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Sartre's Sink

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Published by Granta Books

Extract

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Hanging Wallpaper

with Ernest Hemingway

Tools:

Pasting brush
Wallpaper brush
Decorator's scissors
Pasting table
Plumb line

Materials:

Wallpaper
Wallpaper paste

The old man had worked for two days and two nights to strip away the old wallpaper and now on the morning of the third day the time to hang the new paper had come and he was tired. His palms were blistered from long hours scraping away the old paper and the blisters had begun to weep. The old man felt the pain in his hands as he looked again at the bare walls of the room. "Room, thou art big. But I will finish this *trabajo* that I have begun," he said. "Or I will die trying."

The old man held the line delicately in his right hand. He threaded it through the eye on the lead weight, then he made fast the end of the line to hold the weight in place. The lead weight pulled firmly now and as he let the line run through his fingers he raised his arms so that the weight did not

touch the ground, and the line remained taut and straight. Now he was ready. His right hand holding the line between thumb and forefinger, the left feeding the line, the old man raised his hands and climbed the first of the steps and offered the line to the wall where it swung like the pendulum of a clock. He could feel the tension on the line as it swung and he waited patiently. "It is losing momentum, soon it will circle and stop," he thought. Then he felt the weight go still and saw that the line hung straight between heaven and earth, and the old man took the pencil from behind his ear and drew a mark on the wall beside the plumb line.

The brown wall was patched with plaster and board, and the old man drew the line from ceiling to skirting board. As he drew, he descended, step by step, but always he held the line tight to the wall. Then the old man shouldered the first roll of wallpaper and carried it to the pasting table where he uncoiled the paper, pattern downwards, on to the wooden surface. As he unrolled the paper he bent low, his arms out straight, his palms turned up, until his face touched against the surface. Then he used two pieces of wood to stop the paper from rolling up on itself, one lengthways, one sideways.

He climbed the steps again to measure the height of the wall from ceiling to skirting board with the tape measure. He wore rope-soled shoes, dark trousers and an old shirt. His



shirt was patched and discoloured, and it resembled the wall. At the pasting table he loosened his sheath knife and cut the first drop three inches longer than the wall. “I would have liked to have used the long decorator’s scissors,” thought the old man. “But what is the use of thinking of what I do not have. I must think only of what there is.” The length of paper was longer than the pasting table and the old man tied a piece of string across the legs at one end of the table and passed the end of the paper under the string to hold it in place. “I am an old man,” he thought, “but I have many tricks, and I have resolution.”

He had mixed his paste long before, now the old man lifted the damp cloth that covered the bucket to keep the paste from drying and began to brush the paste on to the paper. He pulled the paper level to the near edge of the table as he pasted the near edge of the wallpaper and pushed it back to the far edge as he pasted the far edge of the paper, and in this way the table stayed clean.

Now he took two corners of the paper between thumb and forefinger and folded almost two feet of the paper back on itself, keeping paste against paste, pattern against pattern, until he had made a concertina of the whole pasted length of paper. He kept the folds loose so as not to crease the paper and he felt the slime like glue slide between his fingers. He knew if he did not make the concertina, the tension on the

paper would be too great and the paper would break, and he would be left holding only the two corners, like the ears of the bull he had once seen killed when he was a young man. Or worse, the paper might tear in the middle where he could not hide the join. He climbed again the steps of the ladder to offer the pasted banner to the wall. "Will the first piece stick well?" he wondered aloud. "If the first piece sticks well I will say five Hail Marys. There, it is said." The old man had no radio and often talked to himself as he worked. He pressed the paper to the wall so that its top edge was an inch higher than the wall and touched against the ceiling. "*Puta de techo,*" he said, "I cannot trust you," and he thought how the ceiling did not run true and how many times he had been betrayed by the ceiling. He was wise to have used the plumb line. Then he placed the edge of the paper against the line he had drawn on the wall. The paper slid into place and the old man took the wallpaper brush from his pocket and stroked its bristles across the surface of the paper. He saw the air bubbles beneath the surface and brushed them out from the paper until the whole drop hung as smoothly as the wall allowed. Then, high up, he tapped the bristles of the brush along the angle where the wall met the ceiling and ran the back of his knife along the recess. When he pulled the paper away from the wall again he could see the crease in the paper. "If I had the scissors it would have been easy to cut

along the fold, but you haven't got the scissors," he thought. "You have only the knife and the brush, and that is enough." With the knife he cut away the narrow strip of paper that was not needed. He wiped the knife on his trousers and then threw the strip of paper over the side of the ladder, watching as it dropped to the floor below.

The old man had worked for two days and two nights to strip the old paper and three times he had had to stop to pull nails from the wall and to fill the holes left behind. Once the head of a nail grazed his brow and drew blood. Now on the third day his back ached and his legs were weak. As he stepped down from the ladder, he sank to his knees and again tapped with the brush along the join where the wall met the skirting board, and with the knife he cut away the narrow strip of paper that was left over and tossed it aside. Raising himself, he saw the paper hanging there on the wall, and how beautiful were its bands of colour against the plaster. Then he shouldered the stepladder and carried its weight the short distance to the place where the next length of paper was to be hung.

"If the boy were here he could have the next length pasted and ready," he thought aloud. "A man should not work alone." His legs and shoulders were stiff, and the pasting brush dug into the wounds in his hands. And he felt then the depth of his tiredness and the pain of life.

The old man cut the second drop longer to allow him to match the pattern. Once it was against the wall, he slid the paper until it covered the mark he had drawn on the wall so that the two edges touched each other and then he saw how the pattern continued unbroken across the two lengths of paper. The old man felt good now. He no longer thought of the pain in his hands and in his back, and he no longer thought of the treachery of the ceiling, for it was not the ceiling's fault. He thought of the beauty of the coloured paper that covered the cracks and the discoloured plaster of the wall and he knew that the paper was his friend. "Be calm and strong old man," he said. "Wall, I respect you very much, but I will paper you before this day is over."

