

The Colour of Words

“Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.” Rumi

The tattered sign, high up on the wooden factory wall, reads, ‘Percy’s Paints’. According to a plaque next to the main door, the factory has been here since 1890.

On the third floor of the factory, at a cluttered desk, sits an old man with greying hair. His name-plate reads, ‘Edward Milton’. According to employment records, he has been here since 1968.

The old man stretches painfully before reaching for his water bottle. Stainless steel. A Christmas present from his nephew, who feels that his uncle should try new things now that it’s a new millennium.

So far, the only thing the millennium has delivered to South Australia is a heatwave. Edward’s roses are suffering as much as he is.

He takes a long swig and turns back to his work. His method is simple. He takes a sheet of paint swatches and writes his first impressions, no matter how many, on the accompanying job sheet. When he is absolutely sure, the final names go directly onto the colour samples.

Sometimes the names are obvious – Army Green, Gunmetal Grey – and he almost feels embarrassed to write them down. Anybody could think of that.

Sometimes they take longer. Edward enjoys that, especially on a quiet Saturday when nobody can disturb him as he daydreams over blushing pinks and cool greens.

And sometimes ...

Today he has found one.

With trembling hands he pens the words onto the sample. Carefully, he cuts around the edge of the swatch with a small pair of scissors. It doesn’t matter; he has spare sample sheets. It’s not stealing. Yet he feels slightly guilty as he drops the swatch into a battered brown envelope.

“Hey! Eddie! Wanna coffee?”

Edward looks up to see his boss, Bernie, strolling towards his desk. His flannelette shirt is tucked into sagging blue trousers that are girded by an optimistic

belt. Despite the belt, Bernie is once again hoisting his pants and tucking his shirt around his significant belly.

“So ... d’ya want one?”

“No, thank you.” Edward indicates his shiny new bottle.

“Ah. Yep. So ... you found another one, ay?”

Uninvited, Bernie dips his hand into the envelope and pulls out the sample.

“‘A Rose Remembered.’ Okay. Most people would call that peach. Roses needa be red. Just ask my wife. And you gotta remember ‘em, you got that right.” He chuckles at his own joke.

It is true. Generally speaking, a colour that dithers between clementine and cotton candy pink is deemed ‘peach’. This is despite the fact that peaches are not, in fact, this colour.

But Edward remembers a rose.

They are in the front garden, just past the picket fence that first caught her eye, but not following the other hopeful homebuyers into the house. Flowering vines grace the front of the house while the garden itself is a mix of rosebushes and carefully maintained hedges.

She turns slowly, hands uplifted. Her face is luminous. “It’s so beautiful! And so ... English!” She laughs then, brown eyes sparkling. “My family will think it’s hilarious.”

“Hi-hilarious?” It’s not quite the reaction he was expecting.

Yamini stops and smiles at him. “It’s okay. It’s funny in a good way! And we will decorate the inside in true Indian fashion. That will surprise *your* family!”

It certainly would.

He pulls a small rose from a bush, trying not to think about his last argument with his mother. The rose is pale pink with orange veins through it. From a distance, the colours merge into one. Peach, some would call it.

Edward tucks the rose behind her ear. It clashes horribly with her bright red and gold sari.

He smiles, even as he wonders.

“So whatcha gonna do with those, anyway?” Bernie is curious. It’s not the first time he’s asked, but he never pushes. “If ya need another envelope, I got one. Nice red one. That one ya got, it’s fallin’ apart.”

“It’s fine ... I ... I’ll probably never send them.” The admission has surprised even Edward and he clamps his lips together and bends over a new sample sheet.

Bernie pauses a moment, digesting this. Then he pushes off, shaking his head. “Nah, I’ll get it for ya. Got lots of ‘em.”

Later, Edward sits at his kitchen table and looks out over the garden. The picket fence needs painting and the hedges need trimming. He dips an Arrowroot biscuit into his tea and sighs.

Perhaps he will stay home next week. Take time off to fix up the house. And then ... could he really send it?

He fingers the garish envelope that has somehow come home with him today. Is it enough?

He opens it. Pearly grey peeks out at him. E36 – Tears of Yesterday.

Hiding behind it, D64 – Ocean of Regret.

S21 – The Other Path.

They had seemed so perfect for each other. He, studying for his Masters in English Poetry; she, a teacher of English Literature. When they met he’d been reading Keats. Yamini had introduced him to Rabindranath Tagore and others. He had believed in them, in their future. They both had.

Why had he let others change his mind? How could he have let fear overcome him?

And what, in the end, had he been afraid of?

“We have no time to lose’,” she had whispered, quoting Tagore. “And having no time we must scramble for a chance.” It was the closest she would come to begging. Begging him not to change his mind, not to go back on his promise.

He would never forget the look of betrayal in her eyes.

T14 – Love’s Labour Lost.

Bernie never saw these names. He wouldn’t have liked them. They are spare sample cards, for Edward’s eyes only.

Finally, he finds his favourite at the back of the pile; a pale yellow, like a citrus cloud.

P32 – Hope of Tomorrow. Right behind R89 – Undeserved Forgiveness.

He stares at it for a long time. His emotions are a tangled mess and he can't find the ends to sort them out. The years have done their best to squash any lingering sparks of hope, and yet ...

What did Tennyson say?

*“It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles ...”*

Perhaps it is time he “hacked his way to glory bright” ... or at least to the post office.

By early February, there is some temporary relief from the heat. Rain has fallen to soften the earth - and somehow, also the sky.

On this bright February morning Edward is pruning his roses. There are old blooms hanging on the bushes, heads drooping and colour fading. He knows they can't stay.

Edward grasps a wilted brown flower in one hand. He squeezes the secateurs and sighs as another dead bloom drops into the bucket.

A shadow falls over him.

“Edward?”

He turns, his breath catching.

“Yamini.”

She is the same, and yet not the same. The sunlight catches in hair that is more silver than black, and her eyes are sadder than he remembered.

Then she smiles, and she is twenty again.

“I can't believe you bought this place!”

He laughs a little. “Yes.” He looks around, then back at Yamini, as though he is afraid she will disappear.

“And the roses – they're ... are they the same? I know nothing about roses.” She steps closer as her gaze travels over the garden.

“I ... yes ... they’re the same.” He glances down at his bucket. “I’m just ... trimming them. The dead blooms. They won’t come back.” There is a hint of wistfulness in his tone.

A soft hand covers his callused one.

“Ed ... I got your envelope. Can we talk?”

There is a pause. It seems to hold all the silence of three decades.

Edward looks up.

“Yes,” he whispers.

Dilmah tea. Arnott’s gingernuts. His envelope lies on the table between them, postmarked and opened. There are tears, and there are smiles.

They sit at the kitchen table together, and it almost feels as though this is theirs. Their home. How it should have been. Edward feels a warm glow of happiness forming deep inside of him. He looks at the woman across from him and dares to hope.

Yamini reaches inside her purse.

“I have something for you. They’re Dulux, I’m afraid.” A smile quirks at the corner of her mouth as she pulls out a bundle of swatches.

He stares.

They spill over the table, a palette of bold and soft, bright and dark. Pen marks, squiggly handwriting, mark the surfaces.

But they are not new.

“How ... when did you ... ?”

Yamini reaches out and begins to sort through the pile. “I knew about your job.” She carefully selects a dog-eared blue, like the water off Santorini. “A student of mine worked at Percy’s, back in the eighties. He told me about the English professor who sometimes worked weekends naming the new palettes. ‘Same last name as a famous poet’, I believe he told me.” She laughs softly and holds up the card. “I didn’t know that you were collecting them too. But sometimes when I saw one ... I guess I thought of you.”

He reaches out, wrinkled hand trembling slightly. “‘Ring’d with the azure world, he stands.’ I remember reciting that one! You clapped like you’d never heard it before. Very generous of you.” His smile reveals a dimple that hasn’t been seen in years. He stares down at the card, shaking his head slightly. “So you renamed Dulux

cards in our honour?" He turns it over in his hand. "Do they all have poems on them? Or just this one?"

Her smile dims a little. "It was therapy. Or penance. I have no idea what I thought I would do with them."

Edward's hand drops to the table. "Penance?" His disbelief rings through the quiet kitchen. He swallows and tries again. "Mini, you did nothing wrong. It was my fault. I'm so sorry-" His voice cracks.

"No." Her hand is up and he knows not to interrupt. But now she is struggling to find the words. She takes a sip of tea, looks down, then straight into his eyes.

"Nothing is ever just one person's fault." She says it quietly but he can hear her determination. "Ed ... there were things I did ... that didn't help the situation."

He is shaking his head but she goes on.

"You know what I'm talking about."

She is breathing hard, the memories sparking tears of regret.

"All those years I just ... But I didn't know ... I didn't know you would ..." She covers her face with her hands.

Edward reaches out.

"Mini."

Her shoulders shake. He moves to her side and holds her, letting her cry.

Finally her sobs recede. Her face is tear-stained as she turns to him.

"Do you forgive me, Ed? Really and honestly?"

He clasps her hand. "There is nothing to forgive. I was still wrong. I had a choice." He takes a deep breath. "The betrayal was mine. Will you forgive me?"

They stare at each other, thinking of that time so long ago.

"Love was lost," she says finally, softly stroking his head, "and now it is found again. If I cannot forgive, what have I got left?"

They return to the garden, like time-travellers returning to a happier moment.

The bucket and secateurs are still waiting beneath a rose bush. Yamini fingers a dead bloom.

"I'm no gardener, but I take it ... this isn't the end? Of these bushes?"

Edward smiles and reaches down for his tools.

"No. It's not the end. I'm pruning so that we get more growth." He starts to snip again, the withered memories of summer falling into the bucket like heavy rain.

She hesitates. "So ... things can be beautiful again? Like before?"

He turns slowly, his face a mixture of grief and hope.

"Yamini. Yes. There will be beauty after the winter. More beauty than you can imagine."

Her smile is like a sunrise.

Then he holds her again, because sometimes words, no matter how beautiful, are not enough.