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The Pink Door

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THE PINK DOOR

Nancy Schanze

Olive green, rich gold, burnt orange, with accents of dark brown and pale blue colored the scale drawings of the interior of my imaginary house for art in the home class. I thought the class would be an interesting elective, and I might major in interior decorating. I had been immersed in other schoolwork when I realized this was Friday, and the final project was due Monday. Last-minute - Jo, the girls on my dorm hall tabbed me. Well, I had been tramping to stores for upholstery, carpet, and paint samples for almost a month, but the notebook remained to be begun. I sighed to think of all those tiny pieces of furniture to be cut out, and the infinite mixing of water colors to obtain the exact hue. Texture, old-bitty-Newman insisted, must be shown with water colors. My haphazard efforts had been earning D's in that class, so I supposed I must work for an A on my final project. I needed perfection too much. An all-nighter, or perhaps two, were looming ahead.

I didn't particularly enjoy staring at the nondescript, beige wall directly in front of my desk, so I turned to gaze at the room. Three college girls with all their beautifying and higher learning equipment had stuffed themselves into a nine-by-twelve room last September. A metal bunk and a single bed preempted one half of the space. The green and beige striped bedspreads clashed gratingly with the intense, pink door. The mirror, which was cloudy from hair spray, sported several sorority stickers around its edges and reflected three blond desks and a sink whose mirror faced it. Past the pale, worn, green drapes, across from the door, I saw another duplicate wing of Burns Hall, made of grey aluminum.

Tina, my roommate, popped her head in, "Hey, Jo, you goin' to dinner?"

"No," I replied, "I'll just relax for a minute and have a cigarette. This damn project is due Monday at 8:00 bells."

"Okay," she answered, while slipping into a better pair of shoes and leaving the old ones in the middle of the floor.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and inhaled smoke while reflecting on the sky after sunset. It looked as
if life had just, a moment ago, expired. My mind
turned backward, remembering the dusk, two months ago,
when Daddy had died.

A 160-acre, rented farm in Johnson County, Iowa
had killed him. The dust of the corn fields and the
stench of pigs had eaten away his lungs. I had wished
I had been a boy because we couldn't afford hired
help, and I was an only child. I had fed pigs and
driven a tractor. In the winter, I fed cattle and
helped Daddy bed them down with dusty straw, but I didn't
help enough. Daddy interrupted his work to gasp air
oftener as I grew older. The outside work and the
housework I did because Mother was sick most of my high
school days taught me life is hard. That you must
finish what you start, and you must give all of yourself
to do the job right were etched into my soul. Did this
life environment dictate that I must go to college
and get an A in art in the home? I couldn't figure what I
was doing in Burns Hall, working on a silly project.

Through the smoky-colored air, I perceived the dim
outline of the forbidding tower at University Hospital.
When I was a senior in high school, Larry, my boyfriend,
had driven us eighty miles, daily, for two weeks to that
hospital where Daddy underwent examination. I remembered
trudging to the parking lot with Larry, the day the doctors
told Daddy he had lung cancer, and they couldn't help him.
Larry had held me in his arms in the car, but I couldn't
cry. I knew a terrible ordeal awaited us; I kept my
emotions inside and felt sorry for Daddy.

A graphic image of his death loomed before my eyes.
I watched him stop breathing while I, in vain, turned the
oxygen valve higher. I remember thinking how timely his
dying was. I had become eighteen in August, the legal
age for adulthood in Iowa. I felt I had lost childhood.
I still wanted to be a child. Blackness dominated the
landscape when Tina returned from dinner and pulled the
drapes.

I measured fifteen inches from the floor to a chair
seat, and brought it down to scale. Through the night,
I drank coffee and smoked cigarettes while cutting out
tiny pieces of furniture and arranging them on a floor
plan. I thought of the ten-room farmhouse, empty of
love, where Mother lived alone. In the winter, she had
waded the drifts in the half-mile lane to teach school
at Wittburg. A couple of dozen second graders were
saving her sanity. I felt guilty. She was sacrificing
so much to send me to school, and right now I hated it.
I heard the dorm awake on Saturday and felt festivity in the air. Iowa would play Ohio State at the football stadium that afternoon. By 1:00 p.m., the dorm was silent except for my snipping scissors and brush strokes. Oh, heck, I had worked long enough. I was tired and hungry. Why not go to the game? I locked the pink door and began the three-mile hike to the stadium. The smell of formaldehyde burst into my nostrils as I walked in front of the cement building of smells called the chemistry-botany-pharmacy building. I wished Larry were walking beside me, shielding me from the rain and making the afternoon fun. Tiredness inched throughout my limbs. Ahead, the rain plumped into the muddy, green river; a crowd of umbrellas surged up a hill toward the stadium. I couldn't master that hill. By forcing myself to keep taking one more step, I returned with relief to my ugly, pink door. I shook the water from my trench and kicked off my slimy, cold tennies.

From down the abandoned hall, floated the off beat of Brubeck's "Take Five". I followed the sound and found Maria who was two years older than me, a senior. She and I had attended grade school together at Wittburg and had been friends. Now she lived in Des Moines and we were acquaintances. Our friendship evaporated because I could discern the country girl behind the sophisticated art major, but her present friends had never heard of our hick town. She was trying to ooze nonchalance, sprawled on the green bedspread in a blue slip, smoking. We played honeymoon bridge while 11,998 students cheered the Hawkeyes on. Her long, white fingers with the half-inch nails, holding a Salem, fascinated me. Larry's fingers were brown and slim, and they held Pall Malls. I had learned honeymoon bridge at the kitchen table of Larry's basement apartment. We had drunk screwdrivers and talked. I loved to talk with him; that apartment is still across the street, but he isn't. He is a market researcher in Kansas City, 412 miles away. Bored with Maria, I returned to my project. I had come to college to improve myself, and wondered if university life would evolve me into a phony like her. I thought I preferred to remain a hick from Wittburg.

By 4:00, exuberant with Iowa's victory, excited coeds flitted back from the game to primp for Saturday night dates. Showers ran and doors banged. Hair spray cloyed the atmosphere and lipstick colored busy mouths. Eyes became blue or green shadows, and dresses clung to excited bodies. Jane, my other roommate, interrupted my work to
ask, "Jo, do you really think I should wear the red or the navy? Red is Bill's favorite color, but navy accents my blue eyes. I want so much to impress Bill tonight. Maybe he'll give me his fraternity pin if I play it cool."

"Wear the red and put on blue eye shadow," I replied.

Tina voted for the navy. "The red is too obviously sexy, and you don't want Bill to catch on that you're playing for his pin. Keep them guessin', you know." The phone rang to announce Bill was waiting in the lobby when Jane decided the yellow sweater outfit would look nicest with the pin. Tina and Jane pranced out the door, and the eye shadow, hair spray cans, rollers, and clips lay forgotten on cluttered dressers. A shower dripped. I was alone with Johnny Mathis singing "Wonderful, Wonderful".

Wonderful was the word to describe my freshman year here when Larry had been a senior. Iowa City had been fun and romance with Larry. He didn't have a car then, and I remembered fighting the blowing snow with him to walk downtown to see "Wild Strawberries". After the movie, we had ducked into the Airliner bar for a beer and a pizza. Voices had buzzed around us while we talked of the movie, love, and how we would get married and raise kids. I wondered if a liberal arts degree was required to be a mother and a wife. We had kissed goodnight in the teeming crowd of hands, mouths, and passions in front of my dorm, and each dreamed of the other. I had decided I should return to school the next year and date around. Maybe I didn't really love Larry. He had been strength through adolescence, but security couldn't suffice. In one of my high-minded moments I had turned down his marriage proposal to finish college and to discover if I loved him. I'm not sure I made the right decision. I needed him now. To heck with college, I'd call him and spend the week in Kansas City. I had to stand one foot close to that pink door to phone him. No answer. I played solitaire, drank a Coke, read a book, smoked a cigarette, and clatter returned to the hollow halls. It was 1:00 a.m., and Tina and Jane were high on gin and hilarity. Jane got the pin. I set the alarm for 2:30 a.m. and crawled up on the top bunk. I had to reach Larry tonight to tell him to meet me tomorrow at the train. We would stay in a motel. The alarm; I was dreaming of Daddy.

"Hello," murmured Larry's warm voice.

"Darling, I can't stand it. I'm coming on the 2:00 p.m. train tomorrow. Meet me."
"Jo, honey, you don't really want to do this. We can't be selfish. Think of our parents. Think of your grades. If you got pregnant . . ."

"Darling, I beg you. This place is driving me crazy!" He talked to me quietly and we hung up. Despair fell on me. I crawled up onto the green spread and doubling my knees under my stomach, cried. How could he be so cruel? "Larry, Larry, I want to die. Please God, let me die. Life is a succession of nothings." Tina blubbered, "Don't cry, Jo, don't."

The phone rang. Hope! He changed his mind. In the dark, I reached the phone and thrilled to his, "Hi, honey, you were crying, weren't you?" He talked to me in his gentle way for half an hour. He was the only one who could soothe me.

I found refuge in my project again. That pink door laughed grotesquely as I struggled into a second dawn. The door had become a feeling of circumstances and environment molding my underfined goals and directing my life. It seemed to both shut me in, and open to a new life. I mixed water colors and they were an infusion of pink; I cut tiny sofas and lamps and pasted them on a floor plan. I dreamed of a home with Larry. Then, the wind slammed the pink door shut to remind me I had to grow up alone.

THE CAT

Nancy Dewees

The black cat comes softly and smoothly,
Curling at my feet when I pause.
At night it's a panther with luminous eyes.
I can't see it in the sun --
But the shadow is there, teasing me.
Sometimes I forget, and laugh --
Then I hear the purr,
And feel a claw.