

PAT MURPHY - Iris versus the Black Knight

When Iris opened her eyes that morning, the world was gray. She blinked at her bedspread: dove-gray chenille. The walls of her room were covered with pale gray wallpaper patterned with black roses. The night before, she remembered, the bedspread had been pink, the roses on the wallpaper had been red.

"Iris!" her mother called from the kitchen. "Get out of bed!"

Iris scrambled from bed, staring wildly around her room. Her clothes were gray; her toys were gray; the carpet beneath her feet was gray. Outside her window, the grass was the color of ashes and the sky was filled with clouds. No color anywhere.

"Hurry, Iris." Iris's mother bustled into the room. She was already dressed for work in a neat black suit with black shoes. "You'll be late for school if you don't get dressed right now. Here you go." She snatched a dress from the closet and tossed it onto the bed. "Now get dressed. No excuses now."

"But Mom," Iris said in a small voice, "the colors"

Too late. Her mother was already halfway down the hall to the kitchen. Not that it mattered much. Her mother never had time to listen.

Iris took off her pajamas and pulled the dress over her head. Last night, the dress had been blue. It had been her favorite dress: a beautiful sky blue with dark blue trim. Now it was the color of storm clouds and the trim was black.

Before her mother could return, Iris hurried to her school desk, where she had been coloring the night before. The picture she had colored so carefully in brilliant blues and reds and yellows had faded to gray and black.

She shook her head, bewildered. The crayons that lay scattered on the desk were all shades of gray and white and black: charcoal, granite, ash gray, pearl, dirty snow. She picked up a crayon that had all the paper peeled away. That crayon had been red the night before. When she had worn it down to the paper she had peeled away the wrapping so that she could keep coloring. It had been red, she was sure of that. Her heart pounded as she picked up the crayon and scribbled on a scrap of paper. The line she drew was black.

"No dawdling," her mother said, swooping into the room. "It's breakfast time, young lady."

"But my picture. . . ." Iris protested. Before she could say more, her mother had rolled the picture and snapped a rubber band around it. She tugged a brush through Iris's unruly hair, complaining about the tangles and the curls. Then she escorted Iris to the breakfast table.

Iris was still holding her crayon, clutching it so hard her hand ached. "But Mom"

"Eat your breakfast," her mother said.

Knowing that her mother was not in a mood to listen to anything, Iris slipped the crayon into the pocket of her dress. She ate gray cornflakes. Her mother took her to the bus stop on the corner. A granite-colored school bus took her to school.

The bus was crowded and noisy. Iris sat quietly, surrounded by fifth graders who ignored her completely. She looked out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of a color, any color. The stop signs were black and white; the traffic light flashed steel-gray, dove gray, and black. No colors anywhere. But no one else seemed to notice anything was wrong.

The bell rang just after they got to the school, and Iris hurried to class and sat at her desk. The class said good morning to Mrs. Dixon, their teacher, and saluted the flag (black, white, and gray).

For the past month, the class had been studying the ancient Greeks. They had spent the previous week building a somewhat angular model of the Parthenon from sugar cubes. That morning, each student had to stand in front of the class and do a report about a Greek god or goddess.

Iris had worked hard on her report. She had wanted to find just the right goddess to talk about. She had spent long hours searching the shelves of the library until, in the grownup section where third-graders were not supposed to venture, she found a battered book that had what she was looking for.

When her turn came, she said: "My report is on Iris, the goddess of the rainbow." She held up the portrait of the goddess that she had painstakingly executed in crayon. Yesterday, the robes that billowed around the goddess had been brilliant blue; today, they were shades of gray. The goddess's flowing golden hair was now grizzled; the rainbow on which she stood was striped with gray and black.

"Iris was the messenger of the gods," Iris said. "When some god wanted to send a message to Earth, they'd send Iris and she would follow the rainbow down to the ground. She had blue robes and golden hair. One time, Hera sent her down to the Underworld. . . ."

"Iris!" the teacher interrupted sternly, "I think you should stop there. You're talking nonsense. What's that word you used: 'rainbow'? There's no such word. And that funny sound -- 'bloo.' What's that supposed to mean?"

Iris looked at Mrs. Dixon, startled. In a room of gray things, her teacher was the grayest. Her hair was the color of cement; her dress matched the playground blacktop -- it seemed to soak up all light, leaving her standing in a gray haze.

"I think it's clear that you've just decided to make up stories," the teacher said. "I don't remember a Greek goddess named Iris."

"I . . . I found her in a book," Iris stammered. She was ready to describe the dusty dog-eared volume that had pictured the goddess running down the rainbow. "She was Hera's messenger and sister to the Harpies. She . . ."

"I think it's time for you to sit down, Iris," the teacher said in her stone gray voice.

Iris sat down, stunned and silent. There was no arguing with that voice, even when you knew that you were telling the truth and you could find the book in the library. Then Cynthia, a sweet-faced girl whose hands were always very clean, presented a report on Athena, the goddess of wisdom whose symbol was the owl.

Iris sat at her desk, staring at her picture of the goddess Iris and wishing that the Harpies would come and rip Mrs. Dixon's entrails out. Or maybe Perseus, carrying the head of the Medusa in his bag. He'd whip out the head and turn Mrs. Dixon to stone on the spot. That would serve her right. Iris sat quietly at her desk, thinking bitter thoughts and waiting for recess.

At recess, Iris pushed her way out with the other kids, staying in a crowd so that Mrs. Dixon couldn't call her over and make her stop. "Hey, Goddess Iris, watch where you're going," said Cynthia when Iris pushed past.

Iris caught a glimpse of her own face in the mirror in the hall -- she was frowning and she looked like she might cry. On the playground at last, she fled to the far edge of the blacktop, out past the fifth graders' game of dodge ball.

She stood on the edge of the field that adjoined the blacktop. In sunny weather, the students sometimes played in the grass. But the last few days of rain had left the field muddy and slippery. Enormous gray and white sea gulls stood in the grass, watching Iris with their bright beady eyes.

"There is a goddess named Iris," she muttered to herself. "There is a rainbow. I don't care what they say."

The largest of the gulls squawked and bobbed his head, as if in response. Iris stared at him and the gull stared back.

"I remember colors, even if no one else does." She glanced up at the cloudy sky. "It's blue up there," she told the gull. "At least it used to be. I bet it still is. If only I could get there."

The gull squawked again and flapped his wings. As Iris watched, he took two steps forward and pecked at something coiled in the grass. A snake? The gull came up with something in his beak. The end of a jump rope, lost in the grass. The gull waddled forward, pulling the rope behind him. It was a long rope. One end

was frayed so that the single strand had separated into smaller strands.

When the rope was stretched straight behind the gull, he put that end down and waddled over to the frayed end. Then he screeched, looking around at the other gulls. The other birds stopped their preening and walked over to join him. There were dozens of them. When the leader screeched again, the gulls took off with a thunder of wings and a chorus of squawks and screeches. Each one clutched a strand of the rope in its claws.

Iris stared in amazement as the rope rose from the ground. At the last possible moment, she snatched at the end of the rope, wrapping it around her hand just before the gulls pulled it out of reach. She clung for a moment while the gulls tugged. She felt light on her feet, as if she were barely touching the blacktop. Above her, the gulls strained.

For a moment she was frightened. What was happening? Then she looked up at the gray sky, remembered that it had once been blue. Thinking of blue, she kicked off her black loafers and jumped in the air.

Slowly, majestically, the gulls rose, with Iris dangling beneath them. The breeze caught her skirt and the fabric billowed. She swayed beneath the flock of gulls like the clapper of a giant bell.

"Goodbye," she called down to the girls playing tetherball, the boys on the jungle gym. Cynthia stood by the monkeybars, waiting her turn. She stared up at Iris, her mouth open. "Goodbye!" Iris called. "Goodbye!"

The gulls carried her over the playground toward Mrs. Dixon, who was standing by the school door. She shouted up as Iris passed overhead. "Where are you going, Iris Johnson? You get right back down here. The bell is just about to ring and"

"I'm off to find the rainbow," Iris called. Then the school bell rang drowning out Mrs. Dixon's reply. And the gulls carried Iris higher, leaving the school behind.

Far below her, cars rushed to and fro in the city streets. She saw a driver staring up at her, then heard brakes screeching. Traffic came to a standstill as drivers stopped their cars to stare up at Iris.

She clung to the rope with both hands now. She felt dizzy from looking down at the cars, and she kept thinking about what would happen if the rope slipped from her hands. She closed her eyes so that she couldn't see how far she would fall.

Still the gulls carried her upward. The honking of horns and the clangor of the school bell faded with distance. It was silent, except for the rustling of the gulls' wings as they flapped. Her hands ached and she was alone, all alone.

Puffs of gray fog swirled around Iris, and she felt its chilly dampness on her hands and her face. When she opened her eyes, she could see nothing but fog below her, above her, all around her. She clutched the rope tighter as the grayness pressed against her face.

She kept rising, and she saw something above her, a darker shade within the pale gray fog. More clouds, she thought, but as she rose toward it she realized that this wasn't clouds, but something more solid. Gray walls, meeting at tidy right angles with a gray floor.

The gulls carried her closer and she could see a rectangular opening in one wall, a doorway into a courtyard of neat gray flagstone squares. As she swayed beneath the flock of gulls, she came right up to the doorway, and then swung away again. Up close, and then away. With each swing, she got a glimpse through the opening into the courtyard. At each corner of the courtyard was a turreted tower. From the top of each tower, a black banner flew. A castle in the clouds, supported by nothing but fog.

On the third swing, she let go of the rope with one aching hand and grabbed the edge of the doorway. The stone was cold against her hand --so cold it felt like it was burning her. Enduring the pain, she pulled herself through the doorway into the courtyard. The rope slipped from her grasp. She fell and landed with a bump on the gray floor of the courtyard.

Above her, the flock of gulls wheeled and flew away, heading back to the school yard. All except the largest gull, the one she thought of as the leader. He landed on a turret, flapped his wings, and settled down to watch

her.

She rubbed her arms and shivered. She was very cold. Her skin was clammy from the fog; her clothes were damp. She did not know what she was doing here. Her teacher would scold her for flying away with a flock of gulls, for being late to class. Her mother would yell at her for getting her clothes wet. She was trembling -- from cold or from fear or from some of each -- she couldn't tell.

Standing in the courtyard, she turned in a circle, looking at the walls that surrounded her. The fog was filling in the doorway through which she had entered. As she watched, the fog solidified, becoming indistinguishable from the rest of the wall. She stood in the center of the courtyard, hemmed in by gray walls. So tidy and square.

"What are you doing here?" asked a voice that was as flat and as gray as the stones.

She whirled around, looking for the source of the voice. "Who are you?" she asked, her voice small and breathless.

"What are you doing here?" the voice asked again. It was hard and mechanical and cold, the color of steel.

"I'm looking for the colors," she said. "I wanted to. . . ."

"There are no colors," the voice said. "There never were any colors."

She was afraid. Her breath caught in her throat. She felt small, very small. "But I remember colors," she began. "The sky was blue, the grass was green, the flowers. . . ."

"You don't know anything," the voice said. "You're just a stupid little girl. The sky is gray, the grass is gray, the flowers are gray. They have always been gray. Be quiet and go home."

She wasn't smart. She knew she wasn't smart. Her teacher told her that; her mother told her that. The voice sounded like it knew what it was talking about, so stern and confident. She knew she shouldn't argue. The voice was level now, but she could sense a hidden anger that might erupt if she disagreed again. Maybe she was wrong. There were no colors. She should just go home and draw pictures with her gray crayons. Maybe gray was not so bad.

Then the seagull that perched on the turret shrieked and she looked at him. Yesterday, his beak had been bright yellow with a red spot near the tip.

"No," she said, her voice still small. "That's not true. There used to be colors."

"Never," the voice said.

"Yes, there were colors." Her voice was louder now, and shrill. "We made red hearts on Valentines Day. And green shamrocks on St. Patrick's Day. And on Halloween, I drew pictures in orange and black."

"Black," said the voice, deeper now. The voice came from behind her and she turned to face it. "There is black. Only black."

The fog had gathered behind her in a dark cloud that formed an enormous figure. The fog swirled and the figure grew more solid and distinct: a man in glistening black armor. He wore a black plume in his helmet, carried a black sword at his side. "There is no rainbow," said the black knight. "No colors." He stepped toward her, his sword held high. "Go home, little girl." He took a long slow swing at her with his sword.

She stumbled backwards, tripping over her own feet in her haste to dodge the blow. She was shaking; she was cold and afraid. He was right; she should just go home -- if only she could find the way.

"Go home and learn to be a good girl," the black knight said. "Learn to draw in black and white. That's the way the world is. Go home."

She stumbled back again, barely evading the slowly swinging blade. What had made her think that she could find colors in a gray world? The knight lifted his sword to swing again.

She heard the thunder of wings and saw a flash of gray and white. The gull swooped under the swinging sword and snatched a dark stick from the gray floor. The bird circled the knight's head, then swooped again, placing the stick in Iris's hand as it passed.

Iris clutched a crayon. She recognized it as her own crayon. It must have fallen from her pocket when she stumbled.

"There is only black," the knight said. "There is no rainbow."

"That's not true," Iris said. She held the crayon and remembered red --the color of fire and of roses. She lifted her crayon like a sword, brandishing it between her and the knight. As she held it, the crayon grew, stretching until it was as long as the knight's sword. Not just a crayon now, but a crayon sword, gleaming in the gray light.

Inexpertly, she flailed at the knight with the sword that had once been a crayon. Surprisingly he gave ground, using his sword only to block her blows. "You're a stupid little girl. You'll be hurt if you're not careful." His voice sounded less confident than before. "You'll be hurt."

"Give me back the colors," Iris shouted, striking at him with the crayon. She was still scared, but she was angry too.

"There are no colors," the knight insisted. "The world is gray."

He was backing away from her, blocking her clumsy blows. He could have struck her -- she left enough openings -- but he just kept blocking until she had backed him into a corner.

She was furious now, her face hot, her heart pounding. Her mother would have said she was in a state and sent her to her room. But her mother was far away and Iris's anger knew no bounds. Red anger, she thought. Hot as fire, passionate as roses.

"You can't do this," the knight said, his voice weaker now. "You're just a little girl."

Iris screamed, an inarticulate cry of rage and passion, and lifted her sword. The knight lifted his sword to block the blow just as Iris sprang forward. His sword caught her on the arm, and she felt a sudden sharp pain.

She stumbled back, clutching at the wound. The sword dropped from her hand. Blood flowed from her arm, red blood seeping through her fingers as she pressed her hand to the wound.

Red blood.

The knight still had his back to the wall, and he had lifted his hand to shield his eyes from the brilliant red. A drop of blood fell onto the sword that lay at her feet, and the weapon was no longer black; it gleamed red as a ruby. She lifted her eyes. Two of the banners that flew from the castle's turrets were still black, but the third had a streak of red and the fourth was a brilliant crimson, glowing like a flame against the dull gray sky.

"No," moaned the knight.

"Yes," whispered Iris. Her arm hurt with a sharp fierce pain. Blood dripped from the wound, making glorious bright splashes on the grayness at her feet. She felt weak and sick to her stomach. But the knight leaned against the wall, as far from her as he could get, his head turned away as if he could not look at her.

Swaying, she took a step toward him. "Red," she murmured, and then her legs gave way beneath her and she sat down suddenly.

Her eyes were filled with tears. She wept because her arm ached and she wept because it was so wonderful to see the red banner against the gray sky.

Her tears fell on her dress, and where they fell the fabric changed from dull gray to bright blue, the color of the sky on a sunny day. The color spread; her dress was blue again. When she looked up, one of the gray banners had become a beautiful blue. The banner that had been striped with red had a blue stripe as well.

The knight moaned. He had fallen too. He sat with his back against the courtyard wall, and he looked smaller than he had before. Or maybe she had grown bigger. As she stared at him, it seemed to her that she knew him from somewhere.

"Who are you?" she asked the knight. "I think I know you, but I can't remember. I don't know. . . ."

"You don't know who I am?" The knight's voice was barely a whisper, but it grew stronger as he spoke. "And you don't know who you are. I'll tell you who you are. You are a stupid little girl. You are. . . ."

Iris frowned at him, then looked up at the banners that flew overhead. The fog was swirling, growing paler and thinner. She caught a glimpse of blue sky between the tatters of fog. The colors were returning. He had taken the colors, and she had brought them back.

She smiled -- though her arm ached and she shivered in the cold and her stomach hurt and her face was wet with tears. "I'm Iris," she said in a tone of surprise. "I'm the goddess of the rainbow."

The sun broke through the clouds and filled the courtyard with golden light. Where the light touched her, it warmed her, soothed her pains. Sunlight washed the last black banner with gold and added a golden stripe to the rainbow banner.

She was Iris, a messenger of the gods who had followed the rainbow down to earth and lost her way. She was the goddess of color and the protector of beauty. She was a little girl in a blue dress, sitting in a courtyard made of clouds, clutching her wounded arm.

She recognized the black knight now. He was the god of the Underworld, a place of darkness, a colorless place inhabited by the souls of the people who had died without hope. She had been carrying a message to him when she lost her way.

"You are just a weak little girl," he was whispering. "You have no power, you . . ."

"Give it up," Iris said, grinning at him. "You've lost. I brought the rainbow back."

"You've won this battle," the knight whispered. "But I'll be back." The sunlight did not touch the courtyard around him; he lay in a puddle of shadow. His shape was blurring, his outline becoming less distinct. But he continued to whisper as his body swirled and flowed. "Darkness always wins in the end," he whispered. "Remember that, Iris."

"I think it's time you went back where you belonged," Iris said impatiently. At a wave of her hand, the courtyard began to blur around him, dissipating like fog on a sunny day. The floor thinned, then broke beneath the knight. As the floor gave way, he changed -- his arms stretched and broadened, his body shrank. A black buzzard swooped away on outstretched wings, gliding downward toward the earth.

Iris watched him fly away. He would be back to fight again, and that was all right. That was the way things were, the battle went on forever. Light against darkness; joy against sorrow. But this time she had won.

Iris heard a screeching cry overhead. The seagull circled her once, then flew upward. He plucked the rainbow banner from the pole with his beak and flew down to drop it at her feet.

She stood then, shaking out her sky blue dress. She still looked like the little girl who had flown off with the seagulls and she rather liked that. In a while, perhaps, she would return to her proper form, but not just now. She wrapped the banner around her wounded arm, a gaily colored bandage that fluttered in the breeze.

She looked at the rainbow path beneath her feet. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. In one direction, the rainbow curved upward -- toward Olympus, the home of the gods. She could go home now.

Then she looked downward, where the rainbow led toward the Earth. Far, far below, she could see the school building. Though the sky was blue and the fields around it were green, the school itself remained stubbornly gray. But that could be changed. She smiled grimly, remembering Mrs. Dixon and her certainty that there was no goddess named Iris.

"Come on," she called to the gull as she started down the rainbow path to Earth. She could return to

Olympus later. Right now, she had unfinished business below. Mrs. Dixon would be so surprised.