

Titanium White

Before I could decide against it, I rushed out of my apartment into a busy college morning, hauling myself and my white stick through the wash of students on the sidewalk, across the street, and into the university bookstore. I had one thing in mind: paints. The left side of the store held books while the other, I knew from my seeing days, was filled with aisles of art supplies. I headed into this section, pulled by the interesting smells of paper and canvas maybe, and a sharp, cutting scent that later I'd know was linseed oil.

I stood there assessing, dark glasses on, and my cane in my hand, an awkward extension of my arm like a leash without a dog. My head tilted to one side as if listening to distant music or awaiting divine inspiration. I was dimly aware that my hands were caked in paint, probably my clothes and hair, too. I hadn't slept for a very long time, and my face wore a manic smile. I wasn't sure how long I'd been standing there, but long enough for self-doubt to start seeping into my sleep-deprived brain. What was I doing here? A blind man in a paint store? I couldn't even see where the paints were, so how was I going to paint with them? What would my friends think? I imagined the gulf between us growing wider than ever, my drawing of the Buddha floating face down.

"Hey, good morning," said a male voice nearby. "Can I help you?"

“I want to paint.” It’s all I could think of to say, and even to me my voice sounded desperate, full of ragged need and vulnerability. I felt like crying. I turned towards the salesperson, and I imagined him looking me up and down and then slowly backing away.

Instead, he said, “Cool,” and added, “Any ideas on paints?”

He sounded interested. I jumped in. I didn’t know anything about using paints but that didn’t stop me. I’d read a lot of art books. “I need to be able to feel the paints, feel a difference between colors.” I rambled on and explained about drawing with the fabric paint, the raised lines, the geometric shapes, about the Buddha. I could ramble real well without even trying. The guy was still listening to me.

“That’s cool,” he said again. Cool, not crazy. “So let’s try some paints. Acrylics might work, or maybe oils, something that dries thick and textured.” I could sense his hands moving nearby as he was talking. He was thinking out loud really, his mind processing what I’d told him. “If you take the tops off, you can feel the paints and get a sense of them.” He said it like it was the most normal thing in the world. “Try this one.” He put a tube of paint into my hand and I held it carefully, reverentially. “It’s oil,” he added. “Titanium white.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Daniel.”

“Well, thank you, Daniel.” I paused. I was about to say more but then I held back. There was too much to say. I nodded my head towards him with a slight bow. “Thanks again,” I said, trying not to let my voice crack.

My stomach roiled with butterflies as I gently squeezed the tube and felt the soft, cold paint on my fingertip. I rubbed it with my thumb and noted the texture, its thickness taking me by surprise. It was like toothpaste, but in my mind’s eye I saw a canvas of white: a bright white; clouds through an airplane window white; wedding cake icing white.

“Hey, try this. Put it on this paper, and you can feel it properly,” said Daniel. He guided my hand to a pad of paper, and I squeezed out a larger dab of paint and sank my fingertips into it.

Immediately I felt my mind make the connection. My fingers touched and my mind lit up in white. “Wow,” I said. And then to include Daniel in my discovery I added, “It’s cool.”

I had been transported to this world of white, this intense concentration between my mind and my sense of touch, so when Daniel spoke again he sounded distant and I had to consciously bring myself back to him, wading through Titanium white. He was suggesting more paints, different colors.

“How about these next? Ivory Black and Cadmium Red? There should be some contrast in the way they feel.” His advice was practical but his voice was tinged with curiosity. I imagined him holding up the tubes for me to see, waiting for my approval. I nodded and grinned, hardly able to wait.

I sensed a weight on the pad of paper and guessed he had put the tubes there. Without thinking, I wiped my paint-smearred fingers on my pants—it’s what I’d been doing all night—and picked up a tube. “That’s the black,” said Daniel.

“Thanks,” I said. Then I focused on opening the paint, squeezing out a tiny amount, and readying myself for the mind-touch connection. The difference in texture hit me immediately. This black was slick and runny and I was thinking about squid ink or shiny black cars. I could have washed my hands in this and stained myself black as a night without stars. It was a black without light, but it felt hopeful to me as there was a sheen, a slight gleam to it. I moved my fingers around and saw my mind’s eye turn dark with this pure, concrete black.

“It’s different,” I said. “So different from the white. I can see the difference,” I said to Daniel, my voice awed and excited. At first I didn’t notice the dreaded “see” word slipping out of my mouth, and when I did, I didn’t feel the need to correct it. It was

the exact right word to use. I could see the difference between Ivory Black and Titanium White. I wiped my hands on my pants again and plunged my fingertips into first one dab of paint, then the next. My mind lit up like a traffic light. Black. White. Black. White. It was fun. I could have spent the whole day in this store playing with the paints. I was laughing now and I knew I must look like a crazy blind man finger painting. Hell, I was a crazy blind man finger painting. Next to me Daniel laughed and I felt him slap my shoulders.

“Knock yourself out, John,” he said. “I’ll be back in a minute. Try some other colors.”

That brought me back to my senses. I could be having this much fun with another paint, too. Hurriedly I wiped off my hands, unscrewed the last tube of paint, and squirted. A little too hard as I feel a splurge of paint mound onto the paper. Never mind. I could hardly wait to sink my fingers into it. At the very back of my mind sat a little spike of doubt, of fear, that this paint would not feel different. But I plunged in anyway and waited to feel some emotion. At first, nothing. I panicked. Was I being too rational? Overthinking the process? How could I be spontaneous again? Could I will the color red into my mind? I moved my fingers around slightly in the Cadmium Red, still consumed with my thoughts. And as I worried, my fingers took over, circling in the paint, gently dabbling, as if searching for something. They noted that this paint was not thick like toothpaste nor slick like oil but was somewhere in between. It gave beneath my fingertips, plastic and pliable, warm and comforting, and I began to see the color red building in my mind’s eye. It was a soft red that made me think of home hearths and dogs lying in front of fires, but there was a touch of the regal to it. It was a color that made you take notice and then invited you in to join it. For me this would always be Cadmium Red.

So now I tested myself. I wiped my hands off again on my paint-encrusted pants and moved from one paint to the next. Thick—Titanium White. Slick—Ivory Black. Pliable—Cadmium Red. Again my mind lit up with the colors. Wedding cake icing and shiny black cars and a roaring fire in a grate. Images that could tell a story or two. I was remembering that joke “What’s black and white and red all over?” and instead of “newspaper” or “a zebra with sunburn” I was thinking “my pants” and “all the pictures I’m going to paint.” Because I knew now that this was what I was going to do. I’d buy these three oil paints and a bunch of canvases and with them I’d paint my way back into the world. A world of my own making, on my own terms. No matter how long it took.

When Daniel returned he was excited that the oils had worked out. He wrapped them up for me, offering to get new tubes from the back but I said no, these tubes had meaning for me. “Sure thing,” he said, packing up some canvas paper, a palette, and brushes. “You may want to get a rag or something, an old towel or T-shirt for your hands.”

I laughed. “You’re right.”

“See you soon,” said Daniel. I didn’t even wince.

As I left the store I was on cloud nine, my head up, my stride long, and my cane tapping with confidence. I was thinking about how lucky I was that I chanced upon Daniel. Things could have gone so differently otherwise. He didn’t question what I wanted to do, didn’t think of me as crazy, he just saw me as an artist who wanted to paint. Of course he had noticed that I was blind. How could he not? Unless he was blind, my train of thought added ironically. But the important thing was that he saw my blindness as just one part of me. It didn’t define me for him. I imagined him telling his friends later, “A guy came into the store today looking for paints. He was blind.” Or would he say “A blind man came

into the store today looking for paints”? There was a difference. But did it matter? The important thing was that he had embraced what I wanted to do, and he had helped me.

Once at home inside my apartment, I laid down my prizes and petted Ann as she trotted over to greet me. I was surprised to feel matted paint all over her fur and laughed. She must have been my paint rag last night, too.

Alone in my apartment I stashed my paint supplies in my bedroom. I wasn't really sure of my motives, but I thought I didn't want my friends to view me as crazy. Blind and epileptic was bad enough. Blind, epileptic, and crazy would be too much for them to bear. Or maybe I was scared they would gently persuade me not to paint. They'd tell me not to open myself up to failure, to concentrate on the things I could do, not the things I couldn't. They would take me to bars and coffee shops to get me out of my apartment, away from myself, and we would continue to make small talk as usual until the next time. But I didn't want to do that anymore. The way I saw it, things couldn't get any worse. So what would one more crushed hope matter? I'd already hit rock bottom and seen my dreams shattered. There was that “see” word again. To be precise, I hadn't seen my dreams shattered. I hadn't seen anything for a long time in the world outside my mind and that was the problem. Not in terms of me seeing or not seeing, but in terms of the people close to me. For them seeing was knowing. Seeing was believing. And if I couldn't see, they reasoned, I couldn't know anything anymore.

It was interesting that they didn't have Daniel's objectivity. They knew me when I was sighted and now viewed everything that I was as diminished. They saw me in terms of what I had lost. What I could have been. Maybe it was easier for people who met me now, not knowing my history. They accepted me as I was. It

was just that the people close to me hadn't learned to do that. And neither had I.

Sitting on my bed after stowing my newly acquired contraband in a closet, I tried to understand why I was determined to paint. Certainly I loved drawing and this was the closest way I would ever get back to it. But it was more than that. It ran deeper. It had to do with the images in my mind. In many ways I was tired of them fluttering there like exotic insects in search of a home. I was hoping that capturing them forever in paint on canvas would free my mind of them and record them for me. Many of them were memories of my past, images that I loved from my sighted life, and I lived in fear of them disappearing one day from my mind and leaving me with nothing. A desolate canvas. I wanted to get these memories down on paper to keep them forever. Thinking about these reasons it seemed that my mind was too full of the visual. I needed to declutter and archive my images and memories, both the wanted and unwanted, to leave my mind free to process new ways of seeing. In short, I needed to spring clean my mind and move forward.

My thoughts had a kind of twisted logic, even if they did rest on the doubtful foundation that a blind man could paint, but I decided to accept the challenge of this premise. I was going to paint pictures of the recesses of my mind, a personal album of sorts, writ large in red, white, and black. I wanted someone to notice and say, "Hey look, guys, it's still John in there. He's still one of us."

Today was an amazing day.

I finished my first drawing and in that moment knew that I would be able to paint.

I discovered how to see color with my fingertips.

I went into a store as a blind man and came out as an artist.