

## 2021 WINTER WRITING CONTEST ENTRY 8

### Horse Firetruck Apple Sky

“What is the color of seashell?”

I made a loud *hmm* noise as I scanned the dozens of paint swatches spread across the living room rug. If Tea Olive kept this new interest up, she would have the entire apartment covered in no time. That’s if I could find more colors. I picked up a few squares and held them out to her. Tea Olive studied the four squares of white, beige, pink, and brown in my hand before taking them. She set them on the velvet seat of the nearest chair and sighed. She was dissatisfied. She leaned back hard into the chair and almost knocked out it’s leg that had been recently ducted back together. It was a scavenged piece like the rest of the furniture.

“It’s a start,” I said as I headed back to the kitchen where the macaroni was threatening to boil over. “Seashell is a tough one! That has to be hundreds of colors.”

Tea Olive was always grumpy when she didn’t have all of the colors that would make up an imaginary object of her choosing. I heard her mumbling and did my best to ignore her until she started shouting.

“Why can’t we get more colors yet?” Tea Olive cried.

When I turned around she was standing behind me with a face reddened by frustration and too much time sitting by the space heater. “You know why. We can’t go through this every single time we can’t get something you want. Do you know how many things *I* want?”

She kicked the kitchen cabinet with the tiny toe of her boots. “I don’t care,” she whined.

I let it slide because she and I both knew she could do worse and this was more a release of anger than the start of a violent campaign. “You don’t?” I continued. “Well, do you know who cares even less about what either of us wants?”

Tea Olive let her whole head loll back on her shoulders and moaned. It was the new form of rolling her eyes at me. Lately she exaggerated anything she could. I think it was her way of adding some drama to our solitary life in our small apartment. Did she not see enough drama out there? I had imagined us in a bigger space for a long-term hideout, but more square footage meant more windows, doors, vents, and thus a whole slew of security risks. Smaller was manageable, if too cozy for a four year old and her mother.

I turned Tea Olive around and walked her to the balcony curtains. I turned off the lantern and pulled the thick, dark fabric back so we could see down into the whitened courtyard far below. Blanketed in light snow, half a dozen zombies were shuffling their way around the frosty, moss-covered fountain. They left tracks in the snow that exposed the red brick underneath. We had chosen the colors for the courtyard from the paint swatches just yesterday. We didn’t include the zombies. We did not want to imagine their colors.

Tea Olive gave the zombies a small wave before I wrenched the curtain closed again and turned the light back on.

I pointed to the colors on the rug and said, “Pick something easier.”

“Easier,” she repeated as she kneeled down and swirled the swatches up.

“Yeah, pick something I can really see,” I said. “I can’t remember the last time I saw the ocean.”

The color swatches had been a boon from a recent scouting mission. I had found a giant paint swatch display crushed under an industrial refrigerator. I snatched up every color I could before darting to safety behind a dumpster. A pair of zombies had shuffled past, sniffed my way, then moved in the opposite direction. Dumpster's usually hid human scent pretty well. Never thought the scent of trash would smell like safety.

Tea Olive played with the swatches nonstop after that. We spent hours shouting out objects and finding their colors in the giant pile: Horse. Firetruck. Apple. Sky. It was endless fun assigning colors to the universe. I didn't think I'd be good at normal homeschooling and there wasn't any point to that anyway with no real schools, jobs, and well—human society. I would teach her through color and conversation I decided.

I cut open the packet of cheese sauce and placed it between the sauce pan and its lid to squeeze out every drop onto the wet noodles. We were doing well with our rationing this month, so I indulged in adding a tablespoon of salsa. I dished out two bowls and carried them into the living room where Tea Olive sat pooled over her colors in deep concentration.

“What are you trying to find now?” I asked.

Tea Olive reached for the bowl without taking her eyes from the colors. She looked so serious as if when she looked away the right color might disappear. “I'm looking for the color of escape,” she said. “Do you know what it looks like?”

I looked around our tiny home that held my tiny daughter and our tiny life. I've never known anything about escape.

“What about you?” She asked in a pleading voice. “Do you have a color? Do I?”

I looked down at the colors for a solid minute before I looked into her dark eyes. “Tea, if life has a color, it is not here.”