

## Defining Pastel

Scarlet, fuchsia, saffron, teal cascade from the unstructured pile on the ottoman at the end of the bed. Angus has come to help his mother 'tidy up'. It's a ritual. About every eighteen months, they have a good 'tidy up and sort out'. This amounts to Angus holding up a garment, a clearly unworn scarf, maybe, or a blouse with the label still swinging from the collar. "Do you really need this?"

"Of course I do. It's the exact shade to go with..." Mo always has a reason, a justification for everything. So, Angus just hangs the blouse neatly in the wardrobe, or folds the scarf inside the chest of drawers. Mo is the only person Angus has met who has an entire chest of drawers dedicated to scarves. Cobalt, vermilion, amber. Strong, bold colours. Inside each drawer lies a silken rainbow. More than a rainbow. At least a rainbow only has seven colours.

She's always been like this, his mother. He thinks back to parents' evening in the Great Hall. Those were the days before pupils had to sit with their parents and endure the ritual humiliation of hearing the teacher's judgement. "Angus needs to contribute more in class." "Angus is a quiet boy. We'd like to hear more from him." "Angus is quite a promising student." Damned with faint praise.

Of course, Mo never gave a verbatim report of what the teachers had said. "They're very pleased with you, darling." She filtered everything. "No point dwelling on the negatives." But Angus knew that he was just mediocre. Nothing special. Nothing scintillating. Not like his mother.

He'd look down from the gallery above the Great Hall and see a splash of colour illuminating a corner of the otherwise grey room. His mother. At 14, it was mortifying. He was doing his

best the whole time not to be noticed, not to be remarkable. He knew the other boys mocked her. Those boys with their parents in careful, sober suits. He'd once heard Jenner say, "It looks like someone sicked up in a paint factory." He'd wanted to defend her. He'd wanted to launch himself at Jenner. But he said nothing, pretending that he'd not heard. Blending into the background.

It wasn't just at school. It was every social occasion, every family gathering. He knew that people would be waiting to see what outfit Mo had put together this time. Emerald trousers, paired with a maroon cummerbund and sunburst shirt, perhaps. All topped off with the ubiquitous work of art, casually tied at her neck. This is what she wore when he first introduced her to Steven. "You might want to wear sunglasses," he'd joked to Steven. But it wasn't a joke. He so wanted Steven to like her.

"What are you going to wear?" Angus had asked her a couple of days before the dinner.

"No idea, darling. You know I never choose ahead of time. It's like people going to a restaurant and knowing what they're going to eat before they get there. I have to wait and see what I fancy."

This wasn't helping Angus' anxiety. "Steven's very stylish. He's got excellent taste."

"Of course he has, my darling. He's chosen you, after all." She smiled.

He was going to have to confront the matter head on. "Perhaps something toned down. Less vibrant."

Mo examined her son's face for some time, then held up a blazing orange shirt, so bright that it made Angus squint. "Close your right eye," Mo told him.

"What?"

“Humour me. Close your right eye.”

He did as she asked.

“What colour is it now?”

Angus was shocked. “Well, it’s more of an apricot.”

Mo said nothing but held up a powerfully magenta bra. Angus turned away. “Come on, darling, you know I wear them,” Mo laughed. “Same again. Look at it with your right eye closed and tell me what colour it is.”

“It’s a really delicate shade. Almost going to baby pink.” He paused. “I don’t understand.”

“I thought it might be genetic. Everyone has this but to a much lesser degree. One eye sees colour very slightly paler than the other. We’ve just got an exaggerated version.”

Angus looked around the room, right eye closed. Everything was much softer, much less hectic.

“So, if you don’t like the look of something, look at it differently. Look through your left eye.”

He’s been looking through his left eye for about fifteen years now. Not all the time. Just occasionally. He’s needed to less and less as the years have gone by and he’s grown accustomed to a brighter world.

Mother and son have almost finished the ‘tidy up and sort out’. Mo unzips the suit carrier that’s hanging on the back of the door. A plain navy wrap-around dress. Angus raises his eyebrows. “Is that what you’re wearing for our wedding?”

“Yes, darling. Do you like it? Do you think Steven will like it?”

No, he doesn't think Steven will like it. He thinks Steven will be disappointed because, from the minute Angus introduced him to Mo, he has loved her flamboyant clothes and her flamboyant personality.

"Erm, put it on. Let's see how it looks."

Mo changes in the front bedroom, then stands in the doorway.

"It certainly looks...smart." Angus is disappointed. She looks like the careful, sober parent he thought he wanted when he was a teenager. "Turn around. Let me see how it fits." He's looking for every excuse that she shouldn't wear the dress.

Mo spins and, as she turns, reveals the back of the dress, which is one giant peacock feather from hem to neck. Iridescent turquoise, acid green, gold, violet.

She spins back. Angus stands, both eyes wide. "Steven will absolutely love it." He pauses. "I love it."