

The COLOUR OF HOPE

ROSS MACKENZIE



ANDERSEN PRESS

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, UK
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any
means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Ross MacKenzie to be identified as the author of this
work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Copyright © 2022, Ross MacKenzie

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 83913 202 5

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



In memory of Siobhan





PART ONE

THE WISH





CHAPTER ONE

IN WHICH A WISH IS MADE



‘Tell me again about colour, Grandma.’ The boy sits on the floor at the old woman’s feet, staring up at her with large, shining eyes.

The old woman’s hands are resting on her substantial belly. She drums her fingers. ‘Tsk. You should be in bed, child.’

‘Please, Grandma! Please!’

She purses her lips like she’s sucked on a lemon, but he can tell that her displeasure is an act. She reaches for her glass, swirls the liquid around, takes a sip. ‘Fine,’ she says with a sigh. ‘What do you want to know?’

The boy sits in silence for a moment, questions hurtling around in his little head. The only sound is the delicious pop of the fire as the white flames lick the air. The room is cosy, bursting with moreish smells of rabbit stew and carrot soup from the stove.

At last, the boy smiles and says, ‘Tell me about orange.’

The old woman's skin is mid-grey, her cheeks dotted with freckles. Her dark eyes are deeply set within bundles of wrinkles, but now, as she casts her mind back to another time, not so long ago, those old eyes twinkle. She smiles and looks at once much younger. 'Orange? Let me see now. Yes. Well, you know the walks we take in the forest when harvest season is all sewn up, my love? Those days when the air is crisp, and you can taste the winter on the edges of everything?'

The boy nods.

'And you remember when we return from our walks to warm our fingers by the fire and sip mulled cider? When we are warm and cold both at once, and so very glad to be alive as the cider heats us from the inside?'

Again, he nods.

'That feeling of heat and cold and life and spice all tied up in a pretty bundle,' she says. 'If we could see it, that is what orange would look like.'

The boy is smiling now. Imagining. His eyes are filled with a faraway look. Such pretty eyes. Like his mother's eyes.

As the old lady watches him, she wonders, as she has done so often since he was born, if her grandson's eyes are the same shade of blue his poor late mother's were. How she remembers those eyes. Blue as the ocean – when the ocean was still blue.

Before.

Before the colour disappeared from the world.

No. Not disappeared.

Before it was stolen.

‘Can you tell me one more, Grandma?’

She tuts. ‘Are you determined to get me arrested, boy? The Emperor’s snitches are everywhere, and his Black Coats would string me up in the City square if they found me talking like this.’

The boy edges closer. ‘No one can hear us way out here in the farmhouse, Grandma. Besides, I don’t think anyone would ever try to arrest you. Not even the Black Coats.’

The old lady takes another sip from her glass. The hint of a smile plays on her lips. ‘Oh, they would *try*.’

‘Just one more colour, Grandma. Tell me about green.’

‘You, boy, are as stubborn as a mountain. I’ll tell you for one minute. But then it’s bedtime.’

‘OK, OK. C’mon!’

She drains the final sip from her glass. ‘Close your eyes. No, shut them properly. Good. Now think of how the world feels after a rainstorm. Are you doing that?’

He screws up his eyes and nods.

‘Well?’ she says. ‘How does it feel?’

He thinks for a long moment. ‘Clean. And new. And more alive. A little bit like when I’m swimming in the river and I dive down deep. When I come back up and take a big breath. It feels like that.’

She nods. ‘Aye. Now imagine you could see *that* feeling. That’s what green looks like, child.’

The boy has heard all of this before, a hundred, hundred times, but it never ceases to make his heart soar. ‘So that’s how grass looks? And frogs? And trees in the springtime?’

‘Yes.’ The old woman narrows her wrinkled eyes. ‘Now I want you to imagine something else. I want you to imagine climbing up the stairs and going to sleep, Darroch, because that is exactly what is about to happen.’

A few minutes later the old woman is tucking the boy in for the night. He insists she check under his bed and in his cupboard to make sure there are no Black Coats or Ripper Dogs lying in wait.

‘Safe and sound,’ she says, planting a kiss on his forehead.

Moments later Darroch is alone in the silent dark. He listens as the old lady makes the house secure, puts out the lamps and goes to her own room. Only when her snores rumble does he climb out of bed and creep to the window. He pulls the heavy curtains open, slides the sash window upwards and breathes the sweet warmth of the late summer night.

The sky is clear and black and patterned with a great scattering of twinkling stars. He looks to the west, over his grandmother’s farm towards the rolling hills and the forest, and then to the east, to the City and the sea. The moon is dazzling as a new coin, and its soft light brushes the high walls and spires of the city.

He tries to imagine what all this might look like should colour suddenly come rushing back into the world. But no matter how beautifully Grandma describes the wonder of colour, all Darroch has ever known is a world in black and

white and shades of grey, and his imagination cannot truly comprehend anything else. How he longs to see the green of the sheep meadows, the blue of the clear sky, the glimmer of golden sunlight on the city rooftops.

He sighs and is about to come in and close the window when something catches his eye. High over the sea, a streak of iridescent light flashes beneath the curve of the moon and is gone again in moments.

A shooting star.

Darroch's eyes widen and then close tightly as an idea burns in his head.

He whispers, 'I wish for somebody to bring colour back.' Then he opens his eyes, shuts the window and climbs back into bed.

He falls asleep without giving his wish another thought.

He has no clue that he has just changed the world, and the fate of one person in particular, forever.

CHAPTER TWO
IN WHICH A REMARKABLE
CHILD IS BORN

At exactly the moment the boy is making his wish, a fisherman named Tom Laurie is pacing around the kitchen of his cottage on Harbour Street in the City.

He walks around the table, wringing his trembling hands, and then to the foot of the stairs, where he stops and listens. He hears his wife cry out, puts one foot on the bottom step, but stops himself from climbing any further; he knows that the midwife is looking after his beloved Sarah the best she can, and his presence will not help the situation at all.

Back to the kitchen it is, then, for more helpless pacing.

Then, finally, after many hours of labour, Tom hears the sound that he has longed for: his child's first cry.

He rushes for the stairs and bounds up them two at a time, but when he is almost at the summit a new sound makes him freeze.

A scream.

The bedroom door flies open and out rushes the midwife, hurriedly closing her leather bag. He blocks her way at the top of the stairs, and when he looks at her face, he sees something that turns his heart to ice.

She is terrified.

‘Mistress MacLean?’ he says in a tremulous voice. ‘What is wrong?’

She does not speak, only continues to stare wild-eyed at him.

‘Mistress MacLean,’ he says again. ‘Please. Tell me, what has happened? Is it the baby? Is something wrong with the child? Or is it my wife? Speak, please!’

She opens her mouth, and for a moment it seems that she is going to say something. Her eyes fill with frightened tears. Then she pushes past him. Stunned, he watches her go, down the stairs and out of the door to the night. Then his senses return and he rushes into the bedroom.

His mind has conjured terrible images of what he might find there, but thankfully none of these are true. And yet he stops, still as a stone, and can do nothing but gawp, amazement and wonder and, yes, fear coursing through his every fibre.

His wife is sitting up in bed. There is a bundle of blankets in her arms, and within the bundle is a tiny, perfect baby. Tom is looking at the very scene he has always dreamed of. He is a father. He has a family.

But this scene has one difference to his beloved fantasy. One very important difference.

The baby's skin is not light grey like her mother's skin, or the dark grey of Tom himself. No. Tom remembers colour from when he himself was a child, before The Emperor and his Necromancer took it away.

He recognises that his baby's skin is light brown.

'It's impossible,' he says.

'She's a miracle,' Sarah says in a hoarse whisper.

'She?'

'Yes, Tom. You have a daughter.'

The baby makes a fussy little sound, wriggles, and the blankets swaddling her turn from whitish grey to pale blue. Then the colour continues to spread, turning the smooth skin of Sarah's arms pinkish white. The colour blossoms, filling the stripes of her nightgown with blue, reaching her neck and pretty face, reddening her cheeks.

This all happens in a blink, and Tom, who has never seen his wife in colour before, almost falls to the floor in shock.

'It's all right, Tom.' She holds out a hand, beckons him. He has always thought that she is beautiful, but now that he can see the colour in her face, the emerald green of her eyes, the shining red of her hair, he feels that he is looking at an angel.

He edges towards her as she holds his daughter out towards him. Trembling, frightened that he might drop her, or break her, he takes the tiny bundle in his arms. She is warm and asleep and completely perfect. When next he looks at his wife, all trace of colour is gone from her.

‘Look,’ she says.

He looks.

It begins with his hands and arms, the skin turning from dark grey to a brown deeper than the colour of his daughter’s skin. The colour reaches the sleeve of his heavy jumper, suddenly burnt orange, and continues to billow outwards until every bit of him is alive with vibrant hues.

‘It must happen to whatever she touches,’ says Sarah. Her face becomes grim. ‘Tom, we’re going to have to get her out of the City. Tonight. Now.’

A lump of panic rises in Tom’s throat. ‘But how? You’ve just had a baby! You can’t go on any long journeys.’

‘I’ll just have to,’ she says. ‘I’m not staying in this City a moment longer than need be. You know how it works. The Ripper Dogs will probably have already picked up her scent. It’ll only be a matter of time before they lead the Black Coats here. We might have an hour – and that’s if Mrs MacLean doesn’t go telling them first.’

‘The midwife?’ Tom’s heart stutters. ‘She wouldn’t do that, would she?’

Sarah is climbing from bed, teeth clenched in effort.

‘You can’t!’ says Tom. ‘It’s too dangerous!’

‘I think I know better than you what I can and can’t do, Tom Laurie. Now put the baby in her crib and help me get changed.’

CHAPTER THREE

IN WHICH TRAGEDY STRIKES
AND FATE INTERVENES

‘D

id the stable man ask any questions?’ Sarah says. She is walking around the kitchen, the baby warm and asleep in a sling close to her heart. Sarah made the sling when she first discovered she was going to have a baby, though back then she did not know what colour of silk she was using. It turns out that the diamond pattern is shining gold and royal blue.

‘No,’ says Tom. ‘Not a word. People hire horses at all times of the day and night, my love.’

A skinny black horse stands hitched to a post outside the door. The horse is secured to a small cart, the type of which is usually used to deliver vegetables or sacks of coal. Tom is busy loading some essential supplies. ‘There,’ he says with a final tug of the leather straps on a heavy pack. ‘Time to go.’

He helps her onto the cart with great care, trying to hide the tears welling in his eyes. She makes herself as comfortable

as possible on the blankets he has placed on the flat bed and sits stroking the soft wispy hair on her new-born daughter's head.

Tom unhitches the horse, climbs to the driver's bench, takes the reins and urges the horse on. As they turn the corner out of Harbour Street, Sarah watches the grey front door of the little cottage she loves until it is out of sight. Then she holds her baby and begins to cry.

It takes half an hour to clear the city boundaries, and soon after that the road becomes rocky and uneven. The cart judders and jumps, but still the child sleeps peacefully. The horse pulls them past a small sheep farm atop a meadow, and then the road takes them into the woods.

The trees soon become so tall and dense on either side of the road that the only sign of the sky is a long strip of star-dusted grey overhead. The air is thick with the scents of sap and pine, and the sounds are distant and wild.

'Where shall we go?' Sarah asks.

'Wherever we must to be free,' Tom says. 'There is a village half a day's ride away. I'll find a safe spot in the woods for you and fetch some supplies there. After that, we'll keep riding.'

'But where, Tom?'

Tom does not answer at first, because he does not know. 'We'll ride until we find the end of the Necromancer's spell.'

She hugs her daughter. 'But most folk say there isn't an end to it. Nobody's ever found it.'

Tom's shoulders are slumped. 'Well, we'll be the first, my love, won't we?'

No sooner has he spoken those words than something catches her eye. She sits up and squints back the way they have come. Her heart begins to thud faster and faster. A series of points of light bob up and down on the road a long way behind them. She knows instantly what they are, because she has seen them before. Each dot is one of a pair. Each dot is the eye of a Ripper Dog.

'They're coming!' she cries out. 'Tom, they're coming after us!'

He glances back and his eyes widen in the light of the oil lamp upon the cart. With a whip-crack of the reins he drives the horse on, and the cart jumps and jolts as they pick up speed. The baby awakens and begins to cry.

'They're gaining!' Sarah watches the points of light grow larger, until she can see the shapes of the dogs appear on the edges of the cart's lamplight, bear-sized and shaggy and dark, the guttural sounds of their slobbering growls echoing all around. Upon the dogs' backs are their riders, tall, thin creatures that might once have been human, hidden beneath long coats and hoods. Black Coats.

One of the Ripper Dogs lunges forward, knocking the edge of the cart with a long muzzle filled with teeth the size of daggers. The cart veers wildly, tips onto two wheels, and crashes back down. The baby is screaming now, Sarah clinging to her as she rolls uncontrollably around the flat bed of the cart. The dog has another lunge, and this time its

huge front paws land on the flat bed, tipping it, making Sarah slide forward towards its waiting jaws. The dog snarls and snorts, sending globs of thick drool spraying. Sarah screams, kicks out, and one of the dog's fangs punctures her leg. The pain is searing, blinding, but still she clings to her child, kicks and fights, knocking one of those deadly teeth out, making the Ripper Dog fall back and the cart right itself with a crash.

Two of the Ripper Dogs go sprinting past the limping cart, overtaking it, blocking the road, causing Tom to bring the horse to a skidding stop. Instinct kicks in. He leaps from the bench, draws his fish-gutting knife and tosses it. It plunges handle-deep into the nearest Ripper, and the creature growls and lunges at him, grabbing him around the waist in its jaws, sinking its teeth in, shaking him around like a wet rag and then throwing him twenty feet down the road.

Upon the cart, Sarah's world is growing fuzzy, far away. The pain in her injured leg is burning worse with each passing moment. She can feel the Ripper's poison invading her every cell. One of the great black dogs climbs onto the back of the cart, making the wooden beams groan and buckle. Sarah tries to back up, but all of her strength is gone. The dog's hot, stinking breath blows her hair back as it comes closer, its enormous wet nose twitching, brushing against the child she holds to her chest.

'No!' she cries. With one final effort, she rolls over so that her back is to the dog, her body shielding her crying little girl. She waits for the fangs to bear down upon her.

From far away there comes the fizzing sound of something travelling fast through the air, and then the THWACK of contact, and an echoing howl of pain.

More growls, more howls, more THWACK, THWACK, THWACKS.

Sarah does not know what is happening around her. She no longer has the strength to lift her head. As she closes her eyes for the last time, she prays that her baby will be saved.

All is still and quiet. Nothing moves. Nothing makes a sound. Then a shadow detaches from the solid black of the woods and steps onto the road.

The man's face is weathered and leathery. He wears a long tweed coat and a wide-brimmed hat. His nose is long and bears the crooked angles of several breaks. His top lip is hidden under a long, untidy black moustache.

He moves under cover of dark, first to make sure that his special arrows have done their job. The Ripper Dog carcasses are bubbling and melting, and the Black Coats have already turned to dust. He retrieves the arrows, wiping the poisoned blood from the silver arrow tips upon the mossy woodland floor.

When he is sure all is safe, he checks on the man lying crumpled on the road. By the soft light of the oil lamp on the cart, he can see the man is young. He feels for a pulse.

'Deid,' says the man in the tweed coat with a shake of his head. He stands, walks to the cart and frees the horse. 'Go on, ma beauty,' he says, patting the horse, watching it

run back towards the City. Next, he moves to the cart, climbs onto the flat bed and finds a young woman face down.

He stops. His sharp, shining eyes narrow. He reaches for the cart's lamp, brings it down, holds it nearer her so that he can properly see. His breath catches in his chest.

'Colour?' he whispers, reaching out a trembling hand, lifting a lock of the young woman's shining red hair. 'Colour! But how can it be . . .'

A soft sound makes him draw back. It is a muffled, cooing noise, and when he realises where it is coming from, he gently rolls the dead woman over and finds a surprise.

'A wee babby!' he cries. 'And crivens! You have colour too!'

And so she does. Her skin is light brown, her hair brown. She has stopped crying now, and she looks up at him with large, dark eyes that melt him. He reaches out a finger and her little hand wraps around it.

And that is when it happens.

First his finger and then his hand turn from grey to sunbeaten gold. Soon the sleeve of his tweed jacket is flooded with shades of tan and cream. His mouth drops open.

'Goodness me!' He holds his free hand out, watching the colour come alive in his fingers. 'A wee miracle! I see now why these devil dugs and their riders came after you.' As gently as he can, he unwraps the sling from the baby's mother and lifts the tiny child free. She coos and gurgles as he cradles her in his arms.

‘Your mammy and daddy are away now, my wee lamb. But don’t you worry about a thing. Sandy Burns will see you right.’

He wraps the sling around himself, makes sure the baby is safe and warm and then, with one final look around the scene, he sadly shakes his head and disappears once more into the shadows of the woods.