

TEXT ADVENTURE

*'DEFINE
COLOR'*

by
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1

Slake Bottom looked at the photo. Then he looked at the old woman.

He looked at the photo again.

The photo contained more detail. In real life, the woman's movements seemed indistinct, lacking in definition. Blurry, even. The photo revealed a gracefulness that was absent from the awkwardly perambulating image that paced before him in the kitchen.

Her apparent beauty was a matter of interpretation.

Slake took a drink from his cup.

He considered his options. But, before he could speak, he found that the old woman had resumed her monologue. Bending his ear, as usual.

"Those friends of yours are no good. Wasting basement resources. Blowing off their work as if none of this mattered. You're going to see how they turn out."

"Aye, Nana."

Slake adjusted his gauntlet. The old woman wanted to knock out the kitchen wall. One of the younger kids had said it was typical of her restlessness. No real purpose to the changes. He took down some measurements and then set himself to wait.

"I forget sometimes that you contractors can't just power yourselves down. Go on, then, get out of here. I'll ring tomorrow after I've decided on a color scheme."

"You got it, Nana."

2

Odd sensation, just now. A perturbation in my visual field. But, nothing has changed. The room remains inert. The items within, static.

The old woman is in the kitchen, henpecking yet another contractor. Renovations to the basement are almost complete, but still she keeps on hiring new workers. Mostly non-natives. Non-graduates. No doubt an intentional strategy. Once their work is completed, they won't be coming back. The lack of a common language keeps them from comparing their experiences with the current residents of our happy home, or, for that matter, with anyone above ground.

How the hell is she paying for all of this?

We don't yet know.

3

Slake Bottom was descended from perhaps the greatest ever fan of Shakespeare's *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*. Some number of great-grandfathers ago, his ancestor had witnessed one of the production's earliest performances; had been transformed; had adopted the surname of his favorite character, in spite of the gentle advice of his friends and family. People laughed knowingly at his new name. He found that it was usually good for a few tankards of ale. And so, the/his laughter

rang out, down, through the centuries. The fact had pursued Slake throughout his education, but he had avoided delving too far into the original material on account of having little interest in his family's traditions.

Later, in prison, when he had been forced to scan through the works of William Shakespeare in order to organize a brief overview of all human literature, he had learned to hate the material on its own merits.

Slake flicked away his cigarette and donned his donkey helmet.

"Out of the way, asshead," said one of the children as she elbowed her way into the kitchen.

4

The old woman finished the dishes, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Be polite," she admonished.

"Aye, Nana," chirped the young girl.

"Really, I don't mind," said Slake Bottom.

Without warning, the old woman pulled up her apron, propping it in front of her face, exposing the tops of her legs, as well as the fact that she was not wearing any clothes beneath the tails of her shirt.

"Slake, how many eyes do I have?"

"Eyes? I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"Count my eyes. Stop jabbering and answer. By the way, they're up here." Motioning from behind the upturned apron.

"I--I can't see them."

"Really, that's interesting," said the old woman, apparently losing interest in the conversation.

5

"I'm no longer human," complained Slake Bottom. "Haven't felt so, for some years."

"Do you dream in color?"

"Define color."

Slake exhaled smoke the color of unpolished steel. It contrasted sharply with the rich green of the old woman's bedspread. He didn't feel anything, one way or the other.

"Your uniform is monochrome. Even your flesh is a pallid gray. There is little to distinguish you in the presence of other men. And what about your main weaponry?"

"I know, I know," said Slake, resigned to the dull finish of his sidearm. "I've been saving up for something new."

He sat, sagging, his helmet removed, his face in his hands.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Nana Mold.

"I guess that would be okay. When they brought me back to Earth they placed

no restrictions on my conversations. And there's nothing in my contract about the basement."

"The only reason you were ever brought down here," Nana said, reassuringly.

6

Peek out of my bedroom into the hall. Some kind of commotion.

Hm, nothing.

Decide on dinner. Something from the fridge.

Kitchen door locked.

The old woman? No. One of the girls.

Curious, though.

Down the hall. The old woman's bedroom.

Also locked.

Back to my bedroom. Tools. Then, I decide I don't really care.

Sit down on my bed. Pick up my book.

Message waiting.

Not right now. Delete. Leave me to my book.

I lose a couple of hours, flipping pages. I don't hear her when she finally comes in.

This time, she's not alone.

Notes

