

A Stubborn Stain

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

Like a stain it stood out vividly against the pastel background of her mind - an incident in her past Paula seemed to be unable to forget. Every so often it rattled her and frequently left her with a vision that forced her to rub her eyes until they turned red, and scratch her skin to a severe rash. "It's all nerves," her doctors had said.

As it had been haunting her for years, she had tried to remove this sinister memory from her head with the help of various mediums. Their suggestions or pieces of advice had failed to help her. She had tried soaps, solvents, scrapers and scrubbers, hoping concrete items would somehow give her a break. Without success.

After having given up for one long year, she felt the time had come to have another try. Being creative might be a possible solution. She made a large elaborate sketch of that memory on a blank page. An intricate maze which she coloured in. She stared at it as at a curiosity and genuinely wondered why it was tormenting her so much. It looked harmless enough when given some sort of a shape.

On her day off, she stopped at a stationery shop where she bought various erasers. Back home she sat at her desk, looked at her design and tried using one, then another, rubbing and rubbing. All proved inefficient: the image remained glancing at her and she at it. Paula shrugged. It was a stain she could simply not remove.

On that day Paula also bought black crayons. She streaked the drawing with horizontal and vertical lines, ending with random scribbles. Underneath the black covering, her picture persisted. Still visible, still rattling her, still hurting her eyes and irritating her skin.

She bought a pot of paint at the hardware store with a couple of brushes. Again she sat in front of her drawing and smeared it over somewhat angrily. The determined face of her memory shone when raised to the light.

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Maybe she could look at it with different eyes. Imagine it to be a vase perhaps. A delicate one with undulating rims, a transparent one with no secret, a multicoloured one for uplift, a pearlescent one for soothing effect. She tried to visualise any kind of vase, even ceramic ones down to the smallest plain white one. None of these had a favourable touch on her memory. Quite the reverse. They twisted it into a most convoluted thought that nestled within the confines of her brain where it seemed determined to stay.

She began giving up all hopes. Due to despair or rather frustration she had to wipe a trickle of tears, a process that worsened her sore eyes. Her fingers then moved to her arms which she scratched wildly, inflaming her skin rash. "It's just nerves," doctors said.

Perhaps she had not been savage enough in her determination to destroy her memory. She could, if she tried harder, win the battle against it, make it fall lifeless to the floor, broken into pieces like a crystal vase.

She fetched some scissors, cut the drawing into tiny squares, lit a fire, threw them into the flames, and watched the bluish, purplish and greenish tongues crackling and burning grittily.

The smoke had captured all the colours she had been using, reconstructed each piece and replaced them neatly and tidily, like a jigsaw, in the corner of her mind.

