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Opening extract from

The Wish-Bringer

Written by

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Illustrated by

Jana Diemberger

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The Wish-Bringer

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THE Wish-Bringer



Written by Geraldine McCaughrean
Illustrated by Jana Diemberger



For Luca.

GM

For Lucia and the new baby.

JD

CHAPTER TWO

IF WISHES WERE HORSES

You can't have a story without a beginning. That would be like starting at Chapter Two.

Little Monacello knew a little of his own story; how he had turned up one day on a doorstep, a baby packed in a crate of straw. But that could not have been the start.

He must have begun earlier. Babies don't grow on trees like fruit. Somewhere in Naples there must have been a mother, a father, a birth. Somewhere, in Naples' muddled maze of streets, lay his beginning. As soon as he was old enough to walk, Monacello began to search for it.

There are parts of the world where people think Bad Luck comes up from below, and Good Luck comes down from the sky. Not in Naples. In Naples bad luck and good came from just one place … Monacello:

Ugly little Monacello with his pasty face and pale eyes;

Pesky little trickster, dressed like a monk;
Lurking in the shadows, hunched and skittering;
Laughing and crying in the night;
Making mischief.
"My wife dropped a jug of milk. I bet Monacello
jogged her elbow."
"My bread wouldn't rise
this morning. I think
Monacello slept
in my stove."
"Business is bad.
Monacello must
have frightened
away all my
customers."
Monacello got
the blame for
everything.



So he made his home in the city's dank basement;
in the Undercity. To the people living overhead,
he was a dark, darting shadow, a scuffling sound
behind them, a scary glimpse. "Who's there?
Was that something? Was that someone?"

Some said the "Little Monk" was
really a ghost or a goblin.

The Frezza brothers said they had already drowned him.

The brave said they did not believe in him
at all: that there was no such boy.

Some days, Monacello thought they might be
right … but for the cats and Napolina. His cats
must have believed in him, because they followed
him about and slept on his chest at night. And
his friend Napolina; she believed in him.

Then again, if it had not been for Napolina, he would
never have got mixed up with wishes. It was all her fault.

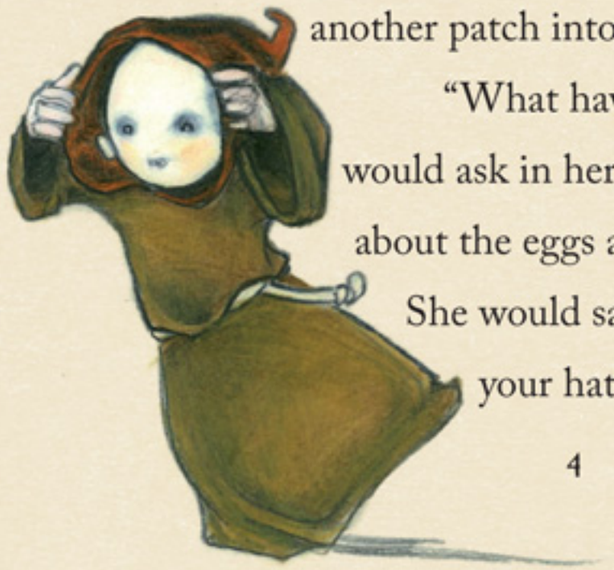
She kept washing his hat.

Monacello had two caps: one red, one black, made from two pieces of cloth found in the same crate as baby Monacello. For choice, he wore the black cap: had much the best fun when he wore the black cap. Whenever he put it on, his head filled with marvellous ideas for mischief.

He was wearing a black cap the day he stole eggs from under a chicken. He was wearing it the day he made handprints in fresh plaster and showed his cat friends around the fish market.

The painted walls were thorny with candle stubs, the candlelight prickled his eyes.

Napolina would be there, stitching another patch into her raggedy skirt.



"What have you been up to?" she would ask in her wide-eyed way. He told her about the eggs and the handprints.

She would say, "I think it's time I washed your hat", snatching the black cap

off his head and sinking it in a tub of water.

So then he had to wear his red cap instead. Somehow, when Monacello wore his red cap, his tricks were no longer any fun.

"Find someone to be nice to," Napolina said, her smile brighter than candlelight. Then, taking one enormous breath, she blew out a dozen candles and skipped away down the dark lanes of the Undercity.

That is how he came to be sitting on a horse trough, waiting for his black cap to dry, wondering how to be nice. It was difficult: when people saw him they either ran away or threw things at him.

An old lady passed by carrying a basket of linen. She peered at the trough and tossed a little coin into the water — splip!

"What was that for?" asked Monacello, thinking she had thrown it at him.

"Sometimes, if you throw a coin into a fountain, you get a wish."

"But this isn't a fountain. It's a horse trough," he pointed out.

"Oh, silly eyes. Silly me! Old age is a curse!" said the old lady.

"What did you wish for?" asked Monacello.

"For a horse to carry me to and from the market. My old feet hate the walk. Now you will laugh and call me a silly old baggage."

Monacello caught sight of his red cap reflected in the water. "No," he said. "I won't."

When she had gone, he reached in, wetting his sleeve right up to the shoulder, and scooped out the coin.

An ancient horse staggered by, led by a boy with a whip. It wanted to drink from the trough, but the boy was in a hurry.

"She's thirsty," said Monacello.

"Won't be soon, the useless bag of bones," said the boy. "I'm taking her to the knackers' yard to be turned into glue."

"I'll buy her," said Monacello, and paid with the little coin.

He gave the horse a drink and took it to market. "Your horse," he said when he found the old lady.

She peered at the knock-kneed nag. "What a noble stallion!" she cried, clapping her hands. "My wish come true!"

Meanwhile, the hungry horse ate carrots off the Frezzas' vegetable stall. The Frezza brothers (who truly thought Monacello done for and dead) caught sight of him, gulped with fear … and then began hurling cabbages.

The hungry horse caught the cabbages and ate them, too.

As the Little Monk scuttled away, the Frezza brothers yelled after him:

