

## Monochrome

By Burgundy Pendragon

The world was monochrome, and Alex was red.

One afternoon they hid inside their room, dried tears running down their face after yet another argument with the stepmother. No, an “argument” suggested that Alex tried to fight back, but they’d given up on that notion years ago. This was a put down, beratement. Alex found that there was no point in defending themselves when the only good it did was make her angrier. They hated anger. It was the one emotion that could shut them down, to turn them numb, spiritless, unresponsive, catatonic. She frightened Alex beyond words.

It’d be a lie to say Alex was happy.

“*Just three more years, just three more years...*” Alex thought to themselves, trying to calm down, and crawled over to their bookshelves. Their eyes scanned the books. They rested on a familiar poetry book, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, by Shel Silverstein. Alex picked up the book and flipped to a random page and started reading. They read for the-stars-knew how long when they reached their favorite poem, *Colors*, which they read twice. Alex didn’t feel right at school, with themselves, in their own skin, and *certainly* not at home; books were the perfect pastime to spirit them away from the real world.

Alex read in their mind, smiling, “*and all the colors I am inside have not been invented yet...*” They played with their hair comfortingly. Alex loved their hair; stroking it was a nervous tick of theirs. It had taken several years for their hair to grow out long, black, and beautiful. Alex wasn’t a particularly vain person; they were incredibly self-conscious despite the façade to the contrary, but their hair was the sole aspect of themselves that they took genuine pride in. “*You*

*know... what if I dyed my hair? Yeah, that'd be great! I should do it! No, my parents would flip out...*"

They sighed an exasperated breath. Alex felt uncomfortable, dysphoric, in their own skin; they hated the constant societal roles arbitrarily expected of them because of the body they didn't sit right in, and the world around them was this constant, dull, monochrome. Throughout Alex's life there was this persistent feeling that there was something else, something outside the monochrome, something they just couldn't see. They sighed again, defeated. Nothing about the monochrome felt right to them.

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Alex stared solemnly at their report card, disappointed. "F." A big fat "F" was written next to their mathematics and English classes. Fantastic. Alex felt a crushing weight of disappointment in themselves, ashamed and upset at failing not one, but *two* classes for the quarter. The remaining classes were fine, acceptable, a couple of "A"s, but not those two. Those two "F"s mattered more than their other grades. Not that their parents would know. Alex's parents had been so engrossed with the new sibling that they had both forgotten to check-in with Alex about school and grades and life. Mom didn't forget!

Mom always texted Alex asking about grades, how school was going, and life. She listened intently. She sought to understand Alex, to listen without judgement, to support them and provide encouragement no matter what. The stepmother and Dad did not do this. They claimed to, but they didn't. Alex was not one to share their grades with them, not when they couldn't be trusted to *not* make them feel like the biggest waste of oxygen. Besides, the parents weren't going to ask anyways. Since the third trimester before the birth of the baby sibling, the

two hadn't asked Alex for their grades in roughly a year. Alex was a subscriber to the philosophy of "don't ask, don't tell." They weren't going to ask.

They asked. One way or another, the parents found out.

"Why didn't you come to us for help!?"

*"You didn't help,"* Alex thought, saying nothing, again, slinking into their chair.

"You're failing *three* classes!"

*"No, I failed two classes and barely passed a third. Gimme some credit here."*

"You lied to us!"

*"You never asked."*

"Why didn't you seek help, or a tutor?"

*"I did. I still failed."*

"Why didn't you show us sooner?"

*"Why didn't you care when I failed math last quarter, too? Why didn't you care when there was time to do something? Why didn't you care when I sought tutoring and still failed? Why did Mom, who's practically on her death bed, remember to ask me about my grades, but you couldn't?"*

"We're pulling you out of Gifted Education."

*"Oh yeah, because that makes sense."*

"These grades are a disappointment."

*“I’m a disappointment.”*

“These grades are fucking shit.”

*“I’m shit.”*

Alex’s parents, the stepmother especially, ended on a note that made Alex feel worthless, a waste of space, that they’d never succeed, that they weren’t capable of anything. They questioned whether it was even worth waking up the next morning. Serious considerations of suicide were nothing new, they never went away from the back of their mind, just fluctuated in their severity thoughts of the bliss of the void, far away from *this*, permanently. Mom texted them that night; she talked to Alex about the good parts, encouraging the “A”s and “B”s. She knew why Alex was failing. She cared enough to listen to them without passing judgement, without making Alex feel worse about themselves than they already did.

It bothered Alex tremendously that their parents raised hell over *one* quarter report card; they never bothered to continue checking-in afterwards. Alex vowed to never show their grades again to Dad and the stepmother, no matter how excellent they were.

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Out of spite and desire to make their Mom proud, Alex’s grades improved! By the end of the year, they had nothing less than a “C” on their final transcript in all classes. The parents had promised to put Alex back into the Gifted Education program if their grades improved! They lied. Alex was never allowed to attend Gifted Education again.

The month following that drama, Alex was *essentially* grounded. Their birthday also happened to be at the start of the next month, right after the grounding period ended. Alex asked

about birthday plans. The stepmother angrily informed them that they wouldn't be doing *anything* for their sixteenth birthday, despite the pre-planning in past months.

Alex saw the fruit she dangled and shrugged it off. They put on a façade of ambivalence, proceeding to make alternative birthday plans with the significant other since the date fell on a Friday, just in time for the Sabbath. The significant other's parents fully supported hosting a small celebration *without* Alex's parents that evening! Shortly before Alex's sixteenth birthday the stepmother again dangled the fruit in front of them. She asked Alex what they wanted to do for their birthday.

Alex didn't bite.

Truthfully, they briefly explained that they'd made plans with the significant other. She was *not* happy. While Alex was not privy to the full reaction, they did witness the momentary but very satisfactory anger on her face. Dad, however, described her as being "rather upset and felt personally attacked." Later, in privacy with their significant other, Alex laughed triumphantly!

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Time ticked forward. That would be one of two victories Alex would ever lay over the stepmother. Tensions increased. Periodically the two would have a "spat" with each other. Without fail it would start with her jumping from zero to hundred faster than Alex would be prepared for. She would get angry at things that didn't matter, things that weren't worth yelling over. Stars forbid Alex ever took a nap afterschool when the stepmother decided to come home from work early. Stars forbid Alex suggested that Mom *might* not be a completely awful parent, that there were aspects of her parenting that *might* be better than hers. Stars forbid Alex *might*

know more about a subject than her. Stars forbid Alex was a human being who made mistakes. Stars forbid Alex defied the gender roles society arbitrarily placed upon them. Stars forbid Alex's heart shone red in a monochromatic world.

After each spat Alex would hide in their room, crying. She'd say something unnecessarily harsh to Alex, sometimes she chased them up the stairs to further insult and belittle them, Alex would eventually be left alone, then an undesignated period of time later Dad would enter the room. Dad would try explaining it to Alex, the broken-record "you know she loves you, she just has a funny way of showing it." He would never listen to Alex's side of the story, he'd never be without judgement, yet he claimed to take no sides. Dad did nothing. The stepmother would always act as if nothing had happened. Alex absorbed themselves into school to avoid the stepmother, and to make Mom proud. They couldn't do anything to please the stepmother, aside from a stellar report card that Alex never showed to their parents again.

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The final year of living with Dad and the stepmother, Alex began the process of self-discovery. While Alex had been a staunch ally to the LGBTQ+ community for years—albeit an uneducated one—it wasn't until their final year that Alex became familiar with the less well-known terminologies, the ones that described themselves. Between learning more about the minute details of sexuality and orientation, and accidentally discovering a lot of information about gender, Alex was coming into their own. They no longer felt alone in their asexuality, and the gender dysphoria was at long last explained.

Over the summer preceding their senior year, Mom, now in comparatively better health, took Alex to get their hair dyed. Alex's long, thick, beautiful, hair was bright red, shining against the monochrome. Both their hair *and* their heart shone red.

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Alex felt confident enough to successfully come out to their mother, the stepdad and their mom's mother the summer before college. When Alex told Mom, she smiled and lovingly told them that she already knew, she just didn't know the words. They arrived at college in the fall half-way across the country. Mom was ecstatic to have Alex live with her again, even if they were living in the dorms. Alex was there to study science and Women and Gender Studies, a combination most people questioned. The school was a breath of fresh air. It wasn't perfect, but Alex was able to meet others who also had brightly colored hearts!

Early in the first semester Dad and the stepmother came to visit; Alex used the opportunity to come out to both of them! In a rare burst of optimism, Alex came out to the stepmother before Dad on the hopes that it would strengthen what little connection remained. She couldn't be *that* uncaring, right? Nothing.

"Whatever floats your boat, kiddo," she said flatly, also making *sure* to remind Alex of what parts they had between their pants, because that was apparently relevant. Disheartened, Alex decided to accept it as an "it could've been worse."

Dad's reaction was less lackluster, "I still love you. You're still my kid."

For months the matter was left at that. Alex nor the parents re-addressed it. The parents didn't even bother to ask Alex about it later.

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The winter holiday approached and Alex went home to their out-of-state parents for the break. Everything was going *fairly* smoothly, other than Alex's constant irritation at being misgendered by their own parents and their homophobic grandparents. It hurt, a lot. Mom could overcome her own disabilities to get it right, why couldn't they, two able-bodied people, do it?

New Year's Eve came along, and Alex and their significant other decided to go out on a date with each other. They were excited to spend time with each other, away from the prying eyes of parents, and without worry over the Sabbath. Alex dressed in a red sweater, a black vest, dark pants, and spent half an hour laboring over their long, red, beautiful, thick hair, brushing out every last knot and tangle. For the first time ever, Alex could look themselves in the mirror and no longer feel dysphoric. It was a great feeling while it lasted. Sure, the date was wonderful, the significant other loved the way Alex was dressed, and the two best friends enjoyed each other's company until the sun went down. No amount of good feelings and love from their best friend could prepare Alex for the following morning.

New Year's Day, three days before the second semester began. Dad, the younger sibling, and the stepmother, decided to go out to eat at IHOP. Alex wasn't a fan of IHOP, and they weren't a morning person either. In an uncharacteristic spur of the moment decision, Alex agreed to go with, expressing their desire to spend more time with their family before flying back to school. Alex would never regret a decision more.

Alex picked at their breakfast, smiling at their fussing little sibling. The parents started talking to Alex about research grants. It was a pleasant enough conversation; Alex was appreciating the knowledge their parents had to offer.



Then the stepmother said, “and in order to impress people when you attend galas, you’re going to have to get dolled up, and do your hair...” She trailed on with further sexist remarks.

“*Galas? What on earth does she think scientists do? Throw parties?*” Alex questioned inwardly. The only reason Alex would be at a gala would be if they were invited for already being impressive, or they were the “plus one” of someone else. This was pointless, and the blatant sexism got on their nerves. Fast.

“Dolled up'?” Alex asked pointedly, dropping the friendly tone. It was no secret that they were *not* a fan of being overtly masculine *or* overtly feminine.

“Yes.” It escalated quickly from there. “If you want to *impress* anybody.”

“*Oh? Am I not capable of impressing others through my own merits? Wow, thanks for the bode of confidence!*” Alex disgustedly thought. Out loud, they spat in their own defense, “I’m *not* female.” The stepmother acted fresh about this fact.

“If you’re not female, then you should cut your hair,” she returned dryly, motioning to Alex’s red hair in a disgusted manner. Dad said nothing.

“I’m not male, either,” Alex added, quickly losing patience with her. “*Why is she having an issue with this now?*”

“You have to pick one,” she told Alex firmly.

Alex growled, “there are more than two genders.”

“In *your* opinion,” she retorted, dismissing Alex’s very existence, conveniently ignoring their coming-out to her several months prior. Alex seldom got angry, only sad. Tensions *always* got personal, but they seldom bothered to defend themselves against her, to stand up for

themselves. What good would it do? But this time, Alex wouldn't tolerate it any longer! They *literally* knew more about and had more personal experience in the subject than she did or could ever hope to have.

Alex countered along the lines of, "I know more about this than you!"

Dad interjected angrily, telling them both to shut up!

Alex slunk in their seat, hiding their tears behind their red hair. "*Gee, thanks for sticking up for me, Dad.*"

They didn't say anything else. During the ride home they said nothing, fighting back tears, trying and failing to remain calm. The jeep pulled into the driveway behind the house. Dad got out, taking the sibling with him to go play in the backyard. Alex was about to exit when the stepmother stopped them.

"Alex, about earlier-," she started in a not particularly friendly tone.

Alex began where they left off earlier, "science supports there being more than two-"

"Yeah, I don't care. Studies say a lot of things." If Alex had fur they would've been bristling!

"You're supposed to be my parent." Alex jumped out of the car. They wanted to drop it. She went from zero to hundred faster than Alex could walk away.

She stormed after them in a furious wrath! Alex tried to move out of her way, but she cornered them!

Alex's heart raced! She yelled at them! She went on about how *she* was the one being attacked, how it was all Alex's fault, *she* was right, Alex was *wrong*, how it was because of *her*

beliefs that Alex's feelings, years of dysphoria, experiences, and knowledge were all invalid because *she* said so!

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She asked Alex, "do these beliefs make me the bad guy?"

Alex nodded honestly.

She was *not* having it. Was she expecting a different answer!? The stepmother went off on them more, finding any deeply personal, non-sequitur subject she deemed fit to insult and belittle them about.

"Yesterday, when you went out with your significant other? Yeah, your hair was *not* acceptable!"

Alex grabbed their red hair self-consciously. They'd spent half an hour on it! Then lastly she said the line that would burn the final bridge between them:

"You'd better think twice about coming home this summer. I don't want you eating my food, or using *my* electricity."

The rest of the day, into the afternoon, the evening, and the early morning Alex cried their eyes out. They hid in their room almost the entire time, except for one hour when Dad asked them to help make dinner. Alex used all of their remaining willpower to not cry for the one hour. They couldn't let her know how much it hurt, how much she'd hurt them, and they knew talking to Dad would be futile.

As they and Dad stood silently leaning against the counter, waiting for the meal to cook, Dad said, "you know we love you, Alex, we just don't always understand you."

They felt a flash of irritation. In that moment, whether he realized it or not, Alex began to resent him. He had done nothing, he knew nothing, and still he did nothing. He could've *done something*. By doing nothing for ten years, he'd made it worse.

"I don't feel like talking about it." He wouldn't have believed Alex anyways, or taken them at all seriously. Talking to him would do nothing.

"Okay." He tried giving them a familial hug, but Alex wasn't feeling it.

That night Alex suffered panic attacks after panic attacks, shaking and crying uncontrollably. No one was texting them back. Why would they? It was New Year's Day after all. There was no one to cry to, or hold them, or lie and say it was going to be alright. Nothing. Alex dug their nails into their arms, tears streaming down their face, fighting back the urge to die. They wanted to rip out every last strand of red hair from their scalp, remove it all and throw it away and drown in the monochrome forever.

They eventually cried themselves to sleep around two in the morning. Dad woke them up two hours later to leave for the airport. The stepmother was up, too, acting as if nothing had happened, again. Alex said nothing to her. They and Dad departed. Alex remained silent the entire car ride, stroking their red hair as a nervous tick. They didn't look back. Alex didn't *want* to look back on that monochrome world.