

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

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Melissa's Green

"Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." ~ Matthew 22:21

RAI—that's short for Romanowski Architects, Inc.—had a lot of asses, but the biggest ass was Dorkwimp Buttkisser. His real name was Corwin Rusticker, and he was in charge of the Terra Haute office.

I got hired just after they opened that office. I did the grunt work: mowing, planting things, driving stuff around, fixing crap.

One day, I was hanging up pictures of some of their boring buildings. I was right where the architects sit. About twelve of them. Bunch of guys with polo shirts and bald spots and big guts. And one lady. Pretty hot, and she didn't look that much older than me.

There was crinkling behind me. Corwin Buttkisser and his damn can of GC. He always carried around a GC and scrunched it. Even if it was empty. And he had on this shirt, yellow enough to land jets.

He said, "Hey Patriot." I wore my New England Patriots shirt because they usually kick the Colts' asses. And everybody around there hated the Patriots.

"What's up, yellow?"

"I saw that parking sign you hung up." He looked at the architects and nodded. "You hung that up, right?"

"Yeah."

He looked at my eyebrow ring. His Adam's apple—more like an Adam's cantaloupe—bounced when he talked. "What in the hell is that?"

"Metal."

His cheek puffed out and he smiled at someone. "I think you should get another one in your other eyebrow. Then you could stick two little poles in them. Paint your face green? You'd look like an insect."

A couple architects were looking at us. He winked at that lady, then clinked his pop can a few times. "And I thought jewelry was for women." He must've forgot about his cuff links. Gold ones, with flower patterns.

He stared at me and his Adam's apple slammed out. I wanted to tell him my eyebrow ring hurt like a bitch. That I nearly passed out when they rammed that bastard in there. I said nothing.

He said, "What's your GPA?"

One of the architects leaned back and took a sip of coffee. I said, "3.62."

"Must be a ten point scale."

A snort, a whistle.

I said, "Actually, it's a three point scale."

"You put that 'Reserved for Phil Romanowski' parking sign up, right?"

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You know...Phil Romanowski? The *president* and *founder* of RAI?" He crunched his can.

"Yeah."

"That thing's as level as the Rockies."

"It looked pretty level to me. But I'll fix it."

"Now don't walk away, Patriot. We're not done yet. You said you wanted to be an architect, right?" More crunching and clinking.

"Yeah."

"Well here's your first lesson: pretty level's not gonna do it; if you design buildings that are pretty level, you're gonna have a lot of dead people, and even more lawsuits."

At quarter to five that afternoon, I got called into the conference room. The lady was in there. So was this guy. He had on a green suit jacket and a dumb bow tie. It was the color of baby crap. His face had lots of slopes and curves. Kind of like a skateboard park.

The room had this big table and leather chairs, and a window.

"Hey partner," said the guy in green. "Don't you think that Whomp's a little too sweet?"

I looked at my can. "I think it's pretty good."

"You should go ahead and try GC."

"Nah. It's kind of boring. Tastes kind of old school to me." I shouldn't have said that.

"I like the eyebrow, partner. It looks very professional. Maybe everyone here should go ahead and get one. It'll really impress the clients. Give them a taste of our professionalism, huh?"

Then I held out my keys. "Hey, it's the black Mercedes. License 'Chill 24-7.'"

"What?"

"Your jacket. I worked as a valet, at a country club. Just for a couple months. Wore one just like it."

He smiled at the woman and pointed at me. She smiled and looked down.

"Oh, you have a Mercedes, huh?" he said. "So do I. It's parked right outside. Right in front of a crooked sign."

Mr. Romanowski.

He put a finger on his eyebrow. "If I had something like that up there, you know what my father would do?" Probably not anything near what my friends would do if I was wearing a green jacket and a bow tie the color of baby crap. I shrugged.

"He'd go ahead and rip it right out of there. This is a business. Not

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some night club. And by the way, my wife's a VP at Grand Crown. I'll have to tell her what you said.

"I'd like you to go ahead and help Melissa here." Go ahead, go ahead. I wanted to tell him to go ahead and stop it.

Melissa pulled out a couple of those painting strips. They had different shades of green. "We'd like you — what's your name?"

"Derek."

"Derek, we'd like you to paint the walls. We were just talking about which color." It must have been hard for her, working with all those asses at RAI.

Romanowski's cell phone rang. "I like green. I think we should go ahead and paint 'em green. Bold green. Maybe like this." He pointed to a color called Imperial Jade. He had on a gold bracelet. I wanted to tell him what Dorkwimp Buttkisser said about jewelry.

He brought the phone up to his ear. "And I'm hoping, partner, you're a better painter than sign hanger — Ron."

He listened for a couple seconds, then put the cell on the table. But it wasn't off. You could hear this guy Ron mumbling. Romanowski put on a pair of glasses and looked at the color strips. "This one's good too," he said. "This Place Jewel." Actually, it said *Palace Jewel*.

Ron stopped mumbling, then Romanowski picked up the phone. "So, Ron, how did Carl Steinmeyer like the golf club covers that I asked you to go ahead and bring him a couple weeks ago? What? You know that Carl's got a huge project comin' up. Fifty million plus. Now I want you to drop whatever you're doing and go ahead and bring him — I don't give a shit if your son's on the Colts and it's the Super Bowl. Bring Steinmeyer the god-damn covers. Now. Or you're gonna be back to doing stairwells in Auto-CAD." He clamped the phone shut, then looked at the colors again.

Melissa looked at me and clenched her teeth. Her eyes were as green as a street sign.

Romanowski said, "Whatever. You're the interior designer, Melinda. Up to you. I just like green. I'm gonna need that room painted tonight. Before you leave."

Melissa nodded. "But do you want all the walls the same color?"

"Up to you. It's gotta dry in time for a meeting here tomorrow afternoon. A big meeting, for an important client. So you have to go ahead and get it painted tonight."

"We'll get it done, right Derek?"

"Sure."

"Good. And try not to drink that garbage around here, son." He left.

Melissa looked at the color strips. She didn't wear any makeup. But she didn't need any. And her eyes? We've got this dishwashing soap at home. It's green. Sometimes during summer, the sun just lights it up. That's the green of Melissa's eyes.

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"So what do you think?" she said. "Imperial Jade or Palace Jewel."

"That one, I guess. *Place* Jewel."

She smiled. "Why?"

"Because I like it more. The *Place* Jewel."

"Do you think that most people prefer light or dark rooms?"

"Probably light. Oh, then this one. This Imperial Jade's definitely better."

"I think so too."

There was a crinkle. Buttkisser leaned against the door, and his shirt pounded its yellow into my eyes. "Is everything kosher in here? I heard him yelling."

Melissa said, "Yeah, we're fine."

"Did the Patriot here get raked over the coals for the parking sign?"

"Not really. He was yelling at somebody on the phone." Rusticker looked a little disappointed.

I said, "I'm gonna go ahead and paint the walls in here."

"I only see greens there, though." He winked at Melissa. "With that eyebrow ring, you'd probably prefer to paint something in pink."

"Nope," said Melissa. "I'm sure Mr. Romanowski doesn't want anything really effeminate. Nothing pink. Or yellow."

The can crunched.

Melissa said, "He actually likes these two."

Rusticker made a face that looked like he was sucking wet cement through a coffee straw and taking a crap at the same time. "I'm a bit concerned. I mean, I know that green's our company color. And green works well with some of our big time urban clients. You know, these corporate guys that come to RAI's Chi Town and New York offices? They're all about funky. But this is *Terre Haute*. I'm just concerned." The crinkling. "I'm concerned that if some of our more conservative clients—and that's most of them—see that, they'll think it's too much...too contemporary and fancy. And you know how Phil Romanowski thinks about client perceptions."

He slid off the door, and then, with that Adam's apple bursting out, he looked over Melissa's shoulder. "Perhaps you should do something more subdued. Something in a pastel." He touched the light green, left a smudge. "Well, I'm just saying, he wants bold, and our clients would be more comfortable with something more subdued. Good luck with that one." He cracked his can a couple times, then left.

Melissa said, "Are you okay to stay and paint?"

"Yeah, I was just hoping I could make it out of here by eight though. I have choir practice at eight fifteen."

"Cool. I love choir music."

"Me too. My father's a musician, so music's in the blood."

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"What songs are you doing?"

"'Jesus Praise My Lord, Praise My Savior' and 'My Lord is a Comin'" are a couple of my favorites." That was the best that I could do.

"Haven't heard those. But I'm sure they're great. I'll make sure you're done by eight. It's almost five now, so we have plenty of time." She circled Imperial Jade and a lighter green called London Mist. "I've narrowed it down to these two. But I'm still not sure. So will you please go to Anderson's and pick up two cans of each?"

"Imperial Jade and London Mist!" The guy at the paint counter had to shout over that paint shaker thing. "Two excellent choices. Most customers choose colors that have all the originality of a sack of potatoes. These two are different though, especially the IJ."

He had circle glasses, slicked-back hair, a tie, and a white lab coat. He even had a sweater vest. One of those with the triangle pattern? He was like a professor.

I first told Professor Paint what I wanted at five twenty-five. It was five forty-five.

The paint shaker stopped, but he didn't. "Imperial Jade is very lush. It reminds me of a landscape, an Irish landscape covered in dew, with a castle in the distance. And the second color, this London Mist." He put his fingertips over his mouth and closed his eyes. "It just makes me think of the word 'tranquility.' I'm not sure if *London Mist* is the most appropriate name, though. I'm thinking more of a Celtic Mist, or April Meadow. Yeah, April Meadow."

"Those things ready, man?" All I could think about was eight o'clock.

"Probably. What d'ya say we crack these babies open? See how they turned out." He gently opened the paint shaker door, gently picked up one of the cans, and then set it on his counter, gently, like it was a kitten that he found in his Celtic Mist.

He slapped the top of the can, then looked around. "Ahhh. Where did I put my screwdriver?"

"It's all right," I said. "I'm sure they're fine." Ten to six.

"Oh, we have to make sure that you're getting what you asked for." He pointed to a sign that said, "Anderson's Hardware: You Want It, You Got It." If that were true, then Professor Paint would be hanging from the rafters. And bleeding.

Five minutes later, he found his screwdriver, in his pocket. Then he put on some rubber gloves and a face mask. "Too many fumes, and you know what happens." Yeah, *he* happens.

He slipped the screwdriver into the groove on the lid, slowly pushed it down, rotated the can just a little, and then did it again. He did that about ten times, then peeled off the lid in an amazingly careful way. It took him about five minutes to get it open. The guy should've been taking apart bombs, not mixing paint.

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Six o'clock.

The paint looked like pond slime. "There's your IJ," he said. "Right now, I'll bet, it looks a lot different than what you expected. But when it dries, you'll see the imperialness come out."

He put the lid back on, then used a hammer to tap it down. Gently. He must have tapped it thirty times. Then he did the screwdriver thing to seal it off. "Now, let's see if LM turned out just as good."

"I think they're just fine," I said to the AH. "We don't need to check the other ones. Really." I pointed at the sign. "What I want right now is to get out of here. Can I get that?"

"Absolutely. I can see you're a man in a hurry." He handed me four paint mixing sticks. "But first I'd like to give you a few pointers on mixing paint. You have to start by slowly descending the stick. About halfway into the paint. Then do about ten clockwise rotations. But you can't just spazzy spin it like you're beating eggs. You gotta do more of a slow churn, and while you're churning, you have to also twist the stick itself back and forth. The next step is tricky."

"I know how to mix paint. My father's a painter."

He took off his mask. "A professional house painter?"

"Yeah."

"Excellent, excellent. What's his mixing technique? I'm always trying to perfect mine."

"I gotta go. I'll show you next time."

"Okay. But if you have any problems, give me a call. We're open till nine tonight." He handed me a card that said "Jacob Jenks, Paint & Interiors."

When he went to get the other cans, I said, "Thanks J.J. I'll be sure to put you on my speed dial, and laminate your card too." I shouldn't have said that.

At around six forty-five, I stumbled into the RAI lobby swinging two gallons of paint in each hand.

I dodged around some big boxes stacked next to the bathroom. There was a clank, then a long hiss.

Next to my shoe, a blue can glugged out soda. Some moron put it on one of the boxes. And one of my paint cans knocked it over. My right sock felt wet.

The pop can stopped leaking. I rolled it over with my foot and swore to myself. It had two slashing silver letters: G and C. Dorkwimp Butt-kisser's GC. The men's room toilet flushed.

I set two paint cans in a corner, then picked up the pop can. Pretty much empty. The sink turned on. I put the can back on the floor. The sink turned off. When the electric hand dryer turned on, I started to walk away. Then I came back and stared at the spill. The puddle kept stretching out.

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The dryer turned off. Admit it? Run off? I couldn't decide. So I hid.

The door opened. I crouched behind the two biggest stacks of boxes in there. But I forgot the two cans of paint I'd set down.

I looked through a crack between the two boxes in front of me. All I saw was a sliver of yellow. It moved, and then stopped.

He said, "Son of a bitch." The can crumpled a couple times. There was a heaving noise. A loud clack came from behind me.

The can tapped my shoulder, then clinked onto the tiles. It was crushed.

I stayed quiet. The yellow didn't move. If he saw those two paint cans, I was screwed.

A boom and the box right in front of my face jerked. He must have kicked it. I stayed quiet though, and listened to him walk back to the office area.

I cleaned up the spill, then walked into the office. Buttkisser stood over Melissa and picked at his Adam's apple. She was shaking her head.

Then he saw me. "Where were you?" he said. "When did *you* get here?" His Adam's apple cannonballed out.

"I just got in," I said. "Went to get the paint. For the conference room?" When I lifted the cans, I saw soda in the cracks of my right gym shoe. I stuck it beneath the desk next to me.

"What do you know about that spill?"

"The one in the lobby?"

"How did you know it was there?"

"Saw it when I walked in. I cleaned it up."

"That's mine. My GC got dumped. I put the thing down, take a piss, come out, and bam: the thing's all over the floor?"

He looked at my Patriot's shirt like it was a pile of vomit.

"Well, we're the last three here," he said. "Neither of you spilled it. And I sure didn't. I guess it got excited. Just hopped right off that box. What happened there?" He pointed to my shoulder. It had a wet spot on it.

"This?" I put the paint cans down. "That's...I don't know."

He slapped the desk then stomped out of there.

Melissa said, "I guess the Grand Crown has fallen."

We went into the conference room. When I popped open one of the cans, I knew that Jacob Jenks wasn't really a paint professor. He was a paint jerk; that paint was white.

"Try the others," said Melissa. She didn't look that upset.

I opened the next can. White. "I don't get it. The guy? J.J? He got me the green. He was like a paint god."

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"Well, maybe he'll have mercy on us," she said. "Try the others."

The third can was the Imperial Jade.

"It's a little before seven," she said. "There's probably enough time to go back and get the others fixed. Can you go back?"

"I can't," I said. "The guy told me his department closes at seven."

"That's fine. If the next can is light green, we'll be fine."

I got down on one knee, put the screwdriver in the slot, and then popped the cap. Brown? Brown. It was Jacob Jenks's last laugh. He shit on me through paint.

Melissa walked around the room looking at the walls, the cans of paint, the window. "This is what we have, so we'll have to make do." She pointed at the back wall. "I'd like you to paint that wall the green. Take your time. You have an hour. Then you can go."

I said, "But what about the other walls?"

"I have to see this one first. Then I'll decide."

"But I have choir."

She handed me a roller. "I know, and you'll be fine. You can go at eight." She took a paintbrush, then climbed the ladder. "I can paint too, you know?"

We painted that wall together, and then I left.

The next day, I got there at two. Everyone was in the conference room.

Around two thirty, I was outside fixing that stupid parking sign. Three guys and two women came out of the office. I'd never seen them before. The sign fell. Right onto Mr. Romanowski's bumper. Made a huge scratch.

In a couple minutes, he came out talking on his cell phone. Talking real loud, like a football player tough guy. But he was a fake tough guy. Real tough guys don't throw chairs when they find out the pizza they ordered has green peppers.

And smart guys don't tell tough guys, fake or real, if they just scratched their bumper.

Then Dorkwimp Buttkisser came out crunching his pop can. He looked at my Detroit Pistons shirt—the Pistons knocked the Indiana Pacers out of the playoffs that year—and shook his head. He held up his leather notebook crooked and pointed at me. Then he got into his car and left.

"Looks like we did it." It was Melissa. "The client loved it. So Mr. Romanowski loved it." She had on this dress. It was green. Not as wild as Imperial Jade. But more green than London Mist. Somewhere between.

I said, "What about Mr. Buttkiss—Mr. Rusticker?"

She laughed. "Well, he said he wanted the clients to be happy. So he got what he wanted. C'mon. I'll show it to you."

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When I was driving home that day, I thought about Melissa. And I thought about the conference room. For the first time that spring, I rolled down my window. The fresh air came in. One of my favorite songs came on the radio. I sang along, and I thought about what it would be like to sing in a choir.