Synesthesia

The red mist descended as soon as Alan walked into the house, drunk. It fell from the ceiling in a fine rain, as if from an aerosol. I felt it touch my skin, which prickled with the contact and the intensity of my emotions.

“Hello, David,” he said, grinning. Alan looked child-like in his unconcerned ignorance, and a cloud of innocuous pale green smoke hung around him.

He knew about my condition; but when he was drunk, Alan never seemed capable of thinking of anyone but himself. Sometimes he would try to understand how my synesthesia means that I perceive a conflation of the senses, so that I can literally see colours and objects in front of my eyes or experience familiar scents when confronted with particular feelings or situations. Now, he didn’t care what he said or did. His lack of empathy angered me even more.

“You’re drunk again!” I said, and the words projected more red into the dangerous atmosphere in the room. The walls warped, mutating from their comforting and solid rectangles, and bent inwards towards me threateningly.

“Ran into a few of the guys,” Alan replied as if it explained everything.

His words danced around his face, their accompanying derision transforming his features into a mocking grimace, obscuring his true visage.

I could feel fangs inject venom and vitriol into my skin. Recent loneliness had removed from my body any kind of antidote, and I succumbed to the effects of the toxins.

“Why didn’t you call? How could you be so selfish? You think of your own pleasure, and nothing else! You don’t care about me stuck here on my own, wondering how much money you’re spending!”

There was a familiar stench in the room now, reminding me of the stale smell of damp carpet in a detested pub, etched in my mind among feelings of disappointment, frustration and memories of ruined nights out. It was the smell of the prospective death of our relationship.

“Just don’t go on about it, for Christ’s sake. Not again,” said Alan, reaching for his gossip magazine.

The awful familiarity of being ignored hung around as if it was a faithful pet dog. I felt it snuffle at my ankle.

I smashed the magazine from Alan’s grasp, and sparks like fireworks were flung from the torn pages. He looked up with a face like thunder, and his pale green carelessness turned to crimson fury. He rose to get up, but I pushed him back into his chair.

“Listen to me!” I screamed, braving his stare that penetrated my face like needles. I hated this, hated the violence of the sensations I felt, and the craziness of my interpretations of what was all around me, but I had to be strong. “We can’t afford this! We have no money, and the overdraft costs us more every month. How can you be so stupid?”

Alan’s anger faded as his guilt made him sink back into his shell again, and he looked away. He had no argument for me, and his silence surrounded him in a grey impenetrable fog. That wouldn’t help.

I had to grab him by his collar and raise his head, just so that I could see his eyes. They flashed at me, a little angry, and a little scared, just for a fleeting moment. I was bigger than him, and more muscular.

“We have to economise, stay in more! This can’t go on-!”

He interrupted me this time. “And how do you think that would improve our relationship? Do you think I want to come home after we’ve both been slaving at work, just to stay indoors in front of the tv? I’ve got to get out, David. Got to have some fun...” He grabbed my wrist and threw down my hand away from his neck, looking down into his lap and saying no more.

The futility of the conversation reared up around me in an explosion of earth and mud, suffocating me. “Your kind of fun costs money. We just don’t have money, Alan! Can’t you see? Food and bills going up all the time! Credit card companies demanding payment! And interest on top of everything, from the mortgage to the fucking sofa!” I spluttered, fighting for breath.

Crushing debt and payment plans poured from the laptop in the corner in a river of black treacle, and the red mist sank on top of the mud to the level of my ankles.

Alan spoke softly and deliberately. “Why don’t you just leave then?”

The treacle meant that I couldn’t move, but I would have had no intention of running away. “And what would that solve? We got married, remember? And we have a joint account!”

A tiny bird flew out of my head like in a Disney cartoon and landed on a photograph of Alan and me on the day of our wedding, smiling and optimistic. The photograph seemed like a safe harbour for a time.

“So what?” Alan responded, and I saw the bird slip down the back in its confusion and frailty. “At least if I go, you won’t have to worry about paying for things. Set up your own account. You earn enough on your own to keep going. It’ll be much easier without me.”

There was a mess of feelings and colour as I tried to process this. What did he mean? Was it a threat? Was he trying to frighten me? Did he just want me to get off his back?

“Oh no,” I said finally. “You don’t walk away from me, Alan Jericho. Don’t you dare!”

I saw him shrink into the dimensions of a leprechaun right in front of me. I must have found him out, him and his blustering lies about his fabled pot of gold that could be so close. I hated him for threatening me, pretending there was a way to easy happiness, but let it pass.

“We made a commitment!” I went on. “Don’t you remember? Listening to those damn politicians and their homophobic crap about the danger of redefining marriage? We’re just as good as anyone! Just as capable of making a lifelong partnership, and just as entitled to be together!” I was thinking of those spineless fools who had not the honesty to say how much they hated us, and instead preferred to hide behind yellow rhetoric about marriage being between a man and a woman, as if words were sacrosanct. I knew as much as anyone that words could be anything; any colour or creed, animal, vegetable or mineral.

“I remember,” said Alan quietly. He was still drunk, and I thought that he was beginning to sob.

“Well, marriage *is* an entitlement. But happiness isn’t! You have to work at that. You work long hours, Alan, but when it comes to this sort of work, you’re lazy as fuck! Step up to the plate before it’s too late for both of us!”

I became galvanised by my own words as their sound shone bright white in the room. Alan looked up, and the streaks of his tears looked exaggerated like make-up in the harsh radiance.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “I know I shouldn’t, I know it’s wrong. I feel bad for every note I hand over the bar, I swear I do. It’s not that I don’t care. I just need to have the life I wanted, that we wanted for both of us. It was never staying in. It was party, all night long. And I want you there with me. I miss you so much, but you won’t come.”

The light faded to a soft glow, and a pale blue tinge came over the whole scene. I felt soft caresses all over my back, and the warmth of a hug that I hadn’t felt for far too long; although Alan hadn’t moved any closer to me. His words meant that he still wanted me.

I tried to focus on the pale blue light and the phantom hug, trying hard to use it in some way to calm things down.

“You know I can’t. We can’t afford it. Please Alan, let’s just pay off the overdraft, stop paying the interest to the banks on that at least. Do you have any idea how much I hate paying those bastards? Once we’ve done that, we can celebrate. Just you and me. I promise.”

There was a brief flare of orange as I thought of the banks and the people at the top of their organisations; those who were paid so much because they were such experts, and who were then shown to be nothing of the sort, but still earned shed-loads. They made my skin crawl.

Alan nodded. “I’ll try. I just want some hope, some fun. Something to look forward to. It seems like this goes on forever otherwise.”

“It’s supposed to go on forever. It’s called marriage,” I said darkly.

Alan smiled. He rose to his feet, growing from his stunted dimensions before my eyes, and we embraced.

“We need to talk some more,” I said. “We need to get back to being together again. But not tonight. It’s late. Let’s go to bed.”

The room had reverted back to four rectangular walls, and the air became suffused with a warming yellow. The dark mud had drained away from the floor.

As we both walked to the stairs, I could see jagged fissures of blackness in the painted walls. But they didn’t feel threatening to me. They were just the trials of life. The thing to do was not to put paper over them.