The Day of the Painters

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"Number 248, this is it."

Oli Johnston and his assistants, Alex and Tom, walked over to the second floor apartment door. Without hesitating, Oli pushed the bell. The red metal door was similar to all the others he had waited in front of for the past six years, except that it was cleaner than most. The large brass doorknob was brilliantly shined. There were faint sweeping streaks over the deep red paint, traces of the path of a soapy cleaning cloth.

They heard no sound so Oli rang again. After another brief period of silence they heard light footsteps come to the door and then stop.

"Who is it?"

"It's the painters, Ma'am," Oli replied in a disinterested tone.

The rattle of a safety chain was followed by the clinking sound of a night-bolt. The door swung open slowly, but still no one was to be seen.

"Come in please," came a pleasant but timid voice from behind the door.

Oli swung the paint cans cautiously in front of him and walked in. The other two nonchantly switched their loads of dropcloths from on their hips to a position in front of them and filed in slowly, stopping briefly to wipe their paint-splattered shoes on the new hemp welcome mat.

"Kind of early for you, Mrs. Andrews?" Oli inquired, walking right through to the living room.

"Oh, my gracious, no," she replied in a pleasant voice as she following the men into the living room. "I'm always up by seven o'clock, and today I got up an hour early to have my breakfast dishes out of the way and get the last minute things straightened up. I watched you go to work on the apartment upstairs the last two mornings so I knew you would be here right at seven thirty."

The little woman paused a moment and then went on.

"You know, I told the office that I don't see any sense in painting this apartment. The present paint is perfectly good. But the office said you had to do it now."

"Yes, ma'am, we have a schedule to do each apartment every two and a half years, and yours was last done just two and a half years ago this month," Oli replied.

"But my place doesn't need it. Living here alone like I do, the paint doesn't get worn and chipped like a family apartment would. The Evans' apartment next door should be done instead of this one. Why, they have cracks on the livingroom walls."

While Mrs. Anderson was talking Oli set his paint cans down. Nonchalantly he reached under the left shoulder strap of his clean white coveralls and pulled a small leather notebook out of his shirt pocket. He thumbed it for a moment.

"The Evans' place won't be due for another nine months, Ma'am," replied Oli. "Theirs was done a year ago last February."

Mrs. Andrews looked at Oli for a minute and then down at the floor. Walking over to the center of the dark grey carpet she stooped and carefully pressed her moistened finger on a small piece of lint.

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The little woman paused a moment and then went on.
Alex and Tom made three trips down to the ground floors and back, for scaffolding and supplies. When the two men had set up the scaffolding in the living room and placed all the equipment in one corner, they spread lighter canvas dropcloths over the islands of furniture. Oli, who had finished spreading the heavier cloths over all the floors except for the bathroom and kitchen, opened and stirred the paint. By the time he had the paint ready to use, Alex and Tom were ready to start work.

Mrs. Andrews had stationed herself near the covered furniture in the center of the room to keep out of the way and still observe what was going on. When Oli saw her eyeing the scaffolding he laid down his paint mixer and walked over to the aluminum and wood structure.

"This equipment is the newest and finest out, Mrs. Andrews," Oli explained with a slight air of pride. "You can adjust it to your work—high for working on ceilings and low for the wall work. The end pieces are made out of aluminum which makes them strong enough yet very light. It took us just ten minutes to set up; the old, heavier type took twenty or thirty."

"Yes," Mrs. Andrews replied pensively. After a moment of thought she timidly inquired, "Will they scratch the floor?"

"No, Ma'am," Oli reported. "Those rubber boots on the legs and the canvas dropcloths will protect the floor."

As he was replying, Oli walked back to the short square of heavy canvas which he was using for a mixing area. He filled a light-weight paint bucket with white ceiling paint and climbed up on a higher scaffolding. After checking the stability of the equipment he dipped his four-inch brush into the creamy white liquid and carefully scraped one side and one end of the brush before raising it to the ceiling. He started in the corner and worked along one wall, taking long, even strokes and feathering the end of the stroke skillfully. He not only worked quickly, but he never splattered paint even though he spent most of his time painting ceilings. His white coveralls were always as clean when he left at night as when he started in the morning.

As soon as Oli had finished a three-foot strip of ceiling down the length of one side of the room, Alex and Tom moved their scaffolding over to the same corner, where Oli had begun, and started painting the wall. One man would start in the middle of the scaffold and work to his right until he reached the end of the boards. At the same time the other painter would begin on the left end and work to where the first had started. Before moving the equipment to the right they would paint all the way to the floor.

The color was the same as had been on the walls before—dark cream for the living room and connecting front hall, and beige for the bedroom. The bathroom was to be repainted a soft maise. Kitchens were always painted white, by regulations.

Mrs. Andrews watched the painters for a while and then went into the kitchen and busied herself with cleaning her cupboards. She took the dishes out of each, a shelf at a time, and scrubbed the interior with a strong solution of Okite. Next she cleaned out her tiny broom closet and lined the shelf to it with a new piece of linoleum painted with tiny red tulips. As she was hanging up the wash rag on her towel rack she glanced over at the package of doughnuts on the shelf near the window.

"It's almost ten-thirty. The men would probably like coffee and doughnuts now," she thought.

In her quick-step manner she walked out into the living room. Alex and Tom were just finishing the third wall and Oli was skillfully painting the sash work of the one large window on the last wall.

"Would you men like some coffee and doughnuts?"

"No—thank you, Ma'am," Alex replied, glancing over at Oli.

"I can fix it up right away. I got a box of doughnuts yesterday—"

"No thank you, Ma'am," Oli replied. "It's against regulations, you know."

Baffled, Mrs. Andrews looked to Oli for a further explanation but Oli never lost his rhythmic stroke as he continued with the sash. As she started to leave Oli addressed her.

"Mrs. Andrews, did you see where the paint was worn off this window?"

The little woman walked over to get a better view. Along the bottom sash a small spot of darker shade of color showed through the old paint.

"Oh yes,—I—I guess I've worn a little of the paint off in scrubbing finger marks so many times."

"Well, this new paint will fix that up," Oli replied.

Mrs. Andrews returned to her kitchen and made some coffee. She closed the door to keep the smell in the kitchen as much as possible. When the coffee was made she opened the large package of doughnuts and took out one. A brief coffee snack always gave her renewed energy, especially during a busy morning.

"What will I do with all these doughnuts now?" she thought as she cleaned up the dishes. "Maybe the Evanses might like them."

The men finished the living room by eleven o'clock. While Oli carefully poured the remaining cream-colored paint into its original container and sealed it tightly, Alex and Tom moved the scaffolding..."
into the bedroom. When the two men had finished, Mrs. Andrews came in and asked them if they would move the stove and refrigerator out from the wall so she could clean in back of them. Alex looked over to Oli; he nodded.

By the time the men returned from the kitchen Oli had the beige paint already mixed. The three cleaned their brushes in a solution of quick-acting brush cleaner and started in. This room was considerably smaller than the living room. The men estimated they would be half done with it by lunch time.

Mrs. Andrews had busied herself in the kitchen, cleaning out the dirt from behind the stove and refrigerator. She had wanted to get back there for months; these were two places in her small apartment that she had no way of keeping clean. As soon as she had satisfied herself that the job was finished she washed up and took the doughnuts to her next-door neighbor.

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Mrs. Andrews, a stout, pleasant woman, in her mid-thirties with two adolescent sons, was glad to have the doughnuts but even more interested to learn about the painting. As Mrs. Andrews walked down her neighbor’s long front hall the younger woman followed her.

“I’ve asked the office to paint my living room and front hall but they say I’m not scheduled to have it done yet,” Mrs. Evans announced sarcastically. “The walls are a mess. Have you seen the cracks in my living room walls, Mrs. Andrews?”

“Yes, I have. Maybe if you show it to Oli Johnston when he leaves my apartment he will arrange to get it done for you.”

Mrs. Andrews returned to her apartment and looked in on the painters. Oli addressed her without looking from his work.

“We’ll be able to start on the kitchen about one-thirty, Mrs. Andrews. It’ll be dry enough by six then.”

“Fine, I’ll go get my lunch over with now so I can be out of your way by then.”

Oli wanted to get the ceiling done before noon so he had Alex start on a scaffold at one end while he started on the other. Tom worked on the one large window and later painted the door and closet sash.

Every time Alex worked with Oli on a ceiling he tried to keep up with the boss’s pace. Alex would take faster strokes than Oli but the younger painter did not have the long reach of his taller companion nor his steady, even rhythm. He also lacked Oli’s skill of refilling and scraping his brush quickly and without much thought. Consequently, the Swede would change his scaffolding a bit more often than Alex would, to the latter’s chagrin. When they met, it was well on Alex’s half of the room.

After the ceiling was completed the two exchanged their ceiling brushes for the thicker wall brushes and started in on one wall. They started at the end where Oli had painted so they would not track any wet paint around. Oli never spilled nor splattered paint from the ceiling work, but Alex was not quite that skillful.

At twelve o’clock the room was half finished, just as scheduled. The window sash, the ceiling and one wall had been done. The men left for lunch and were back precisely one-half hour later.

Before starting work again, Oli re-mixed the paint. Using a new mixing stick he stirred the beige-colored liquid around and around until all the oily streaks dissolved. Oli kept up his mechanical stirring until the paint fell evenly and smoothly off the mixing stick.

In the meantime, Alex and Tom took the dropcloths out of the living room and placed them on the tiny front hall and the bathroom floors. They covered the sink and bathtub with the lighter cloths and spent the few remaining minutes dusting the ledges and tops of the doors.

The men put the finishing touches on the bedroom a few minutes before one-thirty. Mrs. Andrews had gotten her dishes washed and put away and had placed all counter articles in cupboards to leave the counters clear; before leaving she had also taken her large geranium plant from the window and put it in the hall closet. While Oli mixed both the white and the maize paint, Alex and Tom spread two small dropcloths on the floor. They folded other, lighter-weight cloths over the refrigerator, stove, sink and counters. They had a standard procedure for doing the kitchens, bathrooms, and halls. Oli always did the kitchens, Alex the bathrooms, and the least-experienced, Tom, would handle the halls. Before starting on the kitchen Oli always painted the hall ceiling, for Tom was not able to reach it with the small aluminum step ladder that he used for the hall walls. If there were more than one hall or bathroom Alex would help Tom or vice-versa until the work was finished.

Oli made quick work of the front hall ceiling. He had finished it and started on the kitchen long before Alex had completed his ceiling. While climbing up on his scaffolding, which had been moved into the kitchen, Oli noticed a small brown stain on the windowsill. He got down to examine it more closely. It was a ring left by a plant pot.

“Mrs. Andrews,” he called out mildly.

Mrs. Andrews promptly entered the kitchen.

“Do you see that stain on the windowsill, Mrs. Andrews?” the Swede enquired.

“Yes, it’s from a geranium plant which I have,” she said.
“You know, Mrs. Andrews,” Oli paused, but went on evenly, “it’s against regulations to have potted plants in the apartments. They have that regulation because the pots stain the sills.”

“But it’s not a bad stain.” Mrs. Andrews came forward holding out a china frail hand to cover the circle. “And it never shows because I always keep the plant in the same place.”

“I know, Mrs. Andrews, but it’s still against the regulations.” Oli glanced from the hand to the equally frail face and added, “Yours is not a bad stain at all; some of them in other apartments are quite a bit worse.”

“Well,” Mrs. Andrews paused and sought his eyes as if to gain courage—“if I put something under the pot in the future?”

“I’m afraid that’s still against regulations, Mrs. Andrews. You know, it’s a regulation and I don’t have anything to say about it.”

Mrs. Andrews started to speak but stopped with a sigh.

Oli, feeling her anxiety, tried to console her. “You know, Mrs. Andrews, my wife likes to have plants in her apartment too. To take the place of the potted plants she now has a couple of philodendrons in little glass flower holders. You might get a couple of those plants—they would be all right, you know.”

Mrs. Andrews’ lips drew back but only for an instant, and when she spoke she thanked Oli for the suggestion.

Now that Oli had started in the kitchen, there wasn’t any place Mrs. Andrews could go except the livingroom, which still had the island of furniture in the center. She decided this would be a good time to take her usual afternoon walk. On the way out she went into the closet and picked up the geranium plant.

Soon after Alex and Tom heard the front door shut they stopped work and gathered in the kitchen for a moment.

“What is it that’s making all these women mad about potted plants?” Tom remarked. “I’ll bet it’s just because it’s against the regulations that they have ‘em.”

“I think old Mrs. Andrews has been talking to her neighbors about us coming here,” Alex added. “I’ll bet dollars to doughnuts they’re in trouble too and will ask us to come ahead of our schedule.”

“If we are going to finish on time we’d better keep going,” Oli remarked as he continued with the ceiling work. He nodded approvingly as the two men went back to their own work.

Because of the small size of the front hall Tom finished first. As the apprentice, he cleaned out all the extra brushes and put all the equipment on one cloth in the corner of the livingroom. When Alex finished, he cleaned his own brush and helped Tom fold all of the dropcloths except the ones in the kitchen. Then the two carefully replaced the furniture, keeping everything four inches from the tacky walls, and leaving the pictures on the couch.

Oli put his finishing strokes on as the other two were laying the rugs. He cleaned his brush and inspected the equipment. Without anything being said, Alex and Tom folded the kitchen cloths and pushed the refrigerator and stove back into place. Oli was making his final inspection when the two returned after their trip to the ground floor with the scaffolding. Satisfied that everything was in order, he picked up the two empty paint cans. At this signal the men picked up the remaining dropcloths and carried them into the outside hall, being careful not to let them touch any wet paint.

Mrs. Evans had heard the men on the stairs. When she heard the three come out together she stepped out to meet them.

“Mr. Johnston,” she addressed Oli, “would you please look at my livingroom?” Alex and Tom continued to carry their loads downstairs.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Oli replied, as he put his paint cans down and walked in.

“It’s been like this for months. That scrape by the door was made by the boys, but not those cracks.”

Oli reached under his overall strap and pulled out his little leather notebook.

“Sorry, Ma’am, but you’re not scheduled until August. I have to go by the book, you know. Maybe you can ask at the office to have it done early.”

“I already have. They said the same thing.”

“Sorry, Ma’am, but they’re the boss, you know.”

Oli picked up his empty paint cans and went downstairs. The men had already loaded their large wagon and were waiting for their boss. “We’ll be in just on schedule,” Oli said as he and Alex started off. Tom followed, pulling the wagon.

Mrs. Andrews returned about a half hour later. She was surprised to see that the men had already left, but she was glad the job was finished and the apartment bore only a faint odor of new paint.

“I won’t be able to start supper before six o’clock,” she thought as she entered the kitchen. She stood just inside the door and examined the gleaming white windowsill, first with her eye and then with her thumb. The paint was tacky and clung to her thumb. She freed her thumb with a sigh of physical anguish, and the brown sack she carried fell to the floor with a faint tinkling crash.