

750 word extract from *Shades of Grey*

We clattered over some points, banked to the right and then rumbled across a wooden trestle bridge to steam up a broad treeless valley. Scattered herds of ground sloth and bouncing goat were grazing quietly to themselves, but paid us little attention. The line shifted direction to the North and plunged into a steep valley of almost indescribable loveliness. The track ran alongside a cascading rock-strewn river while steep hills laced with oak and silver birches rose either side, with buzzards wheeling in the limestone crags high above.

I stared out of the window, my eyes searching for glimpses of Red. It was mid summer and we were past the welcome cascade of early orchid, and it was now the time of the poppies, Sorrel and pink champions. Once they were done the Snapdragons and Maiden Pink would sustain me until the end of the season, and it was in this manner that we Reds leapfrogged through the Spring and Summer on a frugal diet of seasonal blooms. It was the same story for the other colours but in greater or lesser degree. The Yellows had more seasonal bloom, Blues and Oranges had less. Greens, as they constantly reminded us, had only two chromatic seasons - the abundant muted, and the abundant vibrant.

But seeing only one natural colour wasn't the end of it. The enjoyment of *synthetic* colour, although lacking in subtlety, limited in range and only a low-chroma imitation of its organic cousin, was universal. I would never see a naturally hued primrose nor revel in the alleged splendour of a Bluebell spring, but I would enjoy the approximations delivered to us by the dedication of National Colour's skilled workforce.

The Yellow sitting opposite me in the railway carriage looked around for a moment, reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver swatch-case. He snapped open the compact, took a deep gaze of the colour hidden inside, then said:

"Do you want to do some Lime?"

I paused for a moment. I hadn't Green-peeked for months. Dad was quite strict because he thought Lime could lead onto harder colours, such as Lincoln, but was realistic. 'As soon as you've taken your Ishihara and become an adult,' he had told me, 'you can stare at magnolia for all I care.'

"Go on then," I said.

The Yellow turned the compact toward me, and as my eyes fell upon the calming shade I felt my muscles relax and my anxieties about travelling to East Carmine fade away. Everything about the world suddenly seemed rather jolly - even the crummy bits, of which there were many. But I was unused to peeking and my head was suddenly jammed full of crossfires as the Lime wobbled my cortex. I could see Handel's Messiah and smell the sensation of water on my skin.

"That's good Lime," I said, rubbing my temples as small bursts of pink mixed with the smell of toffee-apples erupted on the periphery of my vision.

"Best there is," he replied cheerfully, "you know what they say: Yellows do the best Green."

They might have done the best Green, or even *become* Green with a bit of Blue parentage, but that was as far as it went. No amount of Colourgenics would ever make a yellow family Purple, so they could never rise to the exulted position of head Prefect, a post reserved solely for the Purples. We Reds might be at the bottom end of the spectrum and only one notch above Grey, but with a suitable Blue partner our progeny could have the top spot in a generation. It annoyed the Yellows something rotten - no wonder they couldn't stand us.

The Yellow had another reason to hate me, although he didn't know it. The thing is, I can see a lot of Red. I was quietly confident that I could make Prefect, but I wasn't certain. Colour perception was notoriously subjective, and the very human vagaries of deceit, hyperbole and self-delusion all conspired to make pre-test claims pretty much worthless. But all doubts came to nought the morning of your Ishihara. No-one could cheat the Colourman and the colour test. What you got was what you were, forever. Your life, career and social standing decided right there and then, and all worrisome life-uncertainties eradicated forever. You knew who you were, what you would do, where you would go, and what was expected of you. In return, you simply accepted your position within the Colourtocracy, and assiduously followed the Rulebook. Your life was mapped. And all in the time it takes to bake a tray of scones.