

MANHUNT

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Cover Painting by Michael

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THE PAINTER

by
**MICHAEL
ZUROY**

It worked for a long time. All Anton had to do was tell himself not to kill anybody . . .



EACH NEW MORNING, Anton Druller whispered to himself a certain sentence, which was also a resolution, and the wonderful part of it was that it worked. I will not kill anybody to-day, Anton told himself, and he did not that day, and in this manner twenty years had passed, day by day, during which he had killed no one, not even one person.

Of late years, he had begun to feel that this morning ritual could perhaps be skipped, since he had grown into the habit of not killing, but still he never skipped it. He did not want to take any chances, although he was sure that he could trust himself now.

It had been difficult at first, of course; so many temptations, so many opportunities, and his need

had been so great; but except for the passionate moments of his need, he did not really want to kill; he wanted, rather, to remain gentle and kind. He shuddered when he recalled the terrible wrongs he had done to other human beings.

The little store in which he conducted his sign painting business was on West Thirty-Seventh Street. This morning, as always, Anton hung his jacket up neatly in a corner, got into a paint-streaked, greenish smock, and stepped outside his doorway for the morning air and the sight of the people and traffic increasing in the street. He scanned the tall buildings between which the street seemed an insignificant fissure; dirty gray monsters, he thought, sucking people up from the ground through the

veins of your elevator shafts to feed your insatiable cells; mud-colored atrocities; materialized ugliness.

Two or three old tenements squatted among these buildings, with Manhattan illogic, and from them school children and workbound adults were trickling.

Watching one of the children approaching, a blonde girl, Anton's eyes squinted behind his round glasses and a ripple of appreciation moved across his lean, mosquito-like face. How lovely the sun on her golden hair, he thought, lovely shining, lovely glints, lovely tawny shade. The subtle coloring of the skin. His eyes clung to her, turning liquid within their slitted lids when she stopped and smiled at him.

I shall not kill her, he reassured himself. No, no, I shall never kill her. I have no intention of killing her.

He put out his thin hand and touched her hair. He stared at the contrast: his wrist, flat white, with wiry black hairs that grew to his knuckles, against the soft gold. He slid his hand lightly down to her neck. Incredible velvet! He gave her a penny, saying, "Now, remember, this is our secret. You shall have one whenever you stop a moment with me in the morning."

"Sure, Mr. Druller." She snatched the coin and ran off.

He sighed and reentered the store. Now, he thought, let us see what's to be done. Six signs to be completed today, eight on hand, to be delivered. One by one, he propped up the completed signs and examined them critically and minutely. Fine, fine, he thought, but again the feeling that I should do better, that I have missed perfection; this must be the burden of all artists. Should not that blue be a tone lighter, a wave length lighter? He shook his head and began shuffling through the day's orders.

The biggest one was the Packer order, but the Packer account was long overdue; Mr. Packer owed for several signs. In fact, Anton realized, he hadn't paid for anything yet. Firmly, he turned over the order sheet. The Packer sign would have to wait until he had some slack time. He began working on another order.

His helper came in. Anton instructed him on some of the deliveries and watched him go off, signs in his arms, spare legs swivelling inside the slate gray trousers. A study in slate gray, thought Anton. Slate gray in motion. I could spend a lifetime on mobile slate gray; I could write a book on that alone. Remarkable how much there is to learn about the elementary.

Anton's mind went to the boy. He is perfectly safe with me, he assured himself again. Perfectly safe. He could work for me another ten years, twenty years, and I wouldn't kill him. I wish I could tell him how safe he is here.

Anton applied himself to his work, humming. He sketched and lettered rapidly but with precision. He

spent the most time over mixing his colors, using scores of small jars to graduate his tints and evolve new ones. Most important, he thought, to choose a shade of color suitable to the message, since shades of feeling were innumerable too; so, and with proper harmony and proportion a sign could be a work of art and effectively do its job at the same time.

The phone rang and, with the impatience with the interruption that he had never learned to overcome, he left his workbench and answered it. It was Mr. Packer. Mr. Packer wanted his sign this morning. Politely, Anton explained that he couldn't promise it for two or three days; longer, perhaps; he was rushed with work. Mr. Packer demanded that he get on his sign at once. Anton suggested that he might try another sign-painter; perhaps one who did not care whether or not his bills were paid.

"Damn it, none of your lip there," Mr. Packer exploded. "You've had that order long enough. You know damn well I can't get another sign-painter to start it right away. I got buyers coming in to-day and I need that sign for my sample room, for my display. How do you expect me to sell leather goods without a classy display? Finish it up, and I'll send you a check for the whole balance first thing in the morning. How's that?"

"I'm sorry," said Anton.

"Look, buster," barked Mr. Packer, "I'm coming right over there, and you're going to finish it if I have to stand over you and watch. You'll get your stinking money, if that's what you're worried about."

Anton hung up.

An extremely unpleasant character, he thought, returning to his workbench. That voice; it was the type of a voice that was loud, without yelling; it just came out loud no matter what Packer was saying, and when he yelled it was unbearable. An unfortunate affliction.

Anton worked on. After a while, a short man came and stood in front of his window, examining the neat arrangement of signs. Come on, come in, thought Anton cheerily. Always glad to welcome a potential customer. You will be in no danger at all; I am harmless. This little store would be a fine place for a murder, of course, unfrequented, quiet in the midst of the street clamor, with a little back room where a body could be hidden indefinitely, until disposed of; but have no fear, I do not seriously think of these things any more..

The man came in. He peered at Anton doubtfully. He needed a sign, although he was not very sure as to its composition. Fine, fine, said Anton. This was the type of business he enjoyed, where he could instruct and direct. It turned into a long discussion, with Anton advising, suggesting, explaining, convincing. He demonstrated the importance of the proper color tone. "This green, for example, notice how dull and dingy it appears. How does it make you feel? Weary and lethargic, am I right? But

watch! A touch of lemon yellow, a drop of rose, and see how it livens up, it makes you feel light, buoyant, don't you agree?"

"Why, yes," nodded the little man, "I get what you mean all right. Say, that's something, isn't it? Say, that's a beautiful shade of green, beautiful. You know your stuff all right. O.K., let's settle a couple more details and you can go ahead."

Mr. Packer walked in. He planted his thick-set body in front of Anton and said, "Here I am, buster. Let's get going with that sign."

"If you please," said Anton coldly, "I am talking to this gentleman."

"I was ahead of him. You're not supposed to be talking, you're supposed to be working on my order."

"I don't want to cause any trouble," said the little man nervously. "I can wait."

"I assure you there's no need to wait," said Anton.

"Come on, come on, let's get going," bellowed Mr. Packer. "The hell with this guy. Let's see some action."

"I better go," said the customer. "I'll be back some other time."

"But I assure you . . ."

"Be back." The little man ducked out.

"Good," said Mr. Packer. "Now you can get started."

Anton stared fixedly at Mr. Packer. I had better not fight with him, he thought. It's not good for me to fight. He would be in no danger, of course; I will not kill him. I am resolved not to kill him. Anton indicated the job on his workbench. "You see I'm working on another order."

Mr. Packer brushed the incompleting sign roughly aside. "That takes care of that excuse. Let's go."

Insufferable boor, thought Anton. If I must finish his sign to get rid of him, I had better do it. Without a word, he went to his bench and began the job.

"All right," said Packer. "All right. That's better."

He took a chair and whistled through his teeth while Anton worked. He rose again and walked around the store, his heavy feet clumping back and forth behind Anton. He stood over Anton's shoulder and watched, his noisy breath whispering down to Anton's nostrils, strong with the rich food of many years. "Hurry it up, will you," he said, watching Anton's methodical strokes.

He resumed pacing. "Jeez," he burst out irritably after a while, "how do you stand this place? What a hole. I guess you got to be a certain type to stand this place. Jeez."

When another customer started to enter, he strode over roaring, "Sorry, buddy, we're all tied up now. Come back some other time."

He alternated from the chair to pacing the floor to watching over Anton's shoulder until Anton found himself listening for the creak of the chair

and the footsteps and the whispering breath.

He brushed the workbench once and knocked off a jar of paint. It shattered on the floor, leaving a ragged yellowish pool. "Hell," he said. "Had that too close to the edge, didn't you, Druller? Well, I guess there's no harm done, it's only paint."

Anton went on working silently. Wonderful, he thought, how steadfast my resolution remains. I am positive that I will not kill him. There remains now the mixing of the colors and the painting and I will be through and rid of him.

Packer came and watched, went away, came and watched again. "What's going on," he roared, "stop dragging your tail, will you? Slap it on."

Anton went on mixing.

"What kind of tripe is this?" said Packer.

Anton went on mixing. The blue was about right. He began stroking it on the sign. It was a lovely shade, a beautiful shade, and he stroked it on caressingly.

"Holy cow," said Packer, "what kind of a foul color are you putting on my sign?"

Anton looked up through his round glasses. "This is an exquisite tint, Mr. Packer."

"Exquisite, hell. I want a royal blue, something you can see, like in that jar over there." He grabbed a brush, jabbed it into the jar, looked around for a surface, and painted a wide streak across the incompleting sign that Anton had been working on. "Like that."

Anton got up. The job he just spoiled, he thought, I will ignore that. But he must understand about the color. He must not say those things about my colors. Anton began to explain.

Anton's eyes slitted, staring at Packer. It's true, he thought, this man has no appreciation of color and beauty; he spits upon color and beauty; he spits upon my work. Look at him; look at how he dresses, even; his very appearance is an insult.

This man deserves to die.

Knowing this, he began to tremble with ecstasy. The barrier was down; he could let himself go after all those long years. His breath came rapidly; the waves of passion began surging through him; there was no return any more, the wild need was upon him; there was no return any more, the wild need was upon him. His thin, groping hand picked up a small sharp knife, that he used for cutting pasteboard. Shaking, he waited the smallest part of a second for the spasm, then whirled, his arm swinging wide, and the knife slashed through Packer's throat.

For long moments he just watched the blood. Beautiful, he thought, beautiful. It spurted, it gushed, it gurgled. His hand, as though of its own volition, selected a paint brush, and he bent forward, dipping. The color of human blood was the most beautiful color of all.

