

The Perfect Shade of Blue

I remember pulling out my paints in the garden, trying to create the perfect shade of turquoise or aquamarine, thinking of dolphins leaping between the dips and swells of an equatorial ocean. Back in the days when a favourite colour was a major talking point. When boys came up to me on the playground that was the first question they asked: 'What's your favourite colour?'

And I'd say 'Turquoise.'

And they'd say 'What's that?'

'A type of blue.'

'You can't like blue,' they'd say. 'That's a boy's colour, girls like pink and purple.'

Like that was obvious, and reasonable, and the sort of thing anyone could enforce.

'Maybe I'm not a girl then,' I'd say, taking the thought to bed with me at night, curled up in my blue dolphin covered bedsheets, pondering the possibility. What was I if I wasn't a girl? I'd think it as I put my school uniform on, as my mum demanded that I be allowed to wear comfortable trousers to school, as I stood in the playground between girls skipping and boys pretending to be soldiers and secret agents, taking each other down with a single shot and resurrecting to take their vengeance. Somewhere in the middle there was me, knowing I didn't fit somehow, and knowing that they knew it too, evidenced in the way that each group shunned me, afraid to take me on as one of their own. I couldn't be a boy: I cried too much, I didn't like football, I had long hair, the teachers called me 'she'. I couldn't be a girl: I couldn't skip, I liked to play rough, I didn't understand hair or makeup or fashion, and more than that though, it didn't fit right, it itched my skin like the labels on t-shirts rubbing against my neck. A broken girl, perhaps, that's what stuck in my heart, in the end.

I remember my best friend, long hair dark like a polished conker, skin so pale her freckles adopted a blueish-purple hue sprinkled over her nose and cheeks. Taller than me, in trousers and t-shirts, we embraced a sense of distance from femininity, declaring pink a sexist colour, hissing at cars and building that dared to adopt the shade. We thought we had it figured out, like sexism was a conspiracy conjured up by a section of the colour wheel. I remember thinking of her face when I fell asleep at night, thinking of the ways I might make her smile the next day, of how lucky I was to know her, of how to me she was Snow White and how I couldn't dare to think myself her prince.

I remember going clothes shopping with my Granma, 'Pick anything you want,' She said, leading me towards pinks, and the purples and shirts proclaiming 'Girls just want to have fun'. I stood with my Granma heading to the right, and what I really wanted to left, feeling stuck between two worlds, feeling brave enough, for once, to take a step forward.

'I'd like these, please,' I asked, voice soft, hands trembling as I led my Granma into the boys section and gestured towards some baggy ¾ length jeans, covered in zips and pockets and strands of material; the perfect trousers.

My breath held as I watched her face for judgement, reluctance, refusal, but she said okay, and I got to leave a clothes shop grinning ear-to-ear for maybe the first time.

I remember wearing those perfect trousers to school on a rare mufti day, overjoyed to show them off. I remember the laughter behind hands, the teasing, the disapproval – I never wore them again.

I remember my clothes, my style, oscillating between presenting as my peers to fit in, to see if I could do it without feeling broken, and covering myself in bright colours and eccentric styles that I wore as reflective armour to hide everything I was from those that would try and discern me. A sexless blob of rainbows, I called myself, when they asked.

I remember becoming grown and still standing between worlds, taking hesitant steps forward and then back to straddle a line that had become a reluctant home for me.

I remember asking for help, getting a diagnosis, being told I was part of a spectrum, but not to worry, I was 'only mild'. I didn't feel worried or mild, I felt exuberant, relieved, magnificent. Like I was seeing in colour for the first time, I tracked out my life and used this spectrum to fill it in like a colour by numbers book.

As each square got filled in, coloured by hindsight, I felt just that bit less broken, less wrong, but all those places I had been straddling the line were still blank, so I began pulling at them like mis-stiches in wool, watching as they unravelled and showed me all the things I'd been hiding. I learned I wasn't only not broken, but not a girl either, and that pink and femininity had never been my enemies. That I was never really standing stuck between pink and blue but on a colour wheel of endless dimensions. That just like when I was young sat in my garden, paint splatters covering my overalls, I could mix them together to get my perfect shade of blue, and this time no one was taking it away from me.