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Word Count: 1976 (not including title)

*High Value Gray*

*It happened innocently enough, one Saturday morning. Mary had painted zealously all night; her hands, though washed, still effused the telltale pigments. She was dreaming when light from the first text message awakened her.*

*"I'm so sorry," the text said. "I don't know what to say, but I want you to know that I'm here for you in this hard time. My condolences."*

*Confused, Mary checked the name of the friend who'd texted and decided that this must be a mistake. She rolled over, intending to return to her dreams, but was unsettled. A few minutes later, the insistent light again interrupted the darkness.*

*"Mary, I want you to know that I'm thinking of you and praying for you." This text was from a second friend. "Please, let me know if you need anything." And then, a few seconds later, "I know she was like your own child."*

*Mary sat up. Had something happened to...?*

*With shaking fingers, Mary called the second friend who had texted.*

*"Hey," Mary croaked raspily, a little angrily. "Did something happen?"*

*"Oh my God!" her friend gasped. "Brad said you knew! I'm so sorry..."*

*And just like that, all of the colors in the world were snuffed out.*

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*The world was black and white but mostly gray. Many things, such as the funeral, were not even in focus. Romantic impressionism transitioned into dark minimalism, sometimes stippling. Mary didn't dream anymore.*

*Months passed. Mary's hands were clean these days, and her face looked much older in the mirror. Wrinkles glared starkly. Small streaks of Mary's dark blonde hair had gone legitimately gray at her temples, though it was almost indistinguishable since all colors had flown away.*

*Living in grayscale seemed oddly appropriate for a life that focused on struggling to shuffle back and forth between work and home. No one, besides Mary's cats, observed or cared intimately about her life on a day-to-day basis. She was alone in her thoughts and feelings, but the idea of talking to anyone about them felt crushing. Well-meaning people instructed Mary to be thankful, to focus on the positive things in life. Mary was thankful, but that didn't mean that light could cancel out the overwhelming, ubiquitous shadows that towered over her or followed her through each day, clinging to her heels like exponentially spreading tar.*

*Mary eventually reached a day that she could no longer bear it. She had no energy for the outlets of painting or playing piano, but since she kept dragging herself to work, she visited her coworker Kurt's office.*

*Kurt was an artist —specifically, a writer— and an honest man. He was crusty yet lithe, and though he could be sharp and liked his coffee black, she knew she could depend on him to be stubborn enough to insist that colors existed, no matter what she was experiencing.*

*When she, overwhelmed with shame, sat down in a plump black chair next to his desk and confessed her problem to him, he was gracious.*

*"I couldn't see colors myself, for a long time," Kurt said, to her surprise. "I became an alcoholic. I was an alcoholic for about ten years." He raised his eyebrows. "I'm sober now."*

*"I promise I won't drink until I feel less compromised," Mary said. "I wanted a gin and tonic last night, but it felt like a slippery slope."*

*Kurt tapped at the handle of his snow-colored coffee mug, which had a smoky-gray wisp of steam trailing upwards from its obsidian contents. "I think it's wise to take a break. The colors you see when you drink aren't real."*

*"I have no idea what to do," Mary said, covering her face with her hands while tears filled her eyes. "I don't think I'll ever be able to see colors again, at least not the way that I did before. This feels like permanent damage."*

*She spread apart two of her fingers, but since she didn't dare look at his face, she instead looked down at his tattoo-riddled arms; with life in monochrome, the tattoos looked like dark lace. She couldn't remember what colors they had been.*

*Kurt stroked his beard in thought. "Maybe you can try to coax the colors back by starting with simple things," he said. "You've still got the other four senses, right? Can you taste?"*

*"Not much," she said. "I can taste bitter things, but that's about it. Maybe my tasting problems are because of Covid." She looked at the strong cup of coffee in his hand.*

*Kurt grunted dismissively at the idea that Covid was the problem. "Maybe you could go directly from flavor to flavor to practice distinguishing them, like sit there with coffee, a lemon, a salty dill pickle, and some honey. Shock your tongue a little bit."*

*"That's one idea," Mary said. Lowering her hands, she looked plainly at Kurt's face. She knew intellectually that his eyes were blue, but today, they were only a piercing, high value gray.*

*"Can you smell?" Kurt asked.*

*"Not very well."*

*Kurt paused to inhale the aroma of his coffee before taking another sip. "Is it harder to identify scents than it used to be?"*

*Mary nodded, but took a second to speak. "I know that certain smells should remind me of happier times, but I'm drawing blanks. A lot of smells I notice that should be good, feel either impotent or cloying instead."*

*Kurt glanced upwards at a poster of Duke Ellington tacked to his office wall.*

*"What about music?"*

*"It mostly all sounds the same," Mary choked. "Nothing stands out."*

*"Even the blues are better than the grays," Kurt said. "Well, how about hot and cold? Can you feel a difference?"*

*"I think so," Mary said. "I can't get warm enough most of the time, but then suddenly, I'm too hot and really sweaty." She could feel heat gathering in her face right now, though she knew from experience that her own darkening flesh simply looked about the color of a light raincloud.*

*"I see," Kurt said.*

*They were both silent for several seconds.*

*"How did you get your colors back?" Mary asked.*

*Kurt took another sip of his sparkling jet coffee before setting the mug down with a determined clink. "I had to work with what I had." He looked into her eyes. "You might have to embrace the grays."*

*Mary blinked and bit her lip. He continued.*

*"You paint. Why not pull out your palette and do some mixing? Look for the difference between blacks that are bluer or redder, or shale versus, I don't know, whatever other grays there are. I don't know the names of grays."*

*He looked down at the desk, then back at her. "Try to train yourself on the difference between warm whites and cold whites. Those little steps could at least provide variety for your artist's eye." He rested his chin on his hand. "Even black and white are comprised of other colors, if you examine them long enough. What do you think?"*

*"I could do that," Mary said. "Even if I never get to enjoy vibrant colors again, I think I can at least try that."*

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*Mary contemplated Kurt's words all day long. On the way home from work, she stopped at a grocery store, beginning with the florist section.*

*She walked back and forth examining the colorless blooms, globs of grays and near-blacks, wanting to get what she needed on her own. It quickly became overwhelming.*

*"Can I help you?" asked the girl behind the counter.*

*"I'm sorry," Mary said with a catch in her throat. She blinked away irrational-feeling tears. "I need some yellow sunflowers and some red roses, but..." she hesitated, "I'm colorblind."*

*"Don't worry, I can help," said the girl warmly. "All kinds of people need help sometimes. It's okay."*

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*When Mary got home, she began by lighting a stout candle. The action felt sacred, even though the only candle she could find had a dark, deep gray sheen that she knew should be green. It was a pine-scented Christmas candle. The bright white flame stood high, challenging the air with its existence even as it flickered, and she could almost imagine that the dark edges of the fire were orange. She felt the heat of the match almost burn her fingers right before she blew it out.*

*She put on a favorite album of instrumental piano music; it awakened a longing in her soul. She had forgotten about this album and the memories that she associated with it, homemade dinners with friends on starry nights.*

*On the kitchen table, under a lamp, Mary set up a still life composition that had been pieced together only through the help of benevolent strangers and careful deduction; she arranged two oranges, three limes, two lemons, an artichoke, a Gala apple, and a pair of bananas in her grandmother's china bowl, which, to the best of her memory, had been blue and white. As far as the bananas, Mary figured that they had to be yellow, at least somewhat, because they had those little sugar freckles.*

*Without any colors to guide her, Mary took special notice of the forms and weights of the fruits and their tangible satin-like or textured surfaces in her hands. She*

*used these features to choose each item's position in space. She noticed the beauty of the contrasts between matte and luster, the scalloped and simple line, the fibrous and smooth. She could appreciate the light and dark values despite ignorance of any color hues.*

*To the side of the bowl, she placed a small, bright sunflower and several roses; the rose heads looked like dark, plush velvet suspended on stems bearing glossy, almost-black leaves. She set down a shiny wineglass full of sweet grape juice that ought to be purple and a sourdough French loaf. Light danced on liquid, and flaxen wheat flour dusted the heat-tempered finish of the crust.*

*In a kind of communion with the still life, Mary tore off the heel of the bread for her own plate, exposing the loaf's tender insides for her composition. She poured herself her own glass of grape juice. These would sustain her while she worked.*

*Mary breathed a prayer as she picked up the chalky-gray wooden palette, then squeezed out the butter-like paint from each tube labeled with the name of a primary color: cadmium red, cadmium yellow, and cerulean blue. She remembered that she'd always favored cerulean blue over ultramarine because it reminded her of tropical beaches. She added dabs of titanium white, burnt sienna, and ivory black for good measure.*

*She stared down at the drab blots and tried to imagine the colors cooperating in the way that they had once done a lifetime ago. She tried to remember how blending should feel through the brush's soft hair and how to match the values of the paint on the canvas to the arrangement. Getting the values right was more important than*

*getting the correct color hues. The values, the right relationship between darkness and light, are what give depth and perspective to anything.*

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*When Mary was satisfied enough that she was willing to stop and go to bed, — she had given her paint brush one last good rinse and then set it down— she looked up to see that dawn was peeking at her through the kitchen window from over the horizon, inviting her into a new day.*

*She yawned and caught a whiff of the pine-scented candle. Her eyes were tired. She rubbed them, then stretched her arms as she looked one last time from the canvas back to the arrangement to check her values, the shadows, and the highlights. With the addition of the dim but growing sunlight filling the kitchen from the window, Mary could see, on the fruit inside the bowl, the gentle glimmer of colors.*