

Snowfall

by Mark Keane

Tony France came looking for me in the garden maze where I was pruning the hedges. “You can leave that for now,” he said. “Mr. Davidson has a special job for you.”

“What’s he got in mind?” I asked.

“I’ll let him explain.”

I followed Tony into the house, and up the marble staircase.

We waited on the second-floor landing for Mr. Davidson to join us. He led the way into a room with floor-to-ceiling shelves packed with books. Tiffany lamps in each corner cast diffused light. The Bocote floor was burnished to a rich, brown sheen. In front of one set of shelves stood a four-sided structure with a zig-zag arrangement, like an expanded concertina. Four grey plastered surfaces, nine-feet high and fifteen-feet wide, each with a six-inch wooden skirting board. Three plastic tubs stacked to one side of the structure bore labels that read Brilliant White.

Mr. Davidson pointed to the tubs. “You have been provided with six gallons of paint. Three coats will be required.” He adjusted the cuffs of his bespoke suit. “I want the final effect to capture the whiteness I witnessed following a heavy snowfall in Quebec in January 1981. You will receive credit for any paint you do not use. That credit is, of course, predicated on your achieving the requisite whiteness of the Quebec snow.” He paused, hands clasped behind his back. “On no account are you to get any paint on the wooden border or on the floor. No dripping is permitted. You will not be given any cloth or tissue. If you attempt to cover up mistakes there will be grave consequences.” He pursed his lips. “Joe Spain certainly regrets his carelessness.”

Muffled buzzing came from Mr. Davidson’s pocket. He took out his phone and checked the screen. “I have a meeting. Tony can cover the logistics.” He exited the room, every inch the autocrat used to getting his way.

I waited until he was definitely gone. “What did he mean about Joe Spain?”

“Joe Spain won’t be painting anything for some time.” Tony nodded his head slowly, eyebrows raised, making it clear he had nothing more to say on the subject.

“What’s the reason for the painting?” I asked. “What was all that stuff about Quebec snow?”

“Don’t ask me. I just work for the man.”

“Is it a test?”

“Who knows?” Tony puffed out his cheeks. “If it is, you’d better pass it.”

Up close, all manner of dimples, ridges, edges, and corners covered the four surfaces. “How am I to know if I’ve got the right color?”

Tony shrugged. “Use your imagination. The boss suggested three coats of paint, and he should know.” He glanced at his watch. “Time to lock you in for the night.”

He showed me a small adjoining room. It contained a cot with a Hessian cover, a wooden chair, and a chamber pot. No lights.

“Someone will be back at eight with your breakfast. Probably me or Ivan. Get a good night’s sleep; you’ve a lot of painting ahead of you. One coat per day. Not as easy as you might think. Mr. Davidson will check the final result on Friday.” He leaned a little closer. “I remember Joe Spain’s first night. He was cocksure. Painting a wall was a piece of piss, I remember him saying. He’s not saying that now.”

Tony locked the door. His footsteps faded, and an eerie stillness pervaded the enclosed space, inky black apart from a grey line where a gap under the door seeped pale light from the outer room. I lay on the cot, and didn’t sleep.

The following morning, Ivan Israel unlocked the door. I sat up, and checked my watch: nearly ten o’clock.

“I know I’m late, Taffy,” Ivan said, putting a tray on the ground. “Better dig in. You’ve got to finish the first coat by five o’clock. Mr. Davidson’s instructions.” He stepped back out of the room.

I found Ivan off-hand to the point of hostility. Tall and paunchy with a precarious comb-over and perpetual sneer, he always gave the impression I’d wronged him in some way. Nonetheless, I needed no encouragement to dig in. A top notch breakfast, but I expected nothing less from Mr. Davidson. Blueberry porridge, crispy bacon, waffles and maple syrup, eggs benedict, freshly-squeezed orange juice, and a carafe of Columbian roast.

Ivan reappeared in the doorway. “This is a one-brush job,” he announced. He handed me the brush, large and unwieldy with thick bristles. I turned it in my hand and saw white stains on the handle, dried paint at the base of the bristles.

“Is this what—”

“Same brush Joe Spain used,” Ivan interrupted. “I hope you do a better job than him.”

I thought about the wooden border, and Mr. Davidson’s warning about mistakes. “Do you have a second—”

“One-brush job. Mr. Davidson’s instructions. You better crack on, Taffy. No time to waste.” Ivan turned away but called over his shoulder, “Someone will bring you lunch at one o’clock.”

I stood before the structure. The dimples and depressions I'd noticed the day before appeared arbitrary. A series of intricate rucks reminded me of an animal's backbone. The light from the lamps threw complex shadows that caused the undulations and hollows to shift position. Hardly the best light for painting. Mr. Davidson was testing me and, as Tony said, I'd better pass the test.

I lifted the top tub, my arms wobbling with the effort, and lugged it over to the structure. Ivan provided no tools other than the brush, nothing to lever the lid from the tub. A hard plastic sheath ran around the rim that had to be removed before the lid could be released. I pulled and twisted, cut my fingers on the hard plastic, and finally ripped it from the tub. Using the key to my flat, I pried open the lid bit by bit until it popped.

My hands throbbed, fingernails broken, cuts stinging. I tore the hem of my shirt and wrapped the cloth around the cuts. The paint looked thick and yellowish—certainly not brilliant white. I tried stirring with the brush handle, but it made no difference. Five hours to go and I hadn't applied a single drop of paint.

By the time Hugh Peru showed up, I managed to cover the upper half of one surface. To reach the top, I stood on the chair from my room. Getting up and down from the chair, I worried about dripping paint on the floor and cupped my hand under the brush. The paint missed depressions in the surface. I poked the white tip of the bristles into the hollows, but the brush wasn't up to the job. The lighting was inadequate and misleading.

"Something smells good." Hugh held up a dome-covered platter. "Better eat while it's hot."

Unlike Ivan Israel, Hugh Peru was invariably cheery. A small man in his mid-thirties with curly black hair and an enormous moustache, he could have stepped out of a Velasquez painting.

He handed me the platter and moved to examine the wall. "You've made real progress."

"It's hopeless," I said. "The paint isn't going on properly."

Hugh shook his head. "The first coat always looks like that. You're too much of a perfectionist. I'll leave you to eat in peace."

I lifted the dome, and the warm waft of flavors got my digestive juices flowing. Venison steak in a red wine sauce, garlic mash, and white asparagus tips. A glass of wine to wash it down, and cheesecake for dessert. Mr. Davidson didn't skimp when it came to food. I refused to linger over the meal—no time for such luxury. By the time Hugh returned, I had resumed painting.

"How was lunch?" he asked.

"Tasty." I held out the brush. "How am I supposed to avoid getting paint on the wood with this?"

Hugh grimaced. "Very difficult. I suppose you need to be extra careful. We don't want a repeat of the Joe Spain incident."

“There must be a second brush I can use—a smaller one to do along the border.”

“Afraid not. Instructions from Mr. Davidson. A one-brush job, that’s what he said. You’ll work it out.” He patted my shoulder. “Better get a move on. You have to be finished by five. Ivan will be here to shut up shop.” He dawdled in the doorway. “You’ll get it done. I’ve every confidence in you. You’re nothing like Joe Spain.”

I picked up the pace, moving down the first surface to within three inches of the wooden border. Any closer and I risked getting paint on the wood. I needed a smaller brush. Using my key, I hacked off enough bristles to fashion a precision brush. I should’ve kept the knife from lunch—it would’ve come in handy to cut the bristles and to open the other tubs. No doubt Mr. Davidson wouldn’t have permitted it.

I removed a shoelace, tied it around the bristles to bind them together, then got down on my knees. Slowly, painstakingly, I moved the bristles from left to right, covering the area above the wooden strip. It worked. Starting at an angle of forty-five degrees, the tip just above the border, I let the paint grip and then drew the bristles away from the wooden edge. I followed this with a horizontal alignment, and a smooth motion to the right. Inching along, knees rubbing against the hard ground, my breathing synchronized with my hand. Nothing existed but the wooden strip. I kept going, all the way to the end of the fourth surface.

I eased myself off the ground. Ten minutes to four and I had the better part of three surfaces to complete. I attacked the paint, shoved the big brush into the tub, pulled it out, paused and painted; up-stroke, down-stroke, to the right, up and down, a check to fill dimples, pressing the tip into corners, another press and twist. Back into the tub, careful not to drip. I persevered: mechanical, indefatigable, a painting machine. When the tub became light enough to lift, I carried it with me, minimizing the chances of spillage and working much quicker. I brushed and dipped and probed and squeezed until I completed the final section.

Ivan arrived at five o’clock. I hid the makeshift bristle brush in my pocket.

He walked from one end of the structure to the other. “Looks like you got it finished after all, Taffy. Very messy though.” He hunkered down and inspected the border. “Better hope you don’t slip-up. Mr. Davidson will be here on Friday with special lamps to check for mistakes.”

I said nothing, too exhausted to speak or think. Ivan checked the tub of paint.

“There’s still a lot left; you might have stinted on the paint. Right, put the lid back on and I’ll lock up.” He picked up the brush. “What were you doing, Taffy? Painting or scrubbing the walls? I’ll have this cleaned so it’s ready for you in the morning.”

He locked the door behind me. I lay on the cot, curled into a ball and fell asleep.

Tony France brought breakfast at nine o’clock. Not as lavish as the morning before—two slices of buttered toast, a Danish pastry, and a cup of tea. “Ready for the second coat?” he asked.

“I suppose so.”

He waited in the outer room. When I finished breakfast, he handed me the brush, the bristles stiff and the handle white with paint.

“Word of advice: use more paint on the second coat.” He took away the plate and cup. “Same arrangement as yesterday. Finish by five. Ivan or Hugh will bring you lunch.”

I took the bristle brush from my pocket. It was unusable, hard and unpliable. No matter; I felt calm and assured now that I had my technique. I used my key to saw off more bristles. In no rush, I sat on the first tub, breathed deeply, and pictured smooth white surfaces. I dipped the big brush into the paint, instinctively gauging the correct depth and load. In less than half an hour, I had painted the top half of one surface.

Onto the bottom half, no hesitation or uncertainty, in total command of the task. I reached the border and stopped for a short break to prepare myself for the next stage. I grasped the bristle brush—it felt natural, an extension of my hand. Angled strokes preceded horizontal strokes to complete the first side. I scraped the paint from the bottom of the tub for touch-ups. This time, I had no difficulty removing the plastic sheath and opening the second tub. I continued along the border, angled and horizontal brushstrokes, repetitive and relentless.

I didn’t hear Hugh enter the room. “You’re going great guns,” he said. He watched as I finished one more border section. I made no attempt to hide the bristle brush, leaving it lying on the lid. He nodded his head appreciatively. “You’ve really got the hang of it.”

He carried a smaller dish with no cover: a bowl of oxtail soup for starters, two sausages and one potato for the main course, a glass of soda water, but no dessert. I ate the food quickly. Hugh kept up a lively chatter, but I didn’t listen. I wanted him gone so I could get back to work.

He went into the small room and returned with the chamber pot. “I’ll empty this for you.”

I sipped the soda water and planned my strategy—finish the borders first then return to the top.

Hugh returned, chamber pot held aloft. “You’re good to go.” He collected the dish and glass. “I’ll leave you to it. Remember to finish by five.”

With the final stages using the bristle brush completed, I returned to the mother brush. A fluent sequence of strokes, up and down, in an elegant flow—an elegance, too, in the precise incursions into corners and depressions. I kept at it, oblivious to the surroundings or the purpose of my task. It required my full attention—the physical act of painting was purpose enough.

I had just finished sealing the second tub when Ivan appeared. Seeing his snide expression, I slipped the bristle brush back into my pocket.

“No time to waste, Taffy. I’ve things to do.” He lifted the empty tub. “Have you finished with this?” He surveyed the structure and grimaced. “You better hope the

third coat works. That doesn't look like the color of any snow I've ever seen."

He ushered me into my room and locked the door. I sat on the cot and brooded over what he said. There was no denying the surfaces looked streaky—the third coat would have to be decisive.

Hugh Peru unlocked the door the next morning. I was already up and pacing the available space.

"The day of the third coat; a most auspicious day." Hugh held the door open, and waved me through. "Breakfast is served." He handed me a glass of water and a plate with a slice of bread. The brush lay on one of the remaining tubs, looking the worse for wear: bristles separated and handle thick with paint.

Hugh gestured to the wall. "It's looking good. I feel cold just thinking about that Quebec snow." I chewed the bread, hard at the edges, and drank the water. Hugh leaned against a bookshelf and checked his phone. I passed him the plate and empty glass. "Ivan will be here with lunch. Keep up the good work." He gave me a thumbs-up. "Mr. Davidson is bound to be pleased."

My eyes ached after a night of fitful sleep. The walls appeared streaked and murkier than I'd anticipated. I returned to my room to get the chair and sat facing the structure. A final concerted effort, I just had to ignore my weariness and the hollowness in my stomach. I repeated the words, Quebec snow, like a mantra. I clasped my hands, broken fingernails biting into the soft flesh, and willed myself to proceed.

Seven hours left—precious time. Urgency fizzed in my veins as I pried open the lid and entered the snowstorm, up and down the chair, paint from brush to wall. Paint and snow. Back and forth, more and more paint—every depression and edge, ridge and dimple, under thick, fluffy Quebec snow.

I cut off the optimum number of bristles and began along the border. Bristle brush at an angle and then horizontal, moving higher, encroaching the upper third coat. Then the mother brush to smooth the overlap and achieve the required snowy, brilliant white. One surface finished, then onto the next, and into the third tub. I bent down, legs straddling the tub, bristle brush into the paint and onto the wall, switching to mother brush, tub and wall.

A quarter of the way across, my rumbling stomach caused me to hesitate and I missed the switch of brushes, using the mother brush on the border. A splodge of paint stuck to the wood, glaringly white. I shuffled backwards, shocked and outraged. After two days, and more than four gallons of paint—how could this happen? Walking in circles, I groaned and cursed the brush and wanted to lie down and sleep. No way. No giving up; not when I'd come this far. Giving up was not an option.

I tore a strip from my shirt and used it to sponge the misapplied paint, spreading and smudging the stain. I spat on the cloth, rubbed and rubbed until the paint vanished. No evidence of the mistake remained, not to my eyes at least. But would Mr. Davidson know? I pressed on, slower now, ultra-careful. I could allow one mistake, but no more than one.

Ivan carried in a tray with another slice of bread and glass of water. He gave me one of his derisive grins. “So, Taffy, what’ve you been up to?”

I said nothing. His grin broadened as though he read my mind.

“Any slip-ups? If you ask me the whole thing looks botched. Mr. Davidson isn’t going to accept this. Snowy landscape? More like badly mixed concrete.” He nudged the tray with the toe of his shoe. “Have your bread and water so I can get going.”

I chewed the stale bread, keeping my eyes away from the spot where I splodged paint. Ivan scanned the books on the shelves and hummed something that sounded like a nursery rhyme. I considered asking him what he honestly thought of the painting but decided against it.

He took the plate and glass. “Finish everything by five. Good luck, Taffy. You’re going to need it.”

I returned to the border, on my knees, hypersensitive and vigilant. All that mattered was the brushstroke, then the next stroke, bristle brush and mother brush. I completed the border—no visible overlap, a continuum of white. One more check on the area where I’d slipped up, but I couldn’t see anything other than wood grain. How could Mr. Davidson tell? His eyesight was no better than mine. He would never know, and I had no intention of telling him.

Entering the home stretch, I painted with renewed vigor. The third tub was severely depleted but enough remained to finish the job. I applied the paint thickly. It went on like a dream, the whiteness lighting the room. I scrutinized the surfaces, searching for paler areas, my tired eyes straining to find blemishes. Absorbed in this search, I didn’t notice Tony France until he stood beside me.

“Job done,” he said.

I secured the lid on the tub, pressing down so it snapped shut. As I handed over the brush, I experienced a surge of sadness—nothing left to do. “Do you think Mr. Davidson will like it?”

Tony took a step back, as if recoiling from my question. “That’s not for me to say. All I can say is you’ve done a better job than Joe Spain.”

Emboldened, I asked, “What exactly did Joe Spain do wrong?”

Tony took his time before answering. “It was more his poor attitude. He didn’t show the work enough respect. Can’t say that about you.”

I went into my room. Tony stood in the doorway.

“I’ll be here in the morning with Mr. Davidson for the verdict,” he said.

When he left, I sat on the cot, got up and stood in the darkness, then sat down again. Sleep seemed unimportant as I vacillated between hope and disquiet. I pictured whiteness emanating from the surfaces in the other room. Then I recalled Mr. Davidson’s reference to grave consequences, and Tony saying that Joe Spain wouldn’t be painting anything for some time. And, of course, there were those special lights Mr. Davidson would use to check for mistakes.

The sound of a key in the lock woke me. Tony opened the door. “Mr. Davidson will be joining us shortly. Come on out and wait.” We stood by the painted structure. I stared at the ground, afraid to look up and see the area where I’d splodged paint or the inadequacy of the whiteness.

Mr. Davidson arrived, dapper as ever. His eyes widened when he saw me, and I realized how I must appear—exhausted, three days beard growth, gaunt from hunger. And my clothes, torn and covered in paint, thick smears on my sleeves and across my trousers.

He stood with his hands on his hips and rocked back and forth. “Well, Oscar. I can call you Oscar, can’t I?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Oscar Wales is quite a mouthful.” He smiled, the merest uplift of his lips. “Well, Oscar, you’ve been busy.”

I waited for his verdict, but Mr. Davidson appeared to be in no hurry. He wasn’t even looking at the structure. Where were the special lights? Was the painting good enough? Did it remind him of the snow that fell in Quebec in January 1981?

“Well, Oscar.” He turned towards the concertina surfaces, his face impassive.

I looked. The structure appeared white, brilliant white, but was it what he wanted? The leadenness in my stomach told me it wasn’t. He walked towards the door, and Tony indicated that I should follow him.

“Oscar, I have an interesting project for you.” Mr. Davidson paused and coughed to clear his throat. “It relates to a visit I made in 1987 to a small village in the Urals. An area surrounded by forest, magnificent old oaks. Late September, the color of the leaves was quite magnificent. Something I’ll never forget.” He looked over his shoulder. “Tony, please take us to the other room.”

With Tony in front, I accompanied Mr. Davidson down a long hallway with thick-piled wool carpeting. Relieved and excited, I could barely take in his words.

“You will be provided with six gallons of paint. The effect I want you to capture is the color and texture of those leaves I witnessed in that village in the Urals in September 1987. Three coats of paint will be required.”

Tony stopped at a door and took a set of keys from his pocket. My neck tingled. I flexed my fingers and slowed my breathing, joyful and anxious. Another challenge.