

The Colour Forty by Lucy Grace.

From where I crouched, I could usually see all forty of them. Each the same diameter, the sharpened pencils were piled in a careful honeycomb. I coveted these smooth, perfect hexagonal spindles like nothing else. I wanted to touch them with my fingertips, roll them out on the floor, build a coloured rainbow. But they were out of bounds - out of my bounds, anyway. So, I hid, and I looked. Until the day there were no longer forty.

“Who’s been at my things?” he raged, slamming down newspapers on the table and sweeping cutlery aside in a noisy rattle. “Which sneaky bugger has buggered off with things that don’t concern them?”

“If you’re going to have to swear, Dear, try to do it more imaginatively,” said Auntie Shirley from the kitchen. She wasn’t my real auntie - she took the title posthumously following the death of my parents’ marriage, but when her own house emptied at the sound of a speedy gunshot dressed in white lace, fired towards her last careless boy, she simply relocated across the yard to ours and continued with her wifely duties. We quickly settled into Auntie Shirley’s calendar of market day Saturday, roast dinner Sunday and wash day Monday. On my favourite day, Tuesday, I would return from school to find a different Auntie Shirley, serene in a tented canopy of fragrant bedsheets and starched shirts. Condensation would creep across the windows, a bride’s veil hiding us inside, and I could sit under the table on the cross of the barley twist struts and watch the people I loved behave as I imagined a real family did. On Tuesdays the air pressure was released. Gone was the raised voice and barely repressed anger of my father – the house smelled of home and swelled its belly, breathing out to make room for everyone. I thought it must have been the steam.

It was a Tuesday afternoon when forty became thirty-nine. I remained in my hiding place under the table and watched from safety as my father turned the kitchen and the back room upside down. Auntie Shirley simply continued at her board, pressing and lifting and turning, her face resolute and eyes neutral. When my name was mentioned, she glided a sheet down from where it hung over the pantry door and smoothed it over the table edge, shrouding me in secret and hiding me from view.

At bedtime there were still only thirty-nine, but the search was exhausted. My father had left for the pub but the heavy slam of the back door told us how he felt. I listened to his heavy boots trudge down the ginnel and gingerly turned over in the lumpy bed, my face pressed into the shoulder blades of my bigger sister whilst the knees of my littler sister dug into the small of my back. I hardly dared close my eyes, terrified that the night would bring an unconscious honesty to my dreams and I would speak the truth aloud, revealing myself to my sisters. These fears prevented me from sleeping, trapping me in a twilight half world of colours. I swirled with emerald green weeds in lake water, catching the light and sliding through a rainbow as I drowned.

Next morning it was a relief to get to school to use the privy, so I could take a minute to screw the heels of my hands into my eyes to make a proper blackness, pressing and pressuring until the stars appeared and made little popping flashes in my head. I lost track of time and got in trouble when my answer to, "Where have you been?" was simply "The privy, Miss" – only a simpleton forgot to call it the lavatory at school, and only a liar said they had been there for more than a minute or two. Everyone knew that your nose would not let you choose it as a place to linger. But today it was my only solitude - I was terrified of what would happen when I got home. My father was on earlies this week, which meant that he finished at half two and was washed up and on his way home at a similar time to me. School was a few streets away

from the pit, and if I cut through Jackie Bates' back yard I could come down our street from the tip end and not tread the same route as him and the other pitmen, scarily white-eyed in their half dirt.

As I approached our house the air thickened. There was a knot of people outside looking up the road, and the noisy quiet coming from the small crowd hushed as I approached. Panicked, my heart started to beat faster as they saw me, giving each other loud glances – how could they have found out so quickly? Did my father know? My steps faltered as I neared, mind racing but my body almost stilled. Then in an explosion of sudden movement I saw Auntie Shirley come flying from the ginnel entry towards me.

“I didn't -” I began, but I was stifled by the grip of her worn red hands and the starched roughness of her apron. Half blinded by her clothing, I was hustled and bustled along, my feet hardly touching the ground, until Auntie Shirley dropped me onto the oxblood kitchen tiles. I felt their shined surface under my thumbs as I looked up, and it was there, plain in the aged paleness of the grieving face why the house was quiet, and why the neighbours were clustered outside like flies trapped in the corner of a window pane.

“He's in the front room,” said Shirley, simply. I knew then that she would never be Auntie again. No-one went in the front room except for high days and holidays, and for days like today for which there was no friendly rhyme. Death days.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs with my hand on the cold door knob, wondering if I'd have to touch his cheek, and whether he would be alabaster smooth like the angels in church or spiked like a conker shell. After a while I became aware of Shirley behind me.

“Go on, its ok – he's your Da, he can't hurt you now.”

Turning the brass knob very slowly, I tried to open the door. Cold sweat had gathered on my palm and it made the sphere slick in my hand, so I wiped it downwards on my clothing and tried again. The door opened into an unfamiliar dark room. Light poked its fingers around the heavy curtain edges and showed the shape of my father and the sideboard, both unrecognisable in their position. I had never seen my father horizontal or the sideboard stranded in the middle of the rug, and the new arrangement of them both was unsettling.

Reaching out to my father's rough hand, I touched his sausage fingers, grimed with the coal dust that crept into every line and crack making his skin look like something that had been screwed up and flattened out. My young hand looked alien next to his aged body, a different specimen entirely, an alternate genus. As if it didn't belong to me, I watched my index finger slide along the length of his, from the nail tip into the joint with his thumb, quickly finding a home in his palm. I rested my finger in this small cave, knowing that he was never again going to close his hand around mine, and everything stood still. From the blackness of the room, my mind was suddenly filled with colour. I saw the first Spring crocus in pearl violet and sun yellow, the new signal green grass of the top field, my mother's warm orient red lipstick and the sticky traffic orange Shirley preferred. I swooned in periwinkle, cerulean, denim, indigo, ultramarine and Persian skies, and fell over and over into the rabbit hole until I could not feel which way was up. Shirley half carried and half dragged me upstairs and put me into bed.

I do not remember much else of the afternoon. I rolled listlessly in and out of sleep, dimly hearing the undertaker and his boy bring the empty coffin, noting the scrape of the sideboard and the curse of the man catching his shin in the darkened room. But that was all.

It was fully dark when I next woke properly. My sisters weren't with me, and I presumed Shirley had instructed them to sleep top-to-toe in the best bedroom, taking up the empty place. Silently, I pushed back the blankets and stood listening. This would be my only chance. I stole downstairs into the back room and knelt in the corner under the window. Carefully, I put my fingernails in the crack between the boards and prised up the plank. My fingers scrabbled blindly before they seized on the roll of papers underneath. I quickly took them into the front room to my father. His coffin was closed now; the peacock bruising from the roof fall was starting to come out, already making the other him a memory.

There was little light, but even in the dimness I could feel the colours in the drawings on these pages. I remembered the evenings I stole down to find my father bent over the table, his rough hands caressing the coloured pencils in front of him. I would watch, hidden at the bottom of the stairs, as he selected a pencil and began to draw, creating a landscape of glowing colours that were not available underground. It was as if all the colours of the day were saved up in his mind whilst he was working in the black, and only in this his quiet, secret time was he able to let them flow out.

Unrolling the papers, I carefully offered the first one up to the slit underneath the coffin lid. After a moment of jiggling, I managed to insert one corner into the gap. Solemnly I slid it further in, until it slipped from my fingers and disappeared. I gently posted all the rest to him. When the last one fluttered down to lie on his dead chest, I rested my forehead on the edge of the wooden box and gave a dry sob. Inside my mind I could see the colours growing up around him, a forest of flowers and fields and streams, a rainbow of life. Turning, I briefly wondered which picture had drifted nearest his heart – was it his early sketch of me and my sisters, playing in the yard, or was it the tender drawing of my mother, drawn from behind, as she stood at the

sink looking out at the world? Neither mattered to me now. He was sleeping in a meadow of colour with all of us, at peace.

Back in bed, I reached under the mattress at the side near the wall and dug around for the colour forty. It had taken me moments to whip it away from the others in the pile – I always knew which one I would take. Running my finger over the stamped gold lettering, my fingers read the words, *chartreuse*. Such a mystical colour, unknown yet familiar; I admired its ability to be two things at once. Green and yellow, chartreuse was exactly the mid-point between both. I loved it for its bravery and worldliness; the ugly abutment of the vowels in its name and the sickliness of its colour did not dim the brilliance for me. I saw chartreuse everywhere, in the apples I ate, in the moss on the yard wall, and finally, in the bruises on my father's damaged body.

Putting the pencil softly under my pillow, I lay down to sleep. With my eyes closed, I walked quietly in my dreams through a world of colour, holding my father's hand.