

THE COLORMAN

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Most of the animals James Morrow had begun to collect since his illness were small and all of them were already dead. He didn't kill them, even though for his purposes, the carcasses were better fresh than days-old and bloated. He could always use the bone from a creature left long on the roadside. Though Morrow had lost his sense of smell by then, he did leave the skunks to the proper authorities. He kept thick, construction-site trashbags and rubber gloves in his car for drives along the country lanes near his manufactory. So it was that some raccoons, an unfortunate opossum and numerous squirrels donated their little bodies to his work.

Working in the evenings after his employees had left, he skinned the animals, separated fat from flesh, and subjected this portion or that to the tools of his trade. The bones he then dried and burned, some charred to matte black, others all the way to ash white. Still others he dried slowly in a kiln until light and powdery. Fat was cooked down, skin and sinew were tanned, muscle and certain organs were salted, dried and wrapped in thick, tar-soaked cloth strips. Cennini had recommended sheep's feet for bone black and whites, but Morrow believed he'd chosen that particular beast simply for its easy availability at the time, though it could have been for the thickness of the bone.

Considering this, Morrow rubbed his arm and squeezed it to the circumference of his wrist. He stared at his hands with curiosity.

At that time he had not yet met Rain Morton; in fact, he had forced the memory of her existence from his mind. Though the probability of his early demise had been explained by the main oncologist his HMO had assigned to him, and though it had prompted him to get on with this project he had vaguely been planning for decades, the doctor had failed to fully impress upon him any tragedy or finality to his diagnosis. In fact, all the various doctors and nurses James had contact with projected an interest in the cancer itself. But, having not met him before he appeared with his symptoms and damning bloodwork, the doctors had made little contact with James Morrow's well-protected soul.

Overlooking the deepest part of the Hudson, just south of its bend at Constitution Island, at the dead end of one dirt road into another, sat Highland Morrow Paint and Pigments Manufactory. The Highland Morrow factory was built early in the nineteenth century by practical men who would never have dreamed of depriving a building of charm or warmth just because its purpose was manufacturing. It was practical for the time, which is to say invitingly scaled to humans, with its red-brick facade, wrought iron gates, small courtyard and leaded windows. The views it commanded over the downward slope of trees, past the train tracks and the river beyond, toward the dramatic peaks of Crow's Nest and Storm King across the water, caused private homes, estates really, to be built right alongside it. Old Mahican Road had become tony and exclusive except for Morrow's modest little 1830s house adjacent to the factory. The other structures that had sprouted along this old dirt road were nothing if not immodest, dream homes designed and then built without compromises. Their money kept the area somewhat private, though every few years Morrow had to fight off

some new resident's concern over the "dangerous chemicals" he used in manufacturing paints. Dangerous indeed. Thankfully, Morrow's grandfather had been forward thinking enough to ensure that his business had rights in perpetuity against all those who bought land around it.

Inside, brick pillars divided the factory's soaring casement windows and long metal and glass work tables held clusters of arcane-looking tools and bottled unctures. The work that took place on the main factory floor was hardly dangerous. Not to the neighbors, anyway. Under each window, mulling stations were manned in turns, fresh workers replacing those worn out by the literal grind. Workers were rarely neighbors, though Morrow often found that job-seekers came to him from art schools, the children of people like his neighbors. He tended not to hire them, however, preferring to hire men and women who were supporting families—folks who had no one else to pay their bills and who were more likely to stay with him long term.

Alvaro Montoya dumped a tall heap of red ochre-pigment powder onto the glass slab on the countertop and stabbed his large palette knife into the center, forming a neat crater. Into that he poured in a measure of first-press linseed oil. With the same palette knife, Alvaro scooped the raw pigment from the outer slope in—out in, out in, pressing down into the darkening center. He worked quickly so as not to lose any oil in rivulets off the side, collecting up what had quickly become a thick paste and pressing off to the center again. He scraped the excess from the palette knife onto the bottom of the crystal-clear muller and placed it down on the center of the lumpy bright red heap.

A muller is a thick, up-ended mushroom of solid glass weighing about ten pounds, the wider bottom flat up to a rounded edge, the upper part round and fat to Alvaro's hand.

Alvaro moved the muller round, round, round, round over the glass surface to a count of twenty-four, causing the brilliant red to flatten out, a wide circle like a bright red vinyl record staining the glass. Then, tilting it up, sometimes having to break the suction with his palette knife, he skimmed around its edges and across the glass surface with practiced gestures, troweling the fresh paint into the center again. The grinding, Alvaro found, always released unique aromas depending on the pigment he was working with. Linseed oil had a sour nutty strong note that most people couldn't smell past, but Alvaro found that the unique qualities of each pigment began to assert themselves as his muller broke up and incorporated smaller and smaller particles of pigment into the oil. Red ochre, he found, gave a desert scent with a little metallic top note. A hint of something familiar, wet and sleek. And back into it he went: round, round, round, round to twenty-four again with his other hand on top.

Morrow had decorated the factory space with a series of large prints of famous paintings. Turner's "An Artist's Colourman's Workshop," surprisingly tame, nonetheless reflected the work carried out at Highland Morrow. It was the other prints, including Degas' "Le Tub," featuring a woman's back and long arm extended downward toward her feet, and Caillebotte's "Floor Scrapers," showing the leaning, intensely physical pose of pulling scrapers along a wooden floor, which mirrored perfectly the physical nature of mulling paints. The muscular backs in Caillebotte's floor-scraper paintings, in his "Oarsmen," and in various Degas bathers reminded the workers where these materials might end up, and the physical nature of what they gave toward that hope.

The yoga teacher James had engaged to train his staff in occupational and physical-therapy techniques encouraged Alvaro and

the other employees to count grinds and switch hands and direction every twenty rounds or so. Alvaro counted to twenty-four since it was a nice musical number. Montoya was from Argentina, Spanish-speaking as most of his factory colleagues, though the others were from desperately poor circumstances in Mexico, Honduras and Colombia. Alvaro had been the beneficiary of a decent education and opportunities in his home country. He'd come to New York to be a musician, but found himself lumped together with the cleaning staff and delivery people by the privileged Americans he had met there. Morrow, on the other hand, though gruff and diffident most of the time, seemed to see Alvaro for who he was, more than just another pair of hands. Still, Alvaro's off-hours were spent at his piano, writing songs and composing tunes, so taking long periods of meditation to a four-four beat was the perfect job for him. One with private side-benefits.

After an hour of mulling, Alvaro took a turn on the machines. Most pigments were ground by hand, but Morrow had two triple-mill grinders for the more voluminous whites and the harder pigments.

The triple-mill grinder rolled its buttery paint, a green malachite this time, from drum to drum. Looking like icing in Oz, the mound of paint folded and bucked between rollers, turning and tucking in on itself like a living thing. The thin sheet it pulled down between the first two rollers was slid over and slurped up by a third roller, whose same direction of rotation pushed the gathering paint back upward where it grew into a silkier fat slug than what had been troweled in. Alvaro dug up the heavy stuff with a wide spatula and wiped it back up onto the first roller for another go through the mill. As the thick paste worked its way around the drums again, it was finally collected with a sensuous push push push into a wide-mouthed bucket below.

Highland Morrow specialized in artists' oil paints. Not just any oil paints, but handmade versions of a classical palette. Ultramarine, Olive Green, Yellow Ochre, Burnt and Raw Sienna and Umber, Venetian Red and Alizarin Crimson. Real Flake White and Lamp Black.

A list of colors at the art supply store. But those colors were cooked up, mixed, treated and tubed in very specific and sometimes quirky ways.

The term "Flake White," for example, struck fear into the heart of many an artist, though its dangers were not always well-known or heeded. Van Gogh was said to have adored his lead white paint so much he ate it. This, of course, would have explained the intractable melancholy of his last days in Arles. Lead poisoning can cause blindness, deafness and kidney damage but, most uniquely of all, nerve disorders, muscle spasms and *irritability* (one of those charming medical euphemisms similar to discomfort as in "you may feel a pinch and then some discomfort during the extraction of spinal fluids"), all this leading, of course, to total loss of mental capacity and death.

Mercury, sulfur, lead and cadmium—materials making up many important pigments—are almost all deadly to humans in large enough doses. Artists have always been vulnerable to their effects by breathing their vapors hours upon hours in treacherously fragrant studios or frequently by absorbing them directly into the skin—on fingers used to smooth and correct, on the back of a hand used as a palette, into the palm while washing a paint brush and, of course, accidentally splattered, wiped on brows and spilled.

Highland Morrow Art Materials folded small-print health warnings into every box of their paints, but James Morrow, artist's colorman, owner and operator of the business his great-

grandfather had started in England in the 1840s, and whose family before that had served as colormen to some of the great portraitists of the realm, refused to update his materials. No water-based oils. No fume-less turpenoid. And absolutely no pthalo, quinacridone, dioxazine, naphthol or hansa pigments would ever synthetically tint Morrow's colors.

Highland Morrow wasn't for all artists. High prices and a fairly limited selection of materials put many painters off, but to conservators, forgers, and a growing number of artists who thought of their materials as a meaningful contribution to the final product, Highland Morrow was the only source.

Morrow, in his uniform of charcoal sweater, black jeans and boots, moved among his employees dressed in theirs of white jackets and paper hats. He checked the texture of the malachite, stabbing a clean palette knife into the bucket and rubbing it across a card lying in a stack kept nearby for this purpose. He tilted the card in the light, eyeing it for hue, texture and covering power. He jutted his chin at Alvaro. "You put it through again?"

"Yeah, boss," Alvaro said, smiling.

"I think you got it. How about the ochres?"

"They're holding steady. I laid you out all the cards over here." Alvaro went back to the mulling table where a dozen cards were carefully arranged, each with the same cryptic brushstrokes. On every card a single red stroke smeared downward from thick to thin over a printed line, dark to light like a stormy red sky above the sea and a milky orb of the color, fifty-fifty with titanium white, hovering next to it.

Morrow pulled his dark eyeglass frames down his long nose and checked the cards. He rearranged them a little. He held two up under a lamp and then angled them toward the window.

"Looks like you have it, Alvaro," he said quietly. "It's good."

Alvaro looked up at Morrow. He noticed that Morrow was unusually slow moving, standing still, not looking at anything in particular.

“You need something, boss?” he asked.

Morrow appeared not to have heard him. He didn’t move and Alvaro didn’t either. All the employees were accustomed to Morrow’s brief “holidays,” a term housepainters use for missed spots. If these got to be too long, Alvaro would ask again, but this time Morrow came back repeating what Alvaro had asked him. “Need something?” he murmured, sounding vaguely present. “Uh, there’s a bottle in my office, Alvaro. Prescription bottle by the lamp. I’d appreciate that, my man.”

Morrow continued around the room taking readings from thermometers, stirring thick oily liquids and checking inside the doors of enormous room-sized kilns, while Alvaro hopped lightly up the spiral staircase to Morrow’s perched second-floor loft office. The room was dark except for a small lamp on the desk, but bottles and jars of detrita lined the walls on narrow shelves. Blown-glass and metal contraptions crowded the room’s corners. A large, black-leather couch lay against the back wall, mostly obscured by stacks of papers and books.

Alvaro found the bottle on the desk, and picking it up, noticed a photo behind it, illuminated by a little halo of light by the desk lamp above. It was a yellowed picture of a beautiful young woman. She was lively and hopeful, her long hair cut in thick bangs hanging over her pretty face, partly hiding what looked like a smile. She held a couple of paint brushes toward the camera, accusingly.

Through the office windows, the view down onto the factory floor was broad, and from this vantage point the well-worn antiquity of the place was enlivened by fields of pure pigment lying in trays, buckets and bags all over the room. Powders, liquids and

oils of contrasting hues created a sharp counterpoint to the calm of the browns and grays of the equipment. Alvaro saw them as can-can dancers cavorting in a monastery.

Sliding back down the railing of the spiral staircase, Alvaro bounded over to his boss to deliver the bottle.

G WENDOLYN BROOKER GALLERIES was painted in subtle tan Helvetica caps on the plate glass window. Behind the glass stood a bare white wall with a single large white canvas hanging on it. Blank mostly, until closer inspection revealed that the meandering marks were purposeful; they were what the artwork amounted to. A freshly gessoed canvas manhandled with haphazard smears and gouges.

A three-person show was opening that night. The artists' families and friends crowded the place, along with the usual varieties of New Yorkers whom art openings attract.

There were the shabby art students hoarding free wine and cheese, and there were the citizen art fans whose interest in art was far deeper than their pockets. There was the occasional collector or critic intensely sought by gallery owners, but whose appearances at openings were rare. They were easily identifiable; they never touched the wine or cheese.

Rain Morton Madlin wandered around the various species and genres in attendance, trying to see the works through their eyes and eavesdropping on conversations. Looking about a decade younger than her years, Rain had a raw-edged openness about her and was pretty in an unself-conscious way. Her hair hung long and clean but carelessly unflattened; untrimmed bangs dipped into her large, liquid eyes. Her wide mouth betrayed a sadness floating around her that she buoyed with a resolute positivity.

Rain neared a couple, the man clearly here under protest, the woman attempting to hold her ground against him.

“...total crap. I mean I know it’s a cliché, but my kid—no, my DOG could do this,” he blurted.

“But the question is *would* your dog do this?” the woman asked.

“Exactly my point!”

“I think that was MY point.”

Rain allowed a smile to creep up on her face, letting on she had heard them.

“I mean, right?” the man said to Rain, just before she passed by.

“What’s that?” Rain asked politely.

“I’m saying, who really likes this? Bodily fluid art, porn, preserved animals. Art that the artist never lays a hand on. It’s like a big joke.”

“I like them,” Rain remarked, surveying the space.

The man and his companion laughed as though she were joking.

“I do, I like them and I don’t think the amount of effort that went into a particular piece has anything to say about its value.” Rain kept her tone light. “I know it’s unfair, but I think it’s true.”

“Right, right,” the man agreed. “You can’t convince me it’s any good and I can’t convince you it’s crap. Eye of the beholder. But you would spend your hard-earned—I mean you’re okay with the obscene amounts of money spent on these when, you know, starving children and all that?”

“Yes,” Rain said.

The man shook his head wearily.

Rain pressed on, “I think the prices are reasonable. It’s expensive to sell art. The gallery owners spend tons on space to show the

work, and on events and overseas art shows and catalogs and ads. Then, of course, there are the artists, spending their lives—”

“Still seems high,” the man interrupted.

“If you’re asking do I think it’s worth spending large sums of money on art, I’d have to say yes.”

“The diamond skull?”

“Oh, I can name better ones than that. I like the two-million dollar, mile-long pole speared into the earth,” she said, “with only a small inscribed disk visible.” Rain laughed. “At least you can *see* the diamonds, huh?”

Rain knew it was one of those conversations not much worth having. Most art-world people would just have moved right past. It’s nothing they haven’t all heard before, loudly, angrily, sometimes drunkenly, but usually self-assuredly as if these objections were original. She wasn’t sure why she had engaged the guy, but despite being so steeped in the art world, Rain could see how it looked to people on the outside. She was deep enough in not to have to make bristly excuses for it, but she’d also thought a lot about the merits of spending her life doing something that few, if any, would ever be able to appreciate. “I assume you go to movies?” she asked.

“Mmmm,” the man answered.

“Think about the money spent on those. Each has its audience. The millions spent on some of those—and some of them everybody agrees are total turkeys—that money eclipses any one of the craziest sounding art prices. Ultimately, I think engaging people’s minds is worthwhile.”

The woman piped in. “And the very fact that it isn’t mainstream, that it *is* quirky and odd and provocative, for some people that’s worth something right there.”

Rain smiled at the woman, understanding her meaning, but not quite joining in. “And really, some of the pieces were

incredibly time consuming to make, if that's what interests you."

"You're probably one of the artists!" the man said with a laugh.

Rain smiled.

The woman put her hand over her mouth and the man blushed. "Which ones?" he asked.

Rain pointed across the room and as the man started to speak again, saying those, those he liked, those weren't the ones he had meant, Rain just moved along nodding and waving, heading toward the back room.

In such a fresh, clean space, Rain's paintings looked almost unfamiliar to her. She was proud of them, but they were like her movie star clients, and she their plastic surgeon. She knew them in their becoming, in their guts and raw vulnerability.

Nothing in the man's criticisms particularly bothered her. If he'd been dragged to almost any art school in America, any biennial, any contemporary art institute, he'd realize Rain was actually laughably antiquated in her use of actual paint. Actual pigment in oil applied to actual canvas on stretcher bars. For most critics, her own husband among them, Rain's work was almost quaint in its attachment to these materials. But for Rain, ultimately, making art was never a matter that required defending. It was what made her feel most human, most alive. Marking canvas with silken paint globules took her out of herself and her mind and into the materials and smells and the textures of the weave of canvas, the skim of gesso, the landscape of oil and pigment. It was pleasure and meaning and hope and acceptance.

In the back office of the gallery a bottle of decent scotch perched on the desk between Gwendolyn Brooker herself and a gentleman dressed in an Armani suit and cowboy boots. He was laughing

and easy; she was leaning toward him, trying unsuccessfully to cover her tension. Gwen pointedly set down her glass.

“Joss, Joss, Joss,” she said, speaking fast but low. “How many years have we known each other?”

Joss Harp took this as an invitation and grabbed her knee in his big, fleshy hand.

Gwen went on as though he’d answered her, “And in all those years have I ever steered you wrong?”

Harp winked, and then patted and released her tiny knee. “Not so as I can tell, you haven’t.”

“Then trust me on this one: it’s an important piece, a smart inv—”

Harp interrupted her. “Not prepared to buy just today. Having to be a bit more conservative in these *times*.” Harp downed his scotch and then plunked his empty glass down on the desk next to Gwen’s.

“But Joss...” Gwen began energetically, refilling his glass as she spoke.

“Just gonna slow down there a little, is all. Just a little risk aversion thing, you understand. But you must be doing okay, Gwenny, huh? What with all them foreigners you been selling to past couple of years?”

Gwen screwed the top back on the bottle and cradled it in her lap. “I can’t help feeling sorry that our best works are flying overseas. There used to be important collectors in this country. Passionate people, visionaries.”

Joss picked up his refilled glass, drank it down in one go and stood. He adjusted his belt over his full belly, shoving his shirt deep into his pants. “Honey, begging doesn’t suit you,” he said with a sudden turn in tone. With that, he screwed his hat onto his head and exited on big confident strides. As he passed through the viewing room, the big man noted Rain standing

there. He touched the brim of his hat and took her in unabashedly. “Be seein’ you,” he said and strolled through the crowds and out of the gallery.

Rain pivoted around the doorway and into Gwen’s office. “*Gwen*?” she said incredulously.

Gwen looked down to find the bottle of scotch still in her hands. She returned it onto her desk. “You know, I USED to be good at this,” she commented with vague irony.

“Come on, now,” Rain said, gathering the glasses and bottle and putting them away.

Gwen didn’t notice what Rain was doing; she was so accustomed to being served.

“That man is a boor,” Gwen declared, smoothing her Missoni dress and rubbing a hand down her fine, still-shapely calf.

“No sale?” Rain asked.

“Twice a year I shipped out crates of important works so he could *view* them,” Gwen complained. She stood and came through her office door with Rain. “Funny how he always shopped for art right before one of those famous parties of his. All very impressive, showing off dozens of important works on your vacation home walls. He even had the nerve to invite me once.” Gwen shook her head. “And I actually went! The Hamptons. Everyone there thought I was raking it in.”

“I always thought he bought.”

“One. He’d return all but one. Now he won’t even do the one,” she said. “I’m getting out.”

“We’ve all heard that before,” Rain said.

“I’m serious. Rain, you should really forget about painting. It’s not a smart move right now. Don’t do it if you don’t have to.”

Rain rolled her eyes and said flatly, “I have to.”

Gwen insisted, “I mean it. Don’t do it. It’s a disease.”

“Yes, it’s a disease,” Rain echoed with a sigh.

Gwen smiled tiredly, “Alright. I’m getting senile. Just wheel me out into the storage space and cover me in bubble wrap.”

They lingered in the doorway looking out at the milling crowd.

“Thanks for this,” Rain said.

“Summer show,” Gwen said, shrugging. “Why shouldn’t you be one of them?”

“But it’s a big deal for me,” Rain replied.

“Well, I can only do it once, so don’t get too worked up about it,” Gwen said, dismissing Rain’s gratitude as if it were a kitchen moth.

Important artists never showed in the summer months in New York City. Those months were often given over to a gallery’s junior directors to curate as they like. For many artists these group shows were second-tier, but still added an important name to the resume.

“It’s changing, Rain,” Gwen said quietly. “It’s always been hard, but it’s getting harder. We had an awfully brief renaissance in this country.”

“That was a renaissance? I thought it was a *will-it-go-with-my-couch*.”

Gwen laughed, “It was a *will-it-go-with-my-stock-portfolio*.”

“And you’re sure the Medicis weren’t thinking the same thing? Do we really care why they collected?”

“Collectors shape art,” Gwen said, shaking her head lightly. “Come on, Saatchi? And yes, when collectors’ motives go off-kilter there are odd bends in the market.” She gestured out to the gallery goers. “Still, what are vacations and clothes and diamonds going to mean to generations to come?”

Rain had heard Gwen rue this same thing during all of the fifteen years she had known her. “You’re right. There won’t be much for the kids to fight over.”

“Rain,” Gwen turned away from the gallery and leaned back against the door jamb looking at her. “Don’t do it. Get a sensible job at an ad agency, raise babies and don’t torture yourself with this. I’m serious, Rain. It’s all falling apart. Even Sotheby’s is feeling it. It’s nothing about what you deserve, or your promise. Nobody cares if you make good art. Nobody can stand still long enough to see it.”

Rain shook her head, still smiling. “Gwen, I’ve heard this so many times from you. Sometimes I actually think you’re trying to talk me out of it.”

“I AM.”

“And other times I think you’re just testing me—” Rain interrupted herself. “Hey, isn’t that Esterow?”

As Gwendolyn unceremoniously left Rain’s company, and Rain watched her go, she felt her fond smile fade slowly as she wandered into the crowd.

“*Rain drops keep falling on my head!*”—the ruckus erupted behind Rain and she knew exactly who it was without turning around. Quinn and Stan, trailing their impossibly stylish entourage. “*But that doesn’t mean my eyes will soon be turning—RED! Cryin’s not for me!*” Rain turned and dipped her knees.

Stan, the singer, was, as always, sore-thumb, low-rent cool in his pork-pie hat and bowling shirt.

Quinn thrust a crazy bouquet of sticks and scraggly wild flowers at Rain.

Stan, making no effort to greet Rain, kept singing as she kissed and shook hands with their friends—an assortment of new girlfriends and boyfriends, among them three models, a writer, a cartographic conservator and a bagpiping firefighter whom they had intercepted while he was walking home from a parade.

Stan finally ended his serenade and took his turn to hug Rain, “*Nothin’ worryin’ me...*”

“How are you, Gee?” Quinn asked. “Good gig!” he added, taking in the scene with a nod.

“You did it,” Stan echoed.

“Stepmother...” Rain reminded them.

“No, no,” Quinn argued. “Professional hard-ass stepmother who would not risk reputation without seeing something real there.”

“Yeah,” Stan agreed. “You’d have gotten it eventually. Nepotism is underrated.”

“I’d be jobless,” Quinn shrugged.

“No apartment for me,” said Stan.

“I’m not ungrateful,” Rain said. “I just want some to sell and I want to get my own show somewhere else.”

“Not here?” Quinn asked.

“Nah, she can’t.”

“Why not, where is she? Let me talk to her,” Stan cried.

Rain put a hand on Stan’s shoulder. “Down boy,” she said. “She’s got her stable of artists. They’re all well established. Certain number of shows a year, all that, you know.”

“Ah, the gentleman arrives,” Stan said, poking out his hand. Karl Madlin took it in a firm handshake. One for Quinn, too. Karl, Rain’s husband, was good looking, in a very youthful-slash-successful way. And he knew it. He clashed with Stan and Quinn in his Paul Stuart, French-cuffed, dress shirt and black Crockett & Jones monkstraps. His trousers hit at the all-too-current, high-water point.

Karl was aloof around her old friends, who seemed to stiffen up around him. Rain had never gotten used to seeing her friends act that way around Karl, and she knew they didn’t like him.

"Nice to see you," Karl said, placing a hand on the back of Rain's neck.

Stan waved toward the rest of their group. "We're going to mix," he said.

"Can I put these somewhere?" Quinn asked, lifting his bouquet.

"Behind the desk, please," Rain said, "and thanks for those."

When they had left, Rain ducked out from Karl's hand. "There are some people you should be talking to," Karl said before she could speak.

The crowd had thickened to capacity now, friends and family waiting smilingly in clusters for the artists to greet them. This swirl of sociability, chatter and strained decorum made Rain tense and unsteady. She preferred being alone, sealed in her small, messy studio, living inside the sinewy lines she painted. This clean space, the dress skimming her body and baring her arms, her hair loose and all the talking and posturing. All of it felt wrong. Too much. It felt like it could all dissolve into nonsense.

"I'd be one of those people," a man behind her said and Rain turned at once and buried herself into a broad, fragrant, barrel chest. The scratchy blazer at her cheek, the perfectly pressed dark shirt by her eye, the tie, one she knew, and the ever-present PEN lapel pin she had always played with as a little girl.

"Alright," he said. As Rain stayed pressed into his chest, John Morton wrapped his arms around his daughter and Rain closed her eyes. "Take me to your paintings, show me something," he said. He understood the moment she was in and helped her cover for it.

Rain took her father's arm and led him to her canvasses.

To her, his famous face was no different than any father's—just as perfect, just as familiar, just as hers. She couldn't look at him now: he had appeared just at that moment of fear and

uncertainty. It was like looking into the face of the sun—the man who had been both mother and father to her.

Her college roommate had exclaimed upon discovering she was the daughter of John Ray Morton, “Oh, my God! He’s the reason I knew I could never write a novel!” Pressed to explain, her friend had simply described him as though it were that obvious: “Big white guy? Fisherman sweaters? Wild white hair? Wire-rimmed glasses? Pipe?”

But John Morton had never been intimidating or iconic to Rain. He was all present, all available, all focus, speaking with her from before the reaches of her earliest memory in fully adult conversation: open, questioning and respectful. He had always made her feel complete and secure.

That’s not to say he had always been there. Rain was raised by a succession of nannies while her father worked or occasionally traveled without her. But somehow he gave her the feeling that he had been there all along when he returned or emerged from his study after long hours away from her.

With her father there for her, Rain finally understood what was good about an opening.

From across the room, Rain’s works were large dark strops that looked stretched across the face of each canvas. The square construction and white of the canvas seemed like the only aspects of the artwork wrought by human hand. Instead of being tucked around the back of the work as was the convention, the canvasses just reached around to the edges, rippled, ungressoed and shredded past thick brass nails. The wood of the supports was stained and beaten to look like the surface of railroad ties. The markings on the face, however, appeared to be formed by some nesting creature—organic and random—each meandering, splitting and rejoining in its journey along the surface.

Though from afar the forms appeared to be made out of glimmering charcoal, closer inspection revealed they were built up with strands of oil paint in layers of color. What was monolithic and singular from afar became busy and suggestive up close. Rain led her father to the piece and positioned him at a close angle to it.

"It looks found," her father commented.

"Thanks," Rain said, adding, "I think."

"Found in a good way, Rain, like things you'd want to gather up."

"I think I like to make them because I want to have them around."

"That's one approach," John said cryptically.

"What do you mean?" Rain asked, a tiny bit defensive.

"An approach," John said. "Your approach, Rain Morton Madlin."

"John Ray Morton," Rain said right back at him, "I know you."

"Alright," John gave in to his daughter. "Plain and simple representation-abstraction question, that's all," he said. "I'm old school. I'm stuck with representation, but I see all the joy and meaning and discovery in that."

Karl approached. John tended to make Karl slightly deferential, but never enough to completely relinquish his claim on Rain's attentions. "Rain, can you come talk to some people over here?"

John benignly ignored Karl. Consistently. Like he was Rain's private dalliance his good manners didn't allow him to acknowledge. It wasn't disapproval. Far from it. Just a polite, knowing, couldn't-care-less. This, of course, drove Karl crazy, but the older man's status didn't give Karl the slightest opening to express it.

John gave Rain a light double pat on the shoulder while continuing to study her work and Rain turned to Karl, as though from one world to another, and said, “Sure.”

Though clearly young, the woman was angular and looked slightly bent. Rain couldn’t help but notice the dark circles under her eyes. She was dressed quite stylishly and her hair was razored and gelled, but she wore no makeup on her worn-looking face. Was it an aesthetic? A way to flaunt carelessness while projecting supremely confident attractiveness? Rain wasn’t fussy about her appearance but she wore a minimal bit of makeup, which she strangely thought a favor to those who had to look at her all day. A little coverup, some lip gloss, mascara, nothing too noticeable. This woman’s sunken eye sockets were like a dare.

“Rain, you know Penelope Caldwell-Worthington. And this is...”

“Peter,” Penelope said indicating the young man with her. (*Pee-tah*: she had a British accent.) Peter shook hands and shoved them back under the strap of his messenger bag.

By “you know,” Karl had meant by reputation. Penelope was an art star. An impressive persona he had enlisted to elevate Rain’s opening. She had won that year’s Turner Prize, which ranked her right up with the biggest celebrities, monstrous for the art world. Penelope’s art—gallery performance—consisted of recitations of current pop songs in earnest, energetic, slam-poetry style in front of caged monkeys. During these appearances, while wearing nothing but Manolos, she peeled bananas and hurled them beneath her feet. She shouted the lyrics, streamed through an ear piece, atonally into a microphone at her jaw, à la Janet Jackson circa 1990. She riffed on the lyrics, now aggressive, now pleading, now robotic. She would then stomp through the bananas and repeat some of the refrains of the songs at the

monkeys. She would keep this up for hours, switching lyrics, even mid-stanza, depending on what song was ranked number one on the pop charts at the time. Though Rain didn't catch her New York show, she saw it on YouTube and was perfectly unmoved by the theatrics. She did acknowledge, however, that the concept was appealing enough for those art-world arbiters only too ready to adore such pandering to human weakness. *Naked girl. Bananas? Heels? Score!* Rain thought.

Rain met Penelope congenially enough but felt both defiant and intimidated in her presence. Part of her admired Penelope's ambition. And she respected the rather long-lensed, utopian-based cultural criticism and the depth of self-assurance that Penelope's performances required. She was Karl's ideal, really, and though Rain knew that, there was a part of her that kind of relished her own NOT being Penelope. It was liberating to be faced by her ultimate rival. Rain had never been an art school "alternachick." Proving herself an artist never seemed to require hair dye, eyeliner and safety pins. But, at the same time, she had never felt the need to lay public claim to her sexuality. Naked, this Penelope looked as though she were wearing a tight Barbie wetsuit, her figure was so elongated and plastic looking. Even her geometrically shaped bush seemed glued on. Unreal. A little gross to Rain, though she understood it was a sort of ironic ideal.

Karl and his colleagues were talking about artists, dealers and curators. They traded players and inside knowledge like baseball fans.

Though she fully acknowledged to herself that she might have been reacting against this woman more strongly than she would have liked, Rain's attention wavered as she watched people circulating around the gallery, trying to keep herself from tallying viewers in front of her pieces against those in front of works by the other two artists. She couldn't help but feel the buzz of eyes

as they brushed by her work—the little pangs as they exchanged comments she couldn't hear.

Rain didn't know the other two artists showing. They were chosen by Philip, Gwendolyn's new director. There was one other painter and a sculptor. Or rather, one wall-based artist and a dimensional artist. The sculptor's pieces were actually just vague swellings in the gallery wall, painted over with the wall paint from Gwen's back room, used to touch up between shows. The sculptor had worked for three days in the place, fitting his plaster forms to the walls, spackling them in and then using Gwen's paint to camouflage them back into the scenery.

The other painter—the one from the front window—had the scratched gesso schtick that seemed to be getting a lot of attention. But then Rain figured most of the admirers were his own recruits. Sometimes, when witnessing the enthusiasm surrounding this sort of work, Rain felt as though she'd missed some entire micro-culture in the art world. Was it jealousy she was actually feeling?

Rain understood that the art "world" was like a network of veins. There were large and small ones crossing each other with absolutely nothing in common. They appeared to perform the same function. They pulsed at the same rate and were moved by some of the same influences. But their players coursed on independently, never mixing or even feeling anything about the other.

One of Rain's jobs at the gallery was dealing with the unsolicited submissions heaped upon them daily. Large manila envelopes addressed in all their variety, some even arriving via FedEx, to the Gwendolyn Brooker Gallery, West Broadway, New York, NY, 10012—printed labels, cartoon-like sharpie, scribbled messes, ripped and retaped.

Mostly artists sent slides in stiff plastic sheets, though increasingly it was CDs along with printed pages. Then, of course, there

were the occasional actual paintings, something that always felt vaguely embarrassing to Rain. A desperate flinging. None of these had much to do with Gwendolyn Brooker Gallery, however. Rain couldn't understand how so many people can have missed day one of art-representation-search 101: *Know what the gallery represents*. Gwen Brooker showed a very particular vein of work: social realism. But, however narrow her area of interest, Gwen always managed to commit to the tradition of the summer show, which helped keep the mountains of slides coming in. That, and her irritating habit of sometimes grabbing a pile of submissions and writing carefully considered advice back to the artists, listing galleries they should approach and other avenues they might pursue. Invaluable information for those who were able to recognize what they had been granted when facing, ultimately, her rejection.

One of the great art dealers who dominated the New York art world during the latter half of the century, Gwen had emerged from a line of powerful professional women in New York: Edith Halpert, Betty Parsons, Terry Dintenfass, Joan Washburn, Louise Ross. Some were mentors, some competitors. But characters, all of them. Confident, intellectual taste-makers who appeared to be passing into history. Even Gwen was beginning to talk more frequently of retiring to England with John, though both John and Rain laughed at her whenever she said that. The art was part of her, the artists like her children, even though most were her own age or older. She would never stop promoting them, never undersell them or resist buying up their works when they became available.

If the submissions included the required Self-Addressed-Stamped Envelope, Rain would open it and push the whole sad packet right back in, sliding a card in after it with Gwen's polite pass and heartfelt encouragement regarding their efforts. It fascinated Rain to see the range of work out there at which so many

people were earnestly plugging away. Much of it was just plain bad. Some of it was alright, though her standards slid downwards as long days of this task dragged on. But, most sadly of all, sometimes she came across work that was actually very good, which was of course rejected, anyway.

The part of her that just loved the visual was made hopeful by finding interesting work out there. She delighted that a human mind and hand had conspired to create something refreshing and thoughtful. But there was that little part of her that was nervous when she came across work she liked. Such a tangle of feeling. Hopeful yet left behind. Hadn't she missed something? Wasn't she making that classic neophyte mistake of misinterpreting her own beginner discoveries as interesting for other people to see? The burst of pleasure she found in good paintings was always followed closely by those dark fears. Fears she willed against blooming into jealousy or paranoia.

Practicing serious effort in art meant excluding things. The moment brush or stick or finger or knife hits canvas or wood or masonite or stone or object, exclusions have been made. Materials, scale, subject, style—these are all mostly determined from the first mark. But these exclusions are not always comfortable. It is the decision made, the selective leavings behind—that is the dirty work which we admire in artists.

“Where are you, Rain?” Karl smiled uncharacteristically.

“Sorry,” Rain said, coming back.

“You know Penelope is here jurying at Pollack Krasner.”

“Is that right?” Rain asked. “How do you like it?”

“Quite disappointing, I should say,” she replied archly.

Karl interrupted, “Rain knows all about that, don't you Rain? She handles the slush pile around here.”

“Oh, my God,” Penelope effused. “It's simply amazing to me the shit we have to slog through in there. It's like none of

them has any idea what's going on in the art world. Honestly, I have no idea how these people can believe that their chalky-looking portraits of nudes with their Cezanne brushstrokes and their Matisse colors are just going to jolt us out of our seats," she laughed. "It *is* despicable. Or the glowing candy-land treacle storybook scenes... I'm not joking." Her words piled out one on top of the other.

Rain waited until Penelope had concluded her offering. Rain was unsurprised that none of them had said a word about her work. It just wasn't done. The most you might get was hearty congratulations, never comments about the work to your face.

"Yeah," Rain said non-committally. "I don't know; I guess I find it heartening."

"Heartening?" Penelope's accent was elevating as she got more animated. "It's absolutely depressing!" she moaned, allowing herself a good look up and down at Rain in her thrift store dress. "Rather pathetic, I should think."

Rain smiled at her. "I guess I see it as a good thing—people making art at all. I don't think about it from a business point of view, I guess. Gwen just isn't going to take on anything new, so it's not even a matter of that. I just see it as something people are doing and getting pleasure from."

"Yes, well...they might keep it to themselves," Penelope quipped cheekily.

"We better get going," Peter said. First thing out of his mouth. American, evidently.

"It was a pleasure," Penelope said to Rain, as though she'd been thanked. Rain was left a little rattled.

Rain watched her kiss Karl on both cheeks. She was irritated by Penelope, but resisted the burden that disliking a person requires. How this person so homely of face could be so supremely confident and superior? But Rain refused to engage in

those sorts of judgments. She didn't believe in them and so tried to nip them off before they could bloom into a whole thought about this woman's skeletal thinness and wide, high breasts and perfect slope of hip all shown off in draped linen and ruched silk. Something in her ashen, unprimed face was belligerent. Something in her embrace and exploitation of popular culture, her exploitation of the utterly unexploitable. Nope. I can't go there, she demanded of herself.

Rain rejoined Karl in the increasing crowd.

"I'm going to head out for drinks with them. You want to join us later?"

"Uh, Gwen's?" Rain asked.

"Oh, God, yeah," Karl said. "Totally forgot. I'll...uh..."

"Go ahead. Just meet us there around nine, okay?"

"Hey," Karl said. "Did I say congratulations?"

Rain gave him a single peck on one cheek.

PURPLE

*Purple haze all in my brain
Lately things just don't seem the same
Actin' funny, but I don't know why
'Scuse me while I kiss the sky.*

—JIMI HENDRIX

Purple is richness beyond measure, the sensuousness of wine-stained lovers' lips and the quenching sweetness of grape and berry. Purple is also injury and death: the florid purple of a bruise, the darkening face of a choking victim, the opalescence of rotting flesh.

The term "purple prose" was coined by Horace, referencing the pretension of sewing bits of purple into garments to feign wealth. It is fussy, overwrought, and nobody's falling for it, anyway. Purple dyes were more precious than gold at that time, so faking it in this way was the ancient equivalent of dripping in cubic zirconia and gold plate. There's a double layer of humiliation. That it's fake, and that you're working so hard to appear to be something that is false to begin with.

Purple is royalty, a connotation that has everything to do with the extreme value of the pigments available for cloth-dying in antiquity. Tyrian purple was the original purple dye, created from tiny, snail-like mollusks. Only the super-rich royalty could afford such expensive stuff. It was the true holy grail the pigment-making alchemists worked toward—the gold created from the "philosopher's stone."

Though found in nature both in flora and precious stones, purple was the most difficult to reproduce as a colorant. Thus purple as a moniker persists to this day in its air of rarity and oddness, per purple cow.

Some theories hold that the earth was once more purple than green, that a purple-appearing, light-sensitive molecule called retinal was more commonly found than our familiar green chlorophyll. Could this explain the “wine dark seas” of the *Odyssey* and the many other confusing color terms in ancient languages? Perhaps this explains the more intricate delineation of indigo and violet after blue in our essential, and older, breakdown of primary colors in Newton’s R.o.y. G. B.i.v. spectrum as opposed to the more current-day color wheel’s triad (red yellow blue) and hexagonal wheel (adding the complements orange, green and purple), with it’s one simple “purple” now comprising the stretch at that end of visible energy.

The Greeks described colors ranging from dark to light, rather than hue to hue along the rainbow. Was this simply a matter of descriptive terms, of translation? Like the proverbial dozens of words the Inuits use for snow compared to our own single word? Perhaps we are color Inuits, lovingly distinguishing shades where ancient peoples just didn’t see meaningful distinctions. Could we have evolved out of color blindness over the millennia? Or did our color sensitivity just shift toward another end of the spectrum?

Left over from the days when the river and then the train were the only reasonable modes of industrial transport in the Hudson Valley, the riverfront still sported oil yards, abandoned factories, chain-link fences and unusable super-fund sites all along its banks. Even as economies picked up, many of these sites were slow to be transformed into waterfront beauties, though a few spots are notable exceptions: the old Nabisco factory in Beacon, now home to the fabulously minimal and grand scale Dia:Beacon; a number of green spa and condo sites in development and the

ever-increasing number of “open space” projects reclaiming river properties as their prior stewards die off and their heirs can’t afford to maintain them.

This type of economic fluke had allowed James Morrow, grandson of founder James Birch Morrow, who had brought the works over from England in the 1920s, to inherit and resuscitate the business his father had failed at so desperately. Morrow still owned a little property around the small factory building, but in the thick woods immediately surrounding Highland Morrow were properties his grandfather had collected, and his spendthrift father had sold off, including an insane asylum (erstwhile rehab clinic now uninhabited), a defunct monastery and no fewer than five churches. Watching his father fall dangerously close to losing the business, James finally quit college in England, married and brought his young, beautiful, Norwegian wife with him. In 1964, at the tender age of twenty-two, James took the helm of the foundering little company and all its mysterious recipes and equipment. The land was nearly all sold off by then, only the small caretaker’s house remaining, and the new country estates were beginning to pop up in the woods around them. James, his wife and father installed themselves in the little house where James’ father set about drinking himself to death with a good deal of efficiency.

James was young enough to have been a part of the hippie generation, but his father’s destruction of everything his beloved grandfather had built made him uncharacteristically practical and unsentimental. Rather than wallowing in the utopian ideals of a better world, James’ energies were honed and focused on keeping alive a centuries-old craft and business. Even through the sorrows and tragedies that dogged his young life, somehow James managed to make the business a success.

Gwen and Rain stood in the kitchen of Gwen's loft. Even though Rain's father lived there with Gwen, Rain still thought of the place as Gwen's. She had owned this cavernous and exquisitely decorated loft since the earliest days of Soho's gentrification in the early 1970s. Gwen and John had dated for several years before marrying ten years ago, at which point Rain was already on her own.

Gwen's loft blended outsider art objects with sleek, modernist furniture and, of course, her own artists' works were peppered throughout. The narrow hallway into the kitchen was crowded with portraits of Gwen by most of them. Gwen sitting demurely in Henry Chilton's distinctive elongated style. Gwen laughing in Rip Goulding's dark, splattery markings. Gwen's hands by Jacob Houseman, her lover for many years. And Gwen dancing with John by Stephan Carr, her youngest artist who was most like a son to her. In it, Gwen looks directly at the viewer, her chin raised proudly and her arm crossing possessively in front of John. He holds her passively, his arms wide to her and the viewer. His demure smile and his downward gaze give his expression a kind of benign satisfaction. Rain always loved this portrait of her father and Gwen. It spoke so lyrically and gracefully of the happy and evenhanded aspects of their relationship.

Karl sauntered into the kitchen having let himself in. "How are the *gallerists*?" Karl said. He took Rain's head and gave it a possessive peck. Karl seemed to think a slight sarcasm was the same thing as easy-going flirtatiousness.

Gwen grimaced slightly with her back to him. "Karl, you always know just what to say to cheer me up." She busied herself opening boxes of crackers for the party she was throwing that night.

"Ah, come on, Gwen, if anyone can make the art bubble last, it's you," he chuckled.

“You’re lucky I adore your wife or I don’t think we could be friends,” Gwen said in a chipper voice.

“Don’t worry, Madam, you may have seen the last of me for a while. I’m off to London—the academy calls.” This was a fellowship they both knew well. A tiny flicker of appreciation of what this meant flitted across Gwen’s face, but only Rain caught it.

Gwen set her face into a natural smile and turned it toward Karl. “How wonderful for you.”

Turning her back to him again, Gwen muttered, “How convenient...”

Karl shrugged, finished with his mission, which was simply to let Gwen know this piece of his good fortune. He picked at an hors d’oeuvres platter and left the kitchen, passing John Morton in the doorway. Karl watched the older man enter the kitchen, seeming to want to turn back. But then he appeared to think better of it, choosing the effortless, breezy exit over the awkward double back.

John gave Rain a warm smooch and, passing around Gwen, took her hand and sat down on a kitchen stool just behind her. He played with his wife’s hand lightly while the three of them talked, ignoring the dozen or so people out in the living room.

“So Dad, I was thinking about what you said at the opening about artworks and books and I just really don’t see it. Unless you’re talking about those massive, storytelling, narrative, formal paintings with troops and generals or tableaux...or maybe diptychs, triptychs...”

“No, no, no,” John said. “I’m not talking at all about how they’re read, or how they’re received...or, or their *literary content* for God’s sake. I’m talking about the experience of making the thing. The discovery and the pleasure I’m talking about is the artist’s.”