

The Colour of Electricity

It came out of nowhere. Suddenly the whole place shut down - the lights, the fridges, the cool rooms, everything. For a moment even the faint, continual snicks, clicks and rustles of the bush stopped, a hush deeper than the usual whispering silence.

Colin was in the workshop, servicing the Centre's tractor, when it happened. There was a loud, sharp concussion from the main switchboard on the wall nearby. He was startled, but not unduly surprised. It was a busy time at the facility, with quite a few new residents, most of them in the early stages of rehab. It wasn't all that uncommon for such people to overload appliances or put cutlery in the microwave.

The only thing that struck him as unusual was that the mains switch seemed to have tripped; even the three-phase circuit had gone down. Whatever had caused the blackout, it must have been something pretty major.

He got a torch from the cab of the tractor and went over to the switchboard. A quick inspection confirmed that the switch was down. He considered for a moment. There was a procedure to follow when the power went down, and Colin understood, from his experience in managing the place, the wisdom of following it. The first step, before any switch was turned back on, was to locate the source of the problem, imperative in case anybody had received a shock and might still be in danger, or if a short circuit somewhere, a fire risk, might be causing the outage.

Most of the residences and outbuildings had their own circuit breakers fitted, so any fault coming from there shouldn't have reached the main board. The only places not isolated in this way were the shed itself and a couple of the older buildings, the two toilet blocks and the manager's residence.

He shone the torch around the shed, sniffing for smoke as he looked around; there was nothing he could see that might have triggered the problem, no sign of a short. He glanced over at the managers' residence. He suddenly realised that Chantelle and the kids would be there, they'd moved in a couple of days earlier, while their own place was being renovated.

He wasn't too worried initially. His wife knew as much about running the place as he did. She'd do everything necessary to make sure the three of them were safe. Still, a tiny flutter of doubt remained. Colin left the workshop and began walking across the wide, sloping lawn towards the old house. People were milling around there; some with torches, lanterns or headlamps, some without, their spectral forms dancing around the beams of the lights.

He mounted the steps to the house, opened the creaking screen door and went inside. The familiar smell of burnt wiring struck him immediately; an acrid mist of smoke that stung his eyes and nostrils as he ran down the hall, past the smoke-filled bathroom, following the sound of Chantelle's shrill, raised voice.

They were standing at the bottom of the steps to the back verandah. Cyrus, looking slightly dazed, was facing his mother, who was shouting at him with a hand on the

sleeve of his shirt, shaking it to emphasise her words. The boy had something in his hands. It jiggled as she shook.

“You could have been *killed!* You understand? You *understand* me?”

Cyrus nodded, his lips set in a thin line, weathering the storm. His younger brother stood a short distance behind, his eyes wide with wonder; his mother had never acted like that before.

Colin shone his torch on the object his son was holding. It was a short length of electrical cord, neatly cut half a metre from the plug. When Colin reached for it, Chantelle snapped a warning. “Watch out, the ends are still hot!”

Colin crouched in front of Cyrus, face-to-face, then reached out and tugged the cord gently from his son’s grasp. He examined it, looking mystified into the boy’s eyes. When the child said nothing, Colin glanced again at Chantelle.

She glared at Cyrus. “*Tell him!*” she snapped.

Cyrus shrugged, tilting his head onto his small shoulder.

“I wanted to see what colour it was,” he said simply.

Colin grappled with this information. “What colour what was?”

“Electricity,” Cyrus replied. “I wanted to see what colour it was.” He paused for effect. “It’s blue,” he added with a touch of pride.

“Look in the bathroom,” Chantelle said, her voice suddenly quiet, tired and resigned.

Colin went back inside. The bathroom was still thick with smoke. Holding his breath, he hauled the window up and flashed his torch around the room. At first he could see nothing amiss.

Then he saw the towel rail. Colin had installed it himself, fixing it to the wall next to the vanity. Now it had a smoking hole, about the size of a five-cent piece, in its centre. When Colin touched its edge it was hot, and his fingers came away covered with a black, sooty residue. He looked again at the cord in his hand, at the nearby scorched power point on the wall, its switch still in the ‘on’ position; at the lead to the hair dryer, neatly cut off; at the hole in the silver rail. And he understood what had happened.

A quick interrogation of Cyrus confirmed it: the boy had cut the cord, turned the switch on and held the severed cord end up to the rail. According to Cyrus, he hadn’t even had to touch the metal; when he got near, an arc of electricity leapt across the gap, instantly melting the steel and throwing the boy off his feet. The colour drained from Colin’s face as he contemplated the possible consequences. If Cyrus had switched the power on before he cut the cord... If the floor had been wet...

He joined Chantelle in making these possibilities clear to their son. Cyrus took the warnings in stoically, listening intently and nodding his head in affirmation at the frequent points at which he was asked if he understood. Eventually they ran out of things to say. Colin crouched again in front of the boy, looking into his deep, drowsy eyes. There was no doubt Cyrus had got the message, and his father was satisfied that the incident wouldn't be repeated.

Despite his angst, Colin's mood slowly began to lighten. A grudging respect for his son infiltrated his anger. When you took the element of personal danger - a consideration that would have had little meaning for a six year old - out of the equation, the experiment required an element of ingenuity. It had its own logic, in a way. Cyrus had always pushed the boundaries, insatiably curious about how the world worked. Whether it was stomping on tubes of paint to see what happened, or wielding a hammer to nail thongs to the wall, the behaviour was always prompted by an innocent curiosity about and driving interest in results. The boy had been no different. Taking in his son's stolid acceptance of his dressing down, Colin was reminded again that Cyrus, like all children, was his own person, more than the product of his parenting or upbringing. A bit like Colin himself.

He calmed his wife, opened the all the windows and blew the switchboard. When he checked the fuse box, the old wire fuse had melted in its housing. He repaired it quickly, then blew the remaining smoke from the house with a leaf-blower. Once the atmosphere was clear, he left Chantelle to put the kids to bed and returned to the shed. When he flicked the circuit breakers back on, the sudden illumination of the facility's lights confirmed that everything was operational.

Colin turned off the fluoros in the shed and ambled back across the lawn, powerless to suppress the slight grin that crimped the corners of his mouth.

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