

The First Two Pages of “Pick a Color” by Eric Beetner
From *Low Down Dirty Vote, Volume 3: The Color of My Vote*,
edited by Mysti Berry (Berry Content Corporation)

An Essay by Eric Beetner

When I decided to submit a story for *Low Down Dirty Vote 3*, I knew that other writers would be better than me in tackling head-on the racial implications of the anthology's theme: “The Color Of My Vote.” So I went small scale. I like small stakes stories. Stories where characters have to put all their eggs in a tiny basket because that's what life is for most of us.

I chose a condo complex board meeting, and if anyone has ever been involved in any small bureaucracy and seen the red tape and the egos at play, you know the smallest thing can get blown up to epic proportions—in this case, what color to paint the workout room.

I haven't had to deal with this particular issue, so it isn't drawn directly from my own life experience, but I've been a part of parent boards for my daughter's sports teams, and I could write a very dark noir novel about that experience for sure, but I'd have to change a lot of names and then probably move after it came out.

The best stories, short or long, are relatable to most readers. I think most people know someone like Mrs. McCaffrey. The kind of person who makes it all about them. Who brings personal grievances into a public forum and who never gives an inch. Most

of us jump to thoughts of murder in the presence of these people. In a short story, I can play that out far beyond anything I'd ever do in real life.

Here's where the story hopefully has another layer. In our current political climate, we see all the time the little things that get upscaled from a molehill to a mountain. A small-town disagreement can become a political flashpoint for a national discussion and a new front line in the culture wars we seem to endlessly escalate.

Small stakes can take on massive implications, if only to a few people. Not everyone is going to have an issue in their life that has consequences beyond their community and often not beyond their own front door. But when it's *your* life, *your* issue, then it becomes something that can affect your whole world.

In our increasingly divided world, it does seem like something as inconsequential as a paint color could lead to fighting, bitterness, and yes, even murder. Sad, but true.

I went first person for this one to really get the anger and frustration across by getting inside Michael's head and letting him think things he would never say out loud. By putting it in his voice I was able to bypass the filter we use in polite society and get his raw feelings on his nemesis fouling his plans. And then when he turns worried and paranoid, we can hear it play out in his head. The first two pages set up the immense frustration Michael feels, the mini-power struggle on the condo board, and lets us know in no uncertain terms who the villain of the story is.

I hope readers can see a familiar face in the story, whether the evil Mrs. McCaffrey or the hapless narrator. And the next time you have a private fantasy about knocking off someone who annoys you to no end, think of this as a cautionary tale.

I enjoyed the first two volumes of *Low Down Dirty Vote*, and I love seeing writers take on a common theme to see how many different takes on it you can get. I'm honored to be included in Volume 3 and hope my story is entertaining for readers. And if you don't like it, take it up at the next board meeting.

The First Two Pages of "Pick a Color"

"Okay, let's take another vote."

Raise your hand. Raise your hand you shriveled up old hag.

I see four hands up, including mine. Then there's Mrs. McCaffrey, arms crossed with her dried apple face, her sour lemon lips, and her black olive eyes. There is a collective groan from the board members and the room of residents who came to this meeting.

I let out a big sigh that doesn't even begin to express my frustration. "It's not that big of a deal, Mrs. McCaffrey. It's the color of the pool house and gym walls, we're not deciding to go to war or anything."

"I don't want blue."

She's got to be north of eighty years old, but she still sounds like a spoiled preschooler. It's been three weeks, three board meetings, three rounds of voting on colors, and she is the only holdout.

My patience is gone.

"Why not? Blue is literally everyone's favorite color!"

"It's not mine."

Her arms are locked across her chest like she is in a straightjacket. *Oh, I wish.*

The number of residents this time is triple the usual attendance. Word has gotten out about her intransigence and Marjorie McCaffrey is a bit of a legend around the building. The longest continuous resident here and one

with zero friends or allies among the other owners, who are on average fifty years younger than her.

I see several residents in attendance with their cell phones out and ready to go at a moment's notice in case this turns ugly. If I lose it or somebody starts screaming at her there will be a half dozen YouTube videos online in an hour.

I try like hell to keep it together.

"That's the third vote on the third color."

"They're all blue."

Calming Sea, actually. I pick up the color swatch thing, the one that looks like a bookmark with four different shades on it. The one I scooped up a dozen of at the paint store so everyone would know exactly what color we were planning on repainting the pool room, the locker and changing area, and the gym. The color we have to get unanimous board approval for.

"I don't think I've ever even seen you use the pool or the gym, Marjorie. You wouldn't ever have to look at the color."

"That's not the point. The vote has to be unanimous." Mrs. McCaffrey lifts her hands and raises her shoulders as if to tell me it is all far beyond her control. "I don't make the rules," she says.

That's it.

"Yes, you do! The charter was written twenty-seven years ago, when you were on the very first board of this complex so, yeah, you are the only one here who literally wrote the rules, goddamn it!"

I slam my hand down on the table and it slaps so loud several people jump. I see cell phones raised and thumbs poised over record buttons, waiting.

I shouldn't have done that. I hate that she gets to me like this. But there it is, the smug smile. The knowing look when she knows I'm beat, and for no other reason than she doesn't want me to get my way as board president. A position I was elected to by the other residents. A position I beat her out for, and she's been bitter ever since.

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Eric Beetner has been called the "new maestro of Noir" by Ken Bruen. Over more than 25 novels he has written crime, thrillers, suspense and been nominated for an ITW award, a Shamus, a Derringer and three Anthony awards. For more visit ericbeetner.com