

A Lesson in Color

Hannah's father squats near a fallen log and slices dirt off a cluster of oyster mushrooms. He adds the trimmed cluster, spongy petals of flesh that easily bruise and tear, to his basket, which already contains a paper bag of Boletus mushrooms and one overgrown puffball. He often takes his daughter Hannah along on these mushroom hunting hikes, and although her naive palate has not yet developed an appreciation for fungi, she seems to enjoy the hunt. She has a good eye for a six-year-old, and she recognizes the mushrooms with funny names like "witch's butter" and "hedgehog."

Hannah, wearing a blue jumper and oversized socks slumped around her ankles, runs to her father's side with her hands cupped together. He has seen her hold toads and crickets this way, bobbing jubilantly towards him to display her treasure but always so gentle and slow with her hands. He hates to see her frown when he instructs her to release the poor creatures. When she smiles, her cheeks puff up like pink marshmallows.

"What did you find, sweetie?"

She leans against his knee and brings her hands near his face before allowing her fingers to slowly bloom open. There is a dead hummingbird in her right palm.

He wonders if she is upset that the bird is not darting among the foxgloves but, rather, limp and still. She places a finger on the bird's neck and draws it over the crimson plumage. He thinks to warn her about disease, but she has already handled the creature, so he will have her wash up at the car.

"That's beautiful, Hannah. This is called a hummingbird. They beat their wings so fast that the motion makes a humming sound, and you can barely see the wings when they're moving. They have long beaks to drink out of flowers like this one." He leans and plucks a pink foxglove blossom. Hannah takes it with her free hand and places the flower's open tube over the bird's beak. This motion reminds her father of how she brings a bottle to her doll's mouth, in complete silence and with such precision.

"Can I keep it?" she asks.

"No, you're going to have to put it back where you found it."

"But why Daddy? It's so pretty! You get to keep the mushrooms and flowers, why can't I keep it?"

He tries to explain to Hannah that there are different types of living things, that flowers can be pressed and mushrooms will be eaten, but that the bird will start to rot in a messier way than a flower would. This leads him to thinking about the natural process of decomposition, and

about respect for death, but he can't seem to justify why he has more reverence for a dead bird than a dead flower, which starts him thinking about the hierarchy of importance that humans place on living things, and why he has been so thoughtless in his consumption of chicken but would never eat a bird with bright feathers like a cardinal or a meadowlark with a pleasant song. The more a death pulls strings of nostalgia or aesthetic beauty, the deeper the mourning. He decides to simplify his explanation so as not to confuse Hannah.

"You can't keep the bird because it will change, in a week's time you won't like it the same way you do now. It's like when you ask for a new toy, and your grandmother gives it to you for Christmas, but you only play with it for a day or two, then it ends up on the floor."

Hannah is not listening. She picks the bird up by its black pin beak and watches how the feathers collapse in on themselves when its body bends. This reminds her of a little metal fish that her mother bought her in Chinatown. The blue enameled scales of the fish fold together on one side and expand on the other. Hannah flicks the bird side to side. It is as light and mobile as the fish.

"Hannah, put the bird carefully back where you found it."

She stares at her father's chin. She likes the way the few white hairs in his beard seem to disappear in the light. Although his face is usually soft and vivid, he has so many wrinkles in his forehead when he lectures her. She wants to laugh at his folding skin, but if she were to laugh she would lose the scowling game.

"Do it now, please."

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Hannah walks away from her father and crouches behind a blackberry bramble. This is the patch of dirt where she first came across her treasure. She had been searching for ripe berries, but had found only two premature black specimens whose bitter flavor still burned in the back of her throat. She examines the bird's feathers once more: the brown belly is soft, like the fur between her cat's toes, the green feathers in the wingtips are stiff, and the shiny red feathers below the neck look more and more to Hannah like fish scales. They seem to change color in the light: shiny, dull, shiny, dull. She imagines the bird hanging from a string around her neck, like the necklace that her mother had fashioned to hold the fish. The body is so small that she can almost close her fist without crushing it. She puts it back in the dirt, strokes its belly, and glances up at her father, who is flipping through his mushroom identification manual. The bird is too pretty to toss into the bushes. She picks it up gently by the beak, and slips it into the pocket of her jumper.

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Hannah arranges objects on her bookshelf. She nests the bird in a little cardboard box that once held a few fancy chocolates. She places the box next to a little bed of dried moss on the shelf. In the moss, a porcelain frog guards a broken robin's egg. She lines up wine corks like soldiers on each end of the shelf and stacks bottle-caps one on top of another in a leaning tower. She places the rocks in a line: a smooth black stone from the ocean, a chunk of quartz, a lump of fool's gold, and a rock with a white band around its belly. Her mother once told her that rocks with white stripes are *wish rocks*, and if you toss them into bodies of water or off a cliff that your wish will come true. Hannah places the rock in her palm and wishes that she could show the bird to her mother.

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Hannah should be asleep. Whenever she can't sleep she climbs out of bed, shuffles through the dark room over stuffed animals and broken crayons to the window, where she wraps herself in the lace curtain, and looks for the moon. Sometimes the moon hides behind the apricot tree in the yard, and she has to wait until it pokes through the branches. The moon is always singing through a gaping mouth, its dark eye sockets permanently set at an anguished angle. Hannah's mother once played an opera aria on the radio in the kitchen, and every time Hannah sees the moon's face she imagines a vibrato voice bellowing from that mouth.

Tonight she sees a figure moving through the yard, the same shadowed obscurity as the grass, apple tree, and hills. The figure, a man, moves slowly between two sources of light: a small bonfire at the edge of the yard, and the light above the front door. The figure darkens as he approaches the fire, but when he nears the front door the bulb illuminates the features of Hannah's father. Hannah eases her grip on the curtain. Her father is carrying what looks like a bundle of clothing and books. When he nears the house again she leaps away from the window, into the hall, and greets him at the front door. He seems frightened by her sudden appearance, as his face did the morning when she hid in the cupboard and grabbed his hand when he reached in for a frying pan.

"What are you doing awake at this hour, Hannah?"

She ignores his question and asks, "what are you burning? Are you doing yard-work? Can I help? What's that, is that Mom's hat? Why are you burning her hat?"

She can tell from his silence that she should stop asking questions and return to her bedroom, but she can see the fire through the crack in the door, and she wants to stand by his side while he works. She could be his assistant.

“Hannah, I’m just getting rid of some things that need to be cleaned up. I won’t have time to do it tomorrow because I have to run some errands. You should be asleep. Will you be a good girl and go back to bed? You can help me the next time I have a fire.”

He ruffles her hair but his face doesn’t soften until she nods her head and scampers back down the hall, barefoot and as quick as a rabbit. When back in her room, she waves goodnight to the moon and crawls back into bed.

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Hannah’s father has arranged a series of objects at the fire’s edge, keeping them close enough to see the objects clearly in the fire’s light but far enough away to prevent them from burning. Among the objects is a silk sundress scattered with little purple flowers, a copy of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* with a heavily creased spine, a purse woven with colored straw, and a half-used sketchbook which charcoal fingerprints on the cover. These were his wife’s things. He cannot continue have them around the house, because when he sees them he sees her, although he only manages to picture Madeline as a blurry stripe of light and patterned cloth. Sometimes he can isolate parts of her body in his memory: an elbow, an earlobe, a loose braid of hair.

He burns the objects one at a time and watches until they each become indistinguishable among the coals and ash. She once instructed him to add eggs one at a time to any recipe for cookie dough, lemon curd, or cakes. He remembers stirring thick oatmeal-raisin dough with a wooden spoon; the yolks would always evade incorporation for as long as they could, pooling in the creases between two masses of flour. He removes a strand of Madeline’s hair from his shirtsleeve and drops it onto a burning log, cringing at the smell. He tosses a stack of photos into the coals near his feet. Colors lift from their glossy surfaces and for a moment the fire dances blue and green.

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Hannah wakes before her father. The dew is so thick in the lawn that soon her socks and even the hem of her skirt are soggy. The light is still metallic and thin; the sun hasn’t yet risen over the hills. Hannah reaches the edge of the fire-pit and taps her foot against a few wet, black coals. She reaches her hand into a dry patch of ash, soft as talc. Along one edge of the pit is an

oblong puddle with a rainbow swirl reflected in the light. She stirs the gasoline rainbow with her finger, but it stings her skin. She remembers this smell from her father's afternoon barbecues in the summer. She wipes her hands in the dewy lawn on her way back to the house.

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Hannah's father should be asleep. He stands at the dresser in his bedroom holding a wooden brush in the dark. Only a few solitary strands hang loose from the felted mass of hair that clings to the brush's body. In Madeline's last months she shed like a molting doe. He remembers massaging her balding temples while she whispered away his anger.

He slips the brush in his pocket and opens the top drawer to sort through the cloth. Linen, silk, cotton, nylon. He removes a pair of stockings and places them in his other pocket. He cannot rest knowing that these things are still in the house, still smelling of her, still woven into her voice, her movements. It will be easier when they are gone. In the living room, he removes her framed painting of California poppies from above the reading chair. From where he stands he can see the bonfire through the window, just far enough away to blur into one orb of light. He imagines the colors that will rise from the painting as it burns. He tries to recall her hands, the way she held the paintbrush, how she mixed the paints, but he can't tell if the image of her skin tonight is his invention or his memory. His hand that holds the painting begins to shake and he steadies himself against the wall. If he burns this, will he be able to remember her hands? If he burns this, will he forget, years from now, how she looked when she painted it? He hangs it back on the wall and climbs back into bed, still fully clothed with the brush and stockings in his pockets.

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Hannah's father drags a fine-tooth comb from the center of her scalp through to the knotted tips of her ochre hair. She cries out in pain, slips off her chair, and bounds to the other side of the room, the comb still lodged in a tangle her father has deemed the "nastiest rat's nest" he has seen yet.

"Why do I have to comb my hair?"

"You have to look presentable for Izzy's birthday party, Hannah, get back over here."

"Why do I have to wear a dress?"

Hannah asks too many questions. She doesn't *have* to wear a dress; he doesn't want to give her the impression that pants are only for boys. She could attend this damned party in a

potato sack for all he cared, but he can already hear the clicking of tongues from the cluster of carefully preened and painted mothers.

“Do you have a present for Izzy?”

“Yeah.”

“What is it? Are you sure you don’t want to go pick something up from the store? Remember when Mom took you to that bead store and you bought Izzy some beads to make a bracelet out of?”

“Yeah. Izzy lost them. I have a better present, but it’s a surprise.”

Hannah is back in the chair, but she flinches dramatically every time he reaches for her hair.

“Hannah, sit still.”

“No, you hurt when you comb my hair, you don’t do it like Mommy.”

He thinks of Madeline’s hair-- a sort of dull, translucent brown, an unassuming brown that blends in with all of his jackets and socks. Her hair lingers still in the house, even after sweeping under the furniture and pulling it out from every drain. He will never be able to burn it all. It clings to him. A strand will appear sometimes on his pant leg or briefcase at work, and his concentration on this or that discussion wanes as he plucks the hair and drops it to the ground.

He tugs harder on the rat’s nest and Hannah leaps out of the chair once more. Hannah’s father shouts down the hall as she turns the corner into her room. He tries to picture how Madeline combed differently. More slowly, perhaps with quick little movements starting at the tips and gradually inching up to the scalp? Did she wet Hannah’s hair first?

When they finally leave the house, Hannah doesn’t let her father remove the comb from her rat’s nest. When he reaches for it, she pretends that she is a princess and that if he touches her tiara she will lose all of her magical powers.

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In the garden, Hannah holds a red plastic cup of lemonade with both hands. Why do the adults have glasses that have little delicate legs? Why are the moms standing so close together, laughing and laughing, talking too loudly, while all of the fathers stand and stare out over the lawn? A long-haired terrier yaps incessantly by the fence. Hannah imagines the terrier and her cat, roughly the same size, battling each other with plenty of hisses and nips.

The cake has arrived. Hannah’s piece disappears within seconds, save for a few smears of blue frosting around her lips. She has an urge to grab a handful from the center of the cake, just to see what the frosting feels like in her hands. She wonders if she would be able to reach her

arm all the way through the cake to the other side and wave at her father, who is watching grimly from the deck.

The other children are dipping wire loops into a bucket of soap suds. They lift the wire loops slowly into the air. The soap expands into fat, billowing worms that drift lazily towards the grass and pop. Hannah chases the bubbles and tries to catch them before they reach the grass, but they disappear when she touches them. She thinks of the Chinese paper wish-lantern that she and her father sent into the sky on New Year's Eve, and whether it popped like these bubbles when it touches the clouds. She catches a small bubble carefully in her hand and watches the colors swirl on the surface. The colors eventually fade as the surface grows thin. She resists dipping her finger into the iridescent swirl as she did with the gasoline. She wishes she could carry this bubble around for a little longer, perhaps even show it to her father, but by the time she reaches the deck it is gone.

When it comes time for presents, Izzy receives many gifts: a few dolls, a teddy bear as big as a chair, Mary Jane shoes, a bag of saltwater taffy. Soon it is Hannah's turn and she glances towards her father, who is staring into his empty cup, before placing a small box in Izzy's lap. She hovers nearby while Izzy lifts the lid.

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Izzy is crying into her mother's dress, who is whispering sharply with Hannah's father by the rose bush. The other children have wandered back to the bucket of soap suds. Hannah peers into the box that is now lying in the grass by the birthday chair. In the hummingbird's place is a hollow lump which smells worse than the cat's litter box. Little white bugs wriggle about on the lump, and they have burrowed tunnels throughout, so that the lump is speckled with shadows. The black pin beak gasps silently. The feathers are pale wires or white veins that rise out of the bird's sunken brown body. Where are the shiny, fire-colored fish scales? Where is the belly as soft as fur?

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Hannah cries into her father's sleeve as they walk towards the car. Hannah's father is silent until they are three blocks from home. He then speaks to her about good manners, and how birthday girls often get their feelings hurt if something goes wrong, and about what kinds of gifts are appropriate for others. Hannah is too upset about her lost treasure to listen. She had been saving that box on her shelf for weeks, next to her collection of pretty stones, bottle-caps, and

corks. She had thought it was such a pretty bird, and such a nice gift for her best friend. Now everybody is angry. Izzy will never invite her over again. Her father will send her to bed early.

Back at the house, her father walks directly into the living room without taking off his shoes, takes a seat on the futon, and closes his eyes. Hannah climbs into his lap, but she accidentally elbows him in the belly, and without thinking he pushes her roughly off his legs. She can feel her face seizing up and growing hot, but she doesn't want to cry. The more she tries not to cry the harder it becomes to swallow the egg that has formed in her throat.

“Daddy's tired, sweetie. Can you give me some quiet time?”

She escapes to her room before he notices her quickened breath.

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Hannah stumbles into the living room with an armful of mismatched socks, crumpled pieces of paper, and a deflated beach ball. She is triumphant, eager, shining. She notices how much her father resembles a raccoon with dark spots under his eyes.

“What are those, Hannah?”

She drops everything on the floor at his feet.

“I cleaned my room. Now can we have a fire? I want to help you.”

Her father pulls her onto his knee and looks down at the rubble on the floor.

“Maybe. I think I might be done cleaning the house for a while, Hannah. I was trying to clear out some things that didn't need to be in the house anymore, things I would never use, but I may have gotten rid of enough by now. If you want, we can trim the Lilac bushes and do a little raking, and then maybe we'll have some material for another bonfire. Would you like that?”

Hannah nods and rubs her hands together over her pile of junk, as if she were already warming her fingers over the flames. She can already taste the burnt marshmallows and graham crackers, and can see the fairy sparks that jump from logs when they collapse over each other.

“Why did you burn Mom's hat? Was it broken? Did it have holes in it?”

She doesn't notice that her father has closed his eyes and is leaning his head on the wall.

“It's sort of like that bird, Hannah. You might have to be a little older to understand, but do you remember how that bird changed over time? It was beautiful at first, but it eventually made you sad. That's how I felt about the hat, so I got rid of it.”

Hannah wanted to be older so that she could understand. The hat didn't change like the bird. It didn't lose color or start to smell bad.

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Hannah's father motions for her to take a seat at the table in the breakfast nook. A pot with three small eggs is simmering on the stove, and she can see two slices of rye bread waiting to be toasted and spread with sour cherry jam. This is her favorite corner of the house, where all of her mother's dried flowers and herbs hang upside-down from the ceiling, and patches of light filtered through the curtains shine on her mother's copper pots. Some of the lavender bundles and ceramic sculptures of pigs and goats are missing from their perch on the counter, her father must have gotten rid of them.

"Can you see those clouds above the apricot tree?" he asks. "Aren't they beautiful?"

She nods.

"I always see shapes in the clouds: creatures and objects. See at that huge, round cloud above the neighbor's chimney? It looks just like a rabbit, with two little ears and even a tail. Do you see it?"

Hannah leans towards the window. Her father lifts a shoebox from the floor and places it on the table in front of her.

"This was your mother's," her father says as he removes a palette with globs of watercolor paint dried along the edges, a handful of brushes with varying sized bristles, and a small booklet of dense, bumpy paper. Hannah rubs the paper between her fingers, and runs the tip of a soft, red-stained brush along her arm. Her father dips a different brush into a mug of water, moistens a blue-gray glob of paint, and draws the brush along the paper. He adds more water to the stain and expands the edges. The paint bleeds slowly outwards, fluid and alive. Hannah thinks of the colors swirling on the surface of the bubbles, and the gasoline in the puddle. Her father deftly adds two lines to the amorphous shape for ears, and a nose, and a tail.

"The cloud that looks like a rabbit is beautiful, but it won't always look like a rabbit, see how it is already being changed by the wind? We can't keep everything that is beautiful. Beauty fades and changes, these clouds won't be in the sky tomorrow. We can't keep birds, because they will change. So do people."

He wants to say that there is a part of Hannah that may never recover, or that she will always be in pain, or that sometimes he wants to be a little boy in his mother's kitchen, with no daughter or memory of a wife, only the smell of sugared steam rising from a pot of apricot syrup.

Hannah suddenly does not want to be at the table. She fidgets and picks at the peeling table varnish. He ignores her movement and rips the page from the booklet, cleans his brush, and moistens the red glob on the palette.

He recalls aspects of Madeline's face: the shadows on either side of the bridge of her nose, the thumbprint above her lip, the bridge between her shoulders and breast-bone formed by

her collarbone. The pieces don't quite fit together; the face formed from these conglomerate memories is only a flat approximation of her, like a drawing made with his eyes closed. He traces his hand through the air, mimicking the curve of her jaw, but when he applies the gesture to the paper with his brush the line looks weak amidst so much white.

A little oval of red. An oval of brown-green. Streaks of blue-green. Little lines of black, a small dot. Suddenly Hannah sees a bird on the page. She reaches out her finger and strokes the bird's red throat. When she pulls her hand away the red remains on her skin. She rubs the paint between her fingertips until it turns sticky and starts to clump up and fall in little bits into her lap.

“You can keep this painting, Hannah. It will help you remember the bird.”