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The Migration of Colour

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'Am I invisible?' asked Maya .

'No, little-one,' replied her Indian grand-mother. But the crinkled woman knew that the girl needed concrete expression of her existence. So she taught Maya to embroider, sew and tell her stories symbolically through threads of colour. Every year Maya's grandmother would teach her a new stitching technique. After five years Maya began inventing her own.

Maya ran her long brown fingers over the designs. At thirty years old, the quilt was her most prized possession. It was so large it flowed over fields, valleys, hills and even a small village.

Every part was different. Squares, rectangles, triangles and circles were embroidered, sewn or hand-woven like a Persian carpet. One panel was knitted from puppy belly soft cashmere. The wool was green like a ripe avocado and decorated with turquoise stones, white ostrich feathers and blue glass beads. Another section was tie- dyed bruise purple and watermelon-juice pink. In the centre dangled amethyst stones with copper coins from foreign countries. On the joining panel, a tree-high Chinese dragon danced on a red silk border. One triangle was the texture of potato sacking, plaited from straw, amber leaves, wild grasses and dotted with sprigs of dried lavender.

Maya designed the quilt to reflect the themes in her life. The months of mauve, created from indigo batik prints, was a year of exploration, deep contemplation and solitude. Shocking pink, the days of Mardi Gras, tutus and tulle, frivolity and laughter was when her life whirled with parties and strawberry daiquiris. Royal blue were austere autumns of words, poetry, reading and learning. Maya smoothed the maroon square embroidered like a whirling dervish with circles and swirls. The time of love.

She remembered their first date. Her thick black hair was twirled with jasmine. Maya dressed in a white blouse she'd embroidered herself, a light pink angora jersey, gold-hoop earrings and a denim skirt. She outlined her eyes in black kohl and oiled her hands so they shone like a polished oak table.

Jay-Jay was a science graduate. He was tall, and wore round tortoise shell glasses, a teal- green turtle neck jumper and black jeans. His face was open like the ocean and his smile warm. When Maya saw the Turkish restaurant was decorated with embroidered wall hangings and woven carpets, her eyes sparkled; she knew it was going to be a successful evening.

The table cloth was covered in butcher's paper. Jay-Jay sat with his hands neatly folded on the table and smiled at Maya. He asked the waiter for a bottle of red wine and two pens. As they drank they drew a map of the world. They doodled symbols of all the places they wished to visit, plotted the route with dotted lines and cartoons of their friends. The waiter returned with a metre long wooden tray balanced on his shoulder that housed bowls of hummus, tahina, dolmadas, and olives. Maya and Jay-Jay joked, laughed and forgot to eat. At the end of the evening Jay-Jay folded the table-cloth map and gave it to Maya.

'Keep it safe, so we can remember our route,' he said.

Maya sewed their map into the quilt. The next day Jay-Jay knocked on her door.

'Are you ready to begin the journey?' asked Jay-Jay.

'Depends where you want to go,' replied Maya.

'I thought we could start with a walk.'

'That's a good place to begin,' she replied and picked up her coat.

Over-time, Maya and Jay-Jay travelled through the landscapes of lush green valleys, white water rapids, caves filled with stalagmites, pristine pebbled beaches and vine verandas. From each place, Maya collected a souvenir and sewed a new design into her quilt.

Although Maya loved Jay-Jay, he wasn't the only person in Maya's world. Maya had many friends. They called her 'the quilt girl' and remembered its many varied colours and patterns. Some remembered the blue peacock feathers while others the shocking pink lace. Her friends had souvenirs from different places on the quilt and helped Maya to recall its details. Joshi had a peacock feather, Jemma a piece of creamy white lace, Carly had black onyx stones.

Because the quilt was so expansive Maya couldn't always see or remember it all. Sometimes she forgot that the ivory patch was complete with small pearl bead

Work, or the black hexagons were made of hard onyx stones, black lace and drawings of charcoal. When she forgot the details of the quilt, she lost sight of the patterns and themes of her life.

Forgetting her past, made it harder for Maya to understand herself in the present.

Carly was short and freckled with hair like a dragon's tongue and a lilting voice. She enjoyed ambling. The two friends would walk for hours along the river bank.

'I'm terrified,' said Maya to Carly one chilly Sunday morning. Maya was travelling in a lonely inner landscape of dark caves and ravines. 'Of course you're frightened,' said Carly. 'You felt the same way in the time of the onyx stones and the black Italian lace. You hid under a table and shook for three days, do you remember?'

'I'd forgotten about that,' replied Maya.

'Find the story of black in the quilt,' said Carly.

Maya unrolled the quilt until she found the black hexagons. She stared at it for a long time. As she took slow deep breaths, she remembered conquering the shaking terror. Her feet began to feel anchored and her slim body felt strong. She flung her arms around Carly.

'Thank-you, thank-you,' she whispered, 'for seeing me.'

One day Maya moved to a new country. It was the next stop on the map she had drawn with Jay-Jay. Wiping her eyes with a cotton handkerchief, Maya waved good-bye to her friends. Maya and Jay-Jay sat on her gigantic quilt and flew as if upon a magic carpet over continents, mountains, rivers and oceans. As they approached the new country, Maya giggled and Jay-Jay wrung his hands with excitement. Together they waltzed through the airport with her quilt billowing like a flag behind her.

At first Maya and Jay-Jay enjoyed exploring the country where the ocean didn't quite smell of salt. Maya marvelled at the ochre rocks, the peeling paper bark trees, and the tall light-reflecting buildings.

But not all was as it seemed; it was a place of many challenges and shape-shifting masks. Maya experienced the country as a game where she didn't know the rules. In this new place she had too much to do- find a job, some-where to live, learn her way around a new place and try to understand the people. There was no time to design or sew the quilt.

So Maya emptied a box of moth balls into an over-sized suitcase and stuffed the quilt inside. However, it was too large and the colours trailed from the bursting sides. She concentrated on her daily life and for a long time she forgot about the quilt.

Then. . .

One Tuesday Maya began to feel grey. Hunched over like an elderly woman, she dragged her feet through the pristine city streets. Her hair, which used to shine like ebony piano keys and smell of fresh jasmine, fell across her face in limp greasy strands.

'I need my quilt, I need my quilt,' she muttered to herself. At home Maya opened the over-sized suitcase and unravelled the quilt. To her horror the quilt had changed. Entire pieces had evaporated like sweet perfume on a warm summer's day. Other parts were fading and turning grey as her inner world. Bits were moth eaten. The

velvet was threadbare like an old theatre curtain. Some of the weavings had unravelled and glass beads rolled around the bottom of the suitcase.

'All my

Work! All my years of weaving and sewing! I'm disappearing.

Dissolving like a dewdrop into this vast landscape,' sobbed Maya into the dishevelled fabric.

She had to do something. Soon.

Maya kissed Jay-Jay good-bye, promised to return promptly and flew on her perishing quilt to London.

She met Bibby in a French bistro near Fleet street. It was lively place with cosy tables and drawings on the walls. Smoky molecules hung in the air and the restaurant smelt of fried chicken and fresh herbs. Maya hardly recognized Bibby who sauntered into the restaurant wearing a black legal suit and high-heeled shoes. When Maya saw Bibby's cheeky smile she felt such relief she wept green crystal beads that splattered onto the floor.

Bibby collected the beads. One by one, she placed them in Maya's hand. From her pocket Bibby took a small box filled with identical beads. Maya gasped.

'These are yours,' said Bibby.

Maya's jaw fell open. She stared trance-like at the beads.

'You've kept them safely all these years,' said Maya incredulously.

'Of course,' said Bibby.

Bibby threaded the green crystal beads onto a string and handed the necklace to Maya.

'But I gave them to you,' said Maya.

'You need them. Take them with you.'

'Thank-you, Bibby, thank-you.'

Bibby's elfin face twinkled.

'You don't smile like a London lawyer,' said Maya.

'London lawyers don't smile. Anyway. . . ' whispered Bibby glancing conspiratorially around the restaurant, 'I'm not actually a lawyer. I'm an impostor. Don't tell anyone.'

Maya giggled. She had missed her old friend's off-beat humour. The two women chatted about their memories of their green crystal youth; the days of ivy leaves on the university walls, the times of confusion, the joy of newness, and the smell of cut green grass in summer. They also spoke of the sharp crystal pain of learning about love and living alone in the world. As they talked and joked Maya could once again sense the lush emerald velvet and the lime crystal beads of her quilt.

While Bibby lit a cigarette, Maya opened her palm and turned the beads over one by one.

'Bibby, My quilt can't survive in the new country while its memories and stories are scattered across the globe. I need my friends, my family, the old landscapes to help me remember.'

'Maybe you should move back home.'

'But so many people have left. It wouldn't be the same.'

Bibby took a long drag on her cigarette and studied Maya through slit eyes.

'Maya, you are not your quilt. You are much bigger. You need to know that.'

'I'm not! The quilt is kilometres long and wide!'

'That's not what I mean. If the whole quilt was destroyed, you would go on. The memories would still be inside you.'

'Perhaps. But it just doesn't feel that way.'

For several days Maya touched the green crystal beads around her neck and basked in the green memories. She ran her fingers over the luxurious emerald patches of the quilt and meandered through the London parks admiring the kaleidoscope of spring flowers. One afternoon she strolled along the high street, past a dingy liquor store, a red letter box, and knocked on Sutra's blue front door. When Sutra saw Maya, she yelped, picked Maya up and swung her around. Sutra was a voluptuous woman with long wild blonde hair and Tibetan bell laughter. Nothing pleased her more than visits from friends.

Sutra's tiny apartment was decorated with mosaic mirrors and glass Moroccan lamps. It smelt of sandalwood incense and brewing coffee. Novels and travel books bulged from a crammed bookcase. Untamed plants searching for a forest floor snaked from the top shelves.

Maya and Sutra drank coffee beneath an embroidered wall hanging bartered at a market in Istanbul. Sutra told Maya about her romantic adventures and exotic travels.

'So tell me my friend,' said Sutra slapping Maya affectionately on the knee, 'To what do I owe this unexpected visit?'

'I've missed you,' said Maya.

'Pah! But you've got that gorgeous man pining for you across the world!'

Maya's face darkened. She unpacked the quilt from her back-pack.

'He can't help me with weaving.'

Sutra silently turned the unravelling threads over in her hands.

'I see,' she replied.

'And there's more Sutra, so much more that is falling apart.'

'It's okay Maya, I'll help you fix it.'

'You will? But it will take so long.' said Maya.

'Doesn't matter. You would do the same for me.'

Maya nodded.

'You start at this end,' said Sutra, 'I'll

Work from the opposite end and we'll meet in the middle.'

'Okay,' replied Maya taking a deep breath, 'Let's go.'

They

Worked on the weaving for a few minutes in silence.

'It's weird Maya, how we take all these different themes from our lives and weave them from our past into our present. It doesn't matter where I travel, I take the same coloured threads, the same issues with me.'

'But how do you do that without forgetting?'

'I guess its like this weaving, you bring the same colours into the next part of the story. What are your designs from the new country?'

'I don't have any.'

'Aha! The source of the problem! Maya you can't stop. You've got to keep

Working with all the colours, the different textures. The new place will bring new creativity. If you allow it to.'

'But I can't. I have no time and I always feel grey.'

'Grey because you grieve and do not embrace the new colours.'

'You're very wise Sutra.'

'No, not wise. Just adapted to gypsy life.'

After days of weaving, sewing and reminiscing together much of the quilt was repaired. Maya was rejuvenated by Sutra's company and bell-like laughter. Filled with colour, she left her greyness behind in the London sky. Maya flew on her restored quilt back to the far- off land with the ocean that didn't quite smell of salt.

'I thought you might not come back,' said Jay-Jay sullenly.

'I haven't forgotten our map,' replied Maya.

'Are you ready to continue the journey?'

'Depends where you want to go.'

'I thought we could start with a walk.'

'That's a good place to begin,' Maya replied and picked up her coat. Maya took Sutra's advice. She began creating designs to reflect her life in the new country. From satin, she collaged the ochre rocks and paprika coloured dust. She sewed a turquoise border to represent the ocean that didn't quite smell of salt. However, there were days when pictures from her old life flashed through her mind and she cried green and pink beads. These she added to the quilt and accepted as part of the story.

'Are you happy here?' Jay-Jay asked Maya.

Maya looked up from her sewing.

'I don't feel grey any-more,' replied Maya.

'But are you happy?' insisted Jay-Jay

'Sometimes. I like discovering all these new things. But I can't preserve the older parts of the quilt and that worries me.'

'Why?' asked Jay-Jay

'Because one day I will turn around and I would have forgotten who I am.'

'You are who you are now,' said Jay-Jay.

'Only partly. The rest is in the quilt stories,' said Maya.

'Well, I have a surprise for you. Sutra's getting married.'

'Sutra getting married! Where? In London?'

'No, in the old country.'

'Why didn't she tell me?'

'She did,' said Jay-Jay handing Maya the invitation, 'But I wanted to surprise you. I've booked us a trip to go to the wedding.'

'Really?' said Maya

'Yes. And everybody is going to be there. Do you think that will help? Going to the wedding and visiting old friends?'

'Oh yes! Oh yes that would be wonderful!' said Maya flinging her arms around Jay-Jay's neck.

Sutra's wedding was in a candlelit garden at the foot of a mountain. She stood with her groom under a canopy of flowers wearing a purple velvet dress and a lilac veil. After the ceremony Catherine wheels exploded in the sky and guests danced around a swimming pool until the egg-yolk sun peaked up behind the mountain.

Maya felt exuberant to be with Sutra and her familiar friends. Her old quilt patterns were as radiant as sunflowers arching towards the midday sky. But the designs from the new country faded to grey. Her friends at the party didn't know about her life in the far-off land. Maya sighed. It was impossible retain the whole quilt. Her memory was too small and the quilt was just too large.

As the fires turned to embers and morning dew sprinkled the lawn, Joshi approached her.

'Ah, the quilt girl! How good to see you! How are you?' he slurred spilling red wine onto the ground. 'Hey, I remember your quilt! I've still got a peacock feather some-where. So old girl is that thing growing larger than ever?'

'Yes,' laughed Maya.

Joshi leaned closer and breathed wine-breath onto her neck.

'Wait! Wait keep still old girl! I can see them in your eyes! New colours! Never used before.

What do we have here? Ah! Orange. No. Ochre, the colour of rocks and what else? Hmm. . . red dust and icy blue. Am I right? What fabric have you chosen? Satin? Must look good next to the old shocking pink lace my dear!'

'Yes! Yes! How did you know?' enthused Maya.

'Ah magic!' replied Joshi taking another gulp of warm wine.

Maya's heart leapt. Perhaps it was possible to keep the complete story alive. For in that moment. In that brief, brief moment, her quilt that could flow over fields, valleys, and villages, blew like a bright triumphant sail over the city behind her.