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I. Blood Red

THE FIRST DAY: Professor Preston enters the classroom. His face is unusual, but I like it. He wears dark blue slacks, a bright yellow shirt, and a blood red tie. His tie clashes with his shirt. It makes me feel nervous.

He goes to the blackboard and begins to write. “You won’t understand these ideas yet,” he says over his shoulder, “but copy these lines in your notebooks anyway. Please remember them.”

He hums a tune. The tune goes with the words he’s writing.

*Our Primary colors are one, two, three,*

*Red, yellow, and blue...*

I smiled. About a third of the class laughed out loud. The rest of the students looked around the room, puzzled. It was an inside joke.
“What’s going on?” the boy next to me asked.

“It’s a song that Latter-day Saint children learn in their Primary classes,” I said.

“Oh nuts,” he exhaled. “I didn’t know you were a Mormon.” There was regret in his voice. He’d been flirting before class started.

I shrugged. “It’s no big deal.” I loved the hunger in this boy’s eyes. I got out a pen and jotted down the last lines on the blackboard. I had NOT learned this verse in church, back when I was three or four. The professor wrote lines more cryptic:

Red Opposition, blood conflict, hard fight.

Yellow, Potential in morning sunlight.

Blue is for Pattern and far destiny.

Find these in all that we speak, do, and see.

Professor Preston began in a lively voice. “Red, yellow, and blue can be mixed to create millions of colors,” he said, “just as Potential, Opposition, and Pattern are the primary ingredients of everything that has meaning. I speak of thought, culture, and language, of course, but also logic, life, and love. These are all topics we’ll touch on.

“In these lectures, we borrow the ideas of Charles Sanders Peirce, nineteenth-century philosopher of science, semantics, and logic. Yellow Potential was his first logical category. Things must be abstract and potential before they get concrete and actual. Fictional characters must be developed before narrative conflict makes sense...”
I found my attention wandering. Looking around the room I saw many blank, even sleepy pairs of eyes. I forced myself to turn back to the professor. I tried to take more notes on what he was saying.

“...but consider the conflict of a story. Opposition is typically raised into first position. In the first line of the ancient Greek *Iliad*, Homer sings the wrath of Achilles. These days, mystery writers all include a dead body on page one. Opposition forces people to pay attention and keep reading...”

SLAM!

Quicker than you could say “*Iliad*,” Professor Preston wheeled around on one foot and shot a karate kick at his teaching desk. It was a heavy, hardwood desk and it slid several, screeching feet across the linoleum floor. All eyes were on the professor.

He smiled. His voice became lively again.

“For some of you, that is the first meaningful thing that I’ve done today. That’s Opposition at work. The velocity of my foot came into conflict with the inertia of the desk, and there was noise. Your survival instincts forced you to pay attention.”

Now he waved his ugly tie at us. “It’s the same with this color. Red puts people on edge. People react when there’s blood or even the potential for blood. They’re jumped on by survival instincts, to bind up the wound, or fight the attacker, or spy out the prey. Remember that a story is mostly Potential, mostly what-if and make-believe, but the conflict in a story has an actual effect on people. It keeps them reading.”
I raised my hand. The professor stopped talking.

“You have a question, Miss Reid?”

I paused. Now I did have a question. We’d never met before. I wondered how this professor knew my name, but I kept that question to myself. Instead I made this smart-sounding remark:

“Not every story has violence and blood on the first page. What about Hawthorne, or Melville, or Tolstoy? The old writers developed characters for a hundred pages before they got to the real conflict.”

The professor shrugged. “Like I said, it’s logical to start with characters and then move to conflict. Logical, but not practical. These days, stories have to fight with each other for survival, just like animals and plants do. The stories with great characters but no conflict until page 101, they did fine when there weren’t many other stories. Now they lose grazing space in people’s heads, especially minds being strip-mined by action movies and video games.

“These days, it’s the violent threat of a failing grade that compels people to read the classics. Many students would rather be punched in the mouth than forced to read War and Peace.”

Laughter filled the room around me. I felt my face coloring. I put up my hand.

“What is it now, Miss Reid?”

“What about love stories? People still read romance novels and they’re not full of blood and violence.”
His face brightened. “Now there’s a good and serious question. My answer is this. 

Opposition is not just a foot slamming a desk, or a knife to the heart. Red isn’t just the color of violence; it’s also the color of passionate love. It’s whenever two different physical bodies struggle to occupy the same space.”

This caught us all by surprise. The whole class laughed.

“Yes, it can be what you’re all thinking,” the professor said, “but red opposition can be so much more than passion or violence.”

“But Professor...” I let my voice be both playful and breathless, “what else is there?” I winked at him too.

He pretended not to notice. “Two answers struggling for the same question, that is Opposition as well. Who finally gets the girl in Gone with the Wind? It’s hard to say but impossible not to wonder. Scarlet loves Ashley. Scarlet loves Rhett. Rhett loves Scarlet, or does he? Sentences, conversations, or stories, all success in language begins with a question.

“A hard and vexing question,” the professor concluded, “a question where life and love hang in the balance. Write from this beginning, and many will follow the words forever.”

I noticed his eyes for the first time. They looked black at first, wonderful and dark. Then he turned toward me, and sunlight from the side windows danced reflections across his eyes. In better light, they were a twilight kind of blue, deep on the edge of a violet dawn.

This man was different. He didn’t need me, but he did need to answer hard questions. I was a hard question, a puzzle. Even a brilliant man might need an eternity to solve it.
II. Yellow Amber

Call me Amber.

I told Felix Preston that, back when I took his class. Back then, he never did. I had to be “Miss Reid,” just like everybody else was “Mr. Smith,” or “Mrs. Jones,” or maybe “Ms.
Jones,” if the girl had a feminist thing going. Other professors called us by our first names.

Some let us call them by their first names. Many never learned our names at all.

Professor Preston...already just Felix in my own head...Felix knew everybody’s name by the end of the first day. He knew my name from the beginning. My father is Gabriel Reid. Felix did consulting work for Papa at the INEL. Felix had sometime seen my picture on Papa’s desk.

“Call me Amber,” I told Felix again on the second day of that class.

“This sounds like the beginning of a Melville novel,” he replied. “‘Call me Ishmael,’ Melville wrote, and then he developed characters and background, hundreds of pages in Moby Dick, before the white whale appeared. It so happens, Miss Reid, that today I want to talk about characters, and the color of amber.”

He stepped to the back of the classroom. All heads turned. Moving from window to window, he threw open the blinds. Morning sunlight struck our faces. I blinked and shaded my eyes. As Felix returned to the front of the class, he repeated a couple of lines from his first-day song:

Red Opposition, blood conflict, hard fight.

Yellow, Potential in morning sunlight.

“If Red is the color of Opposition, the bloody conflict in a story,” he continued, “then Yellow is the color lighting the scenery in the background, and that background is full of Potential. The morning sun lights up the land and the world is full of possibilities.

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“Mr. Pitman!” Felix said suddenly. “If I excused you from classes this fine September morning, what would you do instead?”

The boy sitting next to me was caught off guard. “Uh...shoot. I guess I’d go to work early...try to sell an extra car or two today.”

Felix pointed at another student. “Ms. Parker, how about you?”

“I’d find some friends and get a volleyball game going.”

“I’d climb Meditation Hill and enjoy the view,” another girl said.

“You mean Make-out Hill,” a boy replied. “Who’d you be with?”

Felix held up a hand to cut down the laughter. He pointed at some lines that he’d written on the board:

>You are what you are,

>When you do what you do,

>When you have nothing to do.

“Characters in stories,” he said, “and real people’s characters too, are defined by Potential, what they could do and would do if they had freedom. But, at the end of the day, as the red sunset gives way to blue twilight, only some of those yellow possibilities ever get lived as actual fact.”

Then he really did dismiss the class. He told us to go out and think about this difference, between all that we might do this morning, and what we would actually end up doing by noon.
I lingered by the door after all the other students had fled the room. I waited for Felix to finish erasing the board. At last, he turned to me.

“And what will you do with your free time, Miss Reid?”

“I can’t decide,” I said. “So many possibilities.”

“Your father named you well. You have an amber-colored personality, full of Potential. There’s beauty in that, but in time everyone must commit to something.”

I hoped he’d say more, but he excused himself and left me behind, like the others. I wandered the campus, and found myself climbing Meditation Hill. I thought I’d find the other girl here, but she’d been shamed out of coming. I found myself alone on top of the hill. There was a stone bench and three tall, Grecian pillars. These had been donated, Papa once told me, to the university by the owner of a mortuary.

I sat on the bench and closed my eyes in the sunlight. I knew some things never would be fact, but I dreamed anyway of possibilities.
Primary colors of any story
(the PATTERN):
character (yellow potential)
plot (orange conflict with red action)
theme (out of the blue, love or death)
III. Blue Horizon

Felix announced that we were all going up to Meditation Hill. Nobody called it Makeout Hill that morning, but several students exchanged sly looks. We followed Felix into the hallway. Going out the east doors, our group crowded past two other English professors just coming in. I overheard as one grumbled to the other.

“Do all linguists have this field-trip habit, or is it just Preston?”

“Who knows. Maybe it’s a Mormon thing.”

“Isn’t this man being paid to lecture?”

Ten minutes later, all thirty of us had climbed the hill and gathered around the Greek pillars, fluted columns that had once framed the entrance of a funeral home. Felix stood on the stone bench and waved to get our attention. He then turned. With a straight arm, he pointed away to the northwest horizon. “Take note of what you see!”

Beyond the orange-brick buildings of the university, and beyond the treetops of this college town, what lay before us was the great Snake River plain of Southern Idaho. In the midst of the plain, about fifty miles away, stood a row of dead volcanic craters. I’d often seen these up close, three large hills of olive sagebrush and ancient lava, darkish yellow and reddish black. From Meditation Hill, through miles of invisible air, they only appeared as dark blue mounds in the distance. Beyond these dead craters, out of sight, was the nuclear-waste reservation where Papa worked. Beyond that, the high ranges of the Lemhi and Lost River mountains, their jagged indigo edges crossed the far horizon.
I raised my hand. The Red and Yellow lectures behind us, I knew this was coming.

Before Felix could call on me, I sang out the third line of the verse he’d taught.

*Blue is for Pattern and far destiny.*

“It’s also the color of your eyes, Professor.” I said this in my most sultry voice.

Everyone laughed. Now we were even for what happened on the first day of class.

“That is correct, Miss Reid,” he said carefully. “Can you also give us your insights on how the blue-colored horizon relates to thought, culture, and language?”

“No, I can’t.” I raised my chin and tipped my head seductively. “But I’m just dying to have you teach me.”

His cheeks were slightly flushed, but his smile was still composed, almost angelic.

“Very well, Miss Reid. In that case, you wouldn’t mind helping me now with a little role play, would you?”

“What?”

“Just play along.” He turned back to the group. “In the shadow of these pillars, in the finest Greek tradition, we’re going to enact a bit of theater, a little play about Blue. Miss Reid has volunteered as the first actor. I’d also like Mr. Korth and Mr. Oman to step forward. The rest of you step back. Clear them some space.”

Felix swung a small pack from his shoulder. He opened it and pulled out four party masks. The yellow one he handed to me. The orange-red one went to Jason Oman. He was thin, and maybe an inch shorter than me, but he had a sweet, heart-shaped face and large,
lively eyes. A second, blood-red mask went to Burt Korth, square-jawed and the largest boy in the class, second string on the football team. The final, blue mask, Felix held over his head.

“The rest of you will be the Greek Chorus,” Felix said. Your song is the primary-colors song we learned on the first day, but I have another verse for you to learn.”

When everyone sang the new verse without Felix’s help, he went on to set the play. “I call this little drama, ‘The First Love Story.’ In the first scene, imagine Mr. Oman and Mr. Korth here as primitive creatures. Imagine a time before language evolved. These creatures aren’t quite human beings yet. This is a world of yellow and red, restless possibilities and active conflict, but no blue, no language patterns. Both these creatures want Miss Reid, but being typical red males, they cannot share or negotiate; they can only oppose each other.”

On this cue, Jason shuffled up close and started gesturing for me to follow him. Burt promptly came over and beat him to the ground, lifeless. I jumped back in shock. They made a very convincing show of it. Felix had obviously coached them both before class. Me, he’d left in the dark, to ad lib as well as I could.

In the second scene, Jason wandered off down the hill a few yards. Burt went off in the opposite direction and turned his back. I was watching him when someone else pulled on my shoulders from behind. I cried out, turned and saw it was Jason. At the sound of my cry, Burt ran back. Once again, he beat poor Jason into the ground.

Before the third scene, Felix had the Chorus sing the new verse he’d taught us:
Blue seen in distance, not forced now and here,

Blue sense for words, such as Death that we fear,

But Blue words Immortal, our true destiny,

All these the Pattern of Humanity.

Then he took Jason’s reddish mask away, and had him put on the blue one. “In open conflict, the orange-red creature is usually squashed by the blood-red one,” Felix said. “Even when the Korth creature wanders off, the Oman creature without language is stuck in the here and now. All he can do is try to drag the Reid girl away before the stronger, faster Korth creature catches him. Not very likely.

“But now Mr. Oman has language,” Felix continued, “and he can talk about things in the distance. He no longer needs force. Now he can promise Miss Reid the sun and the seasons...”

The third scene began. Burt wandered away once more. Jason came up behind me again, but this time he spoke a stage whisper at my shoulder. “Psst...hey, Amber. Come away with me.” In a real whisper too low for others to hear, he said that he’d love it if I really did go out with him.

“Why should I?” I answered out loud, without turning.

“Ummmm....” Jason stammered. “I’m sorry, Professor. I guess I forgot.”
“Never mind,” Felix sighed. “This would be the part,” he told the group, “where Mankind discovers poetry, and then uses it to persuade Womankind.” And then he recited these lines himself, from Shakespeare’s Eighteenth Sonnet.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?} \\
\text{Thou art more lovely and more temperate:} \\
\text{Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May.} \\
\text{And summer’s lease hath all too short a date.} \\
\text{But thy eternal summer shall not fade,} \\
\text{Nor lose possession of that fair thou ownest,} \\
\text{Nor shall death brag thou wanderest in his shade,} \\
\text{When in eternal lines to time thou growest:} \\
\text{So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,} \\
\text{So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.}
\end{align*}
\]

“What would you say to that, Miss Reid?”

I let Jason take my hand, but I still looked squarely at Felix, the man who knew the words. “I’d follow those words forever, Professor.”

“Well said,” he answered. “Mr. Oman, do you remember where you’re supposed to take your love in the end?”

“Oh yeah,” Jason said, and he stretched out an arm toward the northwest, over the plains to the distant mountains. “We’re outta here, over that blue horizon.”
“Tell the audience why, Mr. Oman.”

“So Korth doesn’t come and kill me for taking his girl.”

“You never worried about that before,” Felix said. “You took your chances with Miss Reid and just let the Korth creature kill you. Why?”

“I never had a name for myself,” Jason said. “I didn’t know who was dying. I never had a word for death before.”

“And that’s the first love story,” Felix concluded. “It looks like a happy ending, but in some ways it’s not. When people were merely red and yellow creatures, they died perhaps, but they never saw death coming. Our ancestors only became human when they fixed their eyes on the blue horizon. Because of this, they could speak of love for their newly discovered selves, but also now, they feared for death.”

“They escaped some blood-red battles this way. Yet, to avoid merely physical death, they created the very concept of Death, the knowledge of a coming time when death might strike them down, them and all they loved. Destruction out of the blue.”

Felix Preston’s voice became grave. “Such knowledge can be far, far worse than the actual moment of death.”
Thought, Culture, and Language Notes

Yet do thy worst old Time,
despite thy wrong,
My love shall in my verse ever live young.
—Shakespeare, Sonnet 19
Are we only made out of clay,
out of red and yellow mud?
Are we not also made out of words?
Out of the Blue.
—Felix Preston
IV. Test Pattern

With perfect memory, Felix never needed a seating chart for us. But just as church goers
usually have their favorite pews, we all usually sat in the same places. Dirk Pitman had been
sitting on my right from the first day. Today he was late and Jason Oman took that desk.
Another boy already sat behind me. On my left was the south wall. Dirk was left standing,
looking sharply at Jason and me.

Felix was ready to start the lecture. He cleared his throat. “Two bodies can’t occupy
the same space, Mr. Pitman. Opposition colors all the physical world. All you can do is be
careful of the side you choose.”

Dirk mouthed a rude word and dropped into an empty seat in the front and center row
of the class.

“And speaking of choices,” Felix continued, “let’s take a vote on what flavor you think
you’d like best.” He reached into a sack behind the teaching desk and lifted up three plastic
ice-cream buckets. The first looked like it held a bright lemon sherbert, and the second a red
raspberry. Naturally, the third bucket contained something blue, but it was not a “blueberry
blue,” a more appetizing purplish color. This was an electric, early-twilight kind of blue.

About two-thirds of the class voted for raspberry. Another third, including me, chose
the lemon. Only one hand went up for the blue. It was Jason. I gave him a disgusted look,
but he smiled and winked at me.

“I’m thinking of last week’s lecture. Blue is where the power is.”
“So plug your tongue into a wall socket,” I heard Dirk mutter.

Felix looked in his direction and cleared his throat again. “Remember this. Your natural instincts are for reddish or yellowish tastes. Blue feels slightly alien at first. Not often a natural food color, people need time and distance to grasp blue. But, as Mr. Oman points out, blue is power. It represents the pattern of language.”

Then Felix took the lid off the red buckets. He pinched out a small blob of color and quickly rolled it into a plum-sized ball.

“Nuts, I thought we were getting ice cream,” Burt Korth said from the back of the room. “What is that stuff?”

“It’s a clay made out of salt, flour, and food coloring,” Felix said. “See for yourself.” He tossed the red ball across the room.

Burt caught the clay and mashed it with his fingers. “Hey, my Primary teachers used to bring this to church. We’d make animals for Noah’s ark, little Bible villages, Book-of-Mormon warriors, things like that.” He grinned and put some of the clay in his mouth. Girls sitting around him groaned in disgust. “Tastes just the same, too,” Burt said. “What are we making today, Professor?”

“A test pattern,” Felix answered. “Like a television station, before I can broadcast any more ideas into your heads, I need to put up a test pattern, a point of reference we’ll use to fine-tune our color concepts. In the test pattern, the primary colors combine to make a spectrum of other colors.”

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He then told the row of students along the north wall to stand and quickly file past the teaching desk. He told each of them to take a plum-sized blob of each color as they walked past each clay bucket. When the first row had passed, Felix called up the next row. My row along the south wall would be the last one called, but the process went quickly. Jason’s row, next to mine, soon stood and lined up to get their clay.

Soon after Jason left his seat, Dirk came over and took back his place next to me, looking smug. I smiled back at him. I always felt flattered and secure when at least two boys wanted me at once. Three would feel even better. The feeling wilted a little when Jason came back and I saw the look on his face. He quickly turned away and took one of the empty front seats. I stood with the rest of the final row. On the way back with three balls of clay in my hands, I decided to sit next to Jason again.

Felix returned to the front of the class. I almost tripped him with my longish legs. He stopped. I pulled my legs back a bit and primly smoothed my short skirt a little. In doing this, I raised the skirt’s hem another inch on my thighs. I smiled innocently at Felix. He frowned at me and stole a worried glance at Dirk. I didn’t dare look. I knew Dirk was fuming now.

“We start by making worlds,” Felix told us. He took red and yellow balls of clay and held them against the blackboard. They did look like planets hanging in space. “Some say men are from Mars and women are from Venus. It’s because men tend to be more red in their
personalities, more often drawn into physical conflict. Women tend to be more often yellow, more aware of their feelings, their senses, and their possibilities."

He rolled another ball of blue and held that up. “But red and yellow must resolve their differences and live together on the blue Earth.” He looked pointedly at Dirk, Jason and me as he said this. “From the simplest sentence to the longest story, this is the problem that language solves.”

Felix took something from his shirt pocket, a clay figure he had made ahead of time. It had long strands of yellow clay for hair, an hour-glass body formed in red. Face, legs, and arms it had from clay carefully mixed, from pale red and yellow into peachy flesh tones.

“Can you see what this IS?” he asked the class with emphasis.

“A woman,” several students said at once.

Felix shook his head dramatically. “No. It’s just a piece of clay.” The class groaned.

“But it REPRESENTS a woman,” Jason sitting next to me said, “a beautiful one as a matter of fact.”

“Very true,” Felix said, “but to represent is not to simply confuse one thing with another thing.” He then turned on an overhead projector and put up this figure on the screen in front of the classroom.
“Remember this chart when we get to our grammar unit. All sentences are built from a predicate and a subject, but you can’t just throw these two things together. Beauty is NOT this clay; growth is NOT a yellow rose; death is more than human, and humanity is more than death. As I said before, the miracle of language is that it solves this sort of Venus/Mars contradiction in each and every sentence.”

I found myself puzzling over the chart. “But how is the conflict solved?” I asked out loud. What does a sentence do exactly?”

“The process is hard to see because sentences are so small,” Felix replied. “That’s why we talk about stories so much. Stories are language made large, the basic pattern of every word and every sentence reflected in the larger pattern of every story. Stories and the characters in them serve as our microscope because they magnify language patterns.”

He had everyone pinch off a bit of clay from their red “world” and another bit from their yellow. He told us to mix these together and make the rough figure of a man in orange. Next we all made the figure of a woman in pure yellow, another figure in pure red, and another figure in blue. I thought of the three Grecian pillars on Meditation Hill.
“This is the first love story, isn’t it?” I said this out loud. I thought of Jason and me, and Burt. I thought of Felix and Shakespeare’s sonnets.

“Actually, Miss Reid, it’s a single pattern reflected in thousands of stories, and thousands of stories reflected in a single pattern. Orange seeks Yellow, but is opposed by Red. That’s conflict without solution until Orange is inverted and reversed into Blue.”

He then put another figure on the overhead screen. “It’s our first love story, but also Goldilocks and the Three Bears, or Three Little Pigs, plus a Big Bad Wolf. Every story that people tell and tell again across time has to touch this pattern in some way.”

“What about Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs?” Dirk Pitman asked sarcastically.

“I’m glad you asked, Mr. Pitman.” Felix kept his tone carefully diplomatic. “Those seven characters come when we expand the primary pattern farther along into the blue. This is the logic of combining three colors.” He then put a third chart on the overhead screen, now with three overlapping circles.
“On your desks you have four characters so far: red, orange, yellow, and blue. Each of you make another orange figure, but this time mix blue clay into it. Make another yellow figure and mix blue in it. Make another red character and mix blue in it. You’ll get three more clay figures, blackish, green, and purple. Add those to the first four and there will be seven. That’s why we have seven dwarves, or seven samurai, or seven corpses at the end of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, or seven stranded castaways on *Gilligan’s Island*. Snow white is just what you get in the background, where you don’t add any dye at all to this clay.”

Most students followed Felix’s directions. We worked out this same pattern of seven, colored characters on our desks. Dirk, in the meanwhile, mashed all of his clay into one grayish-black lump and left it smeared across his desk. Making disgusted noises, he gathered up his books.

“I’m sick of these stupid nursery-school games,” he muttered to Felix on his way out the door. “Why can’t you lecture like everyone else?”
Felix didn’t answer. I didn’t dare look up from my desk, but I felt Dirk glaring at me as he passed by. I felt Felix’s eyes on me too. They felt even heavier and I had to endure them for the rest of the hour.

The class finally ended. Students stood and began to file out. Some approached Felix with questions, but he excused himself and left the room. I’d expected him to call me aside and lecture me. Papa used to do that after an incident like this between my boyfriends, but lately he’d given up. I pushed past other students and tried to catch up with Felix in the hall. Not finding him there, I went to his office. His door was dark and locked.

I sat down on the floor and waited. Felix had left the classroom carrying books and that sack with three buckets of clay. I figured he’d come back to unload those before too long. After about fifteen minutes, he did come.

He saw me waiting for him. He stopped short in the hallway and took a deep breath with his chin in his chest, as if to lift a great weight.

“What did I do?” I asked.

He looked up at me, not with anger, but with something akin to pity. “I think you know what you did, Miss Reid. I don’t have the power to make you stop. I can’t even make it clear to you why you should stop, not without stepping too far into your personal life.”

“You’re more than welcome in my personal life,” I replied.

“So it seems,” Felix sighed, “but I can only come so far. As a personal favor to me, don’t do whatever you did in my class anymore.”