

SELECTED WRITING

TRUE COLOURS

Mike Scott Thomson



InkTears



Despite never advertising, I do a brisk trade. You'll find me under the footbridge by Camden Lock, within sniffing distance of the food court and just around the corner from the more customary soothsayers and clairvoyants. The bold lettering over the narrow doorway is as straightforward as it is deceptive:

The Colourman

And in smaller handwriting, scrawled underneath:

Danny Storer
I'll read your aura
£10

Somehow it entices people in. I get all sorts. Students in packs of four or five, bemused and fascinated in equal measure; old hippies still clad in printed silks and ankle length skirts, never having managed to give up the dream; gaggles of Sloanies, clutching their designer shopping bags who come to the market to slum it and who think it's all a bit of a giggle.

But no matter who they are, upon entering my box room, everyone is immediately taken aback. They pause in the doorway, do a double-take, glimpse with uncertainty at my hefty, muscular frame squeezed into one of the two battered armchairs, and wonder if they've taken a wrong turn. But I smile broadly and beckon them inside, bidding them to sit down in the one remaining seat. 'That'll be a tenner,' I say nonchalantly before beginning. I don't bother with all this 'cross my palm with silver' bollocks.

Perhaps they are expecting a fortune teller. I don't suppose I should blame them. Madame Firefly's place four blocks down, with her crystal ball and Tarot Cards, resembles an explosion in a paint factory. She has smoking incense sticks and fairy lights in seventeen different shades of purple. Me? Every day I wear a grey, zip-up cardigan and grey corduroys. The room, with only two armchairs and one small table, is also grey. Grey carpet, grey painted walls, grey ceiling. The only splash of colour is provided by a large glass bowl of pink

marshmallows, upon which I casually graze during the short, ten minute readings, but apart from that, it's all monochrome.

I guess this greyness is to make my job marginally easier. In this environment, with little distraction, I can read people's auras: that illuminating, phosphorescent halo of colour which blazes and radiates from the body of every single living soul upon this planet. Everyone has their own – they're all unique, like fingerprints, a mixture of hue underpinned with one main colour running nearest to the body – yet few people can still see them. Apparently children under the age of four are able to, but soon grow out of it. We all had the ability, once.

'You're mainly green,' I may tell them in my gruff East London accent. 'You're a healer. You look for growth, you nurture that growth.' Or, if I see a violet shade, I say 'You're spiritual. You're undertaking a journey.' Pinks are perhaps my favourite, since they bring out my softer side: 'Are you falling in love? Yes? I knew it!' And I would grin broadly, lean over and give them a playful punch on the shoulder, making them blush and their aura pinker than ever.

I have to be wary with reds – it can mean, nine times out of ten, aggression; and if someone comes in surrounded by brown or dirty grey, I know to expect trouble: they're sceptical and guarded; not open to what they regard as psychobabble, and are probably just there to take the piss.

But to tell the truth, I never fully got the hang of what it means to have a certain colour. That is something I had to learn from scratch, and even six years on, I tend to wing it. Madame Firefly probably does a better job with her tea leaves and palm readings. But me, well, I genuinely see what I claim to see. If you were in front of me now, I'd be able to tell you yours in an instant. Which is just as well, because I can't do anything else.

It wasn't always this way. I used to be normal. Or as normal as one could be for a strapping jack-the-lad with a cockney twang, barely out of teenage years, ablaze with hormones. Since the age of eighteen I've been big and slightly menacing: six foot seven with a forty inch waist and five o'clock shadow coating my square jaw like coal dust. My nickname in the rugby team was Desperate Dan. Every Saturday I would play in the county league, a fearsome number five lock, throwing

myself headlong into scrums, caking myself in mud, showering with my boisterous teammates after the game, downing ten pints of London Pride at the King's Arms and copping a quick feel of Tiffany Ledbetter, the barmaid.

At the time, my aura was probably a red, maybe with flecks of brown – combative, competitive, a little insecure – but actually, I have no idea. Back then I didn't have the ability.

That all changed one Saturday just after I turned 21. We were up against St John's Old Boys, an important tie to nab the play-off place in the league, and the ball went for a line-out. My marker that day was Garry Bullard, another chunk of a lad, same weight, same height, even same facial hair – and as we launched our substantial bodies up from the line to try and grasp the in-swinging ball, one of us, we're not quite sure who, slipped. Our heads met – my forehead into his – a sickening crack reverberated throughout the field and both of us collapsed into two bloody, sweaty heaps upon the muddy ground. I remember seeing a haze of grey, red and blue swimming in front of my eyes, overheard Garry groaning 'I want a banana,' before passing out.

We were in hospital for a week. Fractured skulls. We lay in beds side by side with only a white curtain between us, Garry still wittering on about tropical fruits, me trying to come to terms with what had clearly been a seismic shift in my vision. When I say 'vision', I mean both literally and figuratively. Whilst I struggled to make some kind of sense of the halos of yellow, turquoise and blue emanating from the doctors and nurses – plus the deep blue indigo radiating from my own skin – I also realised that my days of playing rugby, fumbling with Tiffany in the beer cellar or drinking my own bodyweight in alcohol every weekend, were over. With that crunch of craniums and gruesome splattering of blood by the try-line, the synapses in my brain had irreversibly rewired themselves.

Garry, eventually, did OK out of it: he opened a smoothie and candy stall near my place in Camden Market – 'Banana Splitz' he calls it – and, having previously been hopelessly unlucky with the opposite sex, fell in love with Tiffany Ledbetter. He tried to deny it, knowing that she was my ex, but of course I could tell. Eventually I admitted that I didn't

fancy her any more and he could court her with my blessing. He whooped with delight and gave me a bear-hug, handed me a free banana and proposed to her the very next day.

In the meantime, I'd been left with a weird new ability which bordered on the paranormal and a perplexing, but certainly not unpleasant, constant craving for marshmallows. With the help of a number of arcane Internet sites, I managed to figure out the nature of my gift, and with very little fanfare, opened my shop. The fact that I was a five minute stroll away from Sweetie Pie's, the café near Chalk Farm which serves the best marshmallow squares in the whole of London, heavily influenced my choice of location. And business, as I say, is brisk: tourists, hippies, students. Yet from the outset, something was missing. I first noticed when my own aura, usually a rich indigo indicating a heightened awareness of the supernatural, had gradually shifted to black with hints of red. Sure enough I knew what it meant: frustration and unresolved karma.

Was I unhappy? Not especially. I was earning good money, socialised well with the other stall holders, led a comfortable existence on a houseboat moored just a little way along the canal, and whilst I'd lost touch with most of my old rugby playing chums, I was at ease with my new life. So what was it?

Was it women? At the time, I didn't think so - I did go on the occasional date. If anything it was easier than before. Occasionally I would go on the prowl amongst the bars and clubs of Camden, where I'd jovially approach single girls and groups alike, adjusting my pick-up lines or topics of conversation to suit their colour. Loud nightclubs were the best for oranges; it usually means they're awakened sexually and are up for it. Wine bars and cafés tended to have yellows, and were cool too - they always reacted the best to my repertoire of feeble jokes that I remembered from my past life - and I even got lucky with a couple of businesslike purples, and, on one unforgettable night, a red.

My relationships were never more than one night stands though. Yet this fact never bothered me until one Monday morning when the door to my shop opened and in walked Emma.

As was often the case, I didn't examine the client immediately. Usually I preferred to let them sit and make eye contact, say a quick greeting and put them at ease before focussing on the detail of their

aura. So nothing, at least initially, struck me as being particularly out of the ordinary. She did the usual quick double-take at the grey room, I reassured her that she was in the right place, asked for my fee and bid her to sit down.

She did so, knees knocking lightly together as she settled herself into the sunken armchair. I regarded the trim young lady opposite. Although it was a crisp spring day, she was wearing a thin dress in mottled pastel colours, and with wavy golden shoulder-length hair framing two sharp cheekbones and deep-sea, aquamarine eyes, I thought at first she was part of the nu-age hippy set. She smiled - her face seemed to buckle together as she did so - and I shuffled up in my seat.

Then I noticed. Or rather, I didn't notice. My eyes widened and brow furrowed as the magnitude of my realisation hit home.

She had no aura. It was like it had been rubbed out; the eraser on the end of a divine pencil, or the Tipp-Ex of the Gods, had scrubbed the essence of her soul clean. Had I lost my ability? She'd left the door open and I could see into the walkway under the bridge outside; a parade of blues, greens, yellows and violets. I looked once more at the girl. She was a blank, standing out in sharp contrast to every human being I'd seen since my accident. My jaw dropped, my mouth a vapid, letter O.

She shifted nervously in her seat. 'So...' she said at last. 'What am I?'

'Uh...' I managed to splutter. 'You're...' I frowned, not knowing how to continue. Spotting the marshmallows on the table, I hastily popped one into my mouth and offered her the bowl.

She politely shook her head. 'I'm more of a Turkish Delight girl,' she said, dimples forming on her cheeks.

I chewed the sweet whilst I thought of what to say. The expression on her face was one of expectation, but also amusement. She inched forward, and cocked her head. I gawped; I must have looked quite a picture of teenage awkwardness. Christ, how old was I? 27? She giggled and uncrossed her legs. 'You're funny,' she said.

'Uh,' I grunted again. 'I mean... uh.' I felt an odd fluttering in my diaphragm. 'This... hasn't happened before,' I tried to explain, before what may have been the sugar rush from the marshmallow gave me a sudden burst of bravado. 'I can't tell you what aura you have. But I can

tell you what you are.' She raised her eyebrows, her amused smile radiant in the grey room. 'You're beautiful, that's what you are.' I cringed, devastatingly aware of just how crass I must have sounded.

She remained perched on the edge of the chair and looked at me, scrutinising this huge, hairy brute before her. After a beat of a few seconds her smile cracked into a laugh.

'Well!' she exclaimed. 'Well, OK!'

I sat there, face reddening under my stubble, the awkward flush of an adolescent half my age. Reaching into my pocket, I retrieved her tenner and held it out to her.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I failed.' I gave a rueful grimace. 'First time ever.'

She didn't take the money. 'No, you didn't,' she said, and puckered her lips thoughtfully. 'You know, maybe I heard just what I needed to hear.' She lifted herself from her seat and took the three short steps to the door, her thin dress flapping in the spring breeze. She turned back to me. 'My name's Emma,' she said. 'I work in Bobby's Boutique just by the road. Come over and see me!'

Then she was gone.

As soon as she departed I hurriedly shut up shop, and in a mood of total befuddlement, rushed round the corner to Madame Firefly. The old lady was perched, as usual, on a wicker chair, the pungent scent of opium cutting swirls in the air around her, a line of silk scarves draped over the doorway to the den. Her aura was a dreamlike blend of gold, deep blue and silver; if I could trust anyone, it would be her. She looked up from her copy of Heat magazine with a frown of concern.

'Danny Boy, my child, whatever has come over you?' she exclaimed.

I told her. No sooner had I finished when she paused for a beat, opened her mouth and flung back her head, letting out an ear-splitting cackle.

'Oh, my child!' She peered at me quizzically over her half-moon spectacles. 'Give me your hand.' I did so, thinking she was about to read my palm, but instead she merely clasped it between her two gnarled paws and squeezed tight. 'Of course you can't see her aura. Not yet, my love.' She winked, the hazel of her irises twinkling from the light of a nearby scented candle.

'But I don't know anything about her!' I pleaded.

Madam Firefly lifted my hand and planted it firm against my chest. I felt my heart beat, hard and heavy. 'Well then,' she said in a near-whisper. 'What are you gonna do about it?' And cackled again.

I ran past the early morning shoppers and tourists, past my shuttered shop, down the passageway to Banana Splitz. Garry Bullard was there, resplendent in his bright yellow overalls with aura to match. I pulled up, panting.

'Yo, D-Man,' he chirped. 'You here to try my caramel plantain?'

'Not today, Gaz,' I said. 'I need to call in a favour. Get your recipe book.'

At four o'clock that Monday, my heart a kick-drum of adrenaline, stomach dancing a jitterbug and clammy hands clutching my little gift to Emma, I gingerly opened the door to Bobby's Boutique. The bell pinged. Emma, still surrounded by a cloud of blank, was by the changing rooms, assisting an orange-aura'd girl with the straps on a mauve cocktail dress. She looked up and saw me.

'Well, hello stranger,' she beamed. She shot a look at the orange girl, who scarpered through a curtain at the back. I edged forward.

'I got you this,' I stammered, and held out a little brown package. She cocked her head, just like she'd done in that irresistible way earlier in the day, and pursed her lips, frowning amiably. Taking the bag, she peered inside.

'Turkish delight!' She looked up at me, lips parted with enchanted surprise.

'Hope you like banana flavour.'

She laughed. 'Yummy!' A few seconds passed. I was tongue-tied, but luckily she knew what to say. 'So. Shall we go somewhere? I know a place I think you'd like.'

And as she led me by the hand towards Sweetie Pie's, on the side road leading to Chalk Farm, I detected a glow, the faintest of phosphorescent glimmers, emanating from her bare arms: a pink, not a strong, shocking shade, and it was accompanied by gold flecks of discovery and adventure, but it was a pink all the same. And when I looked once again into her sparkling blue eyes, I found that this subtle, shimmering but nonetheless definite pink had spread to her slender

neck and beautiful oval face, engulfing her entire upper body in a halo of rose and fuchsia.

Ten minutes later, as I tucked into my Fudge and Mallow Sweetie Special, I noticed my own aura had done the same.

‘Looking forward to seeing more of you,’ I said.

‘Likewise,’ she replied, her face once more breaking into a smile.

Our corner of the café pulsed with a nebula of gradually strengthening pink as we talked the night away.

WRITER PROFILE



Mike Scott Thomson has been a writer since his teenage years. Now in his thirties, and after dabbling in music journalism, blogging and travel writing, he only seriously turned to fiction in 2011. His stories have been published by The Fiction Desk (their anthology, 'Crying Just Like Anybody'), Litro Magazine (issue 121, 'Magic'), plus Writers' Forum Magazine and various places online. A short story of his ('Me, Robot') was also adapted for performance by the theatre group Berko Speakeasy. Based in Mitcham, Surrey, he works in broadcasting.

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