

# CHROMA CASTE



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# **Chroma Caste**

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**WARNING:**

The following story contains references to violence,  
and sexual assault.



*A splash of red nail varnish shines from the corner of the kerb, and Peter feels his heart quicken. It could have fallen there by accident — conceivable, if unlikely — but something about its placement says otherwise. He avoids looking at it a second time, and rubs his palms on the inside of his trouser pockets. When the lights changed he turns and walks up the street as though he had always been heading that way.*

*At the next corner he delays checking the kerb opposite for as long as he dares; but when he glances over, there it is. Not an accident at all then. Oddly, he feels his shoulders loosen, and breath slow. The flush leaves his cheeks, and his mind clears; even as his heart keeps pounding almost painfully in his chest. Somehow knowing it was deliberate, knowing he's committed, washes away most of his anxiety.*

*It is a message. Not one that any normal person would notice, but Peter would. Peter, and the others like him who have escaped custody.*

That the treatment turned out to be remarkably simple was what did all the damage in the end. Just a specific set of codons, on the X chromosome alone. And as almost all the patients were going to be men, modifying it (rather than the Y) was felt to be fairly low risk. After all, they were just correcting colour vision.

It turned out that they could courier the corrective genes in a minor rhinovirus. The kind almost everyone gets, then gets over, every cold season. The company which produced the inoculation ran it through all the

proper development stages, right up to human trials. They conclusively demonstrated no undesired physiological symptoms, and were duly awarded their distribution rights.

It launched with a beautifully filmed and executed cross-media campaign, featuring grown men being followed in a documentary style. Men in their workplaces, their homes, communities, and even at football matches. All shot in predictable black and white. The men had been given the treatment a couple of days before, followed through the third day, all the way to bed that night. Then came the kicker.

The camera crews were there to see them wake up on that fourth morning. The morning the majority of their retinal cells would have regenerated, and they would see their missing colour for the first time. Fading up from black to the same shot as the night before, only this time in full colour, the advertiser treated the audience to an unabashed exercise in sentimentality. The linchpin of this was a charmingly gentle bear of a man named Trevor, who had married a woman with flaming red hair. Sure, there were shots of the triathlete standing awestruck at the ocean pool, eventually managing to whisper "It's so blue ..." And the Liverpool fan jumping up and down ecstatically, tears streaming down his face, screaming "That's my boys! Look at 'em! Oh ... Look at 'em!" There was even a decent joke, with the executive wandering through his office, complimenting his staff on their clothes.



But the most predictable beat of the little adverdoc was also rendered the most affecting by the simple coarse charisma of Trevor. He was a sound sleeper, so the crew contrived to film him on the moment of waking. His wife lay waiting, her mane of glorious hair (clearly given a quick but discreet touch up by the crew hairdresser) fanned out over the pillow around her face. The cinematic lighting was switched on, and he began to stir, as she lay there with a tight moe of mischief, affection, and trepidation twisting her mouth. He frowned, twitched, then came awake.

And gasped.

Stills, gifs and cut down versions of the clip (and the later one when his twin daughters ran into the room, their mass of unruly crimson curls floating around their heads) enjoyed several months at the top of internet meme lists, and being the most viewed media on Youtube. A favourite focus was the very end of the commercial, where Trevor knelt on the bed, his hands tangled in the hair of his children — his wife with her arms around them all. Face bleary from bed, the sleep and drool washing down into his five-day beard in a river of tears and snot, while he kept repeating uncontrollably: “You’re so beautiful! You’re so beautiful! You’re all so beautiful! I.. I never knew!”

*Each mark lies on the side of the kerb, after all. How would they fall there naturally? Let alone in the same way on two adjacent street corners? And Peter recognises the brand, by its shade. It’s a hard wearing*

*type. What was the slogan? Chip Defiant Formula. That's it.*

*Revlon Classic Collection - the NEW Provocative red. Cheap and, not so long ago, available almost everywhere. But durable, and almost pure red. Little co-mingling with other hues. Perhaps a little more green than blue, but very little of either. Say ... under 15% green, and close to 10% blue. Almost pure. But to go any brighter on the red would just be inviting trouble. Eighteen months ago he couldn't have told you that, or the percentages, but today he knows by instinct.*

*He walks on another block, scanning the gutters as discreetly as he can manage. The splash has moved here, and — without pausing to think how he knows to — Peter turns the next corner and walks up the street.*

It had been identified as a risk, but not occurred in any of the clinical trials: the possibility of the rhinovirus reactivating, and causing cell lysis in the upper respiratory tract. But then, all the patients in the clinical trials were healthy specimens in the first place, and apparently none had any congenital susceptibility to that particular cold strain.

When it first appeared in the general populace, the pharmaceutical company's immediate concern was to highlight the very low-level nature of the cold that it seemed to cause. Beginning with one or two susceptible individuals, a 'live strain' had emerged, and was now spreading freely through the community. They had conducted extensive testing however, and

determined that even in immunosuppressed individuals the infection rarely resulted in anything more than a minor head cold. No more than a snivelly nose. The cold they had unwittingly released into the community was in all respects completely harmless.

Except, as it turned out, to their bottom line. For while the cold was a barely noticeable inconvenience, it retained one very important physiological impact: it still cured colour blindness. Their miracle treatment had in a very literal sense ‘gone viral’. It swept across the northern hemisphere that winter, then around through the southern over May and June. In just over half a year it had done its work, rewriting the most common genetic defect in the human species, and all but eliminating protanopia, deuteranopia, and tritanopia, overnight.

*Two police women beat down the street toward him, and Peter forces himself to breathe normally. Christ shit it all. How good is the driver’s licence in his wallet? They pad closer, taking up too much of the footpath, and now he has to decide which way to step getting past them.*

*One of their grey-clad shoulders brushes his, and for a second he almost panics. But then as if said by someone else he hears his own voice absently apologising, with a welcome steadiness. They move on.*

*Peter walks away, steeling himself not to look back. He’s probably rushing a little bit, but can’t help himself. The thrusting mania is taking over, and even though it would be wise to turn into one of the shops —*

*filled with drab, grey skirts and blouses, black shoes, and white jackets — he couldn't stop now if he tried.*

That spring, the air practically hummed. A billion men (and almost two hundred million women) were suddenly seeing a component of light that they had hitherto been denied the full experience of. Most commonly green, or otherwise red, and occasionally blue, in varying degrees across the population.

It was not the pure tones which were the revelation. If your eyes pick up a little less red than everyone else's, a fire engine still looks exactly the same. The cone cells in your retina pick up the red signal, without any other colours mixed in, and transmit the simple message to your brain: that's red. It might be a darker shade, but you still know it's red.

But the mixed colours — the browns and russets, the vermillions and the rusts — all at once these were leaping out at the 'cured'. Or on the other side of the spectrum, the cyans and the limes, the jades and the aquas.

Prior to the virus, one in four men had some degree of color blindness, many without even knowing it. One quarter of the male population of the world went to bed with a cold, and woke up in the Land of Oz.

*Other little signs are cropping up now. Flirty daubs of mustard, or a comma in a band's poster painted orange. An ochre streak of mud ground into a crack in the sidewalk. The corner of an old building*

*with its recent coat of independance-blue paint scraped carelessly (or carefully?) away to reveal the gorgeous dark terracotta bricks beneath ...*

*Then he catches a sudden streak of harlequin, painted along the underside of a street sign. It is coming in from a side street, and onto the path he was now following. Glancing back up that branch he spies flashes of jade, emerald, dartmouth, and celadon. It's another trail, a separate set of clues stretched across the city to gather in the newgreens. That's for the Deuts!*

Traffic accidents spiked immediately. Bingles, collisions, and fatal pileups resulted as people sped right past stop signs, subliminally failing to recognise the strange new hue on the standard warnings. Or more oddly — wandered into traffic on foot, staring transfixed at the flickering beacons of eye-searing green, amber, and red standing sentinel over intersections.

Of course, the brain is a funny thing. Hue, tone, contrast, and colour all have noted effects on mood, cognitive functioning, even decision making. And when a person who has grown up, lived for decades in neuro-typical mood and cognitive patterns, while only seeing the world in muted shades — it shapes the way they think. When all responses to stimuli are tuned to fit in with social norms, but you can suddenly see the blush spreading up a person's cheek, or their face go white in shock, your own reactions are automatically more extreme. The pathways and patterns of a lifetime,

developed through all of childhood and adolescent growth and reaffirmed through adult life, have been laid down in an absence of certain stimuli.

Suddenly one quarter of male humanity was poorly calibrated.

Had it not been such a common condition, perhaps the world would have been able to accommodate the changed. Women generally did better than men, being able to immerse themselves with peers of their own gender, ninety five percent of whom were unchanged. But in male dominated clubs, workplaces, venues, and organisations, a catastrophic amount of disruption took place.

Men previously known for their unstinting dedication to their jobs were suddenly found absent — forgetting meetings, having wandered into a local cinema. Movie houses themselves were quick to capitalise on the phenomenon, and for more than a year MGM Musicals from the Golden Age of Hollywood enjoyed an unprecedented revival. Men thronged to them at all hours of the day and night, obsessively drinking in each new title they could discover.

They threw out their entire wardrobes, and purchased whole new ones, generally in a clownishly garish palette. They dyed their hair. Some started wearing lipstick and rouge. Hundreds of thousands of sports cars walked off the lot in coral, salmon, scarlet, carmine and crimson; in electric blue and cobalt and verdigris. Men quit their jobs and spent days painting

canvases, papers, walls, ceilings, floors, windows, and their own skin. Tattoo parlours developed queues.

*It was not like Peter belonged in the camps, anyway. His crimes had mostly amounted to property damage. He'd only been trying to tweak the brightness levels in the foyer spotlights. If it hadn't been for the electrical short the the whole situation wouldn't have spiralled out of control ...*

Some went out for a jog in the morning, only to stand frozen, staring at the sunrise. Many of them would continue to stare unblinkingly into the sun for an hour or more as it rose from the horizon, subtly changing minute by minute all the colours of the sky. They would do this daily for weeks, until they started to notice the burnt spots in front of their eyes when they tried to read.

Because men would misread social cues, any disagreements were almost guaranteed to flare into full blown screaming matches, torrents of abuse, or fist fights. Some men started to get into fights deliberately, lashing with rings and fingernails at each other's faces, desperate to see the bright splashes of blood when they came.

*There were rumours. They had swarmed around the camps. That there are places — safe places. Places that are run entirely by the chroma-liberated, and made for them to live as they desire. The walls are*

*each a subtly different shade, and mood lighting changes constantly, varying them further.*

*Peter lurches on, almost stumbling now, blood bounding in his brain. If this is real, if he can keep following the clues, he might be able to find them. He could stop running, stop pretending. Stop holding in his tears, and laughter, and gasps of sheer wonder at the world.*

Thousands upon thousands of men waded into the sea, swearing they could feel the blueness, and even hear it singing. They would insist it was calling them, and wade deeper and deeper, and not realise they were getting out of their depth. Or not care.

One man climbed into the tiger pit at his local zoo just before feeding time, the note he left revealing that for weeks he had been fantasizing about being eaten by the beasts. As the family crowds fled screaming, two men stayed, their faces pressed against the glass barrier, eagerly drinking in the glorious spectacle of black, persimmon, and crimson.

*...where fantastic sprays of flowers in delicate gold and cameo and heliotrope, are set in coloured glass vases on every flat surface. With galleries of vast windows for doing nothing but staring at the sky, and boudoirs lined with thousands of satin pillows in a hundred shades of maroon and mulberry.*

There was an appalling rise in sexual harassment. Men got over excited by certain hues, and misread the



responses of their friends, lovers, co-workers, and people on the train. Being immersed in a world of constant overstimulation for weeks on end had left millions of them manic, and unable to judge even what their own responses should be. They were fired and prosecuted, pilloried and stoned in city squares.

There was ... worse.

Politicians and pundits, men and women alike, took to screen, stage, and radio to decry the epidemic, and declaim against the men who refused to control their unacceptable behaviour. Even though the blame lay clearly with the offenders, women started to wear less makeup, and don more muted tones.

*... where every room has a fireplace, with flickering, dancing coals, and chandeliers with leadlight decoration and candelabras to shower refracted flames over almost everything!*

*He staggers into an alleyway. Suddenly all the hints and markers vanish. The sunlight barely penetrates here, and the bricks are so grimed with traffic soot they reflect no colour back other than a horrid muddled black and grey. But at the far end, like a beacon, stands a door. By design or accident, a shaft of light falls directly onto it, and illuminates the hard, lacquered coat of paint on the scarlet portal.*

Most of the affected coped, after a period of adjustment. Hundreds of millions of them moved to live in the country, farming flowers, and tending orchards and vineyards where luminous globules of

pastel, canary, vermilion, pink, and aubergine fruits hung delectable amongst variegated leaves, and the hills leaped aflame each autumn.

Millions more moved unannounced into new careers as artists of mostly mediocre ability; as dressmakers and set designers and photographers. But for the worst cases, containment was the only option. For the lust-mad, and the violent, the manic and those rendered bovine and catatonic with bliss — segregation and imprisonment were the only option.

*He can't feel his toes or fingers. His feet are lead, even as he trips effortlessly toward the gleaming portal. His tongue fills his maw, scalp itching, and his fingers twitch uncontrollably as he clammers down the dirty dead-end lane.*

*His eyes never waver from the red door. They couldn't if he wanted them to. He never even notices the second one — the green door beside it. The red holds him in its song.*

*His hands reach out and touch the smooth, oil-based paint that covers the portal with its flawless field of pure red. He pushes the door and enters.*

Camps were made, often in old quarries, where the grey, white, or bluish granite of the stone was the dominant background, under an upturned bowl of the azure sky. They could be fenced and secured relatively simply, and the men were housed in ex-military camp equipment. The army gear had to be thoroughly bleached, carefully dyed, or both, so a preference went

to navy grey and airforce blue. The severe tritanopes had to be housed separately, in ex-hospitals whose walls often did not need to be painted anything other than their extant pale green.

Rehabilitation programs were trialled, with the least extreme cases being slowly re-socialised in a variety of carefully controlled communities. These were designed with specifically graduated colour schemes, and a quarantine on all items going in or out to prevent chroma-leakage. Each community gradually increased the saturation of colours, while providing a full range of work, social, and communal activities. The inmates could slowly re-learn their interpersonal boundaries, under a controlled increase in stimulation. Misbehaviour ensured an extended stay, or even relegation back to a less chromatically rich environment.

Internet access was strictly controlled, and all monitors and televisions had their display ranges carefully set, then soldered.

*Inside is a long, dark hall, but at the far end an archway promises all the explicit wonders of Hades. There are roses. He can glimpse them on a bloodwood side table. There is a rich Persian carpet in burnt umber and toffee.*

*He starts to walk forward. There is something about the light. He begins panting. He hasn't been allowed to see it in such a long time, but it is so distinctive, and surely he can't be mistaken? It's moving, isn't it?*

*Not moving. Definitely flickering. He knows it just before they come into view: candles! Vermillion candles standing to one side, and on the right, a fire! A fire burning in an open grate, with brass pokers and not even a spark screen between it and him.*

*He laughs aloud with a high giddy sound, lurching into the room, face illuminated in paroxysms of grim joy — so he doesn't hear the slate-clad policewoman step up from the shadows beside the arch and press a Taser Wand into his neck.*

As Peter shivered to the ground, the woman's partner stepped into the room from an alcove in the tunnel. She gripped the radio at her collar and reported into it: "Mobile unit 24, this is CT-Romeo. That package you mentioned has arrived." The radio blatted a reply from the officers on the street, and she clicked off, shaking her head. "How long are we going to be rounding these blokes up?"

"The programs are having some success," the first officer said, putting her stunner away.

"Yeah, but what about all the kids being born now?"

"Nah — the virus was gene corrective. Means you're cured. You pass that onto your kids."

"Yeah? Huh."

"Apparently." The first officer shrugged, and knelt by Peter's gently twitching body. "Let's see what we've got, then."

She rolled him roughly onto his back, pulled out her mobile phone and snapped a full face picture of

him. The police app briefly displayed a ‘searching ...’ icon, and then popped out an identity match. She stood and read from the screen.

“Peter Haythorne. Thirty eight, originally from Springwood.”

“What’s his form?”

She thumbed down a list of priors, whistled low. “He likes setting things on fire. Arson. Fourteen counts. Two families were still in the houses. A little girl died.”

Her partner glared down at the man's torpid face for a second or two. Then she pulled back and kicked him viciously in the side of the knee.

"Arsehole."



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