

THE ARTISTE
by
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The paint chip called it "terracota dream". On the wall it looked like "tangerine scream". This was not at all what I had in mind for the guest room. Anyone daring to stay overnight in this room would surely have to be exorcised in the morning.

"Hugooooo!!!!....." I whined, "now it's tangeriiiiine". It was the fourth color we'd been through, preceded by Bazooka pink, Tweety Bird yellow and It Slimed Me green. I had just wanted a soft, muted color that would be innocuously inconspicuous. Sedately understated. Subtly subliminal. A backdrop. An ambience. Not a hot poke in the eyeball. "I can't get it riiiiight", I wailed as I slumped to the drop cloth covered floor, overcome with a flood of self-pity.

Nothing was going to plan. The most amazing accomplishment in my life and I was miserable. This place was mine, I bought it, I owned it. It was gorgeous. Or it would be if I could only find the right colors. And if I could only put things away, which I couldn't because there were still a hoard of people parading around the house, fixing, painting, hammering, painting, sawing, painting. The contractor was finally gone, but after three weeks the painter was still in the house, faux-ing everything in sight. The dining room, which was supposed to be a rich golden mango color, was more of a frenzied French's mustard. The living room, hopefully setting out to be pale parchment, was an acid lemon trip.

I sat on the floor of the guest room at the back of the house, surveying the cascade of riotous colors that vomited forth in visual cacophony toward the front door. Not only weren't they the right color, they didn't even go well together. I had envisioned a gentle, elegant retreat from the riot of the city. Instead I had Bellevue for wayward colors. Only the bedroom upstairs was great. It was perfect. It was exactly what I wanted, and I got it on the first try. It was, of course, white. Pure white. Perfect white. No mattes, no glazes, no faux, no nothing. I tried picturing the rest of the house so perfectly blessed. Simple, clean, neat. It could be done. It probably should be done. Then I imagined Hugo's face if I told him I was covering all his endless hours of sponging with white. And I knew it will never be done. Not as long as Hugo was alive.

"Where are those damn paint chips," I mumbled half-heartedly, preferring to continue the visual assault than endure the rantings of a half mad Hungarian "artiste". After every color he would stand in the middle of the room, arms in the air like Evita, waving a paintbrush that dripped down his arm in designer color veins, and exclaim "Johanna, come look! It is perfect, no?" And on my expression, "Just a couple more coats...It will be perfect!" At last count there had been 73 coats and it was as close to perfection as I was. To say I was

disheartened would be like describing the Grand Canyon as a pothole. Everywhere I looked were colors that made my skin crawl. My beautiful antique furniture was lumped together under canvas drop cloths in huge, shapeless mottled mounds. The stunning wooden floors were now speckled with mistakes. "Water based", Hugo would chuckle in response to my protests. "No problem!" Between the speckles, the plaster dust, the drop cloths and the boxes, I felt like I was at a refugee camp for new homeowners. Everything I saw was mine, but not mine, within sight but out of reach. I moved about the vast space like a ghost, witnessing the chaos but unable to change anything.

"Johanna, come look!" Hugo yelled. I dragged my weary body up off the floor and followed the sound of his voice to the dining room. There, perched precariously on the top of the ladder, paintbrush in the air, was the source of my torment, grinning majestically. One little push, I thought. It would be so easy...I walked jerkily toward him, short circuiting between the urge to tackle and calming thoughts of clouds and cheese cake.

"It's beautiful! It's rich!" he gloated.

"It's on fire, Hugo" I whimpered. "It's the fires of Hell." He had toned down the mustard with some version of terracotta and the result was a cauldron of flames. People will get cooked in here, I thought.

"No problem!" he beamed. "We add burnt umber, it goes more brown." The problem was I wasn't sure anymore what color I wanted. Originally it had been something light, in the golden tones. That idea had been dragged through the golds, ochres, and reds, and from the looks of it they were headed toward mud.

"How about white?" I offered, tentatively, hoping against hope.

"Wonderful idea!" he exclaimed. "You know, you have a good eye. Maybe you should be a designer!" I couldn't believe how easy that had been. All that agonizing over some imaginary artistic temper tantrum, and here he had thought it was a great idea. An hour later I returned to see the results; he had "sponged" white over everything, rendering it, in fact, mud.

"It is soft, muted. Very pleasant!" he chirped. I hung my head sadly. Maybe if I just agreed with him he would go away, and I could go to town with my own roller, obliterating the last three weeks with a clean, uncomplicated coat of pristine white. Then of course, there was the possibility he'd drop by some day to see how his work was wearing or to show it off to some up and coming little artiste who would make someone else's life a living hell in the near future. I shuddered. Walls weren't like an ugly vase from Aunt Bertha that you pull out of the closet when she comes a-calling. You couldn't just dust them off and say, voila. My head spun at the thought of spies sent by Hugo, peeking into the windows to

make sure the art was intact. Armies of Hugo acolytes storming the place with brushes, rollers, sponges, carrying trays of tiny plastic bottles filled with tints in umber, sienna, vermilion, ocher and all their burnt cousins, restoring the violated walls of sponged inspiration. I smiled vaguely and tried to sound convincing.

"It's perfect. Just what I wanted. Soft, muted, pleasant."

"Yes, I see. You hate it. No problem. We add burnt cerise." He could add burnt bat guano for all I cared. I retreated defeatedly into my perfectly white bedroom upstairs. Maybe I would stay there for a week and when I came down it would be done, and it would be perfect. The guest room would be inviting, the dining room would be elegant, the living room would be a sanctuary of serenity. One day the phone would ring unexpectedly and a deep female voice with an English accent would say "I'm Frieda from Perfect Home Interiors, and I've heard that your walls are absolutely stupendous. We'd like to feature them in our February issue. You know, it's nearly impossible to get a perfect finish on walls, so I'm just dying to see yours." As a result of that article I would start receiving calls from frantic new homeowners who had just wanted a little color in their lives and are now experiencing faux freak out. Could I help. Could it be fixed. I would begin traveling, eventually helping chateaux owners in France find the perfect tone of verdigris for their dungeon's wrought iron. And with me, of course, my priceless artiste, always at my side. Hugo. I sprang upright in a paroxysm of dread, my head feeling like my brain had stuck to my palate. The hot summer air was suffocating and the drone of a weedwacker whined in the distance. I didn't even remember falling asleep. Perhaps it was all a dream? Frieda AND Hugo AND the French's mustard walls. Wouldn't that be nice. I leaned back on my pillows and smiled contentedly at the thought, holding on to it as far as reality would stretch. Then that sound like nails on a blackboard sprang me bolt upright again. It was the sound of reality.

"Johanna! Come! It is fixed! It is beautiful!" Hugo roared dramatically. With a sigh as heavy as steam in a Turkish bath I heaved myself off the bed. This too shall pass, I repeated to myself as I shuffled down the stairs toward whatever perversion of color awaited me. It will have to come to an end, and maybe this is it. Perhaps MY vision of what it should be has finally materialized. Maybe, and my step picked up just a tiny bit, maybe oh maybe this really is it. At the bottom of the stairs I paused and took a deep breath, inhaling the aroma I could no longer smell. I prayed a short prayer and stepped into the room. There he was, paint brush in hand at the top of his ladder, grinning his Hungarian grin. It was smooth. It was elegant. It was soft. I blinked, I stared, I was afraid to look away for fear it would transform into Fig Newton brown. It was, in fact, finally perfect. An enormous flood of emotion swelled in my chest causing my lips to tremble and my tear ducts to fill. Thank you, thank you, thank you I chanted silently.

"Now let's look at the living room!" Hugo emoted triumphantly, bounding off the ladder

in a cloud of plaster dust and paint chips. I took another deep breath and slowly followed him. Whatever awaited me in the next room, I reminded myself, no matter the color, and despite the drop cloths, buckets, brushes and cans, this too shall pass.