

Nail polish

by I. R. Thibodeau

A woman stands on the pristinely manicured lawn of an old home in the Ford district of Dearborn. It's 10:30 pm, on a warm October 22. The couple inside the house sips cheap wine in front of a flat-screen television. They plan to retreat to the bedroom soon. The neighbors, an old couple on the left, and an older couple on the right, are asleep. The blonde woman on the lawn can't be seen from across the street because of the enormous red oak trees that stand guard on the curbs in front of every house. From the opposite side of the lawn the lamppost illuminates the left side of the woman's face as she stares through the bay window at a duo nursing the bottle of wine. The woman was pretty once, and she still could be pretty if she got a haircut and stopped crying at night. *You'll be beautiful again*, she thinks as she watches a man who is graying at the temples nibble at a younger girl he is with. A dog barks from a backyard across the street at the sound of a truck on Michigan Avenue that echoes through the trees surrounding the neighborhood. She twitches in the direction of the noise, but she doesn't turn. In an almost euphoric, absent way she plays with the zipper on her black sweatshirt. Her forehead is slick with sweat; she smells a bit. Those in the house don't notice the sweaty woman on their lawn any more than they notice the Ruger LCP pistol she holds limply in her right hand. The man puts his wine glass down on the coffee table, slides his younger partner's blouse over her shoulder and leans in to kiss her neck. She doesn't push him away. The man is muscular — and rich, and the girl is about to catch a good buzz from the wine.

"Those fuckers," the woman outside mutters to herself, "those mother fuckers."

Inside, the young woman moves her hand into the man's hair and grabs on at the roots. He bites her neck, and slides his hand between her legs. She doesn't moan, but she doesn't pull away; her hand moves to his back. She's wearing magenta nail polish and dark lipstick. The man works her blouse off and undoes her bra. On the

lawn, the blonde woman slips the Ruger LCP into the waistband of her yoga pants that don't quite squeeze *everything* together like they can for the 20-something-year-old girl inside the house; the girl wearing the magenta nail polish; the whore. At 10:35 p.m., the woman walks farther away from the weak light of the lamp post into the shadows on the side of the house. The grass perfectly absorbs her footsteps. Steam emanates from the dryer vent, and the lights behind the house get caught in the sweet mist that smells like lilacs. She thinks that it looks like a scene from "War of the Worlds". The woman slinks low to avoid a window on the side of the house. Inside the man has taken his shirt off.

As she moves along the side of the house, the woman thinks of her dead father and nail polish.

In 1975, when she was just a five-year-old girl, she came home from her aunt's house with blue nail polish on her fingers and toes. She thought that she looked cute, but her father called her a whore and hit her.

Norm Bunch, her father, hated his in-laws. In his fifty-seven years he never *spoke* ill of his wife's family, but he didn't have to. He would only see them on Christmas Eve and Easter, and only for a few hours. When he *did* see them, he piped up from the Lay-Z-Boy in his mother-in-law's living room three or four times, only ever to insult someone. He drank gin and tonics, watched whatever special was on TV, and rounded up his family at 7 o'clock to head back home. He never stayed later than 7 o'clock, and he never let his children stay with his in-laws. His wife, Doreen, never challenged him.

Once, in July of '75, Norm's company sent him to Vegas for a real estate convention. He was supposed to be gone until Thursday night; Doreen let the girl stay the night at her aunt's house and her oldest daughter stay at a friend's house. Aunt Cheryl put the girl's hair in rollers, and let her watch the late night shows, but wouldn't put makeup on her niece. Instead, she told her that she could do a special nail polish job. The girl agreed. She never wore nail polish

before because her mother wouldn't let her touch it; her father didn't even let his seventeen-year-old daughter wear eye shadow. The next morning, Aunt Cheryl cooked eggs and sausage for the girl and drove her home.

"Doreen, you should leave him," the woman remembers her aunt saying, "he's a piece of shit and you know it. He's gone for two more days. Pack your stuff and go to Bryan's. Remember Bryan? He still lives around here and he asked about you the other day."

Cheryl had tears in her eyes. The girl looked from her aunt's eyes, to her mother's, to her blue nails. She loved her nails.

"Come on sis'. Please. He's a bas — hon, go get your dolls out and show them your nails — Doreen, please. Mom hasn't seen her grandkids grow up."

"Cher, I can't. He loves us, he really does," she looked at the girl, "sweetie, go inside please."

The girl looked at her mother and saw the line from a single tear streaked through the rouge on her cheek.

"Ma, why're you cryin'?"

"Sweetie go inside and help your brother set the table for lunch.

As the screen door slammed behind her, the girl heard her aunt plead one more time before getting into her yellow Ford Mustang. Her mother only shook her head and said goodbye to her sister.

Not more than two hours later, a Metro Car pulled in front of the house. Norm had left the convention early because he couldn't stand the heat.

"Hotter than the devil's kitchen there," he said when he walked in the front door, "I never wanna go farther south than Ohio again. Where's my kids? Come say hello to your father!"

The girl's sister skirted into the bathroom to wash the makeup off of her face — the girl and her older brother had to go see their father. How stupid could she have been to forget about the blue nail polish on her fingers and toes? As her brother hugged their father and told him he missed him, the girl waited to make her approach. As she flung her arms open, her father caught her right wrist in his hand.

"And what they *hell* do you have on your fingers?"

The color vanished from the girl's face, her stomach pitched.

"Who put this on you?"

The girl's mother stood in the hallway, petrified.

"I — uhm — it was — it's nail polish from Auntie Cheryl," the girl sputtered.

"And when the hell was Cheryl here?" he looked at Doreen.

"She wasn't, Norm. Why don't you set your bag down and Timmy can take it upstairs for — "

"DON'T INTERRUPT ME!" his eyes bulged. "When did you have that filthy sister of yours in my house?"

"Norm, she wasn't here." She was shaking. "Calm down, you'll frighten your daughters."

His eyes snapped to his daughter.

"You want to be a little whore like your aunt? Do you?"

He took off his thick, braided brown belt, wiped the sweat from his temples with the kerchief he kept up his sleeve, and closed his eyes against his thoughts.

He couldn't contain them, though.

"TIMMY, COME GET MY DAMN BAG!"

The door to the sunroom in the back of the house isn't locked, so the woman lets herself in. It is 10:38 p.m., and the moon hardly illuminates the room. The lights behind the house don't penetrate the bushes surround the sunroom. The woman can hide easily in the shadows with a perfect view of the living room down a broad hallway past the kitchen. She watches the couple through the sliding door that leads to an ornate kitchen, and feels her stomach churning. Bile rises in her throat. She swallows it down and shudders. Down the hall, the young woman is topless, and the man, naked, gropes her incessantly. He's animalistic in his movements, snarling, biting, frowning as he moves his hands over the girl's body. The blonde woman sits on the couch in the sunroom and crosses her legs. She pulls the Ruger from her waistband and rests her gun-hand on her left thigh. The man tries to lay the young woman down

on the loveseat in the front room and kicks a wine glass over in the process. It shatters on the hardwood floor.

"Shit," the man says.

"It's OK," the young woman says, "I got them from Pier 1 for, like, ten bucks. It's nothing."

"Yeah, but that's gonna stain something if we don't get it up."

"Let's not worry about it."

"No, we really need to clean that up."

"It's a small spill."

"Anne, we need to clean that up now."

"Fuck, fine, hang on."

Norm Bunch beat his youngest daughter for a half hour. She stopped crying after three minutes, but he continued. After he'd unpacked his father's bag, Timmy entered his sister's bedroom to watch. He always liked to watch with his hands in his pockets.

When Norm was finished with his youngest daughter, he called out for his oldest daughter, and asked Timmy where she was.

"Where's that other slut you call a sister, boy? Did you keep her in line while I was gone?"

"Uh — yes, yes, sir. I think she's in the bathroom."

"Tell her to come say hello to her father."

"OK, sir."

When Julie came in to the girl's bedroom, she was scared. She had washed all of the makeup from her eyes and cheeks, but her face was red and raw. She had been crying.

"Come here and see your daddy, girl," Norm said.

She walked across the hardwood floor. Her hands were shaking. Norm grabbed his oldest daughter and sat her down on his lap. Timmy returned to watch. Doreen was in the kitchen sobbing.

"Did you miss me?" Norm asked as he moved his hands to his daughter's waist. The girl locked eyes with her older sister and watched a tear well up in the corner of her right eye.

"Yes, daddy. I missed you."

"Oh, yeah? Good. Did you listen to your brother while I was gone?"

"Yes, of course."

"No she didn't, pah, she spent the weekend at that whore Jannie's house," Tim piped up from the doorway.

"Did ya now?" Norm whispered into his daughter's hair. "You know I don't like you goin' over people's houses. I don't know what those other men will do to my little girl. He ran his fingertips down her neck, and tears began to pour soundlessly down her cheeks.

Norm grabbed his daughter's hair and yanked her head back.

"You *continue* to disobey me, Julie, and I'll fuckin' hurt you worse. Now go to your room and wait for your daddy."

Tim laughed at his sisters from his bedroom while he listened to the sounds coming from down the hall. Doreen cried and made dinner.

At 10:42 p.m., Anne saunters to the kitchen to get some paper towel. The blonde woman tenses up for a second on the couch, but then she remembers that she can't be seen. Anne is gorgeous, the blonde woman thinks. Perfect body, no wonder he wants her. As she leans over to look under the sink for a new roll of paper towel, the man in the front room slips his briefs back on. He's not young enough to sit around naked anymore. The blonde woman notices that Anne isn't wearing underwear under her skirt. *To be young again*, she thinks.

"You better not lose it!" Anne shouts towards the front.

"Yeah, yeah. Hurry up,"

"I mean it. You started it, you better be able to finish it."

"Shut up."

"Grouch."

"Anne, will you just get your ass back here and clean this up?"

She drapes five sheets of paper towel across her breasts and struts back to the front room.

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you? If I was your little maid?"

"Right. Come on, I can see the stain setting."

"It's wood, ass, it's not setting."

"Doesn't matter."

He snatches the paper towel from Anne without so much as looking at her chest and pats at the wine. The blonde woman inches the door to the sunroom open and slips into the kitchen. She crouches low on the opposite side of the granite countertop, leans her right shoulder against the back of wooden cupboards, and re-grips the pistol. She clicks the safety off.

"Done?" Anne asks from the living room.

"Yeah, I'll throw this out. Take your skirt off."

"Ooooo, mister bossy. OK. Hurry back."

The man pounds down the hallway towards the kitchen as Anne closes the blinds in the front room.

"We left these fuckin' things open?!? Haha, Tim can you believe that?"

"Huh?" He peeks down the hall. "Oh, shit. Hope you don't have any nosy neighbors."

When Norm Bunch went to bed, the girls stayed up together. Julie cried, but she comforted her little sister while she wiped the nail polish from the girl's fingers and toes. The girl didn't fully understand why Julie was crying until much later in life. But the girl knew she couldn't sit down because her bottom was bruised from the spanking her father gave her.

"Shh, come on, it's OK. Look, we're making this all go away."

"I hate him, Julie," the girl said.

"I know, sweetie, I know. I promise, everything will be OK. He'll go away soon." She wiped the last bit of blue off of the girl's left hand.

"How — how do you know?"

"I just know. And we'll all be happy. OK? And I'll buy you all different kinds of nail polish."

"You gonna kill him?"

"Shh, that's a horrible thing to say."

She started on the girl's toes.

Three weeks later, the girl watched as Julie aimed a 20-gauge shotgun at her father as he slept in the living room. He woke as he heard the hammer cock back, and he jumped up. He didn't get a word out before Julie pulled the trigger and sent buckshot through the man. The girl watched bits of his lungs and heart and spine speckle the robin's-egg-blue walls. She thought it was beautiful. Julie then turned the gun on herself.

"Everything's OK, sweetie. Look at your nails, they're so pretty." she whispered as she placed the double-barrel shotgun on her mouth. The girl's nails were painted magenta now, and she watched the light dance on the polish as the gun went off and her mother thundered down the stairs. There was screaming, but the nail polish was so beautiful.

It would never hurt her.

The blonde woman waits, crouching and sweating profusely while Tim rummages around the kitchen cabinets for a minute. It is 10:44 p.m.

"Anne where the hell is your garbage can?"

"Wha-? Oh, it's on the side of the cabinet right there."

The blonde woman grips the Ruger in both hands and aims at the corner of the cabinets. She's on one knee, with her elbow locked in to place. Tim emerges from the other side of the counter with the wine-soaked paper towel in his left hand, and he doesn't see the blonde woman crouching in the dark at first.

"Huuuurriry UPPPP!" Anne calls from the front room. "I have work in the morning, dick!"

"I'm coming! If you didn't have this fuckin' stupid garbage can over here I'd be back already."

"Yeah, well you knocked the wine over."

"We can keep goin...who the fu--?"

The blonde woman fires two rounds into her brother's stomach. He presses the wine-soaked paper towels to his abdomen. Grimacing, he looks down at his younger sister.

"The fuck was that?" Anne shouts from the front room.

The woman fires another round into his shoulder and Tim staggers back into the taupe cabinet behind him. The paper towel is now soaked with blood and wine — he's like some sort of Christ.

Tim slides down to the floor as Anne stands up in the front room and screams like the blonde woman's mother did twenty five years ago. She looks for her blouse. The blonde woman rises, still pointing the Ruger at Tim.

"You're a fucking pig," she says to the man who looks so much like her father did. She hears Anne scampering towards the hallway.

"Don't move another foot, WHORE! YOU STAY RIGHT THERE."

She fires a warning shot down the hallway without taking her eyes off of the man at her feet. Anne screams and begins to cry. The woman points the Ruger back at Tim. She fires one shot into his face and his skull explodes onto the cabinets and floor. Blood splatters on the finger nails of the hand the woman steadies her gun with.

It is so beautiful.

Everything is beautiful.

