

Color

By Loren Powell

Most times the remembrance was triggered by color—that primary red of valentines or Coca Cola ads—the color of her toenails, girlish and perfectly polished. Blue—the deep blue of her favorite shirt and the gray-ish blue of her eyes. Black, and the way she finally convinced me there was more than one shade. Purple, yellow, green—all of them had memories attached. They would hit me like a wave, rolling over me with equal parts relief and pain. I hated the remembering, but it wasn't nearly as awful as the forgetting.

In a way, it was color that took her away from me. Somebody mistook red for green and in a split second she was gone. We were alike in a lot of ways, my sister and I. We were the same height, we had the same bra size, we were often asked if we were twins. We both loved to read and listen to music and we could never eat our fill of Mexican food. But when it came to color, we could not have been more different. I had red hair, she had blonde. I had brown eyes, hers were blue. I wore only gold jewelry while she preferred silver. It was never a point of contention between us, but it was always the thing that separated us the most. I think that's why later, when so many other things had faded from memory, it was color that always brought her back.

It was a shock, then, when I fell in love with a man who was colorblind. I had dated a series of painters after my sister's death, seeking out people who were as obsessed with color as I was. Few of them understood the way color spoke to me, but it spoke to them all in one way or another as well and I thought it was the best I could get. Then came Jacob. He owned a rare bookstore that one of my exes had introduced me to, and I visited so often that I was already in love with

him before I knew he could never understand the depth of meaning color held for me. His eyes were green, flecked with brown and gold. His hair was a sandy blonde, almost exactly the color of my sister's. He drove a silver SUV and his store had eggshell walls and his socks were always black. He couldn't have told you any of these things.

I tried many times to explain colors to him. But I could never explain one color without comparing it to another. He listened to all of my fumbling attempts because he knew it was important to me, but it didn't take long for me to realize that I would never break through to him. It took less time for me to realize that I didn't care.

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Planning a wedding was much more difficult than I had ever given it credit for. I had never really seen myself ever getting married, maybe eloping at the very most, but Jacob thought we would regret not making the most of our nuptials and I conceded. My mother was thrilled, agonizing over every decision and trying to get me to care. "Layna," she would say whenever I was fed up with the minutia of event planning, "this is a day you're going to remember for the rest of your life. It might seem like overkill now but you'll be glad you took the time later." While I didn't fully agree, there was one decision to which I gave much thought.

"I love the idea of yellow flowers, but yellow also represents insanity and cowardice, so I'm leaning away from it. I'm thinking teal for the bridesmaids dresses. You know the Ancient Egyptians believed teal was the color of truth and faithfulness? That's more the message I'd like to send." My mother and best friend, Mira, listened with limited comprehension, but they added and deleted options to the list as I rambled. After maybe half an hour of indecision, my mother sighed and placed her hand on my knee, silencing me.

She said, "Honey, I know this is important to you, but don't you think there are things that matter more than the color scheme? The menu, maybe – something Jacob will enjoy as much as you do. Do you want a sit-down dinner or would you rather do hors d'ourves?"

I remained silent for a moment, trying to decipher the true meaning of her words. There was always a subliminal message to what she said, something meant to go unnoticed but to penetrate the psyche and take seed. I had learned to be cautious, to never take her words at face value. "Are you implying that I should dress my bridal party in gray since it makes no difference to Jacob? He's going to be the only one there who's colorblind, and he understands that color means more to me than most people. He wouldn't mind me spending a little extra time on this decision."

She sighed again, looking like she wished I would just let it go. "Layna. You know I'm not trying to hurt your feelings. But this is the man you've chosen to marry and marriage takes compromise and sacrifice. You have more than yourself to think about now." "So I'm supposed to deny the most important things about me in order to make him happy?" The room suddenly felt smaller, the air thicker and heavier. My mother didn't answer me, just stared at me with her knowing blue eyes.

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Mira was a dark-haired natural beauty with caramel-colored skin and a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. There were flecks of gold in her brown eyes and she was never seen without the silver cross given to her by her late grandmother. Her favorite color was pink and she was the only thing that had seen me through my sister's death. She didn't like Jacob.

I had asked her why a hundred times, and she would never give me a straight answer. She would say something vague such as, "He just doesn't seem right for you," or, "You need somebody who sees the world like you do." The wedding was rapidly approaching and after my conversation with my mother, I was having something that might be described as cold feet. I wanted nothing more than to talk to my sister about everything, to binge on cookie dough and potato chips while she listened to me ramble and laughed off my unfounded concerns. Although I knew of her reservations, Mira was the closest thing I had left to a sister and she didn't bat an eyelash when I showed up at her apartment at three in the morning.

"Pretend for a minute that I don't know your answer to this question. Pretend for a minute that you like Jacob. Am I still making a mistake? Can we make it work when we're so completely different? When we can't fathom the most defining parts of each other?"

"I'm gonna be real with you. Do I think you can do better? Hell yeah." I glared at her halfheartedly and she smirked back. "But I haven't seen you this happy since... before. You're not perfect for each other, but I know you don't believe in 'the one' anyway. I can't promise you y'all are gonna make it, but I think you owe it to yourself to give it a go."

"But have we known each other long enough? I feel like we might be rushing into things. We've never lived together, and we've only been officially dating for a year now. What if he has skeletons in his closet? What if my obsession with color pushes us apart until there's nothing left between us?"

She chuckled. "Forgive me for making light of this, but it seems like that's already happening. If you don't quit worrying about it you're going to turn it into a self-fulfilling prophecy." I stared at her, and I must have looked so pathetic that she took pity on me. She moved closer to

me on her sofa and grabbed my hand. "He's going out of town next weekend, right?" At my answering nod, she said, "Why don't you spend some time at his place? Move some of your stuff in, try to picture yourself living there together. No pressure. Nobody will think less of you if you need some more time, but I think you're just psyching yourself out. Probably letting your mom get inside your head. Do you think you can do that?" I nodded again. Maybe while I was there I could pick out a new paint color for the bedroom.

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We were on our first official date when Jacob told me he was colorblind. I had talked his ear off several times already about the symbolism of one color and the psychological effects of another, but he never spoke up until I asked him directly, "What's your favorite color?"

He shifted awkwardly in his seat, avoiding my gaze from the other side of the white tablecloth. "Well, this leads to something I've been meaning to tell you for a while now. I don't have a favorite color. I don't see color."

It took me a moment to process what he had said. The idea of someone being unable to see and experience colors was nearly incomprehensible to me. Eventually I gathered my wits and managed to respond eloquently. "Oh."

"I know I should have told you by now. But I wasn't sure if you were interested in me and I thought you'd turn me down if you knew I was colorblind. I could tell how important color was to you and I didn't want to disappoint you."

He was over-explaining, and I couldn't quite tell if he was being defensive or simply thorough. I gave him the benefit of the doubt. "I understand. I come on a little strong about color sometimes. People don't always know how to handle that."

“I find it charming.” He smiled at me, and I nearly forgot that he had been lying by omission the entire time.

That should have been my first hint that Jacob wasn't to be trusted.

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I never meant to go snooping. I had never been a suspicious person by nature, and I didn't set out to go through his things. Jacob was away for a weekend of drinking, gambling, and other kinds of trouble with his friends. The wedding was a week away and I was following Mira's advice to the best of my ability. He had told me to move anything I saw fit to and we would find another place for it later. The bottom of his closet was packed with boxes, very few of them housing shoes or anything else belonging in a closet, so I began to remove some of them to make room for my own shoes. I was moving a slightly precarious stack into the hallway when one of the boxes slipped from my arms and spilled its contents all over the mahogany floor.

It was a picture of Jacob as a teenager that caught my attention and kept me from scooping the papers and photographs back into the shoebox. In it, he posed with a group of friends, all unknown to me, and his smile was blindingly white. His conscientiousness about his wardrobe must have come later in life, because in the photo he wore a bright orange polo with a pair of green and brown plaid shorts. It was one of the worst ensembles I had ever seen, but seemed endearing from such a distance. I lingered over the image for a few minutes before placing it back in its box and beginning to gather the rest of the mess.

My hands came to an abrupt halt when they uncovered a newspaper clipping, one so achingly familiar that it stole my breath away. It was my sister's obituary, paired with a photo printed in sepia tones that did her no justice. It seemed out of place among the rest of the contents

of the box – mostly old photos from Jacob’s childhood and other similar mementos such as Spider-Man Birthday cards and exams with “A+” written at the top in faded red ink. The lid of the box was dusty and it had obviously not been disturbed in some time, probably since before we had met. The presence of the clipping in a place like this spoke of its importance to its possessor, something that went beyond any interest in my relationship with my sister. I had told him the entire story, had cried on his shoulder as I relived the experience and its aftermath. I had told him everything, so there seemed to be no reason for him to go searching.

I found the obituary on Friday night, and it wasn’t until late Sunday afternoon that I saw Jacob again. I listened to his recounting of his weekend, feigning interest while my mind was consumed with other thoughts. As soon as I felt I’d spent enough time pretending everything was normal, I produced the piece of paper from the back pocket of my white jeans and held it out to him. “Why do you have my sister’s obituary? Were you stalking me? Were you stalking her?”

Jacob paled. “No, it was nothing like that. When I cut that out of the newspaper I hadn’t even met you, and I didn’t know she was your sister. Not until after we were already dating.”

“Why did you cut it out in the first place? What was she to you?”

He avoided my gaze, stuffing his hands deep into the pockets of his khaki pants and jingling his change in the way he only does when truly nervous. “I... I was there when it happened. I didn’t want to forget—”

I closed the distance between us, grabbing onto his hands with desperation. “You saw what happened? Did you see who did it? Why didn’t you talk to the police? They might have been able to—”

“Layna...” He met my eyes and sudden realization dawned on me. “I’ve been wracking my brain trying to figure out how to tell you. I wanted to so badly, but I knew it would be the end of us. I don’t drive much, you know that, and I was distracted and—”

“Oh my god.” I dropped his hands and backed away, staring into his defective eyes as if seeing him for the first time. “Oh my fucking god.”

“Layna, please let me—”

“I love you. That’s the only reason I’m not calling the cops right now. But I’ve hated my sister’s killer a lot longer than I’ve loved you.” I grabbed my canary yellow purse, the one my sister gave me the Christmas before her accident, and I left her murderer’s apartment without looking back. He didn’t try to stop me, didn’t even speak. As I walked, my vision swam out of focus, either obscured by tears or dampened by shock. I couldn’t make out the shapes or details of the things around me, but I still saw colors. I saw the green welcome mat outside his door, the green of the light that beckoned my sister to her death. I saw the red of someone’s car, the same red that failed to protect the innocent, and the red of my sister’s blood spilled on the pavement. I saw the black asphalt that covered the parking lot, the black of the dress I wore to her funeral. She was everywhere, and now so was he, poisoning the memories and the colors themselves. For the first time I wished I possessed his gift, the ability to see without being influenced by color.