

Paint By Number

Mitzi Gordon

One is Red. Two is White.
Three is Brown.

She wets her brush with paint, swirls it around the little plastic cup. The old clock on the mantle buzzes, starts chiming.

One, two, three, four ...

Four is Green. Five is Tan. Six is Black.

Through a mess of squiggly blue lines and numbers, the picture's coming clear. A puppy's face. Stay in the lines.

Gramma switches off the PTL Club (they sent her a special Bible with gold letters stamped on front because she gave them so much money) and gets up to watch game shows in her room.

Smells of wintergreen tobacco and tomato juice as she passes, cracked ice rattling in her cup.
It smells like a cut in the earth.

Pay attention to the lines on the paper, don't worry about the spider. There's going to be a bow around this puppy's neck. A red bow.

One is Red.

Under the table, something's moving. Mom isn't coming back tonight.

(once she woke up in bed and her legs were covered in huge red welts, it hurt so bad she couldn't stand up and they said it was a spider)

Now she sees the spider on the table, fat and pinkish. A four-legged spider, and in the middle bobs its stubby head, a blind monster. Head bobs and legs wiggle.

Behind the spider, an arm. Look up the arm and see the spider-man.

She keeps her eyes on her work. Two is White. Two puppies on the grass.

From the other room Bob Barker is announcing the Showcase Showdown. She wants to get up and watch, go sit with Gramma in the adjustable bed. But only her hand moves, in tiny brush strokes.

The spider is under the table again. She feels it brush her leg. Freeze Tag with No Electricity. If she doesn't move, maybe she will disappear.

(hate hate hate the spider, want to crush it but how)

Maybe she could kill that spider with a gun.

(they said he was cleaning his shotgun, he was cleaning the gun outside and didn't know it was loaded and it just went off, blam! and took half his middle finger)

Gramma turns up the volume and the spider runs under the table. Don't breathe. Staring at the grass now, the white grass but soon it will be green, Four is Green and there is a blurry forest of Fours.

The spider bites, soft then stinging, she feels it biting and wants to scream but is frozen, too late now to unfreeze, it stings and now the poison is inside.