

The Color of Warm and Cold

by Paul de Denus

I exit the building onto River Avenue and flip my collar high around my ears, pulling my neck in like a turtle in his shell. The café is only half a block downstream but I'm a frozen fish when I arrive. At the counter, I order a large mocha house blend and wheat toast.

"To go," I tell the girl, "with extra butter please."

She is shy and plump and moves like deliberate molasses. Her name is Chloe or Joni or something like that. She doesn't wear a nametag and I can't understand Mosca when he says her name, lays his bad English on her. Her straw-blond hair is short with a splendid slash of emerald veering across the one side; I imagine her as an artist in the outside world. She wears wide rimmed pink glasses - 'SW#6857 Pink Moment' upon checking my paint chip sample book. They frame her beautiful warm eyes. I wonder if she knows how beautiful and warm they are or if anyone has ever told her that. 'Burnt Sienna', I'd say, a standard color but not standard for her by any means.

She doesn't look me directly in the eye, which tells me she may like me. Or maybe she is self-conscious about my eye, the left one that droops a bit. It's just lazy, that's all. I think she may find it rude to stare. She exudes a certain style, displays a confident palette. I can tell by the way she serves customers, efficient with a clean counter and orderly napkins with silverware.

Man, it's snowing hard, the flakes the size of downed feathers. It's as though a million angels exploded out there. The city plowed the streets yesterday and created huge snowdrifts along the walkways. There aren't too many fools out in the cold. The ones that are, slip along in the narrow groves that act as walkways. I damn near break my neck maneuvering the icy channel back to work and it's not because I slipped; I'm laughing too hard. Up ahead, two

approaching people have fallen. They stand again, the man and woman haplessly groping each other. They're drunk as hell. Two steps and he is down. The woman bends and yells at him, expecting something impossible. He rises like a zombie, barely stable, and then it's her turn. She falls straight-legged sideways like a tree in the forest. My eyes hurt. I shouldn't laugh. I may be next. Tears freeze like clear glue on my face and I can't see. I dab my eyes with the sleeve of my stiff overcoat. It leaves a glistening stain.

I enter the building and Claire is waiting at the bottom of the stairs. She's leaving for an appointment. She's decided to have a cigarette first. The most interesting thing about Sandra is her hair. It's jet black and shrouds around her white oval face like an egg in a nest. It cascades down, broadens her shoulders. It's quite beautiful really, even when it's up.

"I wish we could run away," she says, blowing smoke against the window.

I nod and look at my feet. The snow melts around my shoes, bleeding an even-spreading puddle.

Claire has a boyfriend. I've never met the guy. I never ask too many questions. I wonder what he doesn't have that I possess. I wonder what she sees in me? She hasn't said. I'm cool with that. I work in the paint department. I'm not that colorful. I've been there five years and I'm not even manager.

Claire's a nice girl, smart and attractive in an ordinary way. She holds a safe managerial job - executive assistant. She's been with the company for almost a year. We hang out a bit, privately. She prefers it that way. We've never been intimate though I have seen her in a bathing suit.

She lives in a two-story house on a decent street with shady trees. She rents the bottom floor suite. I wonder why the boyfriend of three years doesn't live with her. The landlady, a Ukrainian woman occupies the upstairs and is particular to guests hanging about. "He's a *nice* boy," Claire says up the stairs and a door closes. She gives me a smirk.

It's a blistering summer day, the kind where the humidity wears your skin out, squeezes your body like a wetsuit.

"I'm going to change," Claire says. "Make yourself comfy."

Her apartment is ordinary with dark wood floors, a plain taupe carpet. The walls are a darker taupe and pictureless. She doesn't entertain much of a color palette. A couch and chair look new, sleek black, straight from a CB2 catalog. The coffee table isn't clear. It's covered with travel magazines.

Claire exits her bedroom wearing a bikini. It's celadon green, though brighter, 'SW#6705 High Strung', I'd say. A saturated splash of yellow overtakes its straps. It shouts 'SUMMER!' It screams 'you can fuck me!' I love that color; I could give you its mixed color values. I've never considered her like this. No, that's not true. Her achromatic breasts sway freely inside the full halter and I see her hips dance, suggesting that I do something. She stands with her knees turned slightly inward and she bows as she wrestles her hair up into a ponytail. "My, it's hot out there." She glances up sideways, a coy smile on her lips. "Don't you think?"

"I wish we could run away. Go some place warmer, different. Away from here."

She stares out onto the street, finishes her cigarette. I wait.

"Would you go?"

I wonder if it's a question or a request.

The brown bag holding my toast is weightless, my coffee a cold mocha. Chloe will be happy to give me a refill. The drunken couple has arrived and stopped in front of the door. Their arms rotate, pinwheel through the air. Stiff hands claw for purchase. They grasp at snowflakes, floating angel's wings. Then they fall.

