

The Color of Silence is Radium Green

by Savannah Schroll Guz

Wearing stylish, white canvas coveralls with black stitching, Doreen boasted that she no longer wore her corset. “Well, I don't need it anymore with this new clothing.”

“Don't need it?” said Beverly in a dispirited tone. “I've got to or my tummy sticks out. All this new clothing is for girls without a chest or hips,” she said, dipping her brush in painting medium. “Take me back to the good old days of flowing dresses.”

“What, and 18-inch waists? No, thank *you!*” said Lorraine, putting the finishing brushstroke on a two.

“Really, you should buy one of those Dunlop-Lastex girdles,” Doreen replied. “Corsets are for grandmas now.”

Beverly did not immediately answer because it was her habit to clamp her lips tightly closed when she did detail work. Of their small work group, she was the best and most accurate. She finished the number eight and half a nine before wetting her brush between her lips. Although Doreen sometimes wore lipstick (inspired by a pure spirit of insubordination), none of the girls who sat along the short row of wooden tables did when they were working. It would get into the paint and then onto the numbers on the watch face, marring the patented effect.

Behind them, the graying and spinsterish floor supervisor, Ursula, paced back and forth behind their chairs, occasionally stepping towards their work tables to inspect their progress. “Ladies,” she said archly, “less talking, more painting.”

The three girls in the small subunit were quiet then, but glanced occasionally at one another and gave a sly wink or noiseless, toothy smile. For the next half hour, a general silence settled on the women like the fairy dust they mixed with adhesive compound and painted on the jet-colored dials with the careful precision of ornamental calligraphy.

During their twenty minute lunch break, Lorraine finally said, "You know, wouldn't it be nice to do something neat, put a little surprise on these watches? Paint tiny stars or crosses. Give some guy who wears it a thrill."

Doreen leaned toward Lorraine and said, nudging her, "Come on, Lori. You can give a guy a thrill with Undark in a much better way."

Lorraine leaned back, blushing. "Well, *of course!*"

"What, what, *what?*" asked Beverly, leaning over the empty brown paper that her sandwich had been wrapped in.

Doreen sipped at her cup of cold coffee and narrowed her eyes over the rim. Lori answered for her. "Well, you put it on, you know? Like make-up....make your lips glow, your eyelids glow. Listen, when Ursula isn't looking, we'll do your nails."

"Oh," said Beverly. "Well, *I* knew that! You should see me glow in my nightgown. I thought you were going to tell me something interesting."

"Honey," said Doreen, "if it isn't interesting then you're not using it the right way."

Was it contempt that edged Doreen's words? Beverly wasn't sure, but it wounded her and she was silent.

Lorraine spoke up, pulling something from her lunch bag. "I almost forgot. I brought something, ladies!"

Lorraine's brother had come back from the war and met a French girl named Berthe. *Imagine that*, said Lorraine weeks before, *a French girl in Orange, New Jersey!* What Lorraine now laid in front of the girls was a magazine Berthe had given Lorraine and her mother, Eleanor, who had not warmed to Berthe and showed no signs of doing so.

I can't even read it, said Eleanor. *What good will this do me?*

But there are pictures, mother, said Lorraine. *You know she meant well.*

Inside the magazine were illustrations of snappy pleated skirts and soft Eaton haircuts. There were close-fitting felt hats, speared by thin, tiger-striped feathers. The models' faces were not the focus. Instead, it was their delicate and daringly naked necks. "No long hair in Paris," declared Lorraine eagerly shaking her own bobbed curls.

Then there were pages of scintillating drop-waisted gowns that Beverly knew she could never wear successfully. And while they lingered on these segments, the real reason Lorraine brought the magazine was because of a single advertisement. When they reached it, all three of them gazed at it with rapt attention. It was stunning to look at. A full color painting of a lovely, blonde woman appeared to rise above a glowing pot of powder. Around her, all was darkness, and the light from the make-up pot cast its lovely radiance upward, throwing her perfectly symmetrical features and flushed cheeks into dramatic high relief. Beneath all this was stunning yellow script that read: *Tho-Radia*.

"And look," said Lorraine. "It's approved by a doctor named Alfred Curie! Imagine having a name with the word 'cure' right in it!"

"I wish we could read it," said Beverly. "It's got the word science and beauty, though. I can at least understand that much."

Doreen was silent, looking intently. Of all three, she looked the most like the woman in the ad, and was considering the woman's hair cut and her complexion. Her chin lifted almost imperceptibly, in a simulation of the model's pose. *Could she*, she thought, *model?*

Doreen's empty stomach pinched, and she looked up at the clock on the wall, which ground audibly forward. She sat back and lit a cigarette. "I think we've got time for a short one before we go back. Anyone else?" She held out the open pack to Lorraine and then to Beverly who both declined.

Ursula appeared at the lunch room door, announced only by her efficient, clipped gait. "Ladies? Time to return to your stations." She then focused specifically on Doreen. "Miss Russell, put that out please."

Doreen cast her unfinished cigarette into her coffee cup and the trio heard it fizzle. It released a final anemic ribbon of blue smoke as it died. Doreen did not break eye contact with Ursula, whose lips thinned in silent condemnation.

The afternoon continued quietly, each girl submerged in her own fantasy brought on by the fashion magazine. At 4:17, Lorraine furtively started on Beverly's nails with her thin-bristled paint brush. By 5:00, she'd gotten every one without Ursula seeing. She'd even painted Beverly's teeth, on a lark. "Now, *you*," she patted Beverly's plump cheeks. "Go out and smile pretty for the boys tonight, all right? Hook yourself a nice one."

The color in Beverly's cheeks rose. She would not, in fact, go out. She rarely did. Instead, by 8:00 p.m., she would stand in front of her vanity table, position her mirror just so and then turn out the light. Immediately apparent in the darkness were her ghoulishly glowing lips, phosphorescing fingernails, and lustrous traces of eyeliner, the very reverse of King Tut's kohl-lined eyes. She saw, too, that her pupils glowed, and to a fainter degree, her irises, too. In two small, plumed shapes beneath her nose, she found the faintest evidence of the glowing dust. She turned sideways and watched herself exhale, as if she'd been holding in smoke. To her surprise, out came a faint cloud of quickly dissipating phosphorescence. She exhaled through her mouth a second time with the same result.

“Science and beauty indeed,” said Beverly, thinking of the Thor-Radia ad.

She then turned the light back on and saw again the plump and awkward Beverly Saunders she was all too familiar with. And so she turned the light out once more, where she again saw the alluring woman inside, who struggled to get out. This was Beverly, Mistress of the Dark.

On nights like these, while her parents slept several rooms away, and she exhaled radium in fine phosphorescent particles, she dreamed of men with fine Edwardian mustaches, men of a different era, not the clean-shaven figures that had come back from the war. She sat there, glowing, at the corner of some imagined club, which she envisioned as hazy with cigarette smoke and papered in red velvet flock. A man with an Edwardian mustache and manicured beard would approach her in a waist coat and black tie. He would bow and take her hand. She would ask his name. He would say: “Dr. Alfred Curie” and kiss the pallid skin on the fingers he held, gently squeezing them as a clandestine sign of his deeper interest.

All the while, beneath her finely embroidered quilt of enormous calico stars and rings of Saturn—something her grandmother called 'the wedding pattern'—Beverly's molars, tongue, and esophagus gently glowed. Her very bones radiated a soft greenish light against the inside of her skin, whose cells, in opposition to Tho-Radia's promise, did not become vital, but grew confused, ceased to process with their previously natural efficacy.

Days licking brushes, inhaling powder, wishing for some distinctive beauty and a distinguished man, ran together. Lorraine left in January, marrying a former serviceman with a weeping hole in his shoulder that would never truly heal, she told them. Beverly wondered if this was actual or metaphorical.

Suddenly, it was just Beverly and Doreen, with the glue that had been Lorraine now gone. They spoke less. The silence, during their work day, was deafening. Doreen finally took up with girls from the group that sat adjacent to them. They liked her high spirits. Beverly, by comparison, became steadily more reserved, sinking ever deeper into the fluid green world of her imagination, punctuated intermittently by the rising image of Dr. Alfred Curie. His dark whiskers were tipped with a blonde that caught the sun, which only occasionally shone in Beverly's otherwise moonlit world.

And when, in fact, a Full Pink Moon rose in March, which heralded the rural appearance of the ground phlox Beverly would never see in the city, she glowed an even more brilliant green by night, although she never knew exactly how great her illumination. However, she did have vibrant dreams, dreams of floating among fabulous particles, which spun like planets. Beverly imagined herself the center of a universe, a kind of dazzling sun.

Beverly's father, who sat in the evenings by the phonograph with his spectacles on, staring at nothing at all, listened to Franz Liszt and Sergei Rachmaninoff. The music pervaded Beverly's world as it

glided up the stairs and through the open door of her room, inside which she sat with her own eyes closed. Had she been able to see in the dark, she would have been able to discern her pupils pushing light through the thin veil of lid. And her eyes were not at rest, but pitched to and fro as she dreamed her twilight imaginings, which occurred now whether she was upright or prone. She clasped a visible string of notes from Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 1 that held themselves out to her, while floating ever upward like a rising tide. She rose with them through a green mist of particles so fine, they might have been mistaken for fog. What always brought her back was the gentle, if unconscious, pressure of her tongue against a molar, which moved in its socket and began the troublesome thud in the deepest part of her jaw.

She reached for the music again. It wound its way into her room; it made an appeal for her to follow. But the intolerable thudding forced her back onto the vanity stool, where she reassumed her daily shape: poor sad, aching human Beverly Saunders, to whom no Dr. Alfred Curie would ever deign to speak.

When Lorraine grew round with babies, twins, Beverly became suddenly slender. So much so that Lorraine commented on her trim appearance when she visited the factory, carrying her stomach in front of her like a heavy package. She ran her finger along the contour of Beverly's once plump cheek. "Well, aren't you a skinny-minnie now that I'm round as a ball!"

Beverly pulled away, not meaning to. The touch had started her jaw aching. She smiled through her pain at Lorraine, who had meant no harm. When Lorraine hugged Beverly goodbye, standing sideways so her belly did not keep them apart, Beverly felt pain ricochet throughout her body, up her spine, along her clavicle, through each rib like hammers on a xylophone. Lorraine mistook Beverly's tears for sorrow and said, "Oh, Bev dear, I'll be back. And I'll bring the twins!"

But she did not. The twins arrived silently, eyes closed, and lungs unused. They were buried soon after. Lorraine's new weeping wound was metaphorical and, like her husband's war injury, did not heal.

When her father moved onto Claude Debussy—which he listened to with a book over one knee while her mother knitted nearby—*La plus que lente* danced Beverly around slowly in small circles. Now, she had to lie completely still or be called back by her base humanity. Twice, she had gone to the company infirmary, explaining to the doctor the nature of her pains. She spooled together words she felt didn't exactly make sense. They were words that didn't belong to her world. When asked the reason for her visit, she explained that she was experiencing “planetary convolutions,” an answer that caused the infirmary doctor to look up at her suddenly and then a rapidly frown. He wrote in his book. He felt at her neck, at the swollen glands beneath her jaw. She flinched from him. He pronounced her healthy. “Nothing wrong at all,” he said to her mother, whose face had begun to furrow from constant anxiety.

And so she painted. She painted and painted and painted. So productive was she during those days, despite her pain, that even disapproving Ursula nodded and smiled at her productivity. Each lick of the brush started the music playing and maintained it, and she stepped out of the world, out of time as she knew it. Down went an ‘8’, pristine in its execution. Wasn't the ‘10’ perfect....then the ‘12’ and onto the next dial. Each day ticked away into a gleamingly beautiful night, where if she lay still enough, Dr. Alfred Curie would draw close, take her hand. Yet, he was different now. His Edwardian mustache was gone. His clean-shaven features startled her. *But we change, don't we?*, she thought. He was handsome even so, clutching her to himself, as if he actually needed her. With him, she felt no pain. He remained her curative savior.

She placed the teeth she began to lose under her pillow, though no money ever appeared. She could not, however, bear to throw them away and finally deposited them, with care, in her jewelry box next to the string of lovely seed pearls she received on the morning of her confirmation.

Unable to go to work, immobile under the pattern of dimming calico stars, ornate embroidery, and quilted fabric wedding rings, she listened to her father's scratched recording of Gustav Holst's *Mercury, The Winged Messenger*. Her mother had darkened her room by clipping heavy padded blankets to the curtain rods, and this gentle darkness allowed her consciousness to separate from her body as she slept. She hovered above, regarding her own beauty, which looked, she thought, somewhat like old time gaslight.

Eventually, they brought her downstairs, when she could not get to her room. And there, her father held up records for her as she lay on the couch. There was Pietro Mascagni's Intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, which made her father shed real tears. He sat beside the sofa where Beverly lay, his hands in his lap, looking into the empty fireplace, his eyelids swollen, the whites bloodshot.

"Please, doctor," her mother said to the family physician the day before, "why can she not eat? She never eats. She's all skin and bone."

And when he opened Beverly's mouth, a dark empty cavern filled only with the fetid odor of necrosis, he pushed the chin closed and said: "Because she is dying."

Word came to Beverly of Doreen's plight. Her lawsuit was in the newspapers, and the company accused Doreen of clandestinely suffering from syphilis. Lorraine came to her defense and struck back, arriving in the court room with an equally swollen jaw that bore the stink of abscesses. Beside her, her faithful husband held the

knitted booties once intended for their stillborn babies, and beneath these was box of Lorraine's missing teeth, which rattled as the pair walked along the gallery aisle.

Pretty Doreen Russell, the newspaper reporters wrote, *still walking, but only with the help of two canes*. Other reporters, which Beverly's mother followed, headlined their stories with words like *Walking Dead*. Neither Doreen nor Lorraine could raise their arms to take the oath.

Meanwhile, Beverly's father played Edvard Grieg's gently delicate harmonies, stopping to smile at Beverly before laying each record on the turntable's green felt. She smiled back, when she could. Now, she was always Beverly, never Mistress of the Dark or the center of some jade-colored constellation. She, like Lorraine, smelled strongly of her abscesses, which persisted even now that most of her teeth were upstairs in the jewel box beside her confirmation pearls. And while the increasingly remote Dr. Alfred Curie had abandoned her, she cared somewhat less now. He was without his mustache and dark blonde beard. He was not who she thought he was. He'd mislead her.

Still, in the living room of the Saunders' house, the music played on. Mr. Saunders made sure of it, purchasing records twice weekly, so that they now lined the fireplace mantle and stood in teetering piles on the threadbare carpets. Beverly's consciousness, aware of the tiniest muscle contraction, every ligament's twinge, and even the resolute mitosis going on inside each cell, held onto the notes for all they were worth. She could not be lifted now, but only tenderly towed along.

In those months, her father consciously avoided Mozart, fearing he would find a pressing of *Requiem*, a song for which he was not prepared and never would be. Instead, he unsheathed recordings of Prokofiev and Pachabel to a daughter who was slipping, slipping,

slipping away but also very present, perfectly inert, and now, frequently unconscious from the effect of painkillers. When the stock market crashed, they traded furniture for records and morphine tincture. They sat on the floor or the stairs that bordered the living room, watching, quietly anxious. Meanwhile, Beverly silently glowed, but less vividly, since her bones now resembled lace. All the while, the house never ceased emitting music.

She was buried in a wicker casket threaded with paper flowers. Her rites resembled those of her mother's era, not her own. Beverly, a shadow of herself, was dressed in white lace, in order to conform to her mother's conception of angels. Still, no one saw her, since her jaw was distended, her cheeks collapsed, and her eyes sunken in their sockets. Her mother requested that the lid be closed before and during the service, and so the three leather straps that held the lid closed were secured by an equal number of large, flat mother-of-pearl buttons.

Lying there, under satin blankets less comforting than her quilt of pointed calico stars and matrimonial rings, she still glows green, since the half life of radium lasts for generations. Her remains reach out, now and again, to silently invade the bones and sinews of those who come to visit her. It is her special embrace. She is now truly Beverly, Mistress of the Dark, and the color of her silence is radium green.

