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*THE INTERIOR SPECIALIST*

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On a sunny Monday morning, the last of May, a twenty-four year old man carrying a long toolbox, a thin sack, and a satchel full of paint brushes tapped firmly – but not loudly – on the door of the last house on Maycott Lane, Tandra Barstadt’s brownstone. As the door opened, the man put down the thin sack, thrust out his right hand, and said,

“Good morning, I’m Bradley Dorian.”

Tandra Barstadt – who insisted that everyone call her Aunt Tandy – was normally a thoroughly composed and discerning woman who exuded her middle age as haughtily as if it were humankind’s highest veneration. She could not recall ever having had any difficulty communicating whatever thoughts were in her head. But when Aunt Tandy first beheld the gentleman in her doorway her mind forfeited its customary self-possession.

There was momentary nothingness.

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Mr. Dorian was a man of many talents. Those which earned him a comfortable living were interior painting, carpentry and floor covering. Physically, Mr. Dorian was not exceedingly tall. And yet, he was exceedingly handsome. He had firm, broad shoulders, and a squarely cut jaw, imbuing him with an unmistakable ‘manliness’. His boyish eyes and delicate, feminine lips were thus a neat contrast to his otherwise masculine features, providing an odd, yet strangely attractive facial combination. A loose black curl of hair hung neatly to his collar, completing his rather striking effect.

His company’s professional name was DORIAN—THE INTERIOR SPECIALIST, and he was the only employee. For that, Mr. Dorian was thankful. Some of his best work had been conducted and concluded much more wonderfully than he could ever have hoped if he had been occupied with the potential nuisances of an assistant.

As a man of many talents, Mr. Dorian was well known across a county-sized area which included several towns and hamlets. His reputation was beyond dispute, and the mention of his name never failed to cause men and women alike to recall to themselves or relate to others the results of his marvelous work. Whether it be stroking on a new coat of white paint over a neglected and lonely wall or erecting some splendid creation of his own, he always seemed to know precisely what was needed and exactly where it should go. Whatever the job called for, Mr. Dorian delivered. His work was first rate.

Like Aunt Tandy, Mr. Dorian was a private person. Little was known about him beyond his wonderful capabilities. There had been many a hazy summer day when Mr. Dorian – who worked by contract only – would arrive dry and freshly scented at 7:30 am at the home of his temporary employer. He was usually just on time to have a cup of coffee with the Mr. and Mrs. of the household, before they scurried off to work. At these moments, Dorian never failed to say his polite and courteous goodbyes. “Goodbye, sir,” he’d say. “Have yourself a fine day.” He wore such an infectious smile on his delicate, feminine lips while delivering those words that even the most ill-humoured man of the morning would soften his disposition immediately. The reply was usually a slight

variation of: "Thank you, Mr. Dorian. Why don't you have yourself a nice day." With a wry and unnoticeably less-infectious smile, Mr. Dorian would return: "I'll sure make an effort, sir."

And then, sometimes with a light, amicable tap on the arm to Mr. Dorian and a swift kiss on the cheek to his wife, the man of the house would be out the door and into the sunlight (if the sun had decided to make its sparkling appearance that day).

Mr. Dorian was often genuinely touched by the domestic sight of man and wife exchanging a brief kiss each morning before parting company. Such a compassionate ritual, he would think, for he possessed a delicate spot in his heart for such things and the sight of a married couple showing simple affection in the simplest form never failed to broaden his smile, although he himself had never married.

Each morning as the sun rose outside, the temperature inside each house would faithfully comply. Mr. Dorian had little problem working in even the most extreme heat. In fact, sometimes the more heat he felt, the harder he worked. But from time to time, it would get so that Mr. Dorian would choose to remove his outer work shirt in order to operate more comfortably. Beneath his outer work shirt, Mr. Dorian never failed to wear a stainless white undershirt whose short sleeves allowed his bare arms a spare circulation of air to keep them slightly cooler than when covered.

Being a gentleman – a gentleman with many talents – Mr. Dorian was adamant with himself about never removing his work shirt while in the presence of the lady of the house. There were certain precepts that a man of Mr. Dorian's impeccable reputation regarded as entirely unbreakable. So, while many a young wife or widow would stand or sit and chat with the interior specialist as he worked, he always kept his shirt on. Mr. Dorian was a professional in every way.

If it was one of those hot days that Mr. Dorian had chosen to relieve himself of his shirt, he would wait until the room was vacated and, in the company of himself or sometimes an old house dog, strip off his work shirt. To work more comfortably.

There was something inexpressible about the sight of Mr. Dorian's loose black curl hanging so delicately around his neck, his formidably muscled arms working so fluently, and his bare smooth upper back reflecting the room's warm glow which absolutely mystified women from one house to the next. Whatever it was, it unfailingly caused women – who may have left him alone only moments before for numerous "things to do" – to revert their attention back to him from seemingly discreet positions. Over the years there had been a stunningly large number of women – of all ages – who had endeavoured to conceal their whereabouts so that they might simply gaze at him. Indeed, there had been many an arid summer afternoon when Mr. Dorian was not the only person in the house whose body was coated in a slick sweat.

There were two distinctive facts about Mr. Dorian of which no other person – at least in the area – had knowledge. One was that he was uncommonly advanced in the difficult and sometimes unclear field of the perception and judgment of human nature (whatever that may be). Many people would have been genuinely interested and equally enlightened by most of Mr. Dorian's observations on this most baffling topic. But in his line of work, such wisdom was impertinent to any save himself.

The second uncelebrated particular about Mr. Dorian would have seemed dull to many people. Nevertheless, Mr. Dorian was a self-educated expert in the uncommon field of mirrored and reflecting surfaces, their angles and depths of reflection. It was an odd hobby so he kept its secrets to himself. Again, like the first unknown fact about Mr.

Dorian, this learned acumen never seemed to be of use to any but himself.

Mr. Dorian was thoroughly familiar with all types of mirrors, glasses, vinyls, plastics, metals, tins and practically anything else that could possibly throw a reflection and show him things invisible to his field of vision without moving his head. In fact, he became so proficient in this peculiar art that he could generate a picture out of certain species of wood. He was, unquestionably, a man of many talents. And his work was first rate.

Since Mr. Dorian was usually entering a customer's home for the first time upon accepting a contract, he found it invaluable to keep on his person or in his truck various instruments and surfaces of reflection. His keen eyes, which enabled him to be a carpenter of severe precision, were trained to survey the design and details of the room in which he was to work after a short moment's swift observation. Sometimes it was easy: a room with only a single door. Other occasions proved more challenging: a parlour with a staircase, two open hallways; maybe a door to the kitchen.

Mr. Dorian found it an exceedingly functional talent to commit to memory the shape and depth of any room, along with the number and locations of any adjoining passages, after one casual glance. And so, once he had determined and surveyed his work area he could, without difficulty, arrange his various tools and pouches and appliances in such a way that there could be no possibility of his being observed unknowingly while he worked. For example, lining the inside of his long, sturdy toolbox – one that Mr. Dorian had built for himself to customized specifications – there was a dark, stained glass. The glass was fastened to the inside of the lid and had a minutely convex surface. The glass itself was smoky and unremarkable. From ten feet away, all one could perceive was the black inside of Mr. Dorian's toolbox lid. But from twenty-four inches away or less, the glass (which had been so expertly treated by Mr. Dorian) had a highly reflective quality.

Mr. Dorian, who always had just the right instrument for any job, would often glance into the smoky glass while rummaging in his toolbox. What he saw on an alarming number of occasions was a pair of eyes, or sometimes an entire face, peering at his turned back. Simply staring, safe in the thought that his back was turned and my god is he something to look at...

The same smile reserved for the man-of-the-house's departure that morning would find its way back onto the face of Mr. Dorian at these moments. He never turned around to surprise or embarrass any woman who didn't suspect that it was, in fact, she who was being observed. That would not have been a gentleman's way, and Mr. Dorian was as adamant on that point of conduct as he was about taking his shirt off in female company. Usually, though, by the time he discovered a pair of eyes peeking through a door crack or from the top of a staircase or from behind a grandfather clock, the handsome young carpenter was safely relieved of his shirt and no violation of his rigid principles had taken place. A gentleman's way, he would think to himself.

With the delicate business of shirt removing and room surveying completed without compromising himself as a gentleman, Mr. Dorian could then concentrate more freely on the duties at hand. While his keen eyes and experienced hands set themselves to work, Mr. Dorian allowed his percipient intellect to equally employ itself. He did not absolutely require his vastly extensive knowledge of human nature to tell him what it was he saw on most of the faces reflected in his toolbox lid. On most faces – sometimes just in the eyes – Mr. Dorian would identify thoughts thinly disguised and betrayed by a

ravenous façade. He would smile again: not a smug, gloating smile, but a kindly, self-reassuring smile. An innocent smile.

Then, after some minutes of concentrated work and thought, Mr. Dorian would stand very slowly, always keeping his back turned to the eyes. His toolbox lid would be of no use to him once on his feet but – because he was a man of many talents – there was invariably another surface, perhaps a little to the left or right or slightly higher off the ground, which presented him with the very same set of eyes. Chairs, tables or mantelpieces were the most effective locations to mount these secondary instruments of reflection, which may or may not have been of practical use to Mr. Dorian's primary task but which were always of practical use as mirrors.

Looking into these secondary surfaces always – somewhat remarkably – made Mr. Dorian thirsty and he would mutter (perhaps a little too loudly), "Boy, this heat does make a man thirsty." He would then shake his head gently and sigh quite audibly. Routinely, before he was able to bend and procure even one more tool, a smiling and somewhat fidgety lady of the house would enter the room. Frequently, when Mr. Dorian was working in a home which employed servants, his hostess would make excuses about the inadequacies of the help to explain why she herself was the bearer of some refreshment.

Mr. Dorian would always turn at the sound of footsteps. The sight of his grinning, unsurprised face and his glistening, chiselled arms was almost always sure to freeze any lady's feet and often stall her tongue. Mr. Dorian – who was, on occasion, admittedly disappointed if he did not receive just that reaction – was always the first to speak, and regularly declared: "Why excuse me, Ma'am, I positively did not hear you come up from behind."

There were vague and windy rumours concerning Mr. Dorian in his first few years of business. Strangely though, there was never born a single complaint. Mr. Dorian's reputation as a gentleman remained completely unchallenged and his business was both respected and increasingly profitable. It is impossible to overstate how Mr. Dorian was a man of many talents. Or that his work was anything but first-rate.

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There were indeed many who had first-hand experience of the high quality of Mr. Dorian's work, but Tandra Barstadt was not one of them. Aunt Tandy had never heard of his name when a friend of hers (who had been the beneficiary of some of young Mr. Dorian's very finest work) mentioned it.

The two women were casually discussing the usually dreary subject of home decorating when Aunt Tandy's acquaintance referred to some large oak cabinets which Mr. Dorian had expertly installed for her in the parlour about six months previously. Aunt Tandy – who was, herself, adeptly perceptive in the difficult and unclear field of human behaviour – noticed an unmistakable change in the pitch and timbre of her neighbour's voice. The woman's manner became slightly agitated, as if some awkward excitement had suddenly possessed her but was forbidden to fully exhibit itself. She spilled a drop of tea from her cup on Aunt Tandy's fine white table setting. The woman never did come right out and say exactly what was so exceptional about Mr. Dorian's work. But it was clear that she had been deeply satisfied, and the depth of that recommendation was sufficient for Aunt Tandy to begin inquiries.

Aunt Tandy had a simple wall-papering and repainting project for the upstairs bedroom in which she slept. There were two more bedrooms in the house, but they had been left unused for ages. She had lived in the large brownstone for many years and had personally renovated the walls of the room on five separate occasions. At forty-nine years of age, she reasoned, it was finally time she got someone else to do things like that for her.

Her friend's recommendation was sufficient to attract her attention, but Aunt Tandy (who never acted upon pure impulse) began making inquiries about Mr. Dorian. Everywhere she made those investigations, the verdict returned the same: Mr. Dorian is a man of many talents. His work is first rate. And not only did her survey produce identical opinion after opinion in unanimous favour of the young carpenter, but the judgment sustained itself from men to women alike. All spoke glowingly of young Mr. Dorian, and consistency was a quality much admired by Aunt Tandy.

Every man who had contracted Mr. Dorian said that he was a pleasant young man who knew his business and completed his work to tremendous satisfaction and nothing more – an estimable young man.

Nearly every woman whose husband or who had herself contracted Mr. Dorian spoke much more enthusiastically about him. He can do all sorts of things, they told Aunt Tandy, frequently giving rise to a subtle blushing in their cheeks and a sometimes not so subtle alteration of their normal breathing pattern. His techniques are marvellous, difficult to put into words, you really have to see them to believe them, she heard with unwavering uniformity. And besides, he's so handsome.

Without ever having been told, Mr. Dorian would know Aunt Tandy to be unmarried or a widower. They were the only women who called him to secure his services. After completing her investigation into his suitability, Aunt Tandy had contacted Mr. Dorian personally, who spoke politely on the telephone and said that his first available day would be the following Monday – one week's time. Aunt Tandy told him that wall-papering and paint was no emergency, and that Monday was indeed fine. They briefly discussed Mr. Dorian's fees for the project before agreeing not to settle on anything until he could actually survey the work in person. They said goodbye until the following Monday.

On a sunny Monday morning, the last of May, a twenty-four year old man named Bradley Dorian, carrying a long toolbox, a thin sack, and a satchel full of paint brushes stood at the front door of the last house on Maycott Lane, waiting to introduce himself to his newest customer, Tandra Barstadt. After presenting himself to Aunt Tandy, and noticing a familiar moment of hesitation, Mr. Dorian blinked his eyes. His smile deepened.

What a handsome woman this –

"Tandra Barstadt, forgive me," said Aunt Tandy, after regaining herself and gingerly grasping Mr. Dorian's outstretched hand. "Please, Mr. Dorian, come in."

Mr. Dorian nodded his head in appreciation, but did not move immediately. Instead, he picked up his thin sack, turned his head around and gazed reflectively up to the sun. There were no clouds.

"Nothing like a lonely sun in a blue sky. All that sunlight and sky, so blue and so pretty," he proffered. Still facing the sun, he appended: "Yes, indeed, I believe this is going to be one special day. Don't you agree, Miss Barstadt?"

Mr. Dorian winked one eye at the peerless sun and then looked directly into Aunt Tandy's azure eyes. Without waiting for a reply, he stepped into the brownstone monstrosity, still smiling.

Aunt Tandy led Mr. Dorian to the kitchen after he stepped through the doorway. He had accepted her offer of tea. And so they went. More tea was poured and conversation flowed freely yet stayed at all times within the boundaries of propriety. After one hour – much longer than the usual time he spent chatting with his clients – Mr. Dorian became aware that Aunt Tandy was not simply looking at him in the common, mechanical way people look at those with whom they are conversing. No, something was different. She was looking at him.

Mr. Dorian did something quite out of character, something he could not recall ever having done before: he shifted, ever so slightly, in his chair. And even a man so knowledgeable in the difficult and unclear field of human nature was at a loss to evaluate and explain this tiny movement. He peered at Aunt Tandy. He had long since conceded her physical attractiveness, but now the way her mouth formed even the most trivial and insignificant words became strangely hypnotic. For the briefest moment, his eyes fixed on the movement of her lips.

Mr. Dorian – who was a man not given to capricious notion or flighty reasoning – felt the tiniest prickle of discomfort. Being a man of composure and estimable reputation over many of his young years had taught Mr. Dorian countless methods of overcoming discomfort. And although he was unafraid of betraying even the smallest pang of concern, he was still narrowly troubled by his inability to categorize the sensation.

“Here I am going on like I'm getting paid to chat the morning away,” he said, looking at Aunt Tandy. “That room of yours isn't going to paint itself. Lead the way, if you would be so kind, Miss Barstadt.”

Across the table, as they had been conversing, Aunt Tandy had experienced similar moments of uncertainty. And as Mr. Dorian gathered his equipment, a reckless thought invaded Aunt Tandy's mind. This Mr. Dorian, this young carpenter, was devilishly handsome, with such a fine set of shoulders, and eyes that somehow smiled and seemed to release a soft heat into the room.

“Proceed this way, Mr. Dorian.”

As she started up the stairs, leading the way, things seemed natural. Years of self-governed composure had engraved into Aunt Tandy the ability to dominate and subdue any slip of emotion or unwanted display of sentiment. There was no passion or sensibility she could not command into restraint. When she reached the fourteenth step, however, her eyes were suddenly on a level with the bottom of her bedroom door. A light tingling began in her lower stomach as she observed that the door was half open. She mounted the steps slowly, Mr. Dorian accompanying her from the rear, matching her pace.

Mr. Dorian never took his eyes off the banister on which Aunt Tandy slid her right hand while they ascended the steps. At approximately the twelfth step (he could not have said for sure), Mr. Dorian noticed the banister had become slick. Although he hadn't had his hand on it, he immediately moved to grasp the smoky oak. He felt a strange wetness. The temperature outside was rising, he thought, giving this odd phenomenon a seemingly suitable explanation. And yet, he felt as dry as firewood...

At the top of the stairs, Aunt Tandy stopped on the landing just outside her

bedroom door. When Mr. Dorian joined her, she cleared her throat, not unpleasantly, and announced, "This is the room I'll need you in." Not completely satisfied with that statement, she hastily added, "You may proceed how you wish, I have few restrictions."

Mr. Dorian, feeling much more comfortable, replied, "Just tell me how you'd like everything done, Miss Barstadt, and you'll have it exactly that way."

Aunt Tandy was having a tiny bout of dizziness. She tried to shake it off by bursting through the bedroom door, but that didn't help. And with exactly the same broad smile on his face as when he had stepped through the front door only an hour before, Mr. Dorian stepped into Aunt Tandy's bedroom.

There was momentary nothingness.