The Short Life of Colors

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There isn't much. There really isn't. About my father, I mean.

I've just turned three. Or maybe I'm a little older. But not by much because he didn't live that long. We're watching a sunset happen. It's very very slow. It's like watching cement harden. We're sitting side by side. On a bench or something. Looking at a landscape. Or maybe there's a frothing river in front of us. With some boats. Maybe we're on a beach, by the ocean. Or maybe those things that we're looking at are houses because we're on a roof. In a city. Maybe there are ducks above us that are flying in a pattern against a darkening skyline. Or a flock of bats rising up the way flocks of bats do at dusk. I don't remember any of these details—so I must be making them up.

I do remember my father talking about the landscape. I can almost hear his voice. We all *oooooh*. That's what he's saying to me as we sit together side by side, wherever we are. That's a beautiful landscape, that's such a beautiful sunset—that's what we all say, he tells me. Will you just look at those reds, will you just look at those streaks of color, the way they reflect off the clouds! Isn't it all too beautiful for words? Everyone just *ooooh*s, he tells me, whenever they watch the sun set. But no one sees the same thing, he says. We all see very different things.

I'm pretty sure I have no idea what he's talking about. I'm too young to even try to guess. I'm just taking it in. For later I mean. That's what children do. That's what we all do when we're children: We make memories. We're memory-making machines. And we store them for life.

I've seen dawn. A couple of times. I've deliberately watched it happen. It's not the same. It really isn't. It ought to be the same, right? Because it's just a sunset running in reverse. Or so you'd think. But no, something's missing.

We are trichromatic. That's what my Dad is telling me now. Almost all of us, he says. A single set of three appropriately chosen primaries is sufficient to match the color appearance of any stimulus. Three types of retinal cones, he says. Blue, green and red cones.

I think he is talking about ice cream cones, about how they come in different colors.

Every colored light, he tells me, can be matched by a blend of three appropriately chosen lights. Primaries, he says. Opponent-process theory, he tells me. Redgreen, he adds, like it's one word. At the time I really did think it was a strange new color word made out of two old color words. That that was something we could do with words if we wanted to. Make two of them into one. Make *six* of them into one. Like magic. For years I thought this was possible. Blueyellow, he says. Another one word. Whiteblack, he finally says. A third one word.

Some women are tetrachromats, he tells me. They see more colors than you and I do. The world is just a whole lot more beautiful for them than it is for you and me. We're men. Both you and me. And that means we're stuck being trichromats. Not like some women. We just don't see as much as they do. Too bad for us. And then he laughs.

I've always remembered the sound of his laugh. Sometimes I hear his laugh hiding in someone else's voice. And then, sometimes, I fall in love with that person. With his voice. For a while.

Imagine you can only see black and white, my Dad tells me. I don't know how to imagine this, but I keep listening and keep looking up at him because he's my Dad and because I love him. Then you'd be *achromatic*, he says, and he laughs again. You would be able to get around by seeing, he says, but you wouldn't be enraptured. You wouldn't love the world. It just wouldn't be that pretty to look at. Everything would contrast with everything else a whole lot more than it does for us.

Pigeons and ducks, he says, pigeons and ducks are pentachromats. Ducks, he says. Ducks are so enraptured by the beauty of the world that they never sleep. Not all of them at the same time, anyway. First, they watch the beauty of the world out of one eye for half the night. And then they watch the beauty of the world out of the other eye for the rest of the night. That's how beautiful the world is to a duck. It's so beautiful that they only sleep with one half of their brains at a time.

This wasn't my first sunset. It can't have been my first sunset. But I can tell this is a real memory because I'm looking up at my father as he talks to me and I can see clear inside both his nostrils.

Deep inside. I remember often looking up at adults and up their nostrils. Usually, I mean, unless they sat down next to me, and leaned their faces in close to mine. Women's nostrils were always clear. Never much in them. The men's noses were always complicated.

Until I got bigger all I could pretty much see was from underneath adults, their noses sticking out sideways from the flats of their faces. Until I got older I mean.

My mother tells me later that this never happened. That this memory of mine can't be real.

None of it, probably, she tells me. Your father never lied, that's what she adds, he didn't know how to lie. And this stuff about ducks, well, that's all just a lot of crap. Ducks are prey animals. That's what she says. He would have known that ducks are prey animals. Because he was a vision scientist. And then she starts to cry.

There isn't much left to my father. Visual evidence, I mean. Nowadays, everyone's got digitalized films and photographs of their whole family. Everybody. They've even got photographs of the black sheep, the members of the family that everyone else in the family loathes. Opening Christmas presents as children. Even pictures and films of the ones on death row. So that they can sell them to journalists if a documentary gets made. From birth to death. Even after. Or before. *Every* occasion.

Of my father—this is weird—there are a lot of photographs of his *funeral*. People standing around in black clothing holding dark funeral cake in their hands. Looking appropriately glum,

as you're supposed to. A bunch of snapshots of Dad in the coffin, his eyes closed of course, his hands folded on his lap, his hands folded serenely over the nice linen that he's been tucked into. Like he's in bed. He's very well dressed. Nice shirt and tie. No more stress. For him, I mean. Some cousins sent us the pictures after the funeral. With labels. In case we didn't recognize someone, I guess. It wasn't *Mom* who snapped them. *Mom* was a basket case. The whole time.

My mother never tries to explain. Taking *pictures* on such an occasion? Is this stuff we really want to remember? Show to friends? Post on Facebook? MySpace? That's what some families do, she tells me, like that's an explanation of something. I look at her. I guess it means we're not Jewish, she adds. That's sort of her kind of humor. Right there: there's a snapshot of it. It's hard to explain. If you didn't laugh, I'm not going to be able to help you to get the joke.

She kept all the photographs. I kept all of them too. After she died. Until the deluge happened, I mean. Until I lost everything.

I'm told that once upon a time, in my father's day, we used coins to travel on public transportation. Trains and buses, I mean. They called them *tokens*, they were small coins that you'd push into a slot at the front of the bus, or at the turnstile that was the entrance in the subway to where the trains were. Weird name. *Tokens*. Tokens of what? *Turnstile*, I sort of get. It was a device that turned. *Stile* is a little puzzling. Maybe there was a more technical name for these things that the people who worked for the MTA used. Back when there were subways. I should just look it up on Wikipedia if I'm really curious.

Sadness fits. That's what we called those moments that sometimes grip people—those moments when you realize that there's just no reason to live. The *Blues*, maybe. You could call them that. People used to. It wasn't always just a name for a kind of music. But sadness fits are much much worse than the Blues. You want to just die. That was our word for those special moments. Her and me. Got to get happy, she would say, got to keep away the *sadness fits*, and then we'd go shopping for some brightly colored things. It didn't matter a whole lot at first what those brightly colored things were: toys, beads, Christmas tree ornaments, candles, posters, crayons, colored chalk, paint sets, even books if they had bright covers. Primary color covers. And a lot of candy too. Only the brightly colored stuff. No chocolate. Wrong color.

We even found candy that glowed colors in the dark. We found it once, I mean. We thought that was so cool. I remember us giggling over the candy all the way home on the bus. Me and Mom. Making up stories about what would happen in our stomachs when everything in there could actually see what their lives were like. Whispering to each other and pointing at the fat people, wondering what it would look like in there if something had light to see by. Would it be too crowded to see?

Hallmark cards. There were a lot of Hallmark cards pinned up on the walls on the refrigerator on the window sills, all over the house. For years. Ones that we had given each other for all sorts of occasions. Real occasions, I mean, and made up occasions too. We celebrated all sorts of birthdays. My birthday. Her birthday. At least several times a year. Maybe as much as once a month. Santa Claus's birthday too (August 17th). The Easter Bunny's birthday (January 9th). All the presidents's birthdays. Except for Ronald Reagan's. And Ulysses Simpson Grant's. (I don't

know why.) We always celebrated Nelson Mandala's birthday for two days each year. Not consecutive days. I have no idea if either day was really his birthday. I guess I could find out if I wanted to. Sometimes we'd celebrate the birthday of The Unknown Person. Who everyone had forgotten except us. There were a lot of Unknown Persons, so we had to do a lot of celebrating.

We celebrated birthdays at least once a week, and sometimes more. We ate birthday cake all the time, especially the stuff with the really gaudy icing. Bright green or blue or red. Shaped in big letters like: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, YOU! We were always giving each other presents. Or we were wrapping presents up to give to ourselves later. Lots of ribbons. Elaborate bows that Mom would make. Won't *we* be surprised when we open this present, she'd tell me. Aren't *we* thoughtful? I liked our presents a lot, even though I always knew what I was getting. What's really thrilling about these gifts, Mom would tell me, is that we know what's coming before it comes. Before we open the gift. While we open the gift. We know the whole time that there's nothing in there that's going to hurt us. Who needs surprises, she would say. Who needs presents from a bunch of strangers, she'd say.

And a Christmas tree. Year round. We kept a real Christmas tree in a very large bucket in the livingroom. A live tree, I mean. Year round. Every few years, though, we had to change the bucket because it had gotten too small for the tree's roots. We had to change the tree to a larger bucket carefully. Because that sort of thing can be really traumatizing for a tree. Trees are meant to stay in place. Forever. They really are. Not a whole lot is supposed to happen to a tree. And we'd change its decorations every couple of months. To celebrate the seasons. Or maybe just to celebrate that some time had passed without something really bad happening.

It had its own sunlamp. On tracks. So that we could move it across the ceiling like a sun moving across the sky. I don't think the tree would have survived otherwise. Without extra light, I mean. We had really high ceilings. And big windows too. Lucky for the tree.

At first it was just about decorating the tree for Christmas. Year round, I mean. Plastic tinsel and ornaments, little cookies shaped as elves and reindeer and people from Iceland. Or Russia. That we'd eat and then replace with new cookie-people. Sort of like life, Mom would tell me. Except that all the reindeer had bright red noses that glowed in the dark like fireflies. And there were always tiny Viking figures trudging through the white-blanket snow next to minature gift-wrapped packages.

Then we gradually started to explore other themes, I don't remember exactly how it happened: Middle Earth, Star Trek, Shrek. So we'd be out buying little fantasy figures and placing them around the tree or wiring them to the branches. Or when we'd switched to a Sci Fi theme, we'd build a world—like the surface of a planet –around the base of the tree. Or we'd make it a spacestation, and hang little Saturns on the branches of the tree. We'd play with the figures for hours, me and Mom, talk about the adventures of the little figures, fly the ships around, treat the ornaments on the branches of the tree as strange little planets that our astronauts would visit.

I hope I'm not giving you the wrong impression. I was a child, but that's not true of my mother. She was an adult.

At one point dollhouses got involved. Small ones, so that we could lay out a number of them around the livingroom. Build an entire small town. Small furniture for the small houses. Some of it we bought and some of it she made. Small cars for the garages that she built from small snap-together tiles. A railroad system with gleaming metal tracks. Some bright plastic helicopters for those families that were rich and didn't like too much traffic. She was very good with her hands, my Mom, good at planning and design. When it involved a bunch of toys, I mean. Stuff that wasn't real. I'd make spot suggestions, constructive ones. I was her consultant. I was her assistant.

I'm not as good as your father was at making things with my hands, she told me once. He could make anything out of anything. Sort of like God. And then she'd laugh. That was her sense of humor again. If you're not laughing you probably wouldn't have liked my mom.

I have no idea what my father could do with his hands. None at all. I know he published a lot of articles because I looked them up once on the web. They're still important, they're still being cited. He published over a hundred articles before he was thirty-five, before he died I mean. But that's not working with his hands. There was nothing around the house either. No attic where I might find his dusty toy models, or the remains of something else that he built with his hands. No balsa wood airplanes. No carvings. No instruments that he made. No sculptures. No sign at all that he ever did anything with his hands.

Sometimes, when you start to write stuff down about your parents you realize there's a whole lot you don't know. Ways you need to fill in the story. And they're dead so you can't ask them

questions. I guess you can sometimes find out in other ways but often you can't. It's all just gone. Forever.

Mom was brilliant with her hands. I know because I saw her hands in action. One time we found a bunch of small metal toys that sort of looked like treasure chests. You could open the fronts of them, two little cabinet doors that swung out, and they kind of had mantels with Goth engravings. They were supposed to be some sort of accessory for reptilian aliens. Cradles, maybe, or hatcheries. We turned them into little fireplaces. *She* turned them into little fireplaces, made little toothpick logs that she placed inside each one, inside each home. The little streaming fires were so cute. She used crystals that she soaked the pieces of wood in so that each fire would flicker with a different color: blue, green, gold. She'd gotten some pieces of fur, too, and she made them into little winter coats and boots and gloves, really tiny, for the shivering figures. Then she'd turn down the heat in our house for a few minutes so that it was cold for us too. Winter can be like that, she told me. After I complained that I was too cold. When you're in it you wonder if it'll ever be spring again. Spring might not happen. It doesn't always.

Think about the people who became the Inuit, she explains to me. They trudge northward slowly, over decades, over generations. They don't know anything about geography, about weather patterns, even that the earth is round. They just don't know what they're doing. Where all this is going to lead to. And then one day, spring is just a myth they tell their children. No one has ever experienced a spring. Not for generations. Smart people in the tribe doubt there's ever been a spring. After all, people tell each other all sorts of crap. They call it speculating. Or the truth.

And then she laughs. There was always a little rumble in her laugh, at the end of it I mean. Because of the cigarettes, I think.

We created a zoo of imaginary animals. Because every town needs a zoo. Unicorns, of course. Dragons, centaurs. orcs. Basilisks, hydras, griffons, vampires. The usual stuff. Most of it we bought in stores. Action figures. No use making up new animals, she once told me. There are so many imaginary ones already in existence.

And we created a zoo of extinct animals. We called it THE ZOO OF EXTINCT ANIMALS. I painted the signs. Like:

TYRANNOSAUR

And then underneath, in little letters:

This animal doesn't exist anymore. Please don't feed it.

Most animals are extinct, my mother told me when we were making cages out of little bits of colored wire. We'll never catch up with them, she told me, no matter how much we try.

Nobody from the town we built in the livingroom ever went to THE ZOO OF EXTINCT ANIMALS. You couldn't blame them, really. All the animals were kind of sullen and angry. It wasn't any fun to watch them.

Self medication maybe. I mean on her part. But why not something a bit more professional, something that could work, something like anti-depressants? She was afraid of side effects. She was afraid of her mind being affected. She was afraid of telling therapists intimate things. Intimate things, she once told me, they're not for strangers. We're supposed to just keep them between ourselves. They're like underwear, she explains to me, you don't show your underwear to just *anybody*.

The sixties, she once told me enigmatically, were *so* dumb. I'm guessing, as you can tell, that she was talking about the drugs. I can't be sure. She couldn't have seen the sixties first hand so she must have been talking about what she heard about them or read about them in school. Perhaps they were all showing each other their underwear in the sixties. Maybe that was what she meant.

I'll be honest. I usually didn't know what the adults around me were talking about. For some reason the adults around me never said a whole lot that was the sort of thing that children *could* make sense of. So that now that I'm an adult I practice archaeology. Or anthropology. Paleontology. I peer at fossils. Old pictures, for example. My memories. Letters or emails. If I've got them. Recollections of old people who are still alive and aren't obviously confabulating. It's like the study of the remains of old civilizations. That's what I do now. As it were, I mean. Trying to figure out what happened, who these people really were. If I had a real job, that's what I'd be doing out there in the world. I'd be out in the field looking over the remains of some of my ancestors, trying to figure out whether they were cannibals or not, when they acquired fire or

language. I'd be trying to figure out what kind of commerce they engaged in, or how sophisticated their mathematics was.

Sadness fits. That's what she called them. That's what we called them. *Got to keep away the sadness fits*. And sometimes it didn't work. Sometimes nothing worked, nothing kept away the sadness fits. Not bright colors, not candy, not toys, not coloring books. Not even the Christmas tree. Sometimes it was a little too dark for a little too long. Sometimes there was just too much rain outside. Or maybe something reminded her of something. Or maybe it just happened. For no reason at all. And that's when I'd soothe her. I'd sit on the bed next to her and stroke her. Her shoulder. Or I'd pet her head the way I'd seen people pet cats. I'd say stuff like *it'll all be alright. We'll be fine. This too shall pass. There's always light at the end of the tunnel. We'll get past it. We always do. You'll feel very different about this eventually.* That's the sort of thing that I'd say. That's the sort of thing she told me I said. Years later, when we talked about it. And it's the sort of thing I remember saying. When I was a little older, I mean.

I was a kid. I was four, then five, then six. I wasn't supposed to be able to give her good advice, or solve her problems. Look, here's what we'll do. You take these papers to a good tax lawyer and he can straighten out the whole mess. The car was probably impounded by accident. All we have to do is go to the department of motor vehicles, and don't forget to bring your license when we go. All you'll have to do is fill out some paperwork. It's totally routine, so relax. Somehow these things just weren't going to occur to me. Instead, I said stuff I must have heard, maybe stuff that had been used on me when I fell or hit my head and was crying. Or things I'd witnessed people saying to other people to make them feel better. I don't really remember where

I got what I said from, or why I did what I did. But it usually worked. Eventually, sometimes it took a long time, she'd become aware of me. That was always the first sign that she was pulling out of it. That she'd bring her face up to mine, and say, Oh you're here. Hello. How are you doing? That was so weird. She'd always ask me how I was doing. Fine, I'd say. And then a little later, after she stopped sniffling, she'd say, I love you. What would I do without you? And then I knew the sadness fit was ending. Eventually, she'd sit up and tell me, let's go get happy. And then we'd go do something after she washed her face and reapplied her makeup. Bake gingerbread cookies. Trim the Christmas tree again. Or try to square dance, just the two of us I mean. Or we'd go to a toy store and buy some translucent plastic fish to hang up in the windows.