

Winter 3-11-1982

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Recommended Citation

Gilbert, Julie E. (1982) "Color Of Life," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 1 : No. 2 , Article 27.
Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol1/iss2/27>

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Color Of Life

by Julie E. Gilbert

The alarm drifted in and out of her dream. She was alone in a corridor. A terrifying sensation swept through her. There was no escape. She was running up and down the stretch of the corridor as the ringing pounded in her ears.

She opened her eyes. All of her senses brought her back to the room that had felt so comfortable to her. She reached over to turn off the alarm that seemed so piercing this morning. The fear of the dream seemed to dissipate. She lay her head back down on the pillow.

Another day had slipped by and still she felt she had no solution to her problem. Glancing out the window, she saw a blue jay. She had always admired the bird until her grandfather told her that they were a mean flock.

"Attack the eyes, they do, my dear Nancy, and bring darkness to those that love 'em," he had said in his lilting Irish manner.

She had wondered how anything so beautiful could be so deceiving. Now she knew the answer. Her grandfather could not have explained it to her any better than her new found knowledge of such a specie.

Nancy slowly moved the covers off her body. It seemed to be an effort to get out of bed this morning. Already it occurred to her that she had felt this way every morning for the past few months. Assuming an upright position in the bed, her feet searched for the feel of her slippers. In a continuous motion, she donned her slippers and stood up. She walked over to the window that had earlier entertained her thoughts. The blue jay had long since left, leaving her to stare at the barren trees that stood outside her window. The sky was an unfitting bright blue that added a glimmer to the freshly fallen snow.

This quiet scene, undaunted by the blue jay, gently swept through her for a brief moment. A tear rolled down her cheek and plummeted on her pajamas. Whatever it may have been that forced the tear to roll down her cheek was not going to be examined. She had no intention of pursuing such trivia.

Nancy turned away from the window and walked towards the bathroom. Many times before she had walked toward the bathroom without being disturbed by any obstacles. Today she noticed the picture of her brother and his wife. They were standing in front of their house in Virginia, both of them smiling, proud of each other and their home. Nancy's sister-in-law was pregnant then, now they have a little girl.

The sense of loss permeated her being. The pain of envy seemed unbearable as she surged for the bathroom. Even the mirror had no intention of lying to her today. The tears were rolling freely as if they would not stop. Grabbing a tissue from behind the toilet, she wiped her cheeks. She looked hard into the mirror and saw how vulnerable she seemed.

Stemming from the part of her long brown hair were premature gray hairs. Her long dark lashes held onto small tears that had not yet touched her fair skin. Swollen and red were her blue eyes that had once looked so youthful. Pretending to smile joyfully, the warmth was exchanged for a jaded appearance. Her once trim figure seemed to have thickened over the past few months.

"How could I have done this to myself?" she screamed.

Feeling some composure at this strange outburst, she pulled out the toothbrush that fit neatly in its holder. As she was preparing to push the fluid on her brush, the haunting memories came back to her.

"I want a divorce, Jeffrey."

"Nancy, I swear I won't see him again."

How many times do I have to listen to this, Jeff? If it isn't Mario, it will be somebody else down the line. Who knows, maybe a month, maybe two, who knows?"

"I can't take it anymore. It hurts everytime I find out about it. You weren't meant to be married, and certainly not to me. I want a divorce, the sooner the better."

"Nancy, try to understand. It's not that I don't love you, I really do."

"If you really loved me, Jeff, you never would have married me. Don't you know how much I love you? I'm torn all the time; let you go, keep you. Jeff, I want to have a family. I want to have a home for my children. I can't have a home if you're running around with some other guy all the time. How on God's earth would I explain it to them?"

"Nancy, you don't have to worry, we don't have any

She was rudely awakened by the soap that fell on her foot in the shower.

"Damn, that hurt."

Until today it had never occurred to her the ritual she simulated daily. She hadn't remembered getting into the shower. This seemed a bit unnerving, since she had wanted to forget Jeff, at least for the moment.

How could she forget him, though? His childish grin and innocent eyes seemed to be playing with her mind today. She remembered her wedding and the comments of how handsome Jeff was. His strong build was accentuated by his beige tuxedo. She was proud of him then.

Today it would be over. She would never wonder where he was and who he was with.

She got out of the shower and patted the drips of water that tried to escape her towel.

The phone began to ring. She was stunned for a moment and stood there motionless. It rang three more times before she moved from the bathroom, throwing her robe over her damp shoulders. It stopped before she reached the kitchen. She retraced her steps to the bathroom. When she reached the bathroom door the ringing began again. She turned and proceeded towards the kitchen once more. Slowly she picked up the receiver.

"Hello," she managed to say.

"Hi Nancy, it's Jeff."

"I had a feeling it was you."

"Are you okay today?"

"Do you really care, Jeff? You're getting what you want."

"What do you want, Nancy?"

She had started fidgeting with the cord that was attached to the receiver. She felt the tears swell beneath the lower lid of her eye.

"You're not having doubts about going through with it, Nancy?"

"It was my idea, remember?"

"If it's any consolation, I think you were right."

"How can you say that? You didn't want the divorce."

"Nancy, I still love you and I know it could never work the way you would like it to."

"Don't give me this martyr routine, Jeff."

"I'm not, Nancy. Believe me, I want you to be happy. I was afraid to face my being a homosexual. You forced me to look at myself."

She began sobbing uncontrollably.

"Nancy?"

"I'm here," she said stiffly.

"Thank you for being strong enough to make the decision."

She felt some sort of anxious relief exit her body. Her composure was coming back to her. She drew in a deep breath to clear the fullness she felt within her sinuses. Her hand gently erased the tears that had streamed down her face.

"Are you there?"

"I'm here, Jeff."

"Nancy, before you know it you'll be married with ten kids. A husband that will be there for you."

"I can handle the husband, but I don't know about ten kids," she forced a smile at the absurdity of such a statement. The seriousness of their conversation came back to her.

"Jeff, why didn't you tell me before we were married?"

"I didn't know what I wanted then. Everyone I knew got married, it was the thing to do. Would it have changed anything anyway?"

"Probably not. I would have thought I could change you."

The conversation stopped for a moment; both of them were in a trance wondering if somewhere along the way things would have been different.

"I'll always love you, Jeff, even if you are," she paused for a moment carefully forming her words, "a homosexual."

"You can say gay, Nancy, it doesn't bother me."

"Gay, then." It seemed strange for her to say it.

"Can we ride to the courthouse together? Maybe we could go out to lunch after it's all over?"

"No, Jeff, I don't think so."

"Okay, maybe later then."

"Jeff, I have to get going, I'm still not dressed."

"See you later, Nance."

"Okay, bye-bye."

She hung up the phone and walked through the hallway to her bedroom. All she seemed to feel was an immense sadness. The loneliness engulfed her entire being. She missed him. She missed the warmth and the love he had freely given to her.

Nancy walked over to the bed and sank into the depths of its comfort. When she opened her eyes a few moments later, she was staring into the crevice of her pillow. She rolled on her side.

It was the blue jay that she had loved as a child. It was Jeff she had loved as an adult. Still, as she watched the blue jay romp about on the branches outside her window, the remarkable beauty that it displayed could not be forgotten, not even by her grandfather's words. For the first time in what seemed to be an eternity, she saw the beauty that marked this bird. Its brilliant blue that brought color to her life.

She jumped up almost instantaneously with her last thought and dashed into the kitchen. Her fingers fumbled nervously with the buttons on her phone.

"Jeff, I really do want to go to lunch with you."

Cousins

by Carolyn Belletre

Randy sat solemnly at the edge of the cow pond, his piercing blue eyes staring aimlessly into the glasslike water. The deep furrows of thought burrowed heavily into his forehead. As he blinked away, his glance and mind were carried to the farm. It was apparent that little had changed since he had left to go to college six years ago in 1962. Cows still chewed placidly on the sparsely growing blades of grass. A few ducks wandered about the edge of the pond quacking incessantly and nipping at a fly or beetle which carelessly landed within the reach of their beak. This was where Randy had grown up, his years of childhood bliss and learning were all around him.

The letter from his Aunt Mira, which he had been reading was laid carefully in his lap, the tender bits of reminiscing about the summers her son Jeffrey had spent on the farm popping out at him. It was impossible for Randy to keep his thoughts from going back to one summer, which would forever remain a part of the memory of Jeffrey's visits.

It was the summer before Randy would begin high school. Most of the boys in his class were working on the farms, which their families owned or rented. Once in a while, a few of the boys would get done with their chores early or else the weather was too miserable to work the land, and then they would come by and just mess around for a while. Generally, Randy spent most of the time by himself. His family lived on a small farm in isolated country.

The best part of that summer for Randy was when his cousin Jeffrey came to visit. Jeffrey was a city boy from Chicago, which fascinated him. There was a wealth of questions Randy wanted to ask Jeffrey about the city, hoping that someday Jeffrey would have him come to visit and experience the sights and sounds of city life for himself. When Jeffrey finally arrived, the boys were immediately friends as well as relatives. Jeffrey was only a year older than Randy, and even though he was from Chicago, he certainly wasn't a snob or pansy as Randy had imagined he might be. The rapport between them was genuine and Randy wanted to show Jeffrey all about the country life which surprisingly interested him. Day after day, the boys spent getting better acquainted and exploring everything about the area.

Although the entire summer was especially memorable, since the bond of friendship was tightly woven between the boys, it was the day before Jeffrey was to go back to the city that was now the focus of Randy's thoughts. The day was already hot and humid, but they wanted to kick around the farm one last time. After an enormous breakfast of pancakes and sausages, Jeffrey suggested that they take the rifles out and do some target practicing. Randy swelled with pride since he had patiently taught Jeffrey to be a better than average marksman and to always remember that a gun should be respected and not used as a toy. Learning to shoot and perfecting his skill was actually going to be tested when Jeffrey came back during the fall to go hunting with Randy and his father.

Shooting was fun but the burning sun grew hotter and hotter the higher it rose in the sky. There was little relief from the heat. No hint of breeze moved even the lightest leaf. The cow pond was only a mile from the house and Randy and his friends had often gone swimming there. Going back to the house for suits would be a waste of time as far as Randy was concerned. More than once he had gone skinny dipping; although, if his mother had found out, she would have really given him the devil for such indecency.

"Jeff, how 'bout we take a quick dip to cool off?"

"That" would be a great idea. But where's the pool? Your mother doesn't have time to take us into town, does she?"

"Aw no. We'd just go down to the cow pond for some skinny dipping."

The skeptical look on Jeffrey's face told Randy that a little more encouragement might be needed to get his cousin's enthusiasm geared up for this.

"The guys from school and I go lots of times when we get some free time. It's really great to see the ducks fly when we splash water on 'em. Only thing is you have to be careful not to rile them too much or they'll come chasing after you. My buddy Mike got a terrific black and blue mark the size of a baseball when the old drake necked him."

After only the slightest pause, Randy saw Jeffrey's face light up. "I guess it would be a great way to cool off. Okay, let's go!" Jeffrey exclaimed.

The boys sped off toward the pond and began taking off their shirts in the process. By the time they reached the edge, both of them were nearly naked. The pond looked more than inviting; it was heaven to the boys. The water itself was no more than about fifty feet across and from experience Randy knew that at the deepest it was only eight feet. The worst part of swimming in the cow pond was getting to the water. For about three feet, all around the edge, it was ankle deep mud mixed here and there with manure. Once past the edge they would revel in the cool refreshing water.

Randy went flying by Jeffrey barely stepping on the edge and threw himself into the water. Coming up spewing water recklessly in the direction of the ducks dozing in the shade, he motioned for Jeffrey to jump in.

"Brother, is this great. I knew I was hot, but this sure does beat standing out in the sun. Hurry up and get in Jeff."

Jeffrey had carefully folded his clothes beside the heap that earlier had clothed Randy's body. His hesitation was only minimal and he prodded through the mire toward the water. Slowly the water rose up as he pulled his foot out of the mud, carefully replacing it again and stepped deeper into the water.

In only a matter of seconds, the water closed over Jeffrey's head and Randy wildly dove under the water and came up to join Jeffrey. Jeffrey's head was bobbing in and out of the water. Enjoying relief from the sweltering heat, Randy splashed, dove, and hollered with glee, oblivious to Jeffrey only a few feet away. Randy swung himself around in the water and looked around for his cousin. Nearby bubbles were gently breaking the surface and Randy assumed that Jeffrey must be submerged, and was probably going to swim under water and pull him under while he wasn't watching. Randy dunked his head under the water to turn the tables on his cousin. When Randy came up this time Jeffrey still was no where in sight.

He must be around Randy thought to himself. "Hey Jeff, come on up! Jeff! Where are you Jeff?"

Slowly an agonizing fear began to grip Randy. A fear which quickly grew until he was nauseated with the tightness in his stomach. Frantically thoughts whizzed through his mind about what he should do. Without thinking, Randy found himself diving into the murky water groping for his cousin. If only he could see in the water. If only he could hold his breath longer. He had to come up for air and return under the water several times before he finally felt his cousin's body not far from the edge of the water, with his legs practically buried in the mud.

Clawing at the sucking mud and pulling desperately at his cousin, Randy realized he must bring Jeffrey to the surface quickly. He had been under the water too long already.

The life-saving courses had been fine when the drowning person was conscious and at least was able to kick their feet to help. But with the dead weight of Jeffrey pulling against Randy it was seemingly hopeless for the lighter boy to bring his cousin out of the water. Struggling beyond his limits, straining every muscle until they felt as though they would literally tear from his body, Randy finally managed to pull Jeffrey to the bank.

Jeffrey's torso was lying lifeless on the bank. The eerie blue of a drowning person glowed through the caking of mud, which was already beginning to crust under the scorching sun. Randy was mesmerized by the frightful sight. His cousin's mouth hung open, muck oozing out and his tongue lolling placidly half in and half out. The eyes entranced Randy. Only the whites were visible.

Panic had squelched the fear in Randy. His first reaction was to run. Run faster and harder than he had ever run before. Run for help, run to hide, run, run, run. But his cousin was lying there dead or dying at his feet. The urgency of Jeffrey's horrifying look embraced Randy totally as he moved Jeffrey's arms so that his head was between his hands and made sure that his mouth was cleared as much as possible of the mud.