

## Our Grey World – Bijou, Year 5, NSW

The sunlight was grey. It pooled through the window spreading with the rising sun, up over the sleeping city. Yet, the sunrise was not beautiful, nor mellow like a flower, or shrouded in clouds. It was grey. Grey, like everything else I saw in the world. My room, my house, my school. My mother's triangular, dangly earrings, suited for a special occasion, but worn day after day as they bore no beauty.

The pills catch my attention every morning, even though they were the same shade as the kitchen table. They looked innocent, and they are, sort-of. This medication is covered in grey spots and leaves a foul aftertaste in your mouth, a bitter flavour that should not belong near someone's taste buds. Issued by our government, who favoured work and production over the imagination and diversity of a society, they wipe all colour from our eyes. It was like a veil over everyone's eyesight, hiding the world's true colours. Literally. Without colour, there was no art or theatre. Books became bland, like the author had lost the will to be inspired, and the world was in tatters.

Click-clack! The sound of a wheelee suitcase bumping into the steps in our yard. The churning, grinding noise of footsteps against gravel and a gentle tap of knuckles on the door. Grandpa!

A hiss of laughter escapes my mother's mouth as the keys jangle, but it is strangled by Grandpa's call of greeting. I look up. His face is framed by a bob of dark hair, greying at his temple, with round glasses and milky lenses. His smile is empty, and his eyes are cold, yet not in a mean way, but a sad one.

I think I know why.

Grandpa still remembers the days before the government's ban on colour, the days without the spotted pills. He was a painter, smearing paint onto canvases, creating stories and secrets, knitting together a blanket of imagination and beauty and colour. And he misses it. It's not like my mother, who was born just before the ban and remembers nothing but the world we live in now.

"Hello, Greer."

He spoke in a soft, quiet voice, that quavered in his old age. The wrinkles that wrapped around his mouth curved upwards as he smiled at me, but it was only temporary, and they never lost that sorrowful quality.

"Grandpa!"

I'm happy to see him, and I let it show, however, he pushes past me, his ancient joints creaking all the way to his room. I can still smell the paint. It is an acrid smell, like turps, but is so addictive that it draws in my nose.

"Andrew! Let me help you with that," my mother says, as she gestures to his suitcase, "And Greer will get you a cup o' coffee."

I do. The coffee beans look scaly and smooth, until I grind them. In my mind, coffee would be a rich, dark colour. Rich and creamy like chocolate tastes. But I wouldn't know. Even through the mug, the hot coffee burns my fingers until they're numb.

"Have you taken your pills?"

My mother is at my heels by the time I'm adding sugar.

"Yes," I reply, stoic as a rock.

"And the coffee is done?"

"Yes."

"Then take it to your grandfather, I need the kitchen for dinner."

My feet shuffle up the stairs. I can hear the crash of Grandpa's suitcase and the wheeze of its zipper.

"Greer! Don't forget his pills," my mother calls, an urgency in her voice.

"I haven't."

I tapped the door with the back of my hand and entered his room. The guest room smells like dust, mould and, recently, paint, though the wafts of Grandpa's steaming coffee is overpowering. The mug clinks onto the table, clattering in my shaking hand.

"Grandpa. I've got your pills," I say.

"Well... thank you, Greer."

The sadness of his eyes is much more exaggerated in this bright room. I see dark bags under his eyelids, a sign of many restless nights.

"How was your trip, Grandpa?"

"Long, grey. The usual," he sighs, "The countryside gets bleaker and bleaker all the time, you know, since... the pills."

"What was it like? Colour, I mean," I blurt out. I don't mean to be insensitive, but I'm dying to know.

"It was beautiful. Colourful. None of this ugly grey. I wish I could see it again, see the paint on my paper. I wish I could just stop taking the pills. But I know what happens. Anyway, what would it do," he says, shrugging, trying to force a smile onto his face, but failing, "the pills last forever after fifteen years of use and I've been taking them too long. I can't stop now, Greer, and it would be foolish for me to try."

Grandpa's words stick with me all the way to bed. I've twisted myself into a knot of blankets and my hand is sweaty as I have been clutching my evening pills for hours. I still haven't taken them and I'm not sure why.

Colour? No, I think, it's not possible. Definitely not. I can't stop taking the pills! The government will find out. They'll punish me. They'll send Mom to jail, and Grandpa and keep me in an orphanage for the rest of my childhood.

But then, I remember my hidden moments with Grandpa, locked behind doors, sharing fleeting stories of the time with colour. Sunsets and sunny skies. Rolling hills and the look of paint smeared onto paper. Maybe I could have that colourful life, and then, I could share with Grandpa, just one day... so I slip them into my pyjama pocket.

Nothing happens. As I drift off to sleep, the world remains grey as it always was.

I wake to the sound of the heavy feet stomping down the stairs. My eyes are foggy, numb and the room in front of me blurs in and out of focus. It's early in the morning and a cool breeze tousles the curtains. But, as my eyes clear, I see something I have never seen before.

Colour.

I sink to the floor, my heart beating like I've just run a mile. It pokes me in both eyes and makes tears run down my face. There are so many different types. One is soft, mellow, and bright and it lights up the bedroom with a fragile glow. Sunlight. Some are warm, plush, and heavy and make me feel brave. They are very rich colours, and the more I stare at them, the more happiness inflates like a bubble inside me.

Outside my window, I see colours swimming through the sky. They are dark in the light of the rising sun, and swirled with clouds and your eyes get lost looking at them. They look calm and happy, yet they make my breath catch and my heart pound with their beauty. The pot plants on the veranda are a lazy shade, deep and thoughtful. Their delicate leaves have multicoloured veins on either side and the stems look flimsy. On top of the plants are flowers, trembling in the breeze, covered in colours that look juicy like the taste of a crisp strawberry.

Yet, I still feel the weight of the pills in my pocket.

"I have to tell him," I whisper to myself, so I look outside one more time, and see the sun, peeking over the tops of the city buildings, staining the windows, "Then I'll take the pills again."

I know by the creak of the floorboards and the grumbling of the coffee machine that Grandpa is up already, and probably the only one. A bright, twinkling morning light is spilt all over the carpet, creeping through the high windows and into the kitchen.

"Grandpa, you're never going to believe this," I call from the stairs, but he cuts me off. "Shh! Greer, your mother's still sleeping! What do you want?"

"Sorry," I say, bursting at the seams with excitement, "I saw it, Grandpa! I stopped taking the pills and I see it! Colour!"

“Shh,” he says, lowering his voice. His face is suddenly laced with terror. “What? How?”

“Just this morning. There was colour everywhere. Come and see!” I pull Grandpa to the window. “Look outside,” I announce, “Look at the sun! It’s this sort-of gentle colour, a ball of pure happiness. And the sky is tinted with joy, knotted through wispy clouds.”

Even though he still sees grey as he stares outside, there is a happy tear rolling down his cheek.