

STEVE PERRY

JUST ASK

Sam padded down the hall into the kitchen, rubbing at his face, half asleep. He

was still in his pajamas, which at this time of year consisted of a pair of so-old-they-were-gray jockey shorts with the waistband stretched out. It was nine o'clock, but hey, he was on vacation, wasn't he?

The kitchen smelled wonderful. Carly was making biscuits. Whole wheat, something nobody else he knew got fight and something Carly had been doing perfectly for twenty years. No lead bread here.

"Morning, hon," she said brightly. "Sleep okay?"

"Yeah, fine."

He waited, but she didn't say anything. He had to know, so he asked.

"You, uh, been out this morning?"

"I brought in the paper."

"And . . . ?"

"They're talking about raising taxes again down in Salem."

He glared at her while he poured a cup of coffee from the thermos. "Thank you, Connie Chung. What about the house?"

She shrugged. "The house? Ah. Well. You know."

"Shit!"

He started toward the door, cup in hand.

"You better put some clothes on. What will the neighbors think?" "Ask me if I care what the neighbors think."

He didn't really look at the house until he was almost to the end of the driveway. Then he turned and got an eyeful.

It was yellow again.

He took a big sip of coffee, then shook his head. Well, shit.

Yellow.

Again.

Okay, fine, it wasn't yellow, if your idea of yellow was Tweety Bird or mustard, it was more of a sand color, maybe a little darker than a manila folder, but as far as he was concerned, that was yellow enough and that stinking hue ran all the way to its rotten heart.

And, given that he had spent most of yesterday and the day before painting the front of the house with Sears' best Weatherbeater(TM) latex in a nice warm blue

-- some gray in it -- it was really beginning to piss him off.

Hathorne came out next door and cast a baleful gaze at Sam in his underwear. Hathorne was sixty-three, retired early from the state. He ambled over to where

Sam stood and looked at the front of the house.

"I saw you out here yesterday with the sprayer and all. I thought you were going to paint it blue," he said.

Hathorne was on the board of the neighborhood association and thus privy to the architectural committee's necessary pre-approval of all painting or renovations

in the subdivision. You couldn't cut down a dead bush without getting permission

from those yahoos. They were all a bunch of Nazis, as far as Sam was concerned.

Not counting Sam and Carly and Tabitha and that one black family down the street, the whole of Beaverton was white Republicans as far as the eye could see

and they liked "earth tones" here in the lovely Four Seasons development.

Newcomers from SoCal quickly recognized Beaverton as Orange County north and that it was held up by pillars of ticky-tacky conformity. You could shoot the new adventures of Leave it to Beaver here, if you wanted. He still wasn't sure how they'd wound up living here. Something to do with the school district

Carly

wanted for Tabby. Carly usually got what she wanted.

"I did paint it blue. Somebody must have Shuck over here in the middle of the night and repainted it yellow again."

"I wouldn't call that yellow," Hathorne said, looking at the house. "More of a sand color. Manila, maybe --"

"Whatever! Anyway, this is the second time it happened."

"How odd."

Sam sipped at his coffee again. "Yeah, well, it may be odd, but it isn't funny."

"Well. I've got to go. You gonna paint it again?"

"Damned right I am."

"Might put on some clothes. Otherwise you might give old Mrs. Jackson across the street another heart attack."

When he finished the front, late in the afternoon, Sam went inside to wash up. It was warm out, a nice spring day, and the paint was already drying in places.

It had been an uneventful afternoon, except for the usual run of the Beaverton Fire Rescue truck to old Mrs. Jackson's house for her monthly case of the

vapors. Old Mrs. Jackson was eighty-eight. He expected she would outlive everybody in the subdivision, her "heart attacks" notwithstanding. He'd seen those young delivery men going into her house and not coming out for hours at a time. He had his suspicions that she had something going with one of the fire department medics, too. Maybe he should get stock in J&J's KY factory -- the old lady must buy the stuff by the barrel.

"How is it going?" Carly asked. She was fixing supper: mashed potatoes, pork chops, broccoli. The smell was exquisite. Carly might just be the best cook on the planet.

"Just fine. Where are the sleeping bags?"

"In the hall closet. Why?"

"Because I am going to camp out front tonight and watch for whoever thinks he's so hilariously funny. And I'm taking the shotgun with me."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Oregon law says you can shoot anybody who sneaks over and paints your house in the middle of the night."

The eyebrow went higher.

"Well, if it doesn't, it should."

"Why don't you just forget it and enjoy the rest of your week off? I like the old color just fine. And it isn't in bad shape."

"Puke yellow. Baby crap yellow. Pus yellow."

"It isn't yellow, it's more of a sand color. Maybe manila. And I like it." Their fifteen-year-old daughter Tabitha wandered into the kitchen, a scruffy vision in black, her long hair pulled back in a pony tail. A beautiful child and the image of her mother, save for the fatty clothes.

"You just get up?" Sam asked.

"Nah, I been up for a while. Half an hour, at least."

"Jesus."

"Spring vacation, Dad. I get to sleep late. So, when's supper gonna be ready, Mom?"

"Thirty minutes."

"Great. How'd the painting go, Dad? Was it yellow again?"

"It was. And I bet it was one of your friends who did it."

"Come on, Dad, just because they rolled the place one time with toilet paper

--"

"What about the load of OCA political signs?"

"My friends didn't do that."

"Hah!"

"Anyway, nobody I know would waste that much energy for a joke." That was probably true, Tabby and most of her friends made garden slugs look like track stars on steroids. But he said, "Maybe. We'll see." He mimicked jacking a shell into the action of a pump shotgun, pointed the imaginary weapon and said, "Blam!"

Tabby flicked a quick gaze at the ceiling. "Really, Dad." She headed for the television.

"Give my love to Oprah," he yelled after her.

"Really, Dad, Oprah has been over for hours. It's Geraldo."

At about midnight, hunched under the small oak tree in the sleeping bag without -- at Carly's insistence -- the shotgun, Sam dozed off. Not more than five minutes, he checked his watch when he jerked awake suddenly. Five minutes tops. Okay, six minutes.

The house was yellow again.

He stared at it. No way. No way could somebody paint the whole front of an entire house in six minutes. Maybe if they had a sprayer the size of a Mack truck and the Flash was running it, but it would have to make a lot of noise even so, and no way could they drive up, paint the house and leave in five -- okay, six -- goddamned minutes. Not without waking him up. No way, no how, no ma'am.

Well . . . damn.

Carly was still awake reading when he went inside. Another of those get-your-shit-together books. The path to somewhere or the other. The joy of breathing.

"How's it going out there, Mr. Bond?" She hummed a bit of the theme from Goldfinger.

"It's yellow again."

"Ah."

"'Ah?' All you can say is 'Ah?'"

She looked back at her book. "Well. What are you going to do now?"

"Do? Do? Nothing right this minute. In the morning, however, I am going to Sears, that's what I'm going to do. We'll just see about this."

The salesman at Sears, a barely post-pimple boy of maybe twenty, had never heard

of anything like it before. Nor had he heard much of anything about anything before, Sam reasoned.

"Uh, maybe I should, like, you know, let you, like, uh, talk to my manager?"

Never had a shotgun when you needed one. "Uh, yeah, why, like, don't you, uh, do that?"

America was doomed. When this kid's generation took over, they'd probably feed all the old folks to the lions. If Generation-Z lived that long, Sam would probably be glad to hurl himself into the cage with the big cats. Not, "You want fries with that?" but, "Fries? What are fries?" Even pictures on the buttons wouldn't be enough. Doomed.

The manager, a woman of sixty with hair dyed the color of a palomino horse's mane and thirty pounds too much weight, all of it below her waist, shook her head. She'd never heard anything like it, either. "What exactly is it you want us to do, Mr. -- ah -- ?"

"Sewall. Sam Sewall. The paint is guaranteed for fifteen years, isn't it?"

"Well, yes . . ."

"Then if it evaporates off in five minutes, something is wrong with it. I want it replaced."

"Replaced."

"Right. I'll swap you my twelve gallons of unopened paint for twelve new gallons."

She shrugged. "All right. I guess we can do that."

"Some freak chemical thing?" Hathorne said.

"Yep," Sam said.

"Must be pretty rare."

Sam refilled the airless sprayer with another thick dollop of the heavy latex paint, screwed the lid back on. Got paint all over his hands. "Nah, it happens all the time, people at Sears said. Mostly with earth tones."

Hathorne glared at him. "I didn't make the board policy, Sewall."

"Yeah, but you help enforce it. The Board doesn't even have a color wheel we can choose from. It's all inside your minds, you should pardon the expression."

"We know what's right. You want a purple house with pink spots, go live in Eugene with all the other old hippies."

Sam didn't speak to that. He flexed his right index finger. It was getting sore, having to hold the sprayer's trigger down all this time.

Good morning!" Sam said as he strolled into the kitchen. He felt so good he had

already showered and shaved and gotten dressed in his paint-spattered overalls. He should be able to finish the sides and most of the back of the house today, if he hustled.

Carly was testing a drop of pancake batter on the cast iron grill. The metal was nicely seasoned: the batter sizzled. Great smell. "Hi. You want to eat first or start repainting first?"

Sam blinked. It took a second for what she'd said to sink in.

"Did you say, 'Start repainting?' As in, paint over a part I already painted?"

"Oh, dear."

He stormed out front.

Son-of-a-bitch!

Back inside, Carly said, "You want Karo or maple syrup on your pancakes?"

"The house is yellow again! Yellow, yellow, yellow!"

"You're upset."

"Upset?! Why would I be upset? Just because I've got the only house on the fucking planet that can't be painted? Maybe I should go on Donahue -- Men Whose Houses Change Colors in the Middle of the Fucking Night!"

"I think they already did that show. I'm sorry, did you say Karo or maple syrup?"

"Karo."

Jesus.

"Whatcha doon, Dad?"

"A scientific experiment. I'm painting this piece of plywood here blue and I'm going to paint a swatch on the front of the house blue and see what happens in the morning."

"Cool."

Yep. Civilization was doomed. Doomed. Might as well start writing his will now.

In the morning, the plywood was still a nice warm blue, some gray in it.

The house, of course, was spotlessly, disgustingly, putridly yellow.

"Now whatcha doon, Dad?"

"I'm setting up the video camera to tape the front of the house. I'll come out and change the tape in the middle of the night. I am going to see exactly how the damned house does it."

"Cool. You aren't worried somebody might steal the camera?"

"No. It's wired to explode if anybody but me touches it. Better tell all your thieving friends. One finger on it and . . . kaboom!"

"Really, Dad."

Sam ran the tape on fast forward. Three hours of the blue patch on his house.

A

couple of moths flew by; once, Carly's coal black cat padded past, taking no apparent notice of either the fresh paint or the camera. She called the cat "Djavul;" when she wasn't around, Sam called the nasty old tom "Feces."

All of a sudden the blue spot vanished.

He rewound the tape and played it at normal speed. The blue patch disappeared

so

fast he missed it. He rewound the tape again, ran it on slow.

Missed it again.

The third time he rewound the tape, he advanced it one frame at a time.

The blue spot vanished between two frames. Like a light blinking out, that fast.

One frame it was there, by the next frame it was gone. Poof. Unless it really was the Flash doing it, it wasn't possible. And even the Flash would have to hurry.

Jesus H. Christ on a pogo stick!

Sam called his college roommate Will Stoughton at the Dow Research Lab in Hillsboro.

"Will, did you get a chance to look at those samples I sent you?"

"Yup."

"And . . .?"

"Well, Sam, old son, I can give you the technical breakdown, if you want -- binders and pigments and adhesives and all like that -- but what you have here is two different colors of exterior house paint."

"I know that. Is there anything unusual about them?"

"Nope, not that I can tell. The fresh blue is standard latex. Sears Weatherbeater(TM) would be my guess."

"What about the dried yellow chips?"

"You mean the sand-colored stuff? Actually, it's more of a manila --"

"Spare me the shade comparisons. Is there anything wrong with it?"

"Nope. Plain ole paint, just like the other."

"If I were to slap some of the blue on my house over the yellow, how long would

it be likely to stay there?"

"Assuming nobody scraped it off, and given the Oregon weather, twelve, maybe fifteen years."

"Well, shit."

"A problem?"

"Yeah. I've put this paint on the front of my house six times and each time it disappeared by the next morning. Just . . . went away."

"Hmm. That's odd."

"Is that your considered Ph.D.-in-chemistry opinion, Dr. Stoughton? Odd, you say? Odd? What could cause that?"

"Damned if I know. I suppose you could come up with something like vanishing ink. You know that stuff we used to squirt on each other as kids, bought it out of the back of comics? Loses its color when exposed to the air?"

"Yeah?"

"Thing is, this isn't it. This is just plain old paint. No way."

"What about radon or something?"

"Sammy, boy, if you had enough radioactivity in your house to bleach the paint off the wall overnight you and your family would all look like burnt pork chops."

"Well . . . shit."

"Interesting, though. Keep me posted on it, would you? I gotta go now. Oprah is coming on. They're doing 'Women Who Pretend to Be Men and Then Sleep With Other Women.'"

"And you supposedly an intelligent human being. Goodbye, Will."

Sam brooded in his study for most of the afternoon, thinking about the problem.

Unless something drastic happened, the house was going to stay that baby trap yellow. He'd run out of ideas. Why? still loomed unanswered. Obviously he'd pissed off some bored god with nothing better to do than sit around zapping his paint job.

Finally, around supper time, he figured it out. The only thing that made any sense, all things considered. He didn't know why he hadn't seen it before. Carly was in the kitchen, cooking fried chicken.

"Hi, honey. Feeling better?"

"Yeah. I think I figured it out."

She turned and gave him the raised eyebrow.



"It's you, isn't it? You're a witch, aren't you?"

Carly turned back to the bubbling chicken. She began to carefully turn the pieces. They were all a nice, golden brown on the bottom. She was a great cook.

She never burned anything. Never. That was a major clue. He really should have seen it before. It wasn't natural not to ever burn anything you cooked. And whole wheat -- anybody who could make whole wheat biscuits that tasted good, well, that wasn't natural, either. Ipso facto.

"Well, actually, yes. I am a witch."

He knew it! "Jesus, Carly! We've been married for twenty years! You would think that if a man's wife was a witch she would at least let him know it, wouldn't you?"

"You never asked."

"I never asked? Jesus, I never asked if you could turn into a fire-breathing dragon, either!"

"Are you asking me if I can?"

He stared at her. "No. I don't want to know. Come on, Carly, you could have said something!"

She shrugged. "It never came up."

He turned away, shaking his head. "So it is you who's been making the paint vanish every night. I been out there busting my butt and you're wriggling your nose or whatever it is witches do and disappearing it!"

"I like the color the house is," she said. "I told you."

"But -- but --"

"You didn't ask me if I wanted to change it. You announced that you were going to paint the house, then you went to Sears and picked the color out, also without asking me."

He turned back around, surprised. "Did I?"

"You did. It didn't occur to you that I might have an opinion?"

"I thought you'd like the blue."

"Well, I do like it, actually. But you should have asked."

He thought about it for a minute. Well. She had him there. That was true. "Oh. Oh. I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I should have asked. I apologize."

Carly stirred the chicken around a little, "Really?"

"Really. I'm sorry. What can I say? I'm no Alan Alda."

She smiled, but it was a little one.

"All right. Where is my sword?"

She looked at him. "Sword?"

"Yeah, so I can fall on it. Mea culpa. I will kiss your feet and then I will do the honorable thing. Me 'n' Brutus 'n' Cassius, we're honorable men, you know."

She laughed and he knew he was off the hook.

"So, can you do anything else? Magic, I mean?"

She laughed again. "You don't really think that being able to make love five times in one night is natural at your age, do you?"

"Hey, I'm only forty-six." He put his arms around her. "Where is Tabby? Didn't she go to the movies? I'll show you natural."

"The chicken will burn."

"Let it."

They didn't make it to the bedroom until the third time. And, of course, the chicken didn't burn, either.

And when Sam woke up the next morning, the outside of the house was a nice, warm blue -- with a little gray in it.

All he'd had to do was ask.