The Mystery of the Colour Thief

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To Magda and Julia





One

He came out of nowhere, a man in the smoke. He was nothing more than a shadow at first, a smudge of black in the grey. But as he loomed closer, he grew bigger, became more solid. My heart was a drum. He was shouting at me, but the sound bounced off my ears in eerie echoes. His long arms reached out. He was so close that I could smell him – a mix of sweat and burning rubber. He leaned in…

3.05 a.m.



The luminous figures stared back at me in the dark. The glow of a street lamp seeped through the wooden slats of my blinds. It was quiet. The man had gone. A nightmare. Though somewhere in the depths of my mind I knew that it was more than a nightmare.

That morning I was late getting ready because Milo

wouldn't come in from the garden. He'd been leaping around like a maniac, chasing a tiny vole that he'd found. Eventually I managed to get him indoors and I waited for my best friend, Lou, while grabbing scraps of breakfast. Dad had gone to work already, leaving me a note on the kitchen table:

Diz, see you after school. Have a good day x.

Lou usually arrived at 8.45 a.m. on the dot, so we didn't have to rush, but it was almost 8.50 a.m., and she wasn't here. She must have been running late herself and decided to go in on her own. I couldn't wait any longer.

I broke into a run as soon as I was outside. My feet hit the pavement in sync with the beating of my heart. The houses on either side of Gulliver Avenue shifted and swayed, and my ears ached inside from the sharp nip in the early autumn air. Clusters of people huddled at the bus stop passed me in a burst of charcoal greys, the white and black of offices and banks and traffic merged into a single, moving stream.

I ran and ran until I reached the finish line of the school gates, my arms propped against the railings, my chest ready to burst. The bell had gone. Even the usual crowds of sixth formers with their slouchy rucksacks and rolled-up blazer sleeves had disappeared inside. I walked into the empty entrance hall.

Lou saw me by the lockers and gave me a disapproving glance, not mentioning a word about why she hadn't come to mine. I'd got used to these glances over the last few weeks. Ever since we'd started Year Eight, she'd been acting as though she was a guru on everything from clothes to hair, music and even who to hang around with.

'Why are you always so last minute about everything? And look at you - what's with the stains on the skirt?' She shook her head. I ignored her. Lou's own skirt was far too short and I hadn't said anything about that. She'd hitched it up recently to expose her skinny knees. It was part of her new look, which included poker-straight hair and thick smudged lines on her eyelids.

'Come on, Izzy, hurry up!'

And before I could ask her why she hadn't called for me on the way to school, she turned on her heel and disappeared in the direction of our classroom. I stood there, thinking that any second she would turn around and wait for me. She didn't.

'Izzy, what are you still doing here?' Mr McKenzie sounded irritated. 'Daydreaming in the corridor? It's already gone 9.05 a.m.! Get a move on.'

We had double maths first with Mr Coruna who was, as always, striding backwards and forwards at the front

of the classroom with a dazed expression on his face. He looked as though, in his thoughts, he was somewhere far better. I liked him a lot – he was kind and funny, even if he wasn't always great at explaining things.

Today, his classroom was horribly hot, and Jonah and Dave were sniggering about something in the corner. I would put money on them having turned up the radiators just for a laugh. It was exactly the sort of thing that they would find hilarious.

Someone dropped a book on the floor and Mr Coruna was brought back to reality. He started talking about the value of 'x', but because of the heat and the fact that I wasn't very interested in algebra, my fingers lost their grip, my pen began to slip and my eyes grew heavy. I rested my head in my hands and pressed my knuckles against my eyelids, thinking that the pressure might help me stay awake. Despite my best efforts, I found myself drifting – a silhouette appeared, the flicker of a shadow in a swirl of smoke… and then the awful crawling began in the pit of my stomach.

'Izzy! Oi… he's going to notice.'

Lou's prod jolted me awake.

'Can't believe you fell asleep. What's wrong with you?'

'I don't know… Lou?'

'What?'

Her eyebrows were raised and she looked annoyed but I carried on. I had to tell somebody.

When Mr Coruna turned to write something on the board, I whispered, 'I had the most horrible nightmare last night. One I never want to have again. There was a man... a shadow man. He was all black - I couldn't see his face or anything. He came out of a cloud of smoke and he was shouting at me... I was so scared.'

I expected her to be shocked, but she rolled her eyes again and I noticed flecks of mascara on her eyelids, like two miniature feathery fans.

'What are you banging on about now, Izzy?' she whispered back. 'You're such a weirdo. You've been so different ever since...'

She tailed off and had the decency to look guilty for a moment, before turning to her equations again.

Mr Coruna tapped me gently on the arm as I was walking out of the classroom at the end of the lesson.

'Izzy,' he said, 'I just want to tell you how sorry I am for what happened to you. I also wanted to let you know, as your head of year, that we're going to do everything we can to support you. I hope you feel you can come to me if you need help with managing homework or anything else. You know, of course, that we have Mrs Tomkinson, the school counsellor. If you wanted to arrange a visit to...'

'I'm all right,' I said abruptly and immediately felt bad. I knew he'd meant well.

'Thank you,' I managed finally, before shuffling off.

But I wasn't fine when I got back to our form room for our last lesson to find Frank the Skank sitting next to me, in Lou's usual seat. His dark fringe fell into his eyes, but I could see that he was trying to avoid my gaze.

'What are you doing here?' I asked him.

'She wanted to swap. I... I said I didn't mind,' he stammered, glancing over at Lou, who was settling herself into a seat at the front of the class, next to Jemima. He brushed his fringe out of his eyes still avoiding my gaze, taking ages picking up the pen he'd dropped on the floor.

The shock rolled over me in waves. Lou was also being careful not to look at me, but I knew she realised I'd just found out what she'd done. She and Jemima were hunched together, giggling, as they looked at something on Lou's iPad.

I sat on the edge of my seat. Surely it was a joke? A mean joke. Any second now, Lou would start laughing at me for being such a sucker and believing she'd do that to me. But when the bell went for the start of the lesson, she hadn't budged.

I thought of saying something to our form teacher, Mr McKenzie, though he didn't care where we sat, as

long as we were quiet and got on with what we were supposed to be doing. Every time anybody bothered him, he'd say that he had 'bigger fish to fry' as if he were some celebrity seafood chef. At the start of the year I'd wished more than anything that we could have had Mrs Gilberton again, but she was teaching the new Year Sevens. I imagined her with them now, wearing one of her homemade dresses, probably getting them to read 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' in different voices. If she'd been here, she would have noticed straightaway that something was up and she'd ask to speak to me or to Lou at the end of the lesson. She always helped to sort things out quietly, without making a fuss.

Now we just had Mr McKenzie and his limericks, which I couldn't focus on no matter how hard I tried.

It was sad because I loved limericks – they were my favourite poems. I'd written a great one for Dad about a man who lived in a bucket. It made him chuckle for the first time in weeks and I felt like I'd won the jackpot. But today two things on my mind left no space for anything else. The first was the nightmare man and the second was Lou. We'd been friends since playschool. She wouldn't give up on me. Would she?

