

## Putrid Pink

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F walked to the end of the block, and then turned back on himself, before reaching the other end, and turning back again. There was only one door, a deep brown door with six panels, filled in with a slightly newer, darker wood.

“This must be it, doesn't look like much of a magician's lair though.” He thought.

As he walked up to the door, he must have looked ashen, and as he charged up, he tried to remind himself of what led him here and reorganise his mental resources.

He was not happy and hadn't been for longer than he could remember. He was insecure, not about his looks, or his brains, or his personality, but about him, the sum total of everything that he was just never seemed quite enough. Whatever happened in his own life, one constant always remained – a mind victimising itself. It would come in waves he couldn't control, couldn't ride. Every day, he wore a cloak of discomfort, he felt himself every moment to be less than he ought to be, a little less than human.

In spite of it all - all the shivering terrors, the gasping obsessions, the lows that scooped himself out of himself – he had always a feeling, buried somewhere hard to trace, but somewhere for sure, that he had something to give to the world, an unknown but significant great contribution unique to him. But when he interacted with the world at large, he felt so insignificant, powerless, and passive. He felt like a wire, stripped bare, all the thin copper strands frayed and dangling every which way for all to see; he felt broken, unconnected, and absolutely unremarkable.

He lived in a shed – a small studio, where he could go between cooker and toilet in two steps. When he looked at his life, he felt a sense of frustration, like dead air caught in his chest, the oxygen seeping away. He felt doomed to the life of a non-entity, and he wanted to break from it, in whatever way he could. He didn't expect his life to be easy, but surely it could be better than this. But when he thought of the changing things, it was like he couldn't take any more air in. Whatever step it was. It just seemed terrifying.

Something finally snapped in him. One night, he was kept awake by intrusive thoughts, pounding against the sides of his head, reverberating, interfering together. The glowing hands of his clock showed the moment he could wait no longer – he would not feel the warm embrace of sleep. He would have to try and face his dead-end office job. It was a job he hated - the culture, the dismissiveness around him and the work - for which he felt too intelligent and simultaneously incapable. But he couldn't just leave it, so he tended to just about drag himself in every day. But that day he simply could not face it. It was either die or do something radical.

His radical move, when he finally resolved himself to it, was to visit the magician. Though naturally full of inertia, F was driven on by desperation, by the sense that this was the only person who could help him. He had heard through the grapevine where the magician could be found, and he thought he'd try it out. The rumours said that he operated in an underground lair, underneath the old city hall.

This was what let him to that small, unassuming door in building, and he started to turn the handle...

The magician... Everyone knew who he was, but few had met, or even seen, him. But he rescued the town from all kinds of scrapes. An outbreak of an unknown pox came, for example, and they called the magician in, and he rid them of it. He had solved all kinds of problems; conflict, violence, disease, architectural, and he even hypnotised several powerful politicians out of their corruption. This was no mediaeval citadel, awash with superstition, this was a thriving modern town. There were those who doubted, who tried to prove that the magician was a just a good scientist or a fraud or whatever else, but nothing had come of it, perhaps because of his elusiveness, or the seemingly inexhaustible breadth of his powers. Whatever the source of his abilities, the people of the town eventually just accepted it, another feature of their world, like their government or the Met office, and hardly anyone even questioned it anymore. He just popped up once in a while, helped them out, and off he went. F had no idea what the man even looked like, and if he would help with such a trifling matter as the downs and downs of F's turmoil.

F was greeted by darkness, shadowy shelves with rusty nails and paint cans and cleaning supplies surrounded him, or so it seemed when he really squinted. What could he do now?

"Umm...." He started to think aloud, but in a second the closet around him was gone, the walls dissolved, and he was in a wide hallway. This must, he thought, have been the office of the magician. And office was the right word. His eyes first caught the anonymous grey carpet exclusively used in offices, atop which stood a maze of tables, pine mostly, around a circular glass central area.

"Come on in" said a voice, as though coming from right beside him –someone leaning in close to his ear - but he saw the magician, the owner of the voice, in this glass room in the middle, putting away a book. He had dark grey hair, without even the obligatory beard, and he was not wearing robes, like F had expected (the magician had always managed to keep himself out of the public eye). He had a white shirt with a purple paisley pattern, untucked above his baggy jeans, which were a mottled pale blue, and scuffed at the bottom. On his feet, there were no boots or pointy shoes, but a couple of dog-eared trainers. He had a very rosy complexion and smiled to reveal perfectly aligned shiny teeth. He was balding, and had a broad face, with a flat chin with a bushy handlebar moustache.

"Just reading a bit of Nietzsche...he's fantastic, isn't he?"

"Sure" F said, hoping that the magician wouldn't call his bluff, and wanting to get onto business.

"So maybe you know me, people call me the magician, but you can just call me Greg."

"Greg? That's your name?!"

"I have many names....is that what you were expecting to hear?" He said with a wink.

F was stunned, he was expecting the grave manner of a character like Gandalf. The magician, Greg, came across more like a children's entertainer. He gave a nervous, forced sort of laugh.

"Don't worry, I'm only rakin' your bacon, now what can I do for you pal?"

F tilted his head and squinted slightly, mentally discarding the entreaty for help that he'd rehearsed for seven hours. And for what felt like another 7 hours, his perplexity came across in the rhythm of his breath, the depth bouncing up and down, like he was preparing to speak, stopping himself, preparing, stopping – searching for the words.

“Ummm...so...it's kind of like... well I have issues...with confidence.” He saw a placid look on Greg's face that encouraged him to continue; so he plunged into a long explanation of how he had been feeling, in every aspect, rattling out the words – having to talk while breathing in to cope with the sheer flow.

When F had emptied himself of words, Greg simply nodded for about 20 seconds.

“Ok, and what can I do?”

“I want to be strong and courageous, I want to be equal to all of my aspirations, to breathe new air that's fresh and pure and nourishing.”

“Well now, that's just as easy as making my bed” he said, with a whisper of a cocky smile.

He made him a potion, pulling out all kinds of exotic herbs and crushed powders, which F had never seen before. He was heating it, not in a cauldron, but in a round glass flask, like the bottom three quarters of a globe, topped with a V-shaped head, which had a thin glass pipe coiled up inside. The whole place seemed to be getting heated from whatever was happening in this flask. The place felt stuffy, and there was a smell that seemed to go up and scratch the inside of the nostrils.

After what felt like two minutes, the room began to spin, such was the effect of the atmosphere.

He picked up an ochre root, which looked like it had warts growing from it. He set it on the table and laboriously sawed a small cylinder with a serrated knife. It was nothing F could recognise. He gave it a little squeeze, and it immediately broke into a grey powder, which he dropped into the flask.

“Would you look at how it sits in the liquor? It absorbs – sits, but it doesn't quite disintegrate – no – it's more like the liquor disintegrates into it, so it is, watch it!”

F struggled to reign in his darting eyes and make them focus on the pixelated flask, struggled to keep his head still.

“Uhh, yeah that's really something” F said, after a while, when he saw Greg looking straight at him for a response. It did have its hypnotic quality, watching the dust particles grow and grow, and combine; until the liquid looked homogenous. The world swam around his head, colours and pictures flashed, he couldn't tell what any of it was; he held on to try and keep his head level.

As he sat there waiting, the magician was telling him a story. He tried to tune in, assuming there was a profound meaning to it.

“...ack sure, you know yourself, they're all just normal people. The other day, I met Paul McCartney. Pretty cool, huh? I was in this sushi place down in London. It was very full, packed to the rafters, and I was with a few mates. Lucky me, I got the seat right next to his table. So, I turned around to him, right? And I said – “now I know why you were so excited about the octopus's garden, hahaha” What do think he said, eh? Mate?”

He looked round at F's queasy, overwrought face, with eyes still darting around.

"Mate?"

"Eh... I dunno, umm good?"

"Oh, he did not like it all, so he didn't, not one bit – was very grumpy in real life. But sure, it was only a laugh, with him having written the song and whatnot."

F thought to himself how it was actually Ringo's song, and for a split second he wondered if he might be able to raise such corrections in the future – to leave as better friends than before – but to assert himself too. But the thought changed in the dizzy atmosphere, it bifurcated into a million alternative scenarios, him confronting the Magician in every possible way with every possible response.

For a second, one of those seconds that drags out in time, the chemicals and currents in his brain cascading - but a second nonetheless - he saw himself outside of himself. He had grown accustomed to thinking of himself as an old man: weary, and with a narrow comfort zone. In that second, though, he saw a young boy. He saw a pitiable and hapless kid going from place to place, pleading for approval, naive and caught up in petty desires he couldn't understand, much less control.

He felt shame, like thick, heavy water, well up in his chest, dragging him inexorably to the floor. And the second passed, his head spun, everything distorted. It was just then that he realised that he was shivering, every muscle in his body practically spasming. He had to get out.

And just as disorienting agitation began to outweigh curiosity, and F was ready to call it quits, he heard a sound like a small beater striking a bell.

Immediately the atmosphere disappeared. He was sitting in a cold, still room, and the magician was holding a clay cup, filled with the transformative potion.

"Here you go young man, job's a good 'un" he said, with a little twinkle in his blue eyes. "Just drink this, to the dregs, and that'll be you!"

"A-and this will work?" Said F, a little bit sceptical in light of the magician's calm, folksy manner.

"Oh aye!"

F thought for a bit – confused by the sudden emptying of the cacophony in his mind, and he figured that he *had* been totally desperate, and that he was tired of his own verdicts and judgements. Was that not, after all, why he was there? The magician's manner, he reasoned, might even show he was genuine. Didn't every charlatan he had seen try and dress up his vain theories as science or magic or spiritual truth? The magician was comfortable just to be Greg - a man, more like a cook, casual, good humoured and not taking himself too seriously. Maybe this was a sign that he knew he would be taken seriously, no need for affectations, no need to press the point.

Even looking at the décor made him feel this. It didn't look mystical or crazy, it looked like a lab or an office – with all the desks and benches arranged around the central room where they sat. There was a certain unaffected nothingness about the hallway, from the fluorescent lamps to the vast piles of boxes under the desks, presumably containing the unorganised detritus and equipment that Greg needed. The chairs were comfy, like

armchairs from a high-end furniture shop, not like some kind of mediaeval looking thrones.

Greg cut his reverie - "Well, are you going to drink it?"

"Sure sure, of course, that's why I'm here" His wavering voice betrayed some doubt, but he pushed it down, "Of course."

He saw a thick pink stew in the cup, he took a small sip, wanting to avoid burning himself with the steaming drink. As it happened the temperature was just fine. But the taste was putrid. He gagged and composed himself enough to gurgle out: "That is horrible, are you sure this is right?"

"Yeah, it's meant to be like that, sorry, it's part of it."

"Oh...ok..."

"You need to finish it in a couple of minutes, mind you – that's also part of it..."

"Alright then" He braced himself, took a deep breath and gulped down the whole thing. It tasted so disgusting that he almost keeled over, but he steadied himself, grabbing the arm of the chair.

"Well, there it is chap, you have the abilities you need, good man yourself. Now you have the blessing and the skill to conquer the world, so I'll let you go now. Take care now, son."

F closed his eyes and opened them again. The big office was gone, he was in the supply closet where he had first entered. Had it all been a dream? This thought of course crossed his mind, but then he felt like kicking himself when he noticed the taste of the potion was still in his mouth. He ambled out gingerly, trying to keep the potion down.

As he was fighting down his disgust, a surge of elation came, swelled up inside him, blasting out his other thoughts, his discomfort. He was surprised to realise he wasn't levitating off the ground. He stopped walking, and practically jumped up. To the empty street he proclaimed. "I can finally be who I want to be! I'm free! God bless that man!"

For a time, he was happier than he had ever felt. He felt like his heart was bouncing with joy at every step – steps which he was almost skipping. The whole city seemed brighter and more beautiful, and all doors seemed to beckon him to come in, to be a part of their worlds, to discover them and conquer them.

But as quickly as his happiness had risen, there came another feeling – a twang of regret, like he was naked on the street – the surge began to dissipate.

He said aloud, with a quiet, wistful melancholy voice, "but why don't I feel any different inside?"

He stopped. He grabbed the railing on the left and held it. He let out a shuddering sigh, his face sunk down, into the crooks of his arms, a consuming slump. He let the thoughts rush over him. "That magician was a fraud? No, surely not... but then... am I so broken that I'm beyond even magic?"

He heaved, trying to expel the potion with these horrid thoughts. But his heaves were dry. Was it too late?

“Could it be that he *has* given me all that I wanted, but it just doesn't feel the way I expected? Could it be that I've always had the tools and capacities that I needed and just never knew?”

He let all these thoughts traverse his mind, settling somewhere in the back. As he started to walk, he felt himself sucking in air, pushing out his stomach, the cold air passing through his nostrils and entering his chest, and he felt it fly away, passing out slightly warmer between his lips. Without realising it consciously, he had straightened himself and was walking along at a sprightly pace.