one chord ends and another begins, blurring the line between who we were and who we are.

So maybe that perfect color will be a yellow? Linked to releasing Serotonin, it makes our brains happy and improves concentration. But if it's too strong, it can cause fatigue and short tempers. Then, if not that, possibly a red—the color of love. So strong, it stimulates the heartbeat and quickens our breathing. But it leads to stress when heavily exposed, causing frustration and provoking anger. Or maybe brown. It's earthy and deep, solid and reliable. Rugged. But try too hard, and it leads to sadness.

My dad stepped out of the bathroom, leaving me alone in the room that shone like the Arctic and rang like Mozart. While I scanned my eyes around the walls, I caught a glimpse of my hair in the vanity mirror, framing the face of the painter. From bright blond to blinding red to brazen brunette, my mother could tell where I've been. And with the eyes she trained me to have, when I looked back at the colors, all I saw was sloppy craftsmanship, misaligned strokes, and the lack of even coverage. With each new shade, what I was trying to cover up still hinted through.

But this last color sank into my natural ash and highlights and interplayed with the years of residual dyes. It created a color that now, finally seamless, leaves the dividing line between the shade it was and the shade it is now.

Turning my head and watching the strands pulsate in the light, I thought back to the day I picked the shade before leaving for college. I settled into the hairdresser's chair that has been the location of my remodeling decisions. I donned the cape that had collected scores of colors, fading into each other so completely that it created a shade all its own—a color that screamed of the desperate search for identity.

I watched my hairdresser pull out the card that listed my colors, flipping it over to find an empty line to write the date. "So," she began, meeting my eyes in the mirror. "What are we doing this time?"

I looked back at myself as I brushed my fingers along the color stains on my cape. “Make it gold,” I told her.

Portrays and enhances joy. Illumination. A partner to power. Associated with growth.