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Dark Red

by Shevlyn Byroo

Instinct is a marvellous thing. It can neither be explained nor ignored.

The oddest quiet came over me. All thoughts in my tumbling 9 year old brain stopped. I inhaled and knew that tonight was going to be a night I would remember for the rest of my life. It was in the air. I knew it was going to be bad but I also knew that we were hurtling towards it and nothing could stop it.

Even now more than 30 years later, I think about the clues. Were there clues? How did I know that there would be blood, so much dark red blood...?

In many ways, it was like every other Friday night. My stepfather would get paid and would stumble down the drive way, late and minus his wages, now in the deep pockets of the shebeen owner and his wife.

The atmosphere in our house from about 5 would be stiff and unforgiving, like the stiff collar of my church dress. Anything would set my mother off. I treaded on the square linoleum tiles not touching the lines with my bare feet. The floors were alive with landmines.

He arrived, my Mother started her usual tirade.

“Where’s the money?” she would ask pointlessly.

He would stare back at her, slack-jawed and bewildered, as if he did not understand how he had got here at all.

I wished she would stop belittling him, it only made him angry but it seemed to give her satisfaction. She grew bolder, bigger, fiercer. If I could only clamp my hands over her mouth, he would go to bed, maybe even sing a sad Jim Reeves song but he would be peaceful and feel loved. We would be safe and sleep in our own beds tonight.

That night she pushed him too hard, all the buttons at once. He broke the windows with a brick and got back in. Locking him out was more dangerous than having him in, even I knew that.

It fed the beast within.

My sister got in the way. I watched, my eyes like saucers as her blood made a swirling pattern like a rainbow made of drops of her blood, on the wall. She screamed in pain, the blood gushed out from her nose in a never-ending stream. I had never heard her make that sound before.

I could smell the metallic smell of blood, glittering shards of glass on the square linoleum tiles mixed with soil from potted plants. The flashing lights of the police van as they drove away with him, peering all forlorn from the back. Then the ambulance. Her flimsy nightie see-through apart from where her dark red blood was drying. I did not cry. What would I cry for?

Perhaps all those nights led to that one, the way one plus one makes two. Or maybe the terror in the heart of a child comes in only one colour. Dark red.

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