

Monochrome

by Wm. Brett Hill

“Mommy! Mommy! Help!” screamed Zoe. She sat in the middle of her bed, crumpled covers thrown to the floor, and stared, wide-eyed, around her room. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing, or more importantly, what she wasn’t seeing: colors. Gone were the reds, the greens, and the blues, every shade, every variation. The yellows, purples, oranges were missing as well. Tears filled her eyes as she looked at her drawing of a rainbow, each stripe now a dull white.

The door to her room burst open and her mother was on her bed with her instantly, pulling her into a hug.

“I know, petal, I know. It’s the same for me. It’s the same for everyone,” her mother explained.

“But how? How is it all gone? What’s wrong with my eyes?” cried the girl.

“I don’t know, Zoe. No one knows,” answered her mother as she cradled her head to her chest and stroked her hair. “I’ve been listening to the radio and watching the news, and everyone thinks they know but no one does.”

Zoe rubbed her eyes hard, hoping for the multi-colored sparkles that usually came to show on the black background, but she only got white, like static on a late-night screen. She looked up at her mother’s face and flinched, confused by the whiteness of her mother’s hair, and her eyes. The usual bright blue of her mother’s eyes was gone, replaced by white. It was hard to look at her, and she almost looked away and then she saw the tear tracks.

“Oh, Mommy, what are we going to do?” she asked, hugging her tightly.

“They’ll work it out,” her mother answered, her voice quavering. “Someone will figure it out and then they’ll tell us what to do. In the meantime, it’s your birthday, little one.”

The usual elation Zoe felt on her birthday was as absent as all the shades of violet. How could she enjoy the streamers and balloons, the wrapped presents with their bows tied perfectly on top, the birthday cake with its kaleidoscope of candles, when there was no color? Would the cake even taste the same?

Her mother forced a smile. “No matter what is happening, whatever this is, it’s still my little petal’s tenth birthday and I’m going to celebrate. Now get up and come to breakfast. I’ve made pancakes. I think.”

Zoe slid off the bed and stared around the room. All of her friends, even Mr. Hippolufagus, stared back at her with colorless eyes. It was jarring, and she felt a little dizzy trying to take it all in.

“It’s best to keep your hand on something steady until you get more used to it,” said her mother.

Zoe trailed her finger along the wall down the hall to the bathroom, feeling all the while like she had wandered into a drawing. She desperately wanted to grab her crayons and begin coloring in everything, but she knew that they, like everything else she had seen, would be blank and white.

She looked up into the mirror as she entered the bathroom and flinched again, seeing herself with nothing to define her, nothing to make her...her. Sure her hair was there, but it was pale white instead of red. Her green eyes were just as bleached as her mother’s, and she stared

hard at herself wondering if, when it all came back, if it all came back, if she would return to being herself or if she would be another set of colors.

“Blue skin could be fun,” she mused, sticking her white tongue out to lick her pale lips. “And red eyes. Definitely red eyes.”

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She found her mother sitting at the kitchen table, a cup of steaming water in front of her and a tray of milk-white pancakes on a platter in the middle of the table.

“I tried one, just to make sure I got the ingredients right,” said her mother through a gentle smile. “I guess being a creature of habit pays off.”

Zoe took a stack and poured the milky syrup over them, wishing it to turn brown as it hit the pancakes but knowing it would not. She stared at the plate and remembered a time last year when a friend had brought some blue catsup to school, the product of a failed marketing campaign by some company, and she had tried it. Even though it had tasted exactly the same as regular catsup, she hadn't been able to enjoy it. It just seemed off. And now she stared down at the colorless breakfast and began to cry.

“Oh, petal,” said her mother, coming over to put a comforting arm around her, but before she could say anything else the two were startled by a loud crash coming from the street outside.

Her mother looked out the front window. “They said on the radio that everyone should stay home, that driving would be dangerous because of how disorienting all of this is, but apparently some people can't be told.”

The crash was up the street, and as Zoe opened and walked out the front door she saw the two vehicles that had collided across the alabaster lawn. The drivers, looking like caricatures of people from this distance, argued with each other over whose fault it was, neither realizing how ridiculous they looked.

“Damn fools, if you ask me,” said a voice nearby, and Zoe saw her neighbor, Mr. Biely, leaning up against the fence that separated their well-kept lawn from his overgrown plot of land. The differences were less obvious to her now, with everything looking so pale, but even more striking was the fact that Mr. Biely, with his pale skin and already white hair, didn’t look very different at all. Only his brown eyes stood out, washed of their color.

“Language, please,” said her mother as she came out of the house.

“Shit. Sorry,” he said. The cigarette that always dangled out of the corner of his mouth was unlit, and Zoe wondered if it was because he couldn’t find a match or if they didn’t work, needing the fiery reds and oranges to make the heat.

“Mr. Biely, please,” said her mother.

“Oops, sorry again, Gail.” The man shrugged and stared down at the cars. The drivers, their argument bearing no real fruit, had returned to their vehicles and were now slowly trying to drive around each other. “Ha! I guess they don’t want to wait for the police since they’ll get a ticket for even being out in this mess,” said Mr. Biely.

“Well, I just hope they get home without getting hurt, or worse, hurting someone else,” answered Gail. She stood behind Zoe, her hands on her daughter’s shoulders, as if holding them both up.

“Mr. Biely, do you know what’s going on?” asked Zoe.

“Hell if I know, kid. I woke up this morning to all of this,” he gestured around the street. “The imbeciles on the radio don’t know anything, or at least they all think they know something. Some say it’s a gas leak messing with all of our brains. Some think it’s aliens. Some think it’s the end of days. None of them really know anything, but they all want to act like they do.”

“What do you think it is?” asked the girl.

“I think,” started the man. He tapped his chin, looking around the yard, and the street, then up at the sky, then back at the girl. “I think it’s a mistake. I think something went wrong, and this is the result, and any moment now the universe will realize it started the day off wrong and it will reset itself and we’ll see those lovely shades of cerulean again.”

“And chartreuse,” added Zoe.

“And magenta,” offered Gail.

“That’s the spirit. Any second now we’ll hear a loud ‘POP!’ and it will all come flooding back. All except puce. I can’t hold with puce. Ugly color. Never should have existed in the first place,” he said.

Zoe laughed and looked up at her mother, who laughed with her. For all of his roughness and casual swearing, Mr. Biely wasn’t all that bad.

They stood in silence for a good five minutes before the man straightened up and let out a loud “harumph!”

“Guess it might take a lot longer than a few minutes,” he said. “I’m going to see if I can’t manage to make a damn cup of coffee.”

They made their way, after managing to get clean and dressed for the day in what they hoped were matching clothes, downtown so that Zoe could get her traditional banana split lunch at the ice cream shop. It was tough going by foot, with perspective being thrown off so that every step held uncertainty, but they held hands as they walked and tried to talk as if it was just another day, albeit a birthday.

“I wonder if they’ll know which ones are the rainbow sprinkles and which are the chocolate,” pondered Zoe.

“I don’t know, petal, does it matter?”

Zoe nodded vehemently. “Of course it matters. It changes the whole flavor profile of the sundae if you put chocolate instead of rainbow sprinkles. And what about the syrups? What if instead of chocolate syrup they put that gross butterscotch? Bleh!”

Gail glanced at her free hand then looked away quickly. The action did not go unnoticed by her daughter.

“What’s wrong, Mommy?”

“Nothing, Zoe. It’s nothing,” said the woman as she slid the hand into her pocket.

They began to encounter people then, all pale albino versions of their former selves. Zoe saw Mrs. Beverly, her beehive hairdo standing straight up on her head like a pile of whipped cream, and she waved but couldn’t tell if the woman saw her or not, expressions being hard to read. She turned her hand around and waved it in front of her own face when she saw it, and her breath caught in her throat.

A dot, small as a sequin, stood out in the palm of her hand, dark green and lovely. She stared at it, looked away, and stared back again, willing it to stay. It did.

She wanted to shout, to race around and show everyone. She wanted to touch things and see if they color bled into them. She wanted to show the world. But then a thought occurred to her.

What if she was the only one. What if all the color in the world was gone except for the dot on her hand? Would people be jealous or angry? Would they blame her somehow, or expect her to fix everything? She didn't know what to do. She was only ten, for crying out loud.

She looked up at her mother and stopped walking, pulling Gail to a stop with her.

"Mommy, look," she said, uncurling her hand and showing the dot.

Gail gasped, then pulled her hand out of her pocket, holding out on top of Zoe's. A bright blue dot sat in the middle of her palm.

Zoe looked around at the wandering people and noticed that each of them, furtively, like shoplifters in the back of a store, hid their left hands from view.

She looked at her palm and then at the nearby bush and smiled, reaching out to stroke it's leaves. She and her mother laughed with glee as every place she touched returned to its beautiful green state.

"We have some coloring to do," grinned Gail.

"It's like the best birthday present ever," said Zoe softly. She looked at the rose bush by the side of the path and nodded her head, her mouth set in determination.

"Alright, everyone," she shouted at the top of her lungs. "Who has red?"