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In a woman's world, colors change every season: sand brown or russet brown, grass green or river green, star white or ice white. But for Tamar red is red. After all . . .

WHAT OTHER COLOR IS THERE?

By JEANNE WILLIAMS

MAURY had been seeing the girl around for quite a while. He'd be blowing his trumpet shrill and sweet, in the Brownsville night spot where he worked, and then she'd dance by with some vague character and Maury's ribs would dig into his lungs and he wouldn't know if his notes came out smooth, sour, or not at all.

She was that kind. Slim, tall, with a flow to the way her legs moved whether she was dancing or plain walking. Black hair fell to her shoulders, not in the mop-like way of most long hair, but with just enough wave to give it shape and dignity. Her flesh was white. Red lips, dark brows that curved like hurt wings over green eyes. She was something.

What puzzled, even worried, Maury was that she changed boy friends so often. No man in his right senses would drop her. It had to be that she did the switching. Maury kept telling himself that he was supposed to entertain her and her pals from the platform, but in spite of seven years in the racket, he couldn't put her in the paying customer niche and forget it.

He'd keep his eye on her till intermission. Then, if any people he knew were near her table, he'd walk over and talk to them, hoping somehow to meet her.

Some girls bantered the musicians, liked to call them by name and make a big deal of getting their favorite tunes played. Not this one. Her eyes would touch him, that was all,

and he'd feel as if a cool hand had brushed his face and quickly withdrawn. He began to keep track of the times she dated each man.

Usually she'd be with the same one several times in a row. Then she'd begin to look tired. She wouldn't dance, but sat at her table, watching her escort from those strange eyes. A few nights later, that man would be replaced by a new guy, and she'd glow again, she'd dance and laugh and a flush would be in her cheeks as if, except beneath those bright patches, white blood ran under her white skin.

Maury sweated and fretted, kept score of the men, and blew his trumpet. Finally, she came in one night with a man Maury knew, Ted Greaves, the town's youngest doctor. As soon as he could take a break, Maury went over to them.

"Hi, Ted," he greeted. "Didn't know you were a pub crawler. It's nice to see people I know come in."

Ted, plumpish, pinkish, and manicured, produced a thin smile. "We're even. I didn't know you massacred a trumpet."

Refusing to leave or get sore, Maury grinned at the

girl. "I always like to meet steady patrons."

"Look—" Greaves snorted.

The girl slipped her hand over Greaves' in a way that made Maury burn with jealousy. "Why, Ted, I'm no end flattered!" she smiled. "Who's your friend?"

"So far as I know," said Greaves, glaring, "he's Maury Howard."

"It's not an alias," said Maury, quirking an eyebrow at the girl. She laughed, and it was a lovely sound.

"Teddy must be imagining he's a scalpel or forceps or some other nasty thing. I'm Tamar Scott. You play a sweet trumpet, Mr. Howard, when your mind's on it."

Had he been that obvious? Maury flushed and shrugged.

"I hope you'll tell that to the manager if he starts to fire me. I was playing *Stardust* the other night when the other boys tore into *Fascination*."

"We thought it was a stunt!" Tamar protested.

Ted scowled. Maury remembered that she had been with another man the night it happened. When Tamar said "we," she meant herself and a man, but seldom the same one. Maury wrenched his gaze from the shadowed sweep of her throat. So what

if she was trouble? He'd never find anyone more worth it.

"See you around," he promised and went back for the next number.

He had her name and it wasn't a big town. Finding her address shouldn't be hard.

Keeping it might.

Maury picked up his trumpet and played with eyes on her. Why worry because she tired of men so fast? Maybe she hadn't loved one yet. If she'd been married, wouldn't that have been worse?

No, said his brain. If she were, you'd look for another doll, or get out of town. As it is, you'll stick around and try to beat the discard heap. Luck, boy! You'll need it.

He glanced back at her. Her eyes were cool green but her cheeks were a transparent blaze. Didn't some sick people look like that? And how about those periods of dullness, of fading, she passed through?

Maury was suddenly afraid. He had found his girl, but maybe too late.

She lived in a neat white rooming house. Maury had found her address in the phone book, and as he drove past, he wondered if she were home. Would she get mad if he went up without calling?

He cruised around the block, making up his mind.

They'd only met last night. She might tag him for a quick explosion tomcat. But— He swung his car around, drove back, and parked. He knocked, and as he waited, for the first time in his life his knees began to shake.

He was scared silly. Of being closed out by those calm eyes, of getting a brush off. Why hadn't he waited till they'd talked a few more times? Why had he come tearing over here like a kid after his first woman? He got mad because he was scared, and was about ready to get out fast when the door opened.

Then there she was and he couldn't think of anything except how beautiful were all her ways, the surprise changing to welcome as she stepped back from the door so he could come in.

"Why, Maury—it's nice to see you. But don't you work tonight?" He moved inside.

"Not for a couple of hours."

She was wearing flat-heeled sandals, slim black trousers and a white shirt, looking entirely different from the girl he had seen in the night club, but it was a fresh, pleasing difference. This way he was tall enough to look down at the white part in her hair and

feel protective. For just a second, she hesitated before she seemed to make up her mind.

"Wonderful! You can have cheese and goulash with me. I was ready to eat when you knocked. If we run out of food, there's lots of coffee."

"Swell," said Maury, and followed through the unamazingly furnished living room into a standard kitchen, white porcelain and blue tile.

Somehow he'd expected Tamar to have startling surroundings, but even the tablecloth on the card table where the meal was laid was a healthy blue-and-white check. She's probably not here enough to bother with making the place individualistic, he thought, helping her lay another setting.

"Do you work in town?" he asked, as she poured the coffee, "or are you vacationing?"

"Call it vacationing." Her eyes darkened. "I don't work, Maury. I can't stand one place more than a month or two. Dad left me a small income."

Maury who had gotten a paper route at the age of ten and been working ever since took a quick swallow of coffee. "Why, how do you keep from going nuts? Gosh, without work any town gets dull." She shrugged.

"I knew you were earnest with all kinds of principles, even if you are a musician." She laughed ruefully. "Now that you know I'm a parasite, foam on top of the beer, are you going to turn up your nose at my goulash and stalk out?"

"Anything but!" Maury said devoutly. A stream of ideas and conjectures were flooding his mind, trying to solve the riddle of Tamar.

Unmarried, idle, restless. What appeared to be an ebb and rise in vitality—. It could be some kind of illness that she didn't want to talk about or something might have happened to make her dread ties, the same people, the same places. Whatever it was, Maury determined to go slow, not scare her into slinging things in a suitcase and leaving. He started talking about a giant tarpon that had been caught that morning, and as they ate, she seemed to relax and spoke without defensiveness.

It began to get dark. Maury glanced at his watch, came to his feet in shock. "Back to the mines before they fire me! Will you be around tonight?"

"Date with Ted," she said without gladness. "Are you two buddies?"

"Not exactly. We drink at

the same bar is all. You like him?" Tamar stood up, stroking her sleeve with a restless hand.

"No, I don't like him, but he serves the purpose. To save trouble, Maury, let me say that I abhor possessive men."

Her eyes were clear as green glass. "I get it," Maury nodded. "You're as subtle as a medic with a vaccine needle."

Clamping his jaw, he snapped himself back in line, tried to grin. "Okay, divert yourself. I work nights anyhow. But how about some afternoon? You like to swim?"

"As well as anything. Tomorrow?"

"Fine. We'll drive over to Padre Island and have the beach to ourselves. I don't like sandy picnics so let's eat before we go. See you about one?"

She walked him to the door. "I hear you," she smiled, "and all your thoughts are good ones. So long, Maury." The feel of her hand in his was with him for long after he drove to work.

They found a tannish-white beach with an improbable horde of sea birds that scattered as they parked. Maury spread a blanket he'd begged

from his landlady down where the sand was still dampish from the tide so they could stretch out and play records without getting their mouths full of sand. He loaded the spindle and sank down by Tamar who was staring past him at the rounding dunes.

Sea oats and tall reed-like grass perched along the dunes like spinsters gripping their last prospect. "They plan to make this a junior Riviera," Maury gloomed. "I hope they don't succeed." Tamar lifted an eyebrow.

"You're a sturdy sentimentalist, aren't you?"

"You bet!" Chuckling, Maury hauled her to her feet. She fitted superbly inside black boy shorts and a yellow polo shirt. "I'm a man of action, too. Ready for a swim?"

"There's no place to change—"

"Sure there is. Go over and pick a nice solid-looking dune. It won't blow away before you're dressed."

She went back to the car and dug out a plastic case. "If I get sand inside my suit, you'd better blow away." She drifted off, managing somehow to walk gracefully even on the hot beach.

Skinning out of his dungarees, Maury tossed them and

his watch inside the car. He had worn his swim trunks. By the edge of the water, he stood on the damp sand and felt the cold water trickle up between his toes and run back as it touched his ankles. The surf was tossing white, roaring as vigorously as it could, but the wind was slow and not helping it; it sounded companionable, not threatening. Four birds went over in formation, one flying wing man.

Maury squinted up at them and grinned. When he glanced sideways, his content was full, for Tamar had come up. She wore an ivory suit; the only color about her was her eyes and lips and hair and those bright flushes in her cheeks. Maury held out his hand to her and they started into the water. There were many shells, some so brittle they cracked underfoot. Tamar cried out suddenly and jerked up her foot.

A thin trace of blood mixed with the water that dripped from the cut on her instep. Maury shot one arm around her and held her while he pressed on either side of the shell gash, making it bleed freely to cleanse it of dirt.

Trembling, her eyes shut, Tamar clung to him.

"Hey!" Maury said banter-

ingly, giving her a little shake. "It's nothing, honey—just a scratch. You can look."

She shivered as she glanced down. Was she one of those women with a morbid fear of blood? Maury stared as her gaze fixed on the cut. Even the soles of her feet were that smooth white. Involuntarily, he jerked out, "Tamar—your blood is so red—"

Her lips twitched. When she faced him, for a second her eyes were unfocused like someone in shock. Then she smiled.

"What other color is there?"

A dreamy amusement in her tone. Maury didn't like it. The day had changed, the salt wind stung bitterly. "Let's drive back to town," he said. "You can't swim with that foot."

She let him carry her and though she wasn't a small girl, she felt pitifully light; as if she were hollow bones and white skin and the blood that should have been in her had drained from her foot in the water— He drove back to town and all the way she leaned against him with her eyes closed and never said a word.

They had their times in the days, she always was ready to go wherever Maury wanted,

or to simply sit and talk in her apartment. She had detached good-humor and a quite attached way of responding to his love. Just one thing spoiled it.

She kept going with Ted Greaves. Maury could leave her to go to work and play through the evening in a remembering bemusement, sure that she loved him, that with care and patience he could end that restlessness of hers, and then she'd come in with Greaves, and Maury watching the doctor's tomcattish attentiveness, was miserably unsure of anything. One day, full of jealous worry, Maury had to say something or burst.

They were at her place, just back from a drive. Tamar was in her room, brushing her hair, talking to Maury through the half-open door. The way the brush tugged at her hair, caught, and then swept out of it reluctantly, stirred Maury, and at once the thought came: had Ted Greaves sat here and watched Tamar?

Maury couldn't stand the idea. He walked over and stood in the door. "Tamar, I wish you wouldn't run around with Greaves."

Just the slightest break in the rhythm of brushing.

"He's my doctor," she said,

without looking at Maury. Maury felt a tightness in his forehead. He kept his hands at his sides though he wanted to go over and swing her to face him.

"Doctors don't usually foot their patients' entertainment bills. Anyway, you need more rest. If he cared about your health he'd see that you got it."

She flung the brush down. Her eyes glittered. "Oh, don't be silly! You work nights and I'm not going to stay home or sit at a table alone waiting on you. And one more thing, my amateur diagnostician, I don't care about being healthy but I do want to be alive!"

The hot words died on Maury's lips. *There was something wrong with her.* He reached out and held onto her hands as if he could keep her that way.

"Are you sick, Tamar? Tell me—! Can't you tell me what is the matter?"

She turned her face away, drew her hands free of his. "Maury, I don't want a crying towel. Just let it go that Ted gives me the treatment I have to have. That's what he's paid to do. He understands about us. I don't date anyone else."

Ted didn't seem the type to amiably keep a girl in cold

storage for another guy. Maury said, "I'd rather you went with anyone but him. And if you're sick, I want to—" She moved into his arms.

"I can think of lots nicer uses for your shoulder than crying on it—. Maury—"

The feeling of her came hotly through his flesh, sent his blood leaping, but this time he wouldn't let it make him forget. This had to be settled. He held her back by her forearms and fought to keep his voice even.

"We've got to quit walking around the subject. I love you. If you love me, you'll let me help you, at least know what your trouble is. Will you?"

Her lips curved back from her slim teeth.

"No."

Dropping her arms, Maury spun toward the door. "Then so long, baby! Parts of it were nice."

Maury was out of town for a week's run in San Antonio. He was glad of it. He didn't have to look back among the tables and watch her with Ted and she wasn't where a ten-minute drive could take him to her. It was easier to grit his teeth and say the hell with a woman who wouldn't trust him.

Say it, not mean it.

Sometimes he was sure Ted was more than her doctor and that her sickness had a brief and nasty name. Other times he remembered her as she had been on the beach that day she cut her foot and the muscles of his neck would ache as he called himself a heel for walking out on a sick girl. His week in San Antonio was over. He drove faster than he should have on the way back to Brownsville.

Tamar's strange eyes seemed to be watching him. His hands sweated on the wheel and he knew he had to see her. He pieced together all he knew about her and realized it gave no actual hint of what was the matter with her. Only the way she'd reacted to the sight of blood gave any lead. Perhaps she had one of those blood deficiencies — maybe even leukemia.

He was going to find out. Greaves' word wasn't enough. Maury would take her to Houston and see what the specialists had to say. There was no use in her living like crazy because she seemed to think she was going to die pretty quick anyway. Maury drove to her place before he even went home.

No one answered his knock. He tried the door. It was lock-

ed. He glanced at his watch. Early for her to be out. It was only five. Maybe she was downtown. Maybe she was at her doctor's—

The receptionist didn't want to bother Greaves.

"Doctor is busy," she said firmly, with that undefined use of "doctor" that always infuriated Maury—as if there were, like God, only one. Maury took her hand off the doorknob and brushed past her.

"He's going to be busier. Just stay there and mail statements!"

It was as complicated as locating the Holy of Holies, but Maury finally found the small lab where Greaves was. The doctor whirled, saw who it was, and managed a thin smile.

"Well, Howard, I don't see any severed arteries. Nothing else would excuse you. What—" Maury braced his hands on the wall.

"I want to know exactly what you're treating Tamar for."

Greaves curled his lips. "That, you know, is none of your business. I can't violate a patient's trust. Now get out of here before I get the police!" Maury walked up close.

"You're telling me," he

said. "Or I'll take you apart. I'm between you and your buzzer, Teddy boy."

Suddenly, Greaves laughed. "You dope! Honestly, haven't you guessed? All those other men? Why she kept changing escorts?" He chuckled softly. "Why she settled with me?" Maury felt dizzy cold. He tightened his fists.

"I'm not guessing! You tell me!"

"Okay," Greaves shrugged. "Your lady is a parasite. A rather odd sort. No man is tough enough to stand her company long without dying, though so far she's always stopped in time. They go to the hospital, recover, and keep their mouths shut, the same as you will. Why? They know if they talk it'll be the end of Tamar and they're all crazy over her." He laughed. "A woman like that gets into a man's blood."

Maury, from a long way off, heard his own voice. "But you're healthy. And me—she never did anything. What do you mean?" Greaves smoothed his white coat.

"When I found out, I explained to her there were neater, less risky ways. As for you—for some disgusting reason, she loves you. Besides, because of my help, she could live without asking you. I've

really done you a favor, Howard."

"What in hell do you mean?" Maury's lips moved stiffly. "What are your neater, safer ways?"

"A doctor," smiled Greaves equably, "can always request blood donations for an ill person. You've caught yourself a vampire. You'd better believe me."

Maury didn't just believe, he *knew*. This explained it all. Still, he lashed out at Greaves, knocking him across a table filled with syringes and bottles. Blindly, Maury reached down and slugged the doctor again as he tried to stand. Leaving him in the middle of

the broken equipment, Maury stumbled through a door.

It was the wrong one, not the way out. Tamar sat in a small consulting room. She was sipping from a white paper cup, and the liquid in the straws showed as brightly as the flush beneath her skin.

She seemed ready to spring up for a second. Then she leaned back and stared at him over the cup.

A girl on a beach with blood dripping from the shell cut on her foot—

"So red—" Maury didn't know he'd said it aloud till she smiled, in a kind of shame and triumph as she turned the straws between her fingers.

"What other color is there?"

THE END