

## Mary's Colours

In the year of the floods, the year when pa got work lugging timber with old man Carthy and his bullock dray up and down the mountain providing fuel for the goldmines, the winter was bone-chilling damp and even our hide coats couldn't keep the wet out. The stubble of logged trees on the mountainsides glistened with the first rains, then darkened when the rain wouldn't stop and then seemed to melt into the sodden hills. Moss clung to the stumps like velvet capes thrown here and there. My sister Mary would point and say 'green' over and over. She knew her colours, my Mary, but she said no other words.

Mary was younger by five years and when the people in the town talked about her they called her strange and queer. It's true she was different. Our pa said as much but he also said that folks needed to mind their own and who was to say that Mary wouldn't grow up to be the prime minister one day.

I know she understood what folks were saying. You could see it in her eyes and the little creases each side of the top of her nose. The first word I heard her speak was blue.

"Blue," she said, pointing to the great expanse of summer sky that was pressing down onto the scrubby hills above our home.

"Yes," I replied, smiling at her voice that sounded like a burst of angel's wings fluttering on the breeze. "Blue sky. It's gonna be hot today, Miss Mary. So hot the chooks could fry their own eggs on the henhouse roof."

When it came time for school our pa said she wasn't to go. "The other kids would tease. You can teach her. If you think it's worth it."

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That year though it was too wet to leave her at home all day and besides, she'd done her chores before breakfast. So, up we'd ride to school on Stormy, our grey mare, and she'd sit outside the school room, listening in. On one particularly cruel morning Miss Harcourt let Mary in to sit at the back of the class as the rain pelted the tin roof so loud we couldn't hear the lesson anyway. Miss Harcourt let Mary choose a book from the small library and of course she chose a book of colours. On the way home she shoved it under her underclothes and it was the only thing that was dry when we got back. She never let that book out of her sight.

Over the next few weeks the river in town inched ever higher so that it slapped against the underneath of the footbridge. A boy from school drowned when he slipped off the muddy bank and was swept away so fast his mother could only hold his lifeless body when they hauled him out two days later during a drier spell. At the funeral the mother's tears filled Mary with a sadness that buried in her bones deeper than the chill of the weather. She refused to cross the bridge or stand near the gushing water. If there was water nearby she clung to me like she feared her own life would end that way. Only we had no mother to wail over us and I doubted our pa would give himself to weeping for too long over either of us before he found a pot of beer to douse his pain.

Pretty soon it was impossible for the bullock and dray to climb the mountain, so pa was laid off. There were stories of men and beasts going over the side, dragged off the side with their timber loads and all eight bulls to boot. And there they lay until the bones and wooden struts of the dray jutted out of their scrubby deathbed the next summer, giving the new bullocky men a good reason to steer straight.

So pa stopped at home and didn't even notice that Mary had started going to school. She would sit at the back and listen but she would never join in. Miss

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Harcourt just smiled and patted her head and the other kids let her be. As long as we brought pa back his beer and his sausages, his Chronicle and his tobacco he couldn't have cared less where we were. I was twelve then and with pa next to useless I found a job in the haberdashers. I would ride me and Mary up the hill to town, drop her off at school and I'd go to work with Mrs Cawley, counting the buttons and zips and cottons and wools and entering the figures in my best hand into the huge, musty ledgers. I'd get orders together for the ladies of the town and prepare the sales docketts. Mary would wait out the back for the shop to close and we'd ride home on Stormy, getting soaked.

One Monday the school house flooded and lessons were cancelled. Mary sat out the back of the shop all day. Mrs Cawley wouldn't let her in.

I took her out scraps of fabric and cottons and she was happy matching them to the colours in her book but it didn't stop her getting bored for too long. By Thursday she'd started to wander off. I followed her once, telling Mrs Cawley I had a headache I needed to clear, and she headed higher up the mountainside. I lost sight of her when she ducked down towards the miners' cabins. Ma had told me stories of the men who lived there. Chinese immigrants, murderers on the run, heathens and mercenaries all looking for a quick quid with a pan in one hand, a gun in the other and a sackful of stories that would lift the hairs right off the back of your neck.

"Word is there's a monstrous brute down there with legs the size of hundred year old gums and skin the colour of coal dust. They say he stepped off a boat from America and has a nose for sniffing out the biggest nuggets, whether he finds them in the river or in someone else's digs. They say he's mute. But of a night they hear a low rumbling coming from his hut that sounds like a dragon ready to blow." That was

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before ma died when I was just a child but it stuck with me, that monster man and his dragon breath.

I could hardly concentrate on my work until Mary came back caked in mud but grinning wildly.

“That child is not right,” Mrs Cawley said. “Your poor father. It’s a good thing your dear mother’s no longer with us. Such a shame.”

I curled my cold hands into fists. My mother would not have been ashamed of Mary. I drove Stormy hard down the hill ready to bust my guts to pa about how rude some folks could be but he was stuck into the grog already and the heat coming from his face could have kept the room warm for a week. I set the copper over the fire and heated water to scrub Mary clean.

“You look like the monster man, black faced and all,” I said.

“Black,” she replied.

“Like coal,” I said.

She closed her eyes and shook her head.

When the school opened again the next week Miss Harcourt was nowhere to be seen. Mary came out that day with her head lolled forward and her eyes sticky from crying. I heard one of the other kids say that there was a new teacher. Mr Miller. I saw him. Long and lean with a narrow face complete with a cruel white beard cut sharp into a point at his chin.

“Maybe you should sit with me in the shop again, Mary.” I knew she couldn’t put into words what she was feeling. I lifted her chin up so I could see her sweet face.

“Gold,” she said.

Gold meant luck. Gold meant comfort. Gold was a feeling like ma being alive and giving you a big fat hug. Mary loved gold most of all. The mountains were full of

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it. Mary panned for gold in the creek sometimes but we never found so much as a grain of it. She was crying so much now I took her stubborn hand and marched her to the Chronicle offices and we looked at the photos of men with nuggets in their hand.

“See the gold, Mary? It’s still there. Maybe you’ll be the first girl to find a huge nugget and they’ll name it the Mighty Mary and you’ll have your photo in the window of the Chronicle!” She didn’t giggle but she did stop crying and we rode Stormy back down the hill.

I didn’t think she’d want to go to school the next day but she did, clinging onto her book as she stood on the step looking back at me. When I arrived at the end of the day to collect her she wasn’t there. Most of the kids had left but I found the girl Heatherington and asked her where Mary was.

“She went home early. She was crying and she ran out of the back room. I don’t think Mr Miller likes her. She went crazy. She upset the little kids.”

Mr Miller walked past me and I wondered if I should ask him what he’d done to frighten Mary so much but he flashed me a warning look as if he could look into my mind and I realised then I didn’t need to ask him, it was just him being him that was making her so afraid. I took Stormy down to the miners’ huts. It was the only place I could think she’d be.

“Gold,” she was saying, over and over. Her voice was tiny and it was studded with sobs.

The hut she was in was clean enough from the outside but I wasn’t sure what I’d find on the inside. I nearly choked on my own scream when I stepped in through the open door to see Mary sitting on the knee of a giant man with skin the colour of coal dust.

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He was just as shocked to see me and he clasped his huge hands around Mary's waist and lifted her off his lap. She ran to me and folded into my chest, sobbing.

"She don't tell me what's been done to her," he said, standing up. His voice was so deep it sounded like he'd swallowed ten men. He was so tall he had to stoop under the low roof and he held his hands up declaring his innocence. "She come to me here and shown me her book. I shown her my books and that's all." He pointed to a small pile of tatty books piled up on a rickety table.

"She can't read," I said, frightened by what the books might be. Stories of evil foreigners, pirates at sea, those who worship other gods or the Devil. What had he filled Mary's mind with?

His huge round face split with a wide grin. "She sure can, Miss. She's mighty fine at reading. She just don't talk about it."

Mary pulled away from me and grabbed one of the books. *Treasure Island*. She pushed it at me and the giant man nodded. I took it and flicked through the first few pages.

"You can read this?" She blinked at me. "You don't talk but you can read a novel?"

The small cabin shook with an eruption of laughter. He bent over and held his knees as his back heaved up and down. At last he recovered enough to speak. "What's there to say when everyone thinks you're stupid? Sometimes it's best to play dumb."

I found myself gulping down a knot in my throat. "We'd better get going, Mary. Pa'll be expecting us."

As we left he pushed the book into my hand and I held it tight all the way down the mountain.

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That night I heard Mary crying under her blanket. She was whimpering and tossing this way and that. I took the book and put it into her hands and she hugged it to her like a teddy bear.

She whimpered the same way when I took her to school but with both her books clutched to her stomach she slipped into the wooden building and I went to work. That evening she wasn't outside again so I rode Stormy to the giant's hut and knocked at the door. There was no answer. The rain drilled down without warning and the skies were heaving with dark clouds. Other men started to drift back and I hoisted myself back up on the horse, scared.

When I got back into town, the rain eased a little and I hoped that I'd find Mary on the school steps. Instead, I rode straight into a gathering crowd at the footbridge. My heart froze. She hated the water. Surely, she wouldn't go anywhere near it. I ran to where they stood pushing through the elbows and skirts and canes to get to the water's edge. A constable was pulling a man's body from the surging river. My heart flipped with relief but was soon hammering again when the body was laid on the bank and rolled over. It was Mr Miller, the teacher.

From deep within the clutches of the crowd I saw a glimpse of Mary, her small back heading away and down the hill. She moved quickly and most people didn't give her a second glance. I broke free from the clamour and caught up with her. She pulled her books closer to her and we walked in silence until the bustle of the shops gave way to residences and gardens and quieter air. Cold rain beat a rhythm against my coat. She shivered.

“What happened to Mr Miller?”

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“Black.”

“Black is bad. Why was it bad?”

“Black.” She moved faster.

“How did Mr Miller fall in the river?”

“Black.”

“Were you there when it happened?”

She hesitated slightly but still said, “Black.”

“What did he do to you?”

She put her head down and marched away from me. I stopped. Should I follow her, go and get pa, go back to the constable and talk to him? Ma would have known what to do. I couldn't go back without Stormy so I headed back into town and watched for a while as the crowd milled and their collective voices rose and fell. From the back I caught a glimpse of the giant heading off to his hut. I followed him into the darkness.

“What's you doing here, Miss? Your sister ain't here.” His voice, whilst he tried to keep it to a whisper, still boomed.

“I know. I just wondered if you knew what happened. With Mr Miller and the river?”

He ushered me in and pointed to a stool at the little table. I refused to sit but was grateful to be inside out of the cold wet. The rain hammered heavy against the roof at least offering some privacy against eavesdroppers and neighbours.

“Your sister came here again this afternoon. I was down at the creek bed sifting through them rocks what fell in the night. She hunkered down next to me and cried whilst she watched me. She don't talk. You know that.”

“So do you know what happened?”



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He stood up and collected a single sheet of writing paper from the stool next to his bed. It had a jittery writing scrawled across it.

*He touched me.*

I shook with rage as I read and re-read it. Just a bunch of letters put together but they packed such a powerful blow.

“She was shaking and crying but she wrote it best she could. Then she ran out. I followed her. She went back to the school. Miller was coming out. He looked at me and he ran fast up towards the bridge. She gave chase. I ran too,” he swept his hands over his body, “but me being so big I move slow, see. When I gets there Miller was under the water. She was staring with those still eyes of hers. I truly don’t know if she did anything. I swear.” He made a fist and pumped his chest.

When I got home Mary was already in bed, her two books tucked under her head like a pillow. Her face was smeared with tears and pa was snoring in his chair, beer bottles collected at his feet. The police constable arrived an hour later. I woke Mary up but she just stared at him.

“There’s stories that she and the Negro were friendly.”

“Negro?” I asked, with all the innocence I could muster.

“The black fellow down at the miners’ huts. Why would she go there?”

“She wouldn’t. The stories are wrong.” I crossed my fingers behind my back.

“I’ll be talking to him tomorrow.”

“I heard he don’t talk,” pa said, leaning forward in his chair.

“Just like your daughter, Mr Walpole.” The constable rapped the table in front of Mary. “You should think long and hard about what happened today Miss Walpole. A man is dead and I think you know what happened.”

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“Black,” she whispered and buried her head in her arms.

I found out the next day from Mrs Cawley that the giant was dead. Beaten to death by a gang.

“I heard the constable say he'd interfered with a little girl and she'd told the teacher, that poor fellow Miller. Said she'd written a note because she was so traumatised she couldn't speak. But when the policeman finally got her to say something, it was obvious who'd done it to her. They're not going to make any arrests. He got what was coming to him.” She folded her arms around her chest and made a face that suggested all was good in the world.

I went home via the miners' huts and collected the rest of the books the giant had on his rickety table. They're added to Mary's pile and she reads them over and over again.