

HER FIRST COLOR

There once was woman who lived a reasonable life. Jenna's forty years on Earth had caused no comment, quick intakes of breath or sudden silences. She was reasonably intelligent, reasonably successful at her chosen work, reasonably well off, reasonably happy. But one day she realized, as if grabbed by the hair, that she did not see colors.

This alarmed her, for suddenly something at the foundation of her life stood exposed as an unreasonable uncertainty. Had she *ever* seen colors? Or were "colors" just something she picked up from other people's conversation? She couldn't remember. With her family dead or far away, she had no way of finding out. She knew the words "red," "orange," "chartreuse," and knew that one never allowed those three to be seen in each others' company. But could she detect those colors in, say, a bouquet of many kinds of flowers, if no one told her the colors were there?

This discovery pressed on Jenna. She knew about color blindness. That was genetic, biological, chemical. She knew this was different. She might visit a doctor, and whatever they would say to each other, what was missing in Jenna was something different.

That she could not find words for this different thing, this essential absence in her, increased the feeling of alarm until it colonized her days. She brushed her teeth and chose her clothing as before (they seemed to be dark – she at least knew darks and lights), she gripped the heavy door handle at the great library and opened the door to her workroom as she had for years, she made no change in her actions, yet every movement, no matter how precise and necessary, only shielded the void that should have been this thing that was missing.

As time passed and Jenna continued to brush her teeth, choose her clothes and open the door to her workroom at the library, she grew accustomed to the sense of living a clockwork masque. She clung to that, but just as a dishful of living microorganisms grows and develops to the point that it suddenly re-organizes into a different form, one day the alarm colonizing Jenna's mind blossomed into a thought. It so startled her that she pushed away the work in front of her, and stared straight at the wall.

Jenna worked among books and newspapers, tall stacks of paper firmly bound in armor of cardboard and leather. She had always liked the smell when she opened the armor and parted the vulnerable leaves. She liked the neatness of the printing, the tidiness of black-on-white that meant words, knowledge, and understanding. Jenna knew all the words printed in her library. Whenever she was introduced to a new word, she only needed to stare at it a little while and soon its pronunciation and meaning would be given up to her.

The thought that emerged in her was this: that this talent for printed words meant only that she was susceptible to other peoples' memories, whether for colors or something else. She could not see colors because she had no colors of her own to see.

Jenna stood up and went into the stacks, a vast room of shelves engorged with books. She picked out several that described things with many colors.

"The rosy-fingered dawn," she read. "Black, black, black is the color of my true love's hair. When the blue of the night meets the gold of the day. The sunset's slow fire chained scarlet to deep blue."

The last one made Jenna turn and look out her window. It was late afternoon (said the clock and the shadows); she would go for a walk by the water and see a sunset for herself!

Soon, Jenna stood at a railing at the water's edge, wrapped in her reasonable raincoat against the evening wind. The light slowly faded, and Jenna turned her head left, then right, then left, looking for evidence of a sunset, or even of a sun. "Scarlet chained to deep blue," she said to herself. But she saw no such thing.

Jenna began to panic. She reached for the railing to steady herself, and twisted her hand around its length; at least she could *feel* things. Cold, steel, railing, hard, round. It was getting darker, and she still didn't know if she was seeing a sunset. A small stairway caught her eye; it led down to a little dock sticking out into the water. Jenna hurried down the steps and out to the end of the dock. She did not care if it was a reasonable thing to do or not.

At the end of the dock she turned around and around, looking at the sky, looking so hard she felt her eyes growing large, heavy and hot. "Scarlet," she whispered. "Blue. Gold. Chartreuse. Red. Orange." She could feel the words in her mouth. But still she could not tell if they were in the sky. *Please*, she prayed to the sky, *let me be susceptible to colors*.

Her stomach twisted and rose inside her, as if roused from sleep by her agitation. It was not nausea, but something different. Power. Jenna wrapped her arms around her middle, but the disturbed power welled into her throat. Jenna doubled over and a harsh, awful sound escaped from her lips – and at that moment she felt her hot, swollen eyes change. Two tears fell into the water at Jenna's feet.

Then the power did become nausea, and Jenna vomited into the bay.

When she straightened, she saw the island.

It was dark and fuzzy in the twilight. She hadn't noticed it when she was combing the horizon for colors.

Someone cleared his throat near her, and Jenna turned sharply. A wrinkled man in a hooded jacket and watch cap sat in a rowboat tied to one side of the dock. She hadn't noticed him before, either.

"Goin' somewheres?" he said, a sound like gravel under wheels. One cluster of wrinkles pulled up in a little smile.

Jenna pointed at the island. The boatman nodded and waved her into the boat. He untied them from the dock and pushed away.

As she sat in the stern of the rowboat, her astonishment clothed by the smell of the water, the sound of the boatman's oars slipping and pulling through the waves, and the broad clarity of the sky, Jenna realized that this was her first color. Its name was *Going toward the island at twilight*.

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