

The Spray-paint Lady Smiles

By Vesta Giles (© 2014)

“We must be destined to meet in heaven,” he said, and that was how my summer started. He was a tiny man, maybe four feet tall. He wore a brown tailored suit, fashionable for the time. It was May of 1989. His face was marred with burn scars. His Irish accent was warm, light and soft and his smile was bigger than he was tall.

Later, when I was searching for her, I thought about the tiny man with the scars. Did I imagine him? Was he was some kind of other worldly spirit sent to deliver a message – something big is happening, Vesta. Pay attention! Was she some otherworldly spirit, too?

The first time I noticed him was at the train station in central Dublin. The station had payphones, and I was looking for a place to live for a six month adventure in solitude. He smiled. I smiled back.

The next time, just a few hours later, was at the youth hostel where I was staying, about a block from the station. The main lobby had a small restaurant and long wooden tables that probably fit 10 people comfortably, or 14 backpackers with limited senses of personal space. It was crowded and I was reading at the table. A tiny finger tapped me on the shoulder. “Mind if I sit here?” he smiled again.

After the third time nothing was ever the same.

I, a creature of habit, rarely vary my routes. That would require paying attention. I prefer to daydream. Walking into town to look at a flat, I was startled to discover I was on a completely unfamiliar road. This wasn't Talbot Street! I was heading in the right direction, but I was walking next to the River Liffey along North Wall Quay, a street I had never walked down before. I don't think I've walked down it since. I remember how the white walls of the buildings ran stifflingly close to the narrow sidewalk. Like the backpackers, the walls seemed to offer no breathing room, no personal space. The sidewalk and the building forced people closer together. I slipped back into a muddled daydream, looked down at the ground, and kept walking, bumping and jostling with the buildings and the crowds.

A door to a tobacconists shop opened suddenly and a man, putting change in his pocket and paying no more attention than I was, ran right into me. He looked up. I looked up. "Well," he laughed in his sing song Irish accent.

"That's three times in one day I've run into you," he said with that towering smile. "We must be destined to meet in heaven!" He laughed again. His laugh was enormous. I laughed back, a bit unnerved. He walked away in the other direction, his head high and his shoulders back, greeting the bright sunny day with joy and a tall smile. I walked on, head down. "What had just happened?" I wondered. I felt changed. When I looked back he and his smile were gone. With alarming ease I found a place to live that met my criteria. I didn't have to share a kitchen or a bathroom, or anything. I wasn't there to share. I was there to think, peel off all my 'shoulds' and 'ought to's' and uncover my inner 'want to'. I didn't want to let people in, I wanted to let myself out.

And so my six months began. Happily alone I walked, explored, went to poetry readings, listened to music and wrote. I observed, absorbed, but never let anyone in. In my 23 years I had never been big on letting people in.

Postcards were my method of choice for reassuring my family and friends I was still alive. They were cheaper to send and I could fit an amazing amount of tiny text on a large postcard. One day, on a quest for stamps, I lined up at the GPO. The General Post Office on O'Connell St. is one of the most famous buildings in Ireland and a popular tourist attraction. It's famous both for its Georgian architecture and the bullet holes from the 1916 uprising. Now it turns out the bullet holes may not have come from letting in bullets, but the architecture is still widely considered to be Georgian. The line for stamps was long and there were people everywhere. I indulged in a daydream to kill the time.

A finger tap on my shoulder startled me. Gloved in grimy cloth of unidentifiable colour, the finger was coated in black muck with accents of silver spray paint. Holes in the fabric revealed what appeared to be skin beneath – also coated in a thick layer of black and delicate hints of silver. The glove was the kind that ladies would have worn in the 1950's and '60s. While I watched, the hand deftly flipped over, palm up and open, as I imagine it had done thousands of times before. Silver spray paint on the palm was apparently expected to be graced with silver from my pocket.

"Can I help you?" the teller called to me. I had reached the front of the line. I stepped forward to the window and the hand, and its attached body, moved with me, crowding me. Invading. The movement was effortless, like a dance. I took a step, the hand and body responded. As I pressed against the ticket counter the hand was there too, in my space, and no one but me seemed to notice.

I looked up at the body. She wore a long green coat and a matching knit hat. If it wasn't for the holes and the grime, and the overpowering smell of spray paint which I'm sure was covering other smells, she might have been mailing a letter to an old friend and then going out for tea and biscuits. On her face she wore a broad smile of silver spray paint around her dull, downturned mouth, "Can I help you?" the teller repeated, annoyed, not smiling.

"Avoid the eyes," I reminded myself. "That's how they get in." But it was too late. I was disarmed by that smile. The Spray Paint Lady's eyes grabbed me, against my will, and pulled me toward them. It was an odd feeling, like I was being sucked out of myself. Painted by addiction and life on the streets, I expected to see hollowness in her eyes. Instead I found myself gripped by two piercing darts, sharp and intense with barbs that kept me from pulling away. Something was desperately trying to get out, or draw me in like a wild animal dragging a prisoner, or a meal, into a cave.

In contrast, her mannerisms - the graceful sideways shuffle that followed me to the teller, the hand that expertly flipped over to let me read the silver lines on her gloved palm - her movements were insistent and confident, almost matter of fact.

I shook my head and broke her spell, waving her off. Shaking a little, I bought my stamps and left as quickly as I could. I turned to look but she had disappeared just like the man with the scars. I knew right away she'd taken something that belonged to me.

I ran into her two more times in the following days. I ducked behind corners, carefully spying on her from a distance. She was just standing on the street corner, a different corner each time, holding her hand out and staring into nothing - perhaps daydreaming like me. Then, I never saw her again. Three times - we must be destined to meet in heaven. I looked for her for months. I asked about her. She had stolen something of mine, my attention, my solitude, the direction of my daydreams. I wanted them back. I still want them back. I still catch myself looking for her.

It's called huffing - the spray paint smile. She sprayed the paint in a plastic bag and inhaled the fumes. Silver and gold, metallic colours, seem to offer the biggest high - nothing like a little glamour and bling to fry a lady's brain. I see it on the news - something teens do. Maybe she was a teenager, wrapped in a patina of silver and decay. Maybe that's when she lost her own smile and painted on this new one.

I have no doubt I will see the tiny man with the scars again in heaven. He told me I would. Maybe that's why I've never found her, I'd already seen her three times and the next would be in heaven. Do they know each other, the Spray-paint Lady and the man with the scars? What will she be wearing? Pearls? I'm looking forward to it.

Now when I meet a stranger for a third time I wonder – will they be joining us for tea and biscuits at a sunny table in heaven? Do we have a reservation? Whatever shall I wear?

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