

The Hidden Colors Of Mrs. John Holton

By Kate V

You wake up to white sheets, white even in the darkness of your unlit bedroom. Your husband is still asleep beside you, but you have to get up before he does.

Turn off the alarm. Rub your eyes and get up. Shower. Scrub off the little marks you didn't catch yesterday, the flecks of color against your hands that could serve as evidence of your sole secret. Get dressed, powder your face. Listen as your children stumble down the stairs. Say a cheery 'good morning!' and smile. Turn on the coffee and the stovetop. Tap perfectly white eggs against the pan, watch the yolks spill out. Pour your husband coffee into your nice, unchipped ceramic mugs. Smile. Serve breakfast. Smile.

Don't start thinking about the what-if, if-only, I-wishes. Those aren't meant for downstairs.

Make a remark about the weather, or maybe the news if it's not political. Give your kids and husband their lunches. Smile, and close the door. Sigh.

They're gone now. The exhaust from your husband's car is melting into the cold January air, and your children's footsteps are the only marks in the otherwise unmarred snow. Inside, the clock is ticking, slowly and surely, echoing around the creamy walls of the downstairs. The kitchen, with its shiny alabaster tiles, is colder than the living room. Pacing now, you walk around the downstairs, over the carpet and to the hardwood stairs, which click under your embroidered slippers. Your dry hands and magenta fingernails skim the white rail and tan wall on either side of you as you ascend. Against those creamy colors, your painted nails seem garish and dark. As you reach the top of the stairs, you look up and reach. A single, thin and entirely bleached nylon rope dangles lightly in the air, and you pull it, unleashing a cascade of creaking silver metal - the stairs to the attic. The steel is tarnished and chipped, and so is the silver pull chain for the ceiling lamp in the attic.

All around the attic, in every direction, are sprawling white towers of covering clothes. A few have a few specks of color, a few anonymous splatters, but mostly they are pearly white and everywhere. In the center of the room, an easel sits. Waiting. The stacks of white in the attic are

reminiscent of beehives, you think. Beehives, maybe in a meadow, maybe in a field with violet and rosy wildflowers, where the oak trees cast mottled shadows against the waving grasses and where the bees can dance and buzz quietly and to themselves, and where the air doesn't smell of cologne and scrambled eggs. You approach the canvas on the easel and begin. And though you can't feel your fingers in the cold attic air, you feel the warm and gentle breeze on your arms and in your hair.

You're there, if only for a brief and entirely luminous moment. You are there.

That night, making dinner, there are little dots of color on your pale hand, on your fingers, on your silver wedding ring. In the shower, the ring chafes against your skin as you rub to expunge the small dot of green. That night, in your papery white sheets, on your magenta nails, there's another color: a gentle cerulean blue. You scrape it off with another finger, leaving a crescent indentation in the polish.

"I can't believe this. I really can't," said Alice, pacing the walls of the gallery. Brightly colored paintings scattered the walls. One of a hydrangea, blooming at the top but withered at the bottom. One of a lighthouse overlooking a sea with an incoming storm. "How could we not know? There are hundreds of these. And they're *incredible*, that art critic just said so," she said.

Her brother replied, "I know. It's just... I don't know, Alice." A pause. The white walls of the gallery were blinding, glaringly white. The only reprieve was to stare fixedly at the paintings, which was what most of the buyers were doing anyways. "Do you think she was happy?"

"I don't know," said Alice quietly. "And now they're both gone." Another pause. Alice sighed. "Maybe we'll never know." They both stared at the paintings. In the fluorescent indoor lighting, all of the paintings seemed to be defiant, refusing to be white against the paint of the walls and the dark grey tile floor. Alice stared at the floor instead.

Elizabeth Holton, 1938-2020: Holton (née Johnston) was known for her realism and scenery, as well as her unique use of color and brushstroke patterns to convey emotion. Her works were only discovered by her family after her death; they were sold posthumously by her children, shocking the art world with more than 600 paintings of astonishing quality. Her intricacy, detail, and worldly yet mundane subjects have ensured her place as one of the most impactful painters of this century.

Note: This is a work of fiction. Any similarities to real people or events are coincidental.