



True Colours

T. J. Healy

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For Ciara, a shining light.

With love and thanks to John for your support.

Thanks also to Catherine, Liz, and Frances.

To family and friends who bring colour into the world.

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YELLOW

I knew that one day I'd have to fight back and prove I wasn't a freak, but when a little bit of wee escaped I realised that day would have to wait.

I covered my ears as the word punched through the bruise coloured fog yet again.

'It's the freak,' Duff repeated, looking into the murk surrounding his gang. 'Did you hear me Laura? Your freaky little brother has come to fetch you.' He cracked his knuckles. 'And it looks like we're going to have twice as much fun because he's brought Slow Cooked Stu.'

My eyes desperately raked the darkness for my sister and rested on two silhouettes looming in the background. Their stillness was more frightening than the agitated movements of Duff's gang. The unfamiliar one was shrouded in eerie threads of concentrated smog that coiled menacingly around the gang and began seeping slowly towards me. The stretching fingers of darkness reached out, getting closer and closer, until at last they were broken by the movement of the second figure.

'Don't call my brother a freak,' Laura said, a faint glimmer materialising from the gloom.

Duff's look fell on her like an ash cloud.

'Because he's starting to think it's his name!' My sister's face darkened as she walked towards me.

'I can't help it if my little brother's not right in the head.' She pushed me hard against my ear but that wasn't what stung.

Duff laughed, revealing his rat-like teeth.

'So, Freaky Allbright and Slow Cooked Stu, who wants to be first?' He picked up the half-chewed stick that Stu's dog had been playing with and I could almost taste the dry wood as he beat it slowly and rhythmically against his palm.

Whoever made up the rhyme about sticks and stones wasn't called 'Freak' or worse every day since starting secondary school. The stick would crack against my skull once and be over and done with. The names would thump inside it over and over again.

I moved towards Stu, checking my treasure was safe in my pocket. It was precious to me but I could use it as a weapon if I had to. Stu was the colour of mouldy mustard and I threw my arms up around his head to shield him from the beating. I searched over his shoulder for Laura but her face just faded into the darkness that surrounded us.

There was a sudden flash of pale light and I realised Stu's little dog was leaping for the stick, sending Duff staggering backwards.

'Run!' I yelled and began to drag Stu across the park as fast as my concrete legs could manage.

The dog overtook us like a streak of violet lightning, his little paws moving comically fast, the enormous stick clenched proudly in his mouth.

'I think I need to change my undies,' Stu panted as we stopped to catch our breath.

I gulped in air, inhaling the smell of freshly cut grass, gasping with relief that Duff hadn't chased us. The gang's dark haze disappeared off into the distance, leaving only an angry red cloud heading quickly in our direction.

'Thanks a lot Freak!' Laura yelled as she stormed past in a crimson fury that I had somehow caused. We'd saved her butt but it headed straight past us towards home, straining against too-tight jeans and farting red exhaust fumes.

'Good boy Jasper,' Stu said as the scruffy terrier dropped the stick at his feet, tail wagging furiously. He fussed the dog's hairy face then threw the stick to send the furry little flash shooting off again.

I loved Jasper. He wasn't complicated like people. He helped me feel normal.

'Do you want a lemon sherbet Bertie?' Stu held out some sticky sweets from his pocket, picking off little bits of felted crumb.

Stu was lemon sherbet, all yellow and fizzy. I don't mean yellow in a cowardly custard way because he stuck up for me every time I got picked on; Stu was a bright, effervescent hue that I loved.

I took one of the fluff-covered sweets that tasted disappointingly like pocket lining. Stu might be a sherbet short of a packet sometimes but he was a really good friend to me.

Stu was the only one who listened when I talked about the different wavelengths of colours and stuff. At least he seemed to be listening. His mouth was always too full to reply but he nodded a lot.

Jasper jumped up at Stu, pink tongue hanging expectantly from a wet mouth, loving Stu simply because he would throw the stick again.

‘I wish we could get away from all this,’ I said, the warmth of my friend thawing the cold left by Duff.

‘You mean run away?’ Stu asked, his voice distorted by four lemon sherbets in his mouth at once.

‘Not run away exactly. I mean go to a summer camp or something, now the school holidays have started. Just you, me and Jasper, away from Laura and those bullies. We could have a really great adventure; discover our true colours.’

‘Yeah.’ Stu bounced three layers of tummy that were hanging over the elasticated waist of his XXL ‘jogging’ bottoms then did the funny little belly dance that always made me laugh. He pulled two tummy rolls apart, moving them like giant lips talking, then he put on a funny voice, ‘but first we need food.’ Stu always needed food.

I looked around to check it was safe to go our separate ways. I always felt better when I was with Stu, but I spat on my hand and Stu spat on his, then with Jasper jumping excitedly up at us we did our special handshake. It was like breaking into one of Mum’s fried eggs, all golden, warm and satisfying.

Stu headed towards his house, a packet of crisps magically appearing from I don't like to think where, and Jasper yapping at his heels. Wafting scents of different dinners were enough to nourish me along the streets until I smelt home. I could hear Laura shouting before I even reached the door.

'Wait for Bertie? Why should I? He's just soooo embarrassing!'

'Because he's only twelve and you're sixteen. You should be looking out for him Laura. I honestly don't know what's got into you since you started hanging round with that lot.' Mum was crashing pans and cutlery; the sound splintering through the window. 'And don't speak about your brother like that. It's not his fault he's ... different.'

'Everyone thinks he's a freak.'

'Don't talk like that Laura! He's had all the tests, you know that.'

They stopped shouting as I pushed open the door.

I knew the word '*spectrum*' was lodged deep in my mother's throat as she tried to swallow it back down. It was a word that I loved and hated in equal measure. I'd had tests to see if I was on some sort of 'spectrum' but wasn't everyone? Wasn't a spectrum infinite?

The spectrum of colours in a rainbow is not limited by a set of labels; it's not just red to violet, but all the tones and shades in-between that don't even have a name.

I loved every single variant of every single colour. But that was the problem.

That was why 'specialists' wanted to put a label on me and stick me somewhere on their spectrum. They said I might have problems with sensory processing and that my obsession with colours showed 'restricted interests,' but seeing beautiful, luminous colours everywhere surely made things richer, not restricted.

It was like they wanted me to wear a badge that told everyone what I couldn't do, instead of making a bright neon sign declaring all the amazing things that I could do.

It wasn't me who needed to change the way I saw things. It was everyone else who needed to change the way they saw me.

'Freakenstein!' Laura pushed past me to hurl mats at the dining table.

'Loser,' I muttered quietly, having almost lost my life once already.

If I were on their spectrum I wouldn't be able to interact so nicely with my dear sibling. That's a fact. I'd looked it all up on the internet.

'Seeing red again?' Laura threw down the forks and knives, making them clash like swords.

'Yes,' I answered truthfully, although the cloudiness of it was becoming more sharp and vibrant around her.

I sat opposite Laura, telling myself to make eye contact so that she could see that I was normal.

‘Why didn’t you help me?’ I held my gaze as Mum came in, a faded version of her usual blue and set dinner in front of us. Laura just shrugged her shoulders.

‘I used to help you Bertie ... and look where that got me.’ Laura looked down at the burnt offering of fish-fingers, even worse at eye contact than I was. ‘It was me who taught you your damn colours in the first place.’

‘Laura!’ Mum speared her fish and waved it threateningly. ‘I haven’t got the energy to fight with you.’

‘But I did teach him his colours. I used to be so happy Mum. I’d pick up a blue toy and say, “this is blue,” and he’d say “blue,” and I was so proud that I was the one who’d taught him.’

I felt a surge of warmth towards my big sister. That proved I wasn’t on the spectrum too. I could empathise. In fact I was so good at empathy, I could usually tell how somebody felt before they even spoke.

I took my treasure from my pocket, placing the crystal stopper on the table to watch the light skip from all its faces.

Laura looked at it in disgust and turned her hand towards it, as if it proved the point she was about to make.

‘It’s not my fault that he got stuck there. It’s not my fault that every damn thing is a colour and not a man or a woman or a Laura or a Mum. It’s not MY fault Dad left.’

Mum got up to take her plate into the kitchen even though there was a piece of potato waffle left. Dark blue steam escaped from the door as she closed it firmly behind her.

‘Nice one Laura.’ I folded my arms.

‘I’m out of here.’ She stood up in flames.

‘Please say you’re not going back to the black ones,’ I begged.

‘Black?’ Laura began burning her angry red.

‘You know I mean the colour that’s around them Laurs, not the colour of their skin. Their blackness hangs in the air. It surrounds them and then slowly oozes over everyone else. I could see it Laura. That stranger there today was so scary. His darkness was seeping into the others. They couldn’t see it, but I’m telling you, it was very dangerous.’

‘The only thing you need to see is a doctor Bertie. You really do.’

Laura threw her plate at me, so I had to duck while peas rained down. The plate smashed and Laura exploded out of the house in a raging fire.

I was left to pick up the pieces.

I gathered the shattered fragments then carried them carefully into the kitchen.

‘Mum! Mum!’ I screamed.

Mum was lying on the floor, grey-tinged and faded.

She tried to lift herself up, managing only to hold out a scrap of paper with Dad's messy handwriting scribbled on it.

'Bertie, you must call this number. Your dad said to ask for Doctor Greene if I ever got sick.'

I began to panic, a kaleidoscope of clashing colours splintering around in my brain.

'Come on Bertie, I need your help. It's time you stood on your own feet a bit more. You can do this.' Mum was fading before my eyes, her lovely blue almost gone.

But what could I do to help? I was just a stupid little freak unable to help myself, let alone anyone else. I reached for the phone but it felt like shrapnel piercing my fingers, and I dropped it clattering onto the tiles. My nostrils were burning, but I took a deep breath and tried again. I steadied my hand to select the numbers that my father had formed with his.

I needed to make my dad proud. I needed to be brave and prove myself. I needed to save my mum.