

when he passed a white woman on the sidewalk, he said, and just respond, Yes, ma'am, if she spoke to him. He has told me, also, of refusing a holiday turkey offered to him by the owner of a mansion by the lake, a rich man who demanded that he wade through deep snow to deliver packages to the service entrance at the back of the house.

The former owners of our house, who were white, made extra money by allowing the house to be used as a set for commercials. John discovers this when he gets a call from a casting agent who wants to know if the house is available. It's not available—we live here. But then we learn how much we will be paid. All we have to do is leave the house for three days and two nights and we will earn \$8,000.

The commercial is going to be for Walmart, the corporation that produced the fortunes of four of the twenty richest people in this country. Walmart couldn't build stores in Chicago for years but they're here now, despite ongoing protests over low wages, and they want their commercial set in a classic Chicago bungalow. We don't own anything from Walmart but this doesn't matter because Walmart furniture is moved into the house, Walmart curtains are put up, and some Walmart prints are hung on the walls in Walmart frames. A white set designer and a white director work to create an authentic African American interior. The commercial, they tell us, is going to feature an African American grandmother serving a holiday turkey.

COMMERCIAL

Our house is a brick bungalow, nearly identical to the house next door. These houses were built by brothers, both dead now. I learn this from my neighbor, who lives in the other brother's house. He's a retired postal worker and a saxophone player who still practices every day, though his health is too poor now for him to perform. The interiors of our houses are the same, he tells me, except for my attic, which the former owners of our house renovated. He would like to renovate his attic, too, but he doesn't have the money. Some relatives of his are in prison and all his extra money goes to supporting their families. I guess God, he says, doesn't want me to have money. I'm not sure, but I think he's joking about God.

He has told me, already, about attending the same elementary school my son attends, and of being beaten on the playground. He has told me that he couldn't, in those days, risk a conversation with a woman like me. He had to keep his head down

Next door, in the house just like ours, lives an actual African American grandmother, the wife of the retired postal worker. We're getting paid to have our house made over to look like what a set designer imagines their house looks like so that Walmart can try to sell things to people who look like them. John tells all this to his friend Dan, who says, I think that's the definition of white privilege.

UNDERSTANDING

I don't understand, my mother says. How is that the definition of white privilege? This isn't the first punch line she's ruined.

My mother dropped out of high school and later, after college and a divorce, she nearly dropped out of the middle class. She still has white privilege, but she often does not have hot water.

I admire how thoroughly she has discarded the life she was born into, the silver in the sideboard and the opera on the record player. She has kept only the books.

In one of the fairy tales she told me as a child, a girl is pursued by a witch. As the girl runs, she throws behind her the things she carries in her pockets, the things her mother has given her. She throws down a hairbrush that becomes a thick forest. She throws down a hand mirror that becomes a lake between her and the witch. You must throw away everything you've been given, my mother might say. That much I understand. But it has only just occurred to me to wonder what

witch she's running from. And if her witch will be my witch, too.

She used to trade eggs from her chickens to a neighbor for expired bread, still good. And when she drove us home from school she would stop at a dumpster behind a restaurant to salvage fruit, also still good. I once asked my mother if she had a retirement account and she laughed at me. I've never had anything like that, she said. And then she said, after a pause, My children are my retirement account. You were my investment.

She had four children by the time she was thirty but she had no income, no contributions to social security. I was still childless at thirty and already working for the university. I have a retirement account, which puts me in a poor position to explain privilege to my mother. Nobody understands privilege as well as those who don't have it. I guess, I tell her, I don't understand either.

THE RIGHT WHITE

I'm taking possession of the house by painting it, every room. And the question of what color in what room is consuming me. I think maybe I should start with historical colors, but I can see the original color of the walls under the layers of chipped paint: cloying pink. Maybe memory, not history, is the place to start. Buttered Yam, from my mother's garden. Evening Blue, an old bottle half-buried in the dirt. Forest Moss, the color of my mother's little living room, which smelled like woodsmoke.

Color(ed) Theory Suite, a work in which artist Amanda Williams painted houses slated for demolition on the South Side of Chicago, began as a collection of colors: Harold's Chicken Shack Red, Crown Royal Purple, Pink Oil, Ultrashreen Blue, Flamin' Hot Orange, Currency Exchange Yellow. "This palette combined my Ivy League academic training as an architect with my lived sensibility as a South Side native," she says. Each house was painted a single color, from the bricks of the foundation to the shingles on the roof. She painted only houses

that weren't worth anything to anyone. Not to dealers, not to squatters, not to neighborhood teenagers. *Zero-value* was her term. And she painted these zero-value properties in colors drawn from products sold to black people. Every color, she says, is a code.

I'm having trouble finding the right white. I don't like Opulence White or Chantilly Lace or French Manicure. This conversation is boring, my sister complains. Maybe I'll give up on white, I tell her, and paint the living room peach. Peach is problematic, she says, laughing at me now.

I've discovered a brand of paint that I can't afford. But I could buy it. To afford something like paint, for someone of my class, is to announce your values, most often, not your financial capacity. I can't admit to valuing paint that costs \$110 per gallon. But I find this paint unbearably luminous, and undeniably better than any other paint. At night, when my family is asleep, I study paint swatches from the hardware store and then I open the heavy folds of the catalog from Farrow & Ball and run my fingers over the small squares of paint, slightly raised in estate emulsion. Even the names are better: Matchstick, String, Cord, Skimming Stone. These are not aspirational whites—these whites can afford to be modest. One is even called Blackened.

I remember the great revelation of moving up from acrylic paints in high school to oil paints in college. First just black

and white on paper and then a full set on canvas. They were worth the expense, those silken oils in their slim metal tubes. I loved all the colors, especially the cadmium orange, which was slightly toxic. Flamin' hot. This is the closest I've come to painting in years, shopping for paint.

I send a swatch of Sulking Room Pink to Robyn, knowing she'll appreciate the name. "To sulk" in French is *bouder*, the source of *boudoir*, a woman's private room. A room of one's own, in a dusty, moneyed pink. And then there's Etiquette, a white described as "a well-mannered hue." It's a white that's hiding behind its own whiteness. Another line for this white poem. My mind is on paint now more often than poetry. I've found a new literature: Crisp Linen, Collector's Item, White Zinfandel, Pashmina, Fine China, Ivory Tower, Mirage White, American White.

Benjamin Moore has declared Simply White the Color of the Year. This, in the year a white man will be elected to the White House. The selection of white as the Color of the Year was "inevitable," the creative director of Benjamin Moore explains. "The color white is transcendent, powerful, and polarizing—it is either taken for granted or obsessed over."

I obsess, which solves nothing. Deep in Thought is my favorite name for a white, but I don't really like the color. I wouldn't want my walls Deep in Thought. On my way to a parent-teacher conference I stop in the hallway of the elementary

school to photograph a huge box of institutional toilet paper, the color listed on the label as Empathy White. Maybe that's the color I'm looking for. Or a variant, a concerned off-white like All Apologies. Or something more revealing, like Paperwork White or Payroll White. Or maybe I should just paint it all Property.

NOT CONSUMERS

The catalogs keep coming. I don't know how they find us, or how to make them stop. Sometimes two of the same catalog arrive on the same day. They accumulate in piles, outdoing each other with heavier paper and richer colors. Then the Restoration Hardware catalog arrives, like a parody of the whole problem, in two volumes, each the size of a telephone book. They are bigger and heavier than my grandfather's two-volume set of *Illustrated English Social History*. We put the Restoration Hardware catalogs near the fireplace and sit on them.

The IKEA catalog has a message on the front: "Designed for people, not consumers." In the photograph, some young people are having a fun, unfussy dinner at a crowded table. There are dirty dishes piled on a cart and a guitar is leaning against the wall. The IKEA catalog sits on top of a pile of catalogs with photographs of sterile rooms showcasing furniture that has never been touched. This other, messier way of life, IKEA suggests, is not just less expensive, it is more human.