

The Color Blue

by **Katie Milligan**

My memories are all tinted with blue.

I remember four blue-raspberry mouths stained with the sticky sugar of popsicles. I see my grandfather's jeans, stiff yet worn, bouncing up and down as he gives me a ride on his knee. There is the teal woolly yarn of my baby blanket against a flushed cheek, clutched in my tiny hand. Blue is nostalgia. Blue is childhood.

I can remember the cornflower blue, fuzz-worn fabric of the snack-stained matching armchairs my parents sit in—big for him, small for her. I finally settled on sky blue for my bedroom walls after surviving my angsty neon-green teen years. My mother made a sinfully delicious dessert for my 11th, 14th, 16th, and 18th birthdays, full of rich blueberries and graham crackers and whipped cream. Blue is familiar. Blue is home.

The boy who has always been there has sapphire eyes; their sharpness nearly blinds me from behind angular glasses. The deep navy of my father's police uniform contrasts with the innocent turquoise of the purity ring that he gave me when I turned fifteen. Blue is protection, loyalty. Blue is safety.

The cloudy, violet fingers of volleyball bruises inch across my shins and kneecaps, products of diving on the unforgiving gym floor at Graham High School for seven years. Damp steel-blue fog hangs like a wet blanket over the shelter house at the Christiansburg Park where my heart was broken for the first time. My best friend's auburn curls dance against her Air Force dress blues as she boards a plane that will carry her far into the sky. At my fifteen-year-old teammate's funeral, there was a basket of royal blue rubber bracelets to wear to remember, inscribed with Ecclesiastes 4:9-10. Blue is pain. Blue is goodbye.

I see all the different skies, like postcards, whipping through my memory. There's the churning grey-blue lake at Warren Dunes, Michigan, ringed by a sky with buttery clouds. There's the brooding indigos of Ocean Isle, North Carolina, freshly calmed from

the exploding scarlets and oranges and magentas of the watercolor sunset. There's the blue ice-capped Andes Mountains of Peru, expansive, cold, close to God. Blue is tranquility, reflection. Blue is adventure.

But my memory isn't just blue. It's purple like my February birthstone amethyst, and grey like my stuffed elephant and my 2013 silver Ford Fusion, and green like homemade guacamole with onions and peppers, and yellow like the sunflower fields that bloom in Yellow Springs each September. It's a palette, and a giant thistle of a paintbrush dabbles in each color and swirls them together to create a magnificent mess. But somehow, the colors don't blend together to make a non-color, a mud like the slush from day-old snow. They stay crisp, marbled, vibrant. My memory is a masterpiece.

I don't know why the color blue is so significant to me. But it's my favorite color. Scientists have proven that certain colors are more stimulating and better enhance our memories.

People perceive colors differently based on their life experiences, their moods, their memories. What is blue to me might not be blue to you, and someone else might perceive another blue entirely. At their very core, humans are all the same. A skin-bag of bones, a pulsing heart, muscle and arteries, veins and cartilage and blood. But there's something else besides the physical, beyond the flesh: a mind. And that's where the common path begins to diverge into hundreds, thousands, millions of paths. Like the fractures in my living room window when my brother hit a golf ball into it. Like the ripples that sped across the pool in my grandmother's backyard when my sun-tanned, floatie-clad cousin landed a tiny cannonball.

The mind is incredibly vast—boundless, even. The human brain can store 2.5 petabytes of data. That's the same as 2,500,000 gigabytes. It's essentially unlimited storage space for memories. Scientists estimate that in a lifetime, one person can accumulate as much as one quadrillion pieces of information—fifteen zeros worth of scraps, tidbits, and snippets. Every person you pass throughout the day—the Oxford-educated professor, the breast cancer survivor, the high school drop-out drug dealer—is a walking, talking, living, breathing encyclopedia. Full-to-bursting with thrills, disappointments, victories and defeats, trials and errors, the mundane and the extraordinary, milestones passed, lessons learned, adventures explored. Imagine how

much pain and frustration and waste could be avoided, if only minds could be combined, if colors could be blended.

There are two distinct types of memory: long-term and short-term. Contrary to common sense, short-term memories are much more easily forgotten. The brain's hippocampus transfers short-term memories, which last an average of thirty seconds, into long-term memories, which can last anywhere from three days to three years. It's shaped like a horseshoe and as one gets older, its functionality declines. On Wednesday evenings I go to the Good Shepherd Village nursing home in Springfield to sing hymns with the residents. Last week there was a woman in a wheelchair with a washed-out Led Zeppelin t-shirt, a wooden cross necklace, and antique silver rings on every finger. Between every song, she would grasp my arm and say, "I go to the Church of God down on Hillside Avenue." After every song, it was the same. Six, seven, eight times, and her head bobbed up and down with renewed vitality each time. Several years ago, I learned that my grandfather was suffering from dementia; the short-term memories were slipping away from him, but for a while, he could still summon to the surface the long-term memories. It was as if someone was repeatedly flushing his memory-palette under hot, soapy water. With time, the once-vivid colors became thin, then translucent, then dissolved into nothing but white. Stephen King once wrote, "The color white is the absence of memory." I'm not sure if that's true, since the color white reflects all wavelengths of visible light while absorbing none, and the color black absorbs all wavelengths of light while reflecting none. Black is an inky memory with the lights off; white is a vacant, void memory. Maybe it's both. Maybe it's greyscale. Either way, it's heartbreaking. All that space in their memories, and their hippocampi betrayed them. They are doomed to forget.

But maybe, on the opposite end of the spectrum, there is such a thing as having too many colors crowded together on a palette. Maybe, when there are too many hues, too many dollops of paint saturated deep inside, they start to mix and embroil into chaos. Are there real-life Rain Men who can remember everything, every insignificant and every fateful detail? In 1942, Jorge Luis Borges published a short story called "Funes the Memorious" about a young man named Ireneo Funes who was thrown from a horse and became crippled. Soon after the accident, he discovered a peculiar talent of

remembering everything. He could tell time to the exact second without a watch, he could recall the precise shape of clouds, he could even recollect the exact pattern of the sprayed river water that flung from the in-motion oar of a canoe. To the narrator of the story, Funes said, "I have more memories in myself alone than all men have had since the world was a world." Borges's tale is a fantasy, but there are six confirmed cases of this condition today: hyperthymestic syndrome, which is Greek for "exceptional memory." The first known case, Jill Price, can recite obscure details of her life since the age of fourteen. She has reported that this highly advanced ability is a daily burden. Ireneo Funes calls his memory a garbage disposal. A waste. A blessing at times, but mostly a curse. I think there is such a thing as overload.

Memories become prioritized and organized in our brains by the level of emotion attached to them. I am more clearly able to remember the moments of sheer fear than mild contentment. I can distinctly see the worry lines on my mother's forehead on the day that I came home from school and she told me my father had been hospitalized. I remember the exact angle of the late afternoon sun slanting through the window. I remember I was wearing black sweatpants and a maroon drawstring hoodie with canvas zigzag slip-ons. I was sitting in my car watching the snow peacefully drift from heaven when I got the phone call that my best friend had been in a car accident. I can remember the shaking hands, the scrambling struggle to open the car door to step out into the winter wonderland, the cathartic relief at the news she was okay.

If you unfold the mysterious wrinkles of the brain, you'd get 100,000 miles of axons (the brain's neurons that fasten themselves to other neurons to store information). That's enough to travel around the Earth four times. We tuck things away between these folds, sometimes for safekeeping and sometimes to forget. What triggers release such that small bubbles of memory float to the surface? What fragments of fear and regret and discomfort burrow deep within our subconscious? We may never know. Our memories shape us, and our memories protect us.

To me, it makes sense that our memories are like an artist's palette. Paint is fluid, impressionable, changes color and consistency as it is told. So do recollections. There is a balance. The Goldilocks principle. Not too little, not too much. If we were all just

machines, without emotions, without authenticity or empathy or the ability to remember, how could we enjoy this life?

Imagine if a giant syringe was lowered down and the tip—just the very tip—made contact with this globe we call home. Imagine if every last drop of color was sucked out of the world. There wouldn't be any more red. No more red rubber rain boots romping through puddles, no juicy beads of pomegranate, no lipstick stains, no more Band-Aids stained with a single drop of blood. There wouldn't be any more yellow, no more tropical pineapple rings or blonde fuzzy ducklings or dewy goldenrod, no Lays potato chips or waxy honeycombs. No more orange incessantly dribbling basketballs or pink fairy-spun cotton candy.

Our memories can so easily be distorted, whether it be from blunt-force trauma to the head in an instant, or a disease that slowly gnaws away at us for a lifetime. So, while you can, be purple, and grey, and green and yellow. Be red and orange and pink. Be blue.



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