

## Red

Red is the color of flavor, I think. Red is the color of blue. Red is the shape of my Valentine's Day. Red is the color of you. Red is the way my eyelids get, closed and staring at the sun. Red is the color of wax fruit apples. Red is the color of fun. Red is meat gravy. Salty, lick it from the plate. Red steak, rare steak. Make mine medium red. I'll have a red with that. Red red red.

Roses are red. Violets are red. Grass is wet with red. I look at my skin and see red. A wave of red just under the surface. Pulsing red. Boiling red. River of red.

Around around around.

Have you ever taken a flashlight and covered it with your hand? Get one now if it's dark enough. It has to be really dark. I'll get one too. Hold on.

OK. I probably did this for the first time when I was a little boy in my closet. Did you? If you did, you know what's coming. For the "beginners" just stick the flashlight under your hand and turn it on. Pretty cool, eh? How's that for red? Look at those red glowing fingers...OOOooo, creepy...

Now clamp your fingers down really tight. Look at your knuckles, glowing from the inside. How can the light shine right through your hand? Don't you need x-rays for that? Wait a second, what's that inside...that dark stuff...meat?...bone? It makes you want to look inside and see. Doesn't it? No? Then I guess you're not the curious type. I've always been curious. I always want to know *HOW THINGS WORK*. But I never liked poking into animals. Not while they're alive anyway. I know some kids that did.

One day in science class we were supposed to dissect frogs. Frogs aren't like little bunnies or anything so it's supposed to be easier for kids to kill them. Isn't that strange, teaching kids how to kill in science class? I thought it was really odd but none of the other kids seemed to think about it, though a lot of them didn't want to do it. I think they knew it was wrong, but the science teacher bullied them on, especially the girls for being squeamish and girly. Once he said "girly" all the boys didn't want to get *that* put on them so they started acting as if it was all fun, even the ones I could tell hated it.

I did it the way you were supposed to, putting some drops of chloroform in the dish with the frog then covering it with a glass jar until the frog was dead or at least unconscious. Then I pinned down his little frog legs (everyone was making frog leg jokes) and took the scalpel and opened up his little frog chest. I felt really sad for the frog. I poked and prodded around for a few minutes and looked for the little heart and lungs like the teacher told us. They looked so tiny and limp and fragile that I couldn't imagine how they were supposed to pump all the blood around and suck in the air and do all the things (like an engine I guess) that made the little frog...work.

I kept looking around and prodding and squishing until I felt a ripple of chatter moving through the room. I looked up and there were girls and boys looking over the shoulder of this one kid, who I couldn't stand cause he was big and dumb and always trying to push the other kids around. Push *me* around.

I noticed the teacher had left the room. I wondered for a second why he would leave a bunch of kids in the room with bottles of chloroform and scalpels but then I heard him talking to Sally Johnson in the little room at the back of the lab where he kept all the smelly stuff and the frogs maybe, so I went over to see what everyone was looking at.

The big kid wasn't doing it the way the teacher said. He had pinned down the frog without giving him any chloroform at all. The frog was twitching and shaking and he even had a pin through his mouth to keep his head from moving around while he struggled. The big kid had the frog's chest cut open and he was prodding the little heart with the blunt end of his scalpel while it was still beating. I thought I was going to get sick when I saw it pound up and down. It looked like a swollen raisin. The heart was sitting in a little lake of red and it was so dark...but still red... especially at the edges where it rolled up over the sides and made a tiny pool on the desk.

I couldn't understand how the frog could still be alive, but it was and I wondered for an instant, with my stomach lurching and rolling, whether a person would be still be alive during all that, or if frogs were somehow tougher. But I didn't, couldn't, think too much because it was making me sick, like all the little girls who were begging him to stop and saying they were going to tell Mr. Fuckhead in the closet still with Sally, always Sally and I started shouting, "*STOP IT! Hey CUT IT OUT!*" and he just smiled like he was drooling and looked at me...just me...and said: "What's the matter, little girl?"

No. Not me. My belly tightened like a bear trap and my legs, like quicksand before, turned to pillars of stone. I saw the bottle of chloroform and I knew how to stop it, stop it now. I picked up the bottle and poured it over the little frog's chest cave, onto the tiny raisin heart and I watched the big kid seethe, but he didn't say a thing. He could see that I was strong now, full of hate and anger, standing on big stone legs and looking him right in the eyes when I did it. I never felt so good in my life when I watched that frog heart stop beating and saw the little kid inside the big bully's eyes.

I felt clean and strong and brave and the little girls looked at me different and smiled like they never had before. But I was just a boy and what mattered most was that I won, that I had stopped him and set the little frog free. Free. I think I might have even said it out loud when I walked back to the desk, but I can't be sure, it was so long ago. I do remember that I went back to my desk and watched the big kid hunched over his dead, dead frog, still pretending to work, not so much fun, not nearly so much fun as before. I watched him breathe in the chloroform, his head so close to the pool of dark, dark red, all mixed with fumes that slithered up his knife and into his big stupid head. I felt giddy with excitement at the show I knew was coming and when he finally stood up like a drunken sailor and raised his hands to grab his fat stupid head I thought my heart was going to rip right through my chest!

*BOOM!* He went down like a Sequoia. Big fat kid with the big fat head.

When he fell I heard two sweet sounds. The hard dull thud of his body and then the quick sharp crack of his head. Mmmmmmmmm.

Red. Red. River of red. Deep, deep, sweet, dark red.

I watched the river run and it felt so good, so right. I didn't think it was strange that I cared so much for the little frog and so little for the big stupid kid.

His name was Kent Parker. It could have been anything. I still think about him after all these years. I think of that poor pinned frog and I think about him lying on the cold lab floor, so still, so peaceful.

I think about how much has changed since then...and how little. I think about love. I think about peace. I think about protection.

And whenever I do, I see red.