

# Black is the Color

by

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*Black is the color of my true love's hair*

*His lips are like a rose so fair*

*The kindest face and the gentlest hands*

*I love the ground whereon he stands*

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Sunrise light glazed the oblong cobbles along the north bank of the River Clyde. The thump of music from a barge-turned nightclub had ended hours earlier. Only the river-winding between stark industrial buildings on the south bank and condominiums on the right-remained. The river, silence, and the morning chill.

And a white stallion's hunger.

He was not pure-white: rather a cobby piebald with a black face and a mostly-white body, more black spotting his legs, streaking his mane and tail and his heavy feathers. The red light scraped across the stones stained his coat also, turning blue eyes unearthly. His hooves were unshod, though old nail-holes could be seen around their fringes should one observe with care.

The stallion stood beneath a bridge so low that if he raised his head, he would strike it on stones—a human of average height could have laid hands on the arch—and he cropped small white flowers of hairy bitter cress from between the stones. Prehensile lips tugged the plants loose, his teeth grinding them to gritty pulp, roots and sand and all.

The picture of morning contentment, he was waiting for a girl.

Not one girl in particular. But not just any girl, either. She had to be a special girl, brave and clear-eyed. Thirteen or fifteen, innocently sociopathic, full of juice and life and solipsism. Wicked. Worthy.

That was the girl for him.

The Clyde had many moods, and the stallion in his time had waited through them all. He'd wait through more than rain and sun, dark and light, if need be. He was a predator, with a predator's patience. He'd wait a long while for the right one.

This morning, he did not have to. The cold black river silvered and then greened with sunrise, though the city slumbered on. And a girl came walking, alone, swinging her book bag, her heels clicking on the rectangular cobbles and her school skirt flaring around her knees.

It was early for school, though, and she didn't walk purposefully. She staggered as if with tiredness, and her high-collared cardigan was buttoned over her throat, her left arm hugged tight to her torso as if to keep in a little extra warmth, or as if her ribs hurt her.

The stallion had a way of going unseen, if he stood unmoving. The light fell around him, draped him like green branches or window curtains, and drew the eye past. But he wanted the girl to notice, and so out

of the nowhere from which he drew his clothing and caparison, he shrugged on a saddle and bridle—old, creaking, oiled leather—permitted a bit of hairy cress to protrude between his lips, and struck an unshod hoof on stone.

Lightly, lightly. He did not care to crack the cobbles, or his foot. Just to raise a clatter, enough of a clatter to raise the girl's head.

She was a pretty girl. That was good; he liked pretty girls best. She had long straight ash-fair hair and a pointed chin, and as she turned toward him sunlight refracted through her irises for an instant so her eyes seemed to glow.

He whickered, low and hesitant, and she limped a half-step forward, her black nylon bag dragging on the dew-damp stones. "Hello," she said, when her eye fell on him. "You're a big one, aintcha?"

He made another sound, a breathy whuff, and mirrored her half-step. "Oh," she said, and let go the strap of her bag so it slumped against her ankle. She held out a hand, palm-up. "I'm sorry. I haven't an apple."

He minced another step, gravely, head bowed and neck tucked, reins dragging between his forelegs. Her narrow chest swelled as she drew in a breath and held it.

He paused, waiting for her to speak again. The trick was to make them think they were coaxing you.

"Come on, Boss," she said, and clicked her tongue. "What's your name, big fella? Did you lose your rider? Is that why you were hiding under the bridge? I know, it feels safer there—"

He tossed his head and stepped forward and then back. His hoof came down on the reins; he thought he even made it look accidental. And then the head-toss again—this time arrested by the tension on the reins—and the flattened jingle of bit swivels.

The girl's eyes widened. They were translucent, green, the color of the Clyde in a different mood with the sun high above it. "Shh," she said. "Shh, shh."

She moved more purposefully now, worried for him, but still cautiously and in increments, edging away from her book bag and talking low nonsense. He watched, ears forward and forelock fallen across his eyes, waiting for her touch.

She surprised him. She let him lip her palm, fingers flat, and then she touched his neck, low and away from his face, making his skin jump and shiver. Cautiously, she ran the hand along the crest of his neck, scratching under the heavy mane, and then slid her palm down his shoulder along the grain of the hair. She crouched, slowly, her hand still trailing down his leg, and grasped the fetlock just above the hoof. Burrs matted the dense coarse hair of his feathers and her hand wouldn't close around his ankle. But she tugged, and he lifted, freeing the reins.

She caught them in her left hand and pulled them clear, winding the worn leather around and around her palm as she stood. "Good boy," she said, as he settled his hoof again.

She scratched his cheek. He leaned into it. "I wish I had an apple."

She had something better, of course. The smell of her was maddening. He rested his chin on her shoulder and lipped her neck, and she scratched harder.

She tasted of salt and unwashed girl. He was right; she had been out all night, and still in yesterday's school clothes. She was his, all his, whenever he wanted her.

He could afford the joy of anticipation.

“Hey,” she said. “That tickles.” She pushed his muzzle away, strands of unbrushed hair sticking to his lips and nostrils. “You’re pretty sweet for a stallion,” she said. “And no shoes either.” She looked down at his hooves. He clattered them on the stone, neck arched, inviting.

The saddle was right there, the stirrup a summons. She touched the cheekpiece of the bridle instead. “Aren’t horses always supposed to know their way home?”

He snorted warm air softly across her cheek and brushed her with his whiskers. She smelled of blood, rich and tantalizing; perhaps she was on her menses. The bit made him froth at the corners of his mouth when he salivated.

“Yeah,” she said. She cupped a hand over his eye, and he let her. “I know my way home too. And I don’t want to go there either. I can’t ride you in a skirt, Boss, and I don’t know where to take you.”

He wondered what she would do if he spoke, if he let himself slip into human form and gathered her in his arms. A calm girl, a brave girl, a sensible girl. One who knew a little about horses, maybe just from reading, maybe from trips out to the countryside.

He liked this one, her furry red smell and her voice with the hitch in it. He pressed his face into her palm and waited.

And she looked at him, sad and strange, and pulled her hand back and pressed it to her neck as if to keep her heart from rising up her throat. And then she looped the reins over the fence, turned away, scooped up her book bag by the strap, hauled back, cocked her arm, and pitched it spinning over the bright aluminum rail.

It fell with a splash and bobbed only once before it sank, recollected by ripples and then bubbles. “Right,” she said. “I guess that’s that, then, innit?”

She hadn’t done much more with the reins than a gesture. Perhaps she half-hoped that when she turned back, he’d be gone. A wisp of dream, burned off with the morning mist rising from the river.

Stately, careful, the stallion stepped out of the shadow of the bridge. The sun was high enough to catch in her tawny hair and warm the crest of his neck now, and he paused in the light so that when she looked up, she would see him. But she stood at the rail, staring, and so he came to her, and breathed across her neck. She shuddered and turned back.

“So,” she said, “where to now?”

He whickered again, tickling her ear with his whiskers. She leaned her cheek against his neck.

And then she turned, suddenly, tossed the reins over his head. She came under his neck and stepped crisply along his near side. He felt her hand on his shoulder, his mane. She grasped the pommel of the saddle and lifted one leg with complete immodesty, revealing a dab of crimson on her panties, her foot a testing weight in the stirrup. The scent of blood and iron dizzied him; he shook froth from his lips. And then she was on his back, knee socks and clunky black shoes, and he could hear her thighs sticking to the leather of the saddle as she settled herself. Living flesh on dead, adhering. She shifted her weight in the saddle, and he waited until she was seated, both feet in the stirrups.

“I know who you are,” she said. “You don’t fool me, pony.” And then she patted him on the neck and said, “And I don’t care.”

He craned his neck, pulling against the off rein, and she moved her hand to give him that freedom. She leaned down to push his forelock out of his eye as it came within reach, making him shake his head and send it tumbling down again. She laughed and drummed her heels against his side. “Well then, run off with me, Kelpie.”

He wondered when she’d known him. The eyes, perhaps: the eyes often gave him away. And those he could not change. Every Fae who transforms has some mark that stays with him in every shape, and the stallion’s was china-blue irises.

He winked at her, and she crowed. “I knew it!”

“You’re not frightened,” he said, his voice unmuffled by the bit.

She straightened his mane again. He dropped his head and ambled forward. His unshod hooves thumped on stone rather than clattering.

She stretched her legs into the stirrups. She understood the basics, he thought, but her balance wasn’t fluid. Knowledge without practice. “What have I to fear?”

“Death by drowning,” he answered, and she didn’t laugh. He hadn’t thought she would; the sort of girl who laughed at literary jokes didn’t tumble her books into the Clyde without a hesitation.

The walk became a trot, which she posted over awkwardly, wincing, and out of pity he began to canter. The river walk wasn’t long, but he planned to take Bell’s Bridge near the science center and bring her across the river, among the scrubby trees in the dawn-cold park.

Where they could find a little privacy.

The rising sun was at their backs, stretching their shadow long across the cobbles, and the river walk was all but deserted. One man, in a long coat and a hat, waved as they passed, and the girl waved back.

“You shouldn’t canter that beast on cobbles,” he called, but they were already past by the time the girl answered, “He’s cantering me!”

Whatever her bravado, and though she clung gamely to the saddle, the stallion could smell her fear. A gallop, he thought, might lose her.

If he had never thrown a rider he didn’t want thrown.

She’d abandoned the reins. They bounced against his neck, and her hands were fisted one in his mane and one on the pommel. She leaned forward, precariously, so he had to hitch his stride to throw her back into balance, and called into his ear, “Aren’t you supposed to look like a wild horse off the moors? And yet here you are under saddle, careering along a tame riverside.”

“Where the river goes harnessed,” he said, “so go the river-spirits.”

Through all the Isles, in these times.

Besides, she’d never stay on him if his back were bare, though he missed the grip of legs around his barrel, the drum of bare heels against his sides.

There had been another. He’d worn her soul for a time, chain and change, and lived in hunger while he’d done so. She had owned him—altered him—but he had won free at the last.

And though he *had* changed. . . a predator needs meat.

They cantered past brick condominiums, startling a red-clad woman who had been fishing in her bag, and came to the place where the riverwalk curved back to rejoin the road. Here there was construction on the north side of the street and—between the road and the river—trees and grass and ratty flowers amidst the litter on the south. They moved with the sparse early traffic but faster, threading around cars he didn't dare jump for fear of losing the girl.

They passed between a white hotel and a round restaurant, under the shadow of an enormous crane and past the auditorium called the Armadillo for architecture like a sectioned shell. And then they were on the bank of the river again, and running now, the girl laughing in his ear as the bridge came into sight, with its center suspension spire and its walkways covered with arches like a seagull's wings.

The bridge was named for a whisky sponsorship, and the stallion thought it a fine irony. "Duck," he said, and lowered his own head so the girl could lean forward along his neck.

And so they passed across the bridge, and she stayed with him, while supports stippled her face with moving light and the arch blurred by above. His hooves a hollow thunder on the span. The river gave back a moving echo.

They burst out under the streaky sky again. The clouds were torn and moving; there would be rain by dusk.

She laughed, and kept on laughing. She'd found the rhythm—a gallop is not so hard to ride—and their wind and his mane stung tears from her eyes.

On the off side lay the shining silver arcs of the science center, like half-moons reflecting the rising sun. The stallion veered away, across sand and then grass and soft earth where his hooves pressed crescents as if in answer.

And then the road, the hard jar up his forelegs, the girl shivering and urging him on. A trail they did not follow: instead, he took them among the winding band of trees.

There, he threw her, head down and rump high, and turned his body and turned his form at once and caught her as she was falling. His intervention knocked the scream right out of her, and she clung, breathless, against his chest. The scent of blood wreathed her, the scent of blood and the scent of woman.

His stomach rumbled.

She pressed closer into his arms, her eyelashes fluttering against the hollow over his collarbone. With blunt-nailed hands, he tipped her chin up and inspected her face, her mouth, the watery green of her eyes under hair tangled by their wild ride.

She winced. And when he touched the top button on her cardigan, she flinched.

"Run from me," he said. "Go on; I don't mind. I'll catch you."

Her lashes were dusted with gold. "There's no point in running. You never get away, and where's there to run to?" She laid her pale hands over his, the bitten nails and the torn, inflamed cuticles. She helped him unbutton her collar.

When the cardigan fell open, he saw the bruises on her throat. She swallowed under tender blue-veined skin, and he touched her softly. The hands that had made the bruises were smaller than his own, but most hands were.

“Did you want that?” he asked her.

She didn’t answer, as such. She lowered her eyes, and shook her head.

“My dad called me a whore,” she said. “He said I needn’t come home again.”

“Your father choked you?”

He was new. He was changed, like the changeless sea. It wasn’t pity he felt, for he was pitiless.

But he recollected pity. He had carried it for a time, and though he’d laid it down since, the memory lingered.

The sea is also capricious.

“You were raped,” he said.

“So? My *dad* told me he *loved* me. That makes what he did better? And you. You’re going to drown me. What makes you so fucking superior, water-horse?”

He had no answer, so he sang—

*I’ll go down by Clyde and I’ll mourn and weep*

*For satisfied I never can be.*

*I’ll write him a letter, just a few short lines*

*And suffer death ten thousand times.*

—and watched her eyebrows rise. And when he had finished, he cleared his throat and said, “You knew the cost when you came with me.”

“I did,” she said, fists on her hips. “And if I hadn’t, you would have taken me anyway.”

He dipped his head. It was true.

She sighed. “I don’t have anywhere to go. It doesn’t matter. Do you know what a sin-eater is?”

“I have been called one,” he answered. “But I am not. I cannot absolve you.”

“I don’t need absolution,” she said. “Will you put your sin on me?”

“I can’t sin,” he answered. He toed the earth nervously. “I haven’t a soul.”

She rolled her eyes, arms crossed, shaking her hair across her shoulders. “If you fuck me, will you say it’s my fault?”

The stallion was as old as the sea; he’d loved and killed and diced with the kings of Faerie, and—for a while—he had carried a mortal woman’s soul. He could not recollect a conversation that had befuddled him as much as this one.

“Of course it’s not your fault,” he said. “I’m a monster.”

“Oh God!” She shook her head so hard it turned her body from the waist. Her hair was a tempest all around her, and he wanted to reach out and smooth it. “A monster who admits it. I can die happy now.”

How he loved these bold young women, their flounces and their storms. He had to touch her hair, and so he did, stroking it smooth as best he could with callused hands. He held her face between his palms, and she let him.

“Did you think I’d be impressed by your stoicism? Did you think you would be different, that you could change me?”

“No,” she said. “I know I’m not that special. I just wanted to ride.”

“Run,” he said. He let his hands fall. “Fight me. You might live.”

“I don’t like kissing,” she said, and buttoned her cardigan down.

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This time, no saddle. Her skin cool on his warm hide, naked as Godiva, but her hair hiding nothing. He ran, hard, exultant. If she wanted a ride, he would give one.

She rode better without the saddle. She left her blood upon white hide.

They galloped between parking lots and along the waterfront, people turning to stare. A man in a green hat; a woman in a flowered dress not warm enough for the morning. Someone snapped a photo; the stallion tossed his mane. They came up to the fence in a headlong plunge, and she called into his ear.

“It’s not a new story, is it?”

“No,” he called back. “It’s as old as the sea.”

He gathered himself and leaped the sunlit silver rail.

They splashed hard, his legs flailing, hers slipping along his sides though she clung with clenched fingers to his black-white, seaweedy mane.

She gasped in cold, clinging. “Your name. What’s your name, Kelpie?”

“Uisgebaugh.”

There is no point in keeping secrets from the dead. But her name, he asked not. And she did not offer.

Her fingers spasmed on his mane and stayed locked there, entangled, when he rolled and took her down.