

RICHARD SCARSBROOK

Brown is Not a Colour

I SEE ADELINE BROWN quietly making her way toward the back of the schoolyard, where she will try to remain unnoticed until the bell rings. She's gripping her *Bible Stories for Children* book in one hand, and the brown paper bag containing her recess snack in the other.

"Hi Adeline," I say as she slips past with her head down. She flinches.

"Oh, Philip, it's you," she says with relief. Then she studies my face, her brown eyes amplified to bug-like proportions by her thick, old-fashioned glasses.

"That looks terrible," she says. "Does it hurt?"

"Not as much as it hurts other people to look at it," I joke.

I suffer from a rather extreme facial deformity. A mutation in my IRF6 gene (which stands for "Interferon Regulatory Factor 6") caused me to be born with a cleft lip, unusual teeth, and a flattened-looking nose. Medical scientists have named my condition "Van der Woude Syndrome," but most of the kids here at Faireville Public School just call me "Monkeyface."

"No, no," Adeline says, her cheeks flushing a deep blood-red. "I wouldn't ... I didn't mean ... I meant your black eye."

Yesterday Graham and Grant Brush, the notorious Grum and Grunt, dragged me out behind the caretaker's shed. Graham held me down while Grant pummeled me, for no reason in particular. Nobody did anything to stop them.

"It's okay, Adeline," I say, smiling as best I can. "I was just kidding. Self-deprecating humour. Ha ha."

She studies her buckled, Pilgrim-like shoes. "You know I would never make fun of your—"

"I know what you meant," I tell her. "You're one of the only kids at school who has never called me 'Monkeyface'."

“*Judge not lest ye be judged,*” she says. “I’m not exactly a fashion model myself.”

She tucks her *Bible Stories for Children* under her arm, and pulls out of the paper bag a sleeve of cold French fries coated in congealed fat, and a small jar of artificial cheese (spelled “Cheez” on the label). She dips a few fries into the iridescent orange “cheez.”

“Want some?” she offers.

I politely decline. If this is her mother’s idea of a nutritious afternoon snack, it’s no wonder Adeline has weight problems. Now that I’m thinking about it, I vaguely recall that this is what Adeline had for lunch today as well. And yesterday, too.

“I just wanted to thank you for standing up and telling Mr. Brush what happened yesterday, Adeline. It made a difference.”

Mr. Brush is the Principal of Faireville Public School. He is also the father of Graham and Grant. Hence, Grum and Grunt have been free to coerce and terrorize without repercussions, as no student or teacher has ever had the guts to report them to their father. Until Adeline spoke up yesterday, that is. Mr. Brush had no choice but to suspend his own sons from school for three days.

“*Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,*” Adeline says. “It was my Christian duty to say something.”

A wave of hot guilt rushes through me. When Grum and Grunt and their minions gather around Cecil Bundy, who has a pronounced stutter and still plays with toy cars, I have always just quietly slipped away, thinking, *better him than me.*

Adeline dips another handful of cold, dangly fries into the jar of orange goop.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like some?”

“Okay, maybe one.” It sticks in my throat like a ball of phlegm. “Mmmm. Thanks.”

I hear giggling behind us. It’s the Colour Girls.

“Aw, look!” coos Lara Lavender. “Adeline has a *boyfriend!*”

“What a cute couple!” Carrie Green exclaims.

“A match made in Heaven!” Caitlin Black adds.

They skip away, tittering like chickadees.

Adeline’s *Bible Stories for Children* book slips from under her arm and falls open on the snow. Her normally rosy cheeks are cadaver white, and she turns her head slowly from side to side, her eyes locked in place like a shock victim.

“Oh, no,” she says, “oh, no.”

“Oh, come on, it’s not that bad,” I say. “They were just teasing.”

“They don’t *just tease*.”

“Hey, they can’t be anywhere near as bad as Grum and Grunt, and we beat *them* yesterday, right?”

Adeline’s eyes widen, an effect that is amplified dramatically by the lenses of her glasses.

“Oh, they *are* as bad as Grum and Grunt. *Worse*, in fact.”

Every bruise on my body throbs in protest. “The Colour Girls are *worse* than Grum and Grunt?”

“At least all the teachers *know* those guys are jerks, they’ve just been afraid to do anything about it because Grum and Grunt’s dad is their boss. But the Colour Girls? They’re the definition of wolves in sheep’s clothing. They’ve got everyone fooled.”

She sighs emphatically. “They giggle like goo-goo dolls and bat their long eyelashes and draw little hearts on their test papers with ‘*I love school*’ written in them, and they leave expensive treats from their mothers’ shops on the teachers’ desks with fancy cards that say things like ‘*Thanks for being the BESTEST Science Teacher EVER!!!!*’, and all the teachers think that they’re just the sweetest things in the world.”

Tears well up in Adeline’s eyes. “They’re just as mean as Grum and Grunt, but *sneakier*. And that makes them worse.” She snuffles and shoves a handful of cheez-coated fries into her mouth.

“Maybe you’re just being oversensitive,” I suggest.

“Oversensitive?” She squeezes the top of her snack bag closed, then folds her arms together tightly across her chest. “A couple of weeks ago, the three of them caught up with me on the way home from school. I thought they were going to start calling me *Fat-a-line*, or ask me if I got my clothes at *Frumps ‘R’ Us*, but they didn’t make fun of me at all. In fact, Lara told me that she and Carrie and Caitlin had been discussing it, and that they thought maybe they should let me join their group, since my last name is Brown, and all of their last names are colours, which is why they’re called the Colour Girls. But everyone knows that, I guess.”

“It was in the yearbook,” I say.

“I suspected they were setting me up, since they’re always torturing me in subtle ways, like giving me cards with hippos and pigs printed on them on Valentine’s Day, or handing me fashion and dieting magazines during library class. So I told them, ‘Thanks for the offer, but I really doubt that you want *me* to join your group’. I thought that would be the end of it, but then, the next day at school, there was a beautiful card on my desk, which said ‘*This is your official invitation to join the Colour Girls. If you decide to accept, meet us this Friday at 8 PM at Lara’s house for your initiation ceremony.*’”

“Initiation ceremony?”

“I was worried about that, too, but they assured me that it would be ‘great fun’—we would just dress up in some fancy clothes, drink some tea and eat some bon-bons, and then there would be a ceremony where I would ‘welcomed into the sisterhood.’ So I pretended to be sick so I could skip my Friday night Bible study, then I snuck out and met them at Lara’s house, which is like Buckingham Palace compared to the shack we live in. Sure enough, there were teacups and candles and china plates full of candies everywhere, and the three of them were all dressed up in fancy satin dresses. Of course Lara’s was lavender, Carrie’s was green, and Caitlin’s was black, just like their names. They told me that all I had to do was put on the special brown ball dress they had found for me, and then I would officially be one of the Colour Girls.”

“That’s it? That was the ceremony? You had me thinking you’d be drenched in pig’s blood or something.”

“Well, there was one problem. Our church forbids us from wearing fancy clothes. We are taught that such things just distract us from our true purpose, which is to worship and obey God. The dress code is pretty strict.”

“I’ve noticed.”

Every day Adeline wears the same bulky, grey, 1890s-era wool suit, with a past-the-ankles skirt that looks like it’s made from a horse blanket.

“The ‘secret uniform’ of the Colour Girls,” she continues, “is that you have to wear something the same colour as your last name every day, but they figured that I could still obey the rules of my church by doing something simple like tying a brown ribbon around my leg where nobody could see it. They still wanted me to put on the pretty brown ball dress for at least a minute or two to complete my initiation, though. It really seemed like they had gone to so much trouble for me, so—” She stops mid-sentence.

“So then what? What did they do that makes them worse than Grum and Grunt?”

“I was supposed to take off all of my clothes, except for my underwear, then fold everything up and hand it over to them. Then I was to go down into the cellar, where I would find my brown satin ball dress hanging. Once I had put it on, I was supposed to emerge again into the room, and we would share what they called a ‘hug of sisterhood,’ and then I would officially be one of the Colour Girls. Lara told me they all did the same thing when they made their ‘Bestest Friends Forever’ pact, and that it was supposed to represent me shedding my skin, turning from a caterpillar to a butterfly or something like that.”

Tears collect in the rims of Adeline’s glasses.

"I'll never forgive myself for believing them."

"What happened?"

"I don't think I want to talk about it anymore." She bends to pick up her fallen *Bible Stories for Children*, but her wool Tabernacle outfit restricts her movement, and her glasses fall off instead. I kneel down with her and pick up her book and her glasses, which I suspect she can't see.

"It's okay, Adeline," I tell her, placing her book in her hand. "You don't have to tell *me* what happened, but you should tell *someone*."

"Who am I supposed to tell?" she says, angrily swatting away a tear. "I'm not allowed to mention it ever again to my mother. We're supposed to '*turn the other cheek*,' you know. And I can't talk to anyone else at church about it, because they'll just say it was a punishment from God for breaking His rules. And there's no point telling a teacher about it, because they all think the Colour Girls are as sweet as maple sugar, while I'm just some useless crybaby from the Weirdo Church. I know they call it that, by the way. And I can't talk to a friend about it, because I don't have any friends. All the kids at this school hate me, because I'm poor and fat and ugly."

With her glasses off, she can't see me looking at her. She's got straight white teeth, and perfectly-formed pink lips; these features alone make her beautiful compared to my twisted face. With those clunky old glasses off, her cute dimple of a nose is no longer camouflaged, and her dark brown eyes are not magnified or distorted.

"You're not ugly, Adeline," I tell her.

I slide her glasses back onto her face, and we just look at each other for a second before standing up again.

"My mother believes that bras are for women, not girls," she says. "She thinks bras attract undue attention from men. I'm not allowed to wear one until I'm eighteen."

I'm not sure why she's telling me this, so I say, "Don't feel too bad about it, Adeline. I'm not allowed to get my face fixed until I turn eighteen."

"Since I'm not allowed to wear a bra," she says, looking down at her shoes again, "trying to keep my boobs covered while I handed my clothes over to Lara was kind of awkward. I was sure that that would be the moment that they would all laugh and make fun of me. But instead, Carrie said, 'God, I would *kill* to have your tits instead of the mosquito bites I've got!', and Lara said, 'Your boobs are gonna look *sooooo* awesome in the bustier of your brown ball dress!' And that was when they had me. At that moment, I finally believed that they really did want me to join their group. So I went down into the cellar to put on the brown ball dress." She pauses to inhale.

“There was nothing but cobwebs and dusty old junk down there. When I called up to ask them where the ball dress was, they locked the door behind me and started cackling like witches. I ran up the stairs and pounded on the door and screamed at them to let me out, but Lara just said, ‘There’s a cellar door down there, Adeline. You can let yourself out the back.’ I stupidly asked, ‘But what about the ceremony?’ I could kill myself for saying that.”

Her lip quivers. She bites it.

“As if they had rehearsed it, Lara Lavender said, ‘*You can’t be one of the Colour Girls, Adeline!*’ Then Carrie Green said, ‘*Everyone knows that brown isn’t a real colour!*’ Then Caitlin Black said, ‘*Yeah! Mr. Whitewood even said so in science class.*’ And they all laughed like hyenas. The more I screamed and pounded on the door, the harder they laughed. I could see them through the old-fashioned keyhole, rolling around on the floor in their pretty satin dresses.” She shrugs.

“Eventually I just let myself out the back door and ran home in my underwear. I went through the ravine so nobody would see me. I slipped in some mud, and I couldn’t break my fall with my hands since I was holding onto my stupid boobs. It wasn’t pretty. Anyway, I got the mud washed off me and got into bed before my mother got home from Bible study. It actually looked like I was going to get away with it, but the next morning Mom found my clothes thrown across our front yard, so then I had to tell her everything. I thought she would never stop screaming at me. She said I deserved God’s punishment for disobeying her and our church.”

“Jesus, Adeline.” I don’t know what else to say.

“It’s not a great idea to take the Lord’s name in vain like that, Philip,” she says.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she shrugs. “Thanks for listening.”

“Thanks for standing up for me yesterday,” I say.

“You’re welcome,” she says, quietly. “Now you had better get away from me, before they start teasing you.”

“Let them tease me. I don’t care anymore.”

The bell rings. Recess is over.

As we all stand in line waiting to be let back into the school, Lara Lavender, Caitlin Black and Carrie Green cluster together with Sam Simpson and Turner Thrift. I’ve got a pretty good idea of what they’re discussing, and I think Adeline does, too. She stands as far as possible from me in line.

This is our last class before Christmas holidays begin. Here in the windowless, overheated science room, the feeling of desperate anticipation is rising to a slow boil.

Mr. Whitewood has not arrived yet; he is habitually late when he has to teach Class 7-C, the unofficial Reject Class at Faireville Public. Adeline and I are the only two students who ever get A grades in 7-C. I figure that I got tossed in here because the Powers-That-Be mistakenly assumed that my deformity comes with some kind of intellectual disability.

A shower of spitballs and eraser chunks rain down from the back right corner of the classroom, where Sam Simpson and Trevor Blunt sit. I occupy the middle desk of the middle row, right in the crossfire zone. Adeline sits beside Cecil Bundy in the front left corner. She has not once made eye contact with me since recess ended.

Caitlin Black sits in the front right corner, looking as unhappy to be here as she always does. Because she was struggling in math and science classes, Caitlin has been transferred into 7-C. There is none of her usual chirping and preening. Separated from Lara and Carrie, Caitlin seems translucent, colourless, a mere outline of herself.

Caitlin turns and stares at me for a moment, probably wondering what Adeline has told me. She can't read my face, though, so turns her sniper's eye on Adeline, who is hunched over with her face buried in her science textbook, stalwartly ignoring the little projectiles that bounce off her back and catch in her hair.

Caleb Carter flips through the pages of a *Star Wars* fan magazine, until Sam Simpson reaches over and snatches it away from him.

"Hey, Monkeyface," Sam calls out, "When you and Adeline have a baby together, this is what it's gonna look like!" He opens the magazine to a picture of the slug-like alien character Jabba the Hutt, and holds it up for all to see. "It'll have your face and Adeline's body!"

Trevor Blunt laughs loudly.

"At least my kids will be able to add and spell," I say, without looking up from my science notes. "Not sure your genes carry those traits."

Sam is pretty sure he's just been insulted. "You better friggin' watch it, Monkeyface," he says.

"Yeah, yeah," I say, waving my hand in the air like I'm swatting away a fly. "Beat me up after school, okay, Sam? Bring Trevor and Brandon along to help."

If Graham and Grant didn't kill me with the beating they laid on me yesterday, then a clown like Sam Simpson isn't going to, either.

"Whatever, Monkeyface," Sam says. "I got better things to do."

Sam stretches his neck out into the hallway from his back-corner desk, to see if Mr. Whitewood is on his way. Then he looks for another victim, and Cecil Bundy is the obvious choice. Cecil is on the verge of tears at any given moment.

Sam reaches out with a blue magic marker and scrawls the words “CEESIL B. SUCKS THEESE!” at the bottom of a faded biology poster entitled *The Male Reproductive System*.

“Hey, C-c-cecil!” he calls out. “I wrote you a poem for you!”

Cecil starts crying.

Trevor Blunt, who sits beside Cecil, says, “Stop blubbering, Cecil, or I’ll give ya something to cry about.”

Cecil cowers as Trevor dramatically raises his fist in the air.

“Okay, people,” Mr. Whitewood calls out from down the hallway, “here I come. Settle down and get your science notebooks out.”

I have a theory that Mr. Whitewood pre-announces his imminent entrance like this so he won’t have to witness what’s been going on before his arrival, and therefore he won’t have to actually do anything about it.

Trevor drops his fist to his side. Sam tosses the magic marker into a nearby garbage pail. Caitlin stops glaring at Adeline and puts on her saccharine-sweet Colour Girl face. The stormy rumble of conversation fades, and the rain of little projectiles stops abruptly, as if a new weather system has swept into the classroom. Mr. Whitewood switches on the overhead projector, and tosses a time-yellowed transparency onto the dust-specked glass.

“Okay, people,” he drones, as he wanders toward his desk at the front of the class. “You are to copy this note on Temperature, Heat, and the Particle Theory. When you’re finished, you can read pages 106 to 125 and answer the questions on 127 and 128. That should keep you all busy until the end of class, but if you have time for chit-chat and goofing off, I can assign more.” He sits down and opens a *Sportsweek* magazine. “So, unless there are any questions, you can begin working on—”

I raise my hand.

“Uh, yes, Philip?” he says, somewhat surprised. In his science classes, Mr. Whitewood is more used to the sound of pens scratching down notes than to any sort of human discourse.

“I’ve got a question about a topic from a previous class, sir.”

“Philip,” he sighs, “Is this something you could look back in your notes and find out for yourself?”

“Well, actually, sir, I’m looking for some clarification on a point you made during our class on light and its spectrum.”

“Mmm-hmm?”

“Well, sir, if I recall correctly, you told us in class that the colour brown is not actually a colour at all.”

Caitlin looks back at me, wide-eyed, her Colour Girl mask momentarily cracking. She now knows that I know *something*. Adeline’s face is still hidden in her textbook, but I know she’s listening. I hope I’m doing the right thing.

“That’s correct,” Mr. Whitewood says. “Brown isn’t a colour—it’s just an impression created by our eyes and brains.”

“But, sir,” I say, flipping my science textbook open to the glossary section, “according to the definition you had us copy into our notes, *colour is the appearance of objects (or light sources) described in terms of a person’s perception of their hue and lightness (or brightness) and saturation*. So, by definition, colour *is* an impression created by our eyes and brains. Therefore, brown is a colour, right?”

Mr. Whitewood sits up in his chair.

“Well, Philip, I suppose you’ve got a point there. But brown doesn’t appear on the spectrum, so it’s still not technically a colour.”

Caitlin smiles smugly.

“So, what you’re saying is, in terms of *perception*, brown *is* a colour, but in *physical* terms it isn’t.”

“Uh, right,” Mr. Whitewood says, re-opening his *Sportsweek*.

“And this is because when you run white light through a prism and break it into its separate colours, you don’t actually see brown light?”

“That’s correct, Philip. Now, you had probably better get started copying that note.”

“But *yellow* exists on the spectrum, right?”

“Of course,” Mr. Whitewood says impatiently. “Yellow is one of the primary—”

“Well, from what I understand, sir, the colour brown can be described as our *perception* of yellow. For yellow light to appear brown, it needs to be set against a background of higher luminance. So the colour brown is how our eyes and brains perceive the *physical* yellow wavelength of the spectrum, when the yellow is darker than the colour that surrounds it.”

“Okay, Philip! You win! Brown is a colour! I’ll change my overhead notes to say that next year, okay?”

Adeline still hasn’t looked at me, but I can see that she’s wearing a tight-lipped smile.

Sam Simpson says, “Uh, will this be on the next test?”

Mr. Whitewood just shakes his head and flips open his magazine.

“Sir?” I say.

“What now?”

“So we agree that brown is definitely a colour. But would you say that *black* is a colour?”

Caitlin Black grimaces. She doesn't like where this is heading.

Mr. Whitewood slaps his magazine down on the desk and stands up.

“Are you trying to test me, Philip? Trying to embarrass the poor old science teacher?”

“No sir. I just want to be clear.”

“Okay, listen,” Mr. Whitewood huffs, now addressing the entire class, who have been listening intently to our exchange. “As Philip has already explained, you can define colour in *physical* terms, such as the wavelength of a particular colour of light, or in terms of *perception*, the way our brains interpret a given wavelength within a particular physical context. So, fine, because we *perceive* the colour brown as a modified version of the *physical* colour yellow, then brown is in fact a colour. I stand corrected on that point.”

He lowers his voice, like a stage actor delivering the climactic line of a dramatic soliloquy.

“Black, however, is a different story. In *physical* terms, black refers to a *total absence* of visible radiation. It has no wavelength. And if there is no *physical* stimulus, there can be no *perceptive* response. No *response* equals no *perception* equals *no colour*. Therefore, I can assure you all with absolute certainty, black is *not* a colour.”

It is the most succinct lesson Mr Whitewood has given all year. He's sweating at the temples. He folds his arms across his chest. “And are you satisfied with my explanation, Philip?”

“Absolutely, sir. I couldn't have said it better myself.”

“Well, that's a relief. I guess I get to keep my job after all.”

A few of the kids giggle at that, which seems to please Mr. Whitewood. He sits down at his desk again, and is finally able to read his *Sportsweek* in peace.

“Hey, Caitlin,” I whisper, “you'd better not let Lara or Carrie find out that black isn't a real colour, eh? You know what happens then.”

For a moment, when I see the expression on Caitlin's face, I feel badly for her. While Lara and Carrie continue to shine in 7-A, she's been sent down to 7-C, the Reject Class. While the other two live in mansions in Victoria Park and have old oil money pumping through their veins, Caitlin lives in Cardboard Acres and qualifies as an Old Weller by lineage only. She's the one of the three who wants to be a Colour Girl the most and she's just discovered that, scientifically speaking, her name isn't a colour at all. Caitlin stares at the top of her desk, perhaps wondering if she'll soon

be running in her underwear out through the cellar door of Lara's house.

Adeline takes this opportunity to flash me a smile and a quick nod. Her colour exists, and even if no one else perceives it, I do.

