

“White Lead”

Heavy are our hands that carry the weight of lead. Heavy are our minds, our hearts, and our limbs that we drag across cobbled stones as we head south to our homes. The salty breeze from the port tears through our eyes, so we dare not look into that direction. We did not see the last metal boat dock for the day, the day Lilith came to town. From that boat Master Tom Sommerfield disembarked and carried a bundle of fine blankets on one shoulder and a leather satchel across the other. He walked north, past the quiet marketplace, and past the town square. There were a few women whispering on the bench, and two older gentlemen playing chess in the corner, watching the Master with his blankets. The blankets were from another land. They were stitched with orange as bright as the bare sun, a red as vibrant as arterial blood, and a blue as mysterious as the deep ocean. Then they noticed a little gold hand reach out, and, with a shift of the Master’s arm as he reached for the apartment keys, the blankets slightly fell to reveal a tangle of black hair. The ladies observed and then whispered some more. They could not speak because their faces and necks were heavy with white lead. It grounded their throats, allowing only gasps molded into words with thin, cracked lips.

Mrs. Clark was ready in the dark stone kitchen, watching the stew simmer over the open fire, when the Master walked in with the child in his arms. “Ada,” he said, “I need you to take care of her, because I do not know how.” The clock rang dissonant in the square and resonated with the walls in the loft. “Her name is _____,” he said, which, to Mrs. Clark’s delicate ears, was unpronounceable garble unbecoming a lady, so she immediately said, “Oh, no, no, no! We must call her by another name.” She took the girl from the Master’s arms and saw the little girl’s face. She had eyes like dark coals ready to

burn, muscles like thin cables running along her jaw and neck, and wrought iron hair that refused to lay flat, all which terrified Mrs. Clark. “Her name must be Lilith,” she said, “for this girl can only be the Devil’s child.”

The Master was hurriedly unpacking his things from the satchel. “Very well, very well, Lilith it is, though she is no devil’s child,” he said. A thought crossed Mrs. Clark’s mind, which she promptly dismissed, since the Master was more of the reserved type. He was a young man, of twenty-four years of age, with unkempt brown hair that covered his eyes. He was tall, like his father, but had narrow shoulders and a long neck, out of which his Adam’s apple thrust forward to support his skull. On warm nights she would retire to her bedchamber behind the kitchen of the apartment, minding her own business, but could only hear the Master in his study shuffling papers into odd hours of the night, and when she awoke to make his morning tea, he would be there, still in his chair but prostrate upon the dark wooden desk, fast asleep.

No, this girl was too different to be of any possible relation.

The Master grabbed a paper, and put on his coat. “Please, look after her now. I need to go down to the factory to check on the men,” he said, and left. Mrs. Clark took the little girl to the washing room, and prepared a bath.

For ten years Mrs. Clark looked after Lilith.

At first, the girl spoke no English, so Mrs. Clark taught her how. She would point to different things in the house as she went about her usual chores, and Lilith would giggle at every new word. She learned her own name. “Lilith,” she would say, letting out the letters with a hiss, “Lilith, Lilith, Lilith.”

When she was old enough, Mrs. Clark taught Lilith how to help around the house. At the five clangs of the clock tower in the morning, she would jostle the girl awake. Their first matter of business was a peculiar request of the Master's. There were ten empty wood buckets left out on the step leading up to the building, and, in the cold morning, Mrs. Clark would stack them into each other and her and the girl would spend time at the creek, filling each one up. They would arrange the buckets, now full, along the outside wall of the building facing the street. At six o'clock, when the postman arrived and handed Mrs. Clark the mail, he would load up the buckets on the back of his cart, and, gently coaxing the horse to a slow trot, would ride to the next building.

The rest of the day required chores of a more regular type. Together they would sweep the study, wash the kitchen tile, tidy the bedrooms, and clean the soot from the stove until their arms and hair were covered in dead black.

Sometimes the girl would play in the rolling hills west of town, not far from Mrs. Clark's watch. The yellow grass would tickle her skin, and her hair caught dead leaves like a rake.

The girl began to despise Sunday evenings, for it was Sunday when Mrs. Clark forced her to bathe. Shivering naked in the cool, soapy water, still around her like frosted glass, Mrs. Clark would push her hair underwater, hoping that it would relax and fall flat.

Every week Mrs. Clark engaged in this battle, but Lilith's hair would not yield. It would shred any sponge and break every boar brush. Once, Mrs. Clark even called on the neighbor, Jane Grace, to help her put as much weight on the hair. It was no use, since Miss Grace, although young, was extremely frail. Her face was caked with white powder, and her thin blond hair stretched across the scalp like a spider's web. It was Miss Grace,

however, who suggest Mrs. Clark use a white steel brush. The brush did wonders, and removed the black rust, revealing the shining raw iron underneath and making the metal workable. She would put all her weight into the hair, bending against the porcelain walls of the bathtub, to straiten it out.

After several washes, the girl's hair began to rust. First it would rust at the tips, which would turn the hair brittle. Then the whole top of the head began to rust, and Mrs. Clark was able to coax Lilith's hair into a braid. She had to do it gently, for the hair would break if she pulled too hard.

One day Mrs. Clark found the mark: a red stain in Lilith's undergarments. Lilith would be a young lady soon. To Mrs. Clark's horror, however, hair, like small black wires, began to grow over the child's arms and legs and chest and face. Mrs. Clark went back to the market and bought another steel scrubber. Every night she would order Lilith to undress in the bath, take one of the girl's legs in her lap, and start scrubbing. She would scrub until the black hairs were uprooted, until Lilith's skin would crack and bleed. Then, she would teach Lilith how to apply the white lead power on her face, and how to cover the wounds.

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The artist laid on the black woven cloth, in a painful reverie, below his latest painting. His name was William Fletcher, his brushes were scattered about, and his pallet, caked with white, rested against his ribs. He should be helping Evelyn pull out the latest batch of white, but his legs and arms felt pinned to the earth below him. Above him were dark floor boards that bended down as men walked over them, probably heaving boxes of metal. They were in the Frosted Den: the paint making part of the factory.

He and Evelyn would take the raw lead, already cut by the men into cakes, and carry it into the boiler room with clay pots. The heat would stick to their faces, rising from the floor covered in warm dung. They would place each pot carefully into the shit, making sure it was completely covered, and set fire to the floor. By then end of the day, the top layer of the dung would mostly be charred and the fire put out, and the clay pots were ready to remove. In each was the most brilliant, buttery white. It had the face of snow, yet its weight would bore into the palm of the artist's hand.

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The Lady Jane Grace had not yet been buried when the frenchman moved into her apartment. His name was Dion Basile de Toussaint III, and he came strictly for business. Mrs. Clark thought he was a fine man, regal, who walked through the streets with bright colored coats. The Master thought him pompous. He had a taste for art, fine wine, and well-manicured beards, the latter of which he insisted was the mark of a truly cultured man.

On the dull morning of his arrival, Mrs. Clark woke up to a rumbling commotion and a faint hint of a woody scent. *Good God!* she thought, *don't these people know an old woman needs her sleep?* But curiosity overtook her, and she got out of bed and dressed while the walls shook. The noise was coming from the outside hallway. She made her way to the heavy double doors in the front of the loft and pulled them back with all her weight, and found two young men struggling to push a giant armoire up the wooden staircase. And oh, the smells! It was as if, by miracle, in this dark and dusty hallway, an invisible garden of the most exotic specimens had grown overnight.

They came from the Monsieur's crates: the result of soaps, fragrances, and creams of the most luxurious quality, primarily for shaving. Even for weeks after, the smells still hung in the hallway, causing the Master to sneeze. It was during these sneezing fits that the frenchman would appear and invite the Master up for wine. At first he was able to decline the invitations. Tom Sommerfield had no use for frivolous conversation, nor did he have an appetite for wine. Soon he had to resignedly accept the frenchman's invitation, for Tom realized that he had no choice in the matter.

"Ah, Monsieur Sommerfield!" the frenchman said with delight at the door, "Come in! Come in! Please, make yourself comfortable." The loft was full of grey light. The monsieur quickly poured his guest a glass of red wine. "Your town, Monsieur Sommerfield, c'est tres interessant. Just this morning, I was walking towards the docks, to see the factories, and what a sight! What a sight they were." Tom sat quietly, his arms stiff, holding his glass like he thought he should.

"Remarkable, remarkable," the frenchman continued, "you own most of those factories, non?"

"I used too, I just manage the plants now," Tom said.

The frenchman leaned back into the chaise and took a sip.

Thus began a series of visits, where the frenchman would marvel at the splendor of the factories or complain about the lack of fashion among the townsfolk.

"I am worried," the frenchman said one day, "about the culture. We are in La Belle Époque, after all. Oh, my friend, I must tell you this story. I was walking back to the market after a brief excursion, underwhelmed by most of the men and women in this town, and then, mon dieu, I saw, right in front of me, the most elegant barbe royale! What

use of form, what symmetry! And then I saw her almond eyes, and her hair formed into a tight bun, and her pale blue dress laced tight around her heavy torso, and, I thought, I never knew a woman could have such pilosity, but I must compliment her at once!”

“That would have been Miss Morgan. She lives around the block,” Tom said.

“I know,” the frenchman said, “I invited her to come drink wine with me. I am curious how she learned such a handsome style.”

What an odd man, Tom thought.

“Now, my friend, to business.” Tom never imagined the ridiculous frenchman would be capable of a somber tone, but he managed to gather his voice into a deeper and quieter resonance. “I would like to invest in West Sea Trading company, to possibly add more equipment in the bullet factory you have down there. What do you say?”

“You’ll have to take that up with the bosses,” Tom said, and took another sip. The wine was bitter and delicious. “It’s their choice. They are looking for investors at the present moment. They are coming down to the docks next Tuesday, I believe Arnold is holding a reception.” Tom finished the wine, and then said, “I will have Ada send you the details. I need to get going.”

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William knew it was dusk when he could hear the machines above him cease to clang and hiss. Main production had halted, which meant that his and Evelyn’s work was also done. He gathered the things he needed, a few small jars, donned a tattered hat and coat, tightened the lacing on his boots, and went out. The factory gave him all the white he needed; Mr. Preacher never dared to venture in the Den, so he never knew how much white was missing. Sometimes he could swindle some coal from the factory floor. The

other colors, however, were another matter. He first made his way to the Metal Marsh; the slag was a perfect raw umber. Then, he would follow the river up towards the market, looking for useful chunks of oxides in the yellow water. There were also discarded bolts and gears, some as large as a man, caked in rust; he would whip out his pocketknife and take a sample. Once at the market, he would resort to what Evelyn called the real business: buying a loaf of bread and a can of butter. Yesterday, Mr. Preacher had given them more than the usual for a week's worth of work, so William added a jar of raspberry jam and three sweet apples to the order.

That day, William was in for a surprise. Sitting at a park bench, mindlessly eating an apple, he saw the most exotic color: the violent rose oxide from Miss Lilith's head. She was making her way down the busy stalls, stopping occasionally and filling her basket with necessities. Her face was caked with white. The collar of her white lace dress was fastened securely around the entire height of her neck with various white ribbons, and her skull seemed to rest on the thick lip of the fabric. "Miss Lilith! Miss Lilith," he cried as he ran towards her.

"Miss Lilith, I must say, this is beautiful hair." He broke off several stray pieces that were not held in a bun. "I have not seen you in the market for awhile. Where have you been?"

"I was in my bedroom, Mr. Fletcher. The Mrs. had me lie in my bed for forty days and forty nights, with my hair in a wooden bucket full of water. She was growing concerned about the status of my neck, because she said that muscles coiled around it like serpents, and that was unsightly. It seems to have worked. My neck is now as smooth as marble, although it is difficult to keep my head upright."

Mr. Fletcher left her there, satisfied with his new find, and Lilith continued through the market. The diffuse light of sun had just been snuffed out, giving way to a coal black night. She bought one last item, the Lady Liberty Bloom of Youth face powder, and made her way up West High St, going home. In the dark stairwell she bumped into Miss Morgan, who had donned a deep red velvet dress and smelled of lilac, exchanged a cordial “Hello”, then skipped up the steps and rapped on the double doors of the apartment. Mrs. Clark opened, happy to see that the girl had made it home safely, but when Miss Morgan made her way past she could not hold her breath, and so said, “What is that ape doing here?” and hastily shut the door. Lilith could hear the light taps of Miss Morgan’s shoes continuing up the stairwell.

Lilith needed a rest before supper, so she made her way to her bedchamber. Despite Mrs. Clark’s disapproval, she would wait until Tom came home, covered in soot. He would wipe his face and change his clothes, and the two of them would eat together. So, until then, she laid on the cold floor. With her eyes fixed on the distant ceiling, she unlaced her white collar. Doing this while standing was deadly. She then contorted her arms behind her back and unhooked the seam of her dress, wriggling to let it off her body. She reached back again and undid the knot that held her corset, and it flung open. She laid there for a moment, letting her chest rise and fall several times. There was no use in removing the corset without assistance. She then used her strength to push her body across the floor and to the bed, her head still on the floor. It hung like a heavy pendulum on her neck. The most difficult part was to lift herself onto the bed, which required her to fling her legs across its width and bend her knees, bringing the rest of her body up and forward. She looked through the window, where light like grey mist rose from the

streetlamps below, but above that there was only featureless black. And from the square the town clock began to clang, shaking the world with each note.

Some time passed. There was an accident at the factory. One of the men, the old timer Jacky Thompson, died. When the clock struck twelve chimes a messenger boy came to the Master's study and told him the somber news. The Master immediately grabbed his black coat with lead clasps, which always hung on a rack close to his desk, and called a cabbie to carry him and the boy to East Dock. After giving the boy a coin for his troubles, the Master shed all disguises of civility, and, at the grand entrance of the furnace room, removed his coat and shirt, and loosened his trousers. His chest and arms were wrapped in thick, leathery scars.

He hung the garments on a dead tree. The steel beams reached high above him as he entered his temple, and the heat melted his world. A group of men were gathered in the center, underneath the furnace. "Get to work!" barked someone in the corner, walking briskly towards the small crowd, "Get to work! Get to work!" It was the man Preacher, a terrible fellow with a grizzly mustache, who the bosses appointed as a lower manager. "Be quiet, sir," Tom said, and Mr. Preacher halted at once, frozen mid-stride. "Tommy boy, this is terrible," said Mr. Samuel, carrying the body towards Tom. There was no doubt that the body belonged to Jacky; it wore his trademark red trousers and leather suspenders that his wife had stitched with blue lily flowers some thirty years ago. The body had no face. Instead, there was a dark grey surface, nearly flat, which curved like an oval and came to a point at the base of the neck. "Master Sommerfield, he just fell in," said a young man whose name Tom could not remember, "I was few feet away from him. He was pushing the molten metal into a mold when he just swooned and fell in, face first.

I rushed to him and pulled him out by his suspenders, but I knew that it was too late. I watched the round of his face go from yellow to silver to dark, and the new weight pushed his head back and cracked his back.” “It is the heat, Tommy,” Mr. Samuel said, “the heat and all this work.” Behind them rung a creak and a heavy groan as other workers tilted the caldron and let out a piece of the sun.

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“I must see how the bullets are made, my friend.”

“Yes, I will give you a tour someday.”

The Master and the Frenchman were on their way to the Doctor’s house, where the man was hosting a lavish reception. Last night, three military men came to town, and immediately requested Tom’s presence. They had also called the bosses from the Capital. There was an urgent matter to attend to, one of national importance, but they would not divulge any details of the situation until after the reception. So the Army’s intentions hung in mystery, and possible explanations occupied Tom’s mind, to such an extent that he could only give shallow replies to the frenchman’s statements.

Dr. Arnold Bishop’s house rose out from the night. It was a splendid building, made out of pale blue marble, with neo-Greco columns and carved reliefs of angels and saints. The lights inside were warm, and chatter spilled out every time the main doors opened to let a new guest in.

Tom knew that the frenchman would be mesmerized by the interior of the house. When they walked in, the man gasped. “How incredible!” he said, then, speaking to the butler while he handed him his coat, he asked, “These ceilings are incredible, no?” The butler nodded silently, absorbed by his duties, but unwilling to displease the Monsieur.

And so they glided into the hall, and stayed for dinner, chatting with some of the older gentlemen and women of the town. Soon, the Doctor called the important men into his study.

One of the bosses stood up. “I am happy to report,” he said, “that the river diversion was a success. With this new source of fresh water, the gears can run at a higher capacity.” The bosses clapped. This river, which once ran to the south of town, now carried the weight of the factory in its currents. Tom tried to clamp, but withdrew his arms immediately to his sides to hide his trembling hands.