

THE MAGICIAN



She is in that zone — that slightly agitated, bored zone — but can't muster the motivation to engage in anything entertaining. Whatever she turns her attention to doesn't interest her anyway. She scrolls through her social media mechanically, with a vague hope that something will enliven her. She flicks through a post: *"Treat yourself like someone you love."* She exhales and mumbles to herself: *"Show me someone who LOVES themselves!"*

These moods descend on her. There is no rhyme or reason to them as far as she can tell. It's a mood that, in an odd way, feels like the smell of rotting oranges — organic, decaying, and slightly sharp. It's a mood that has the capacity to permeate all the nooks and crannies of her being. It's like when you return home from a holiday and the oranges have been festering in the hot, locked-up house. The smell has colonized the whole interior and infused it with a sense of oppressive stagnation. Yes, sometimes she feels that, at her core, is a pile of oranges rotting in the heat of an Australian summer.

What is there to love about that? When these moods settle, she wants to recoil from herself. But she feels trapped in the house of her being. The smell permeates all that her mind attaches to and all that her body does. When these moods settle, she needs to work very hard to disguise the "smell," as surely others would pick up the scent if she wasn't careful.

Upon reflection, she thinks that she is a kind of magician performing sleights of hand. She distracts those around her with her humour, her capacity to endear herself to others, and her skill in making others feel good about themselves. Over time, the magician part of her

has learned that if others are laughing or absorbed in her paying them the sort of attention they crave, their attention is deflected from the badness of her.

“Hah,” she thinks... “Show me someone who genuinely loves others! My gestures of love are tricks of the eye – skilled acts to shift the gaze away from the shameful parts of me. These acts are not acts of genuine love but acts of deception for self-preservation.”

Her audience *“Ooohs and Ahhhs.”* They laugh. They think her “black humour” and her entertaining “antics” are “oh, so funny and clever.” They are none the wiser that the material that inspires “the show” is her own brokenness.

As she sits with these thoughts, the cat jumps into her lap. Rupert has an uncanny capacity to pick up the vibe when she descends into these inner spaces. He has been known to wander in from sleeping amongst the nasturtiums in the spring sun, following the scent of her suffering. He furls himself around her legs or lightly curls up into her legs folded on the lounge. Rupert is always soft and tender in these moments. He treads lightly on her suffering.

Rupert curls into a ball, fitting perfectly into the space created by her crossed legs. He has come to keep her company, and he is at ease with the broken, shameful parts of her. A small, soft smile rises on her face; she touches his delicate little head with her fingertips and caresses him. He purrs.

She is soothed, and her gaze drifts across to the coffee table where the present from her sister sits in a bed of wrapping paper and ribbon. Her sister is consistently meticulous regarding detail. Birthdays never get overlooked. Gifts are carefully and skilfully chosen. Wrapping paper and ribbon are always integrated and beautiful. The title of the book blinks out at her from under torn folds of paper and strands of ribbon: *“The Courage to Be Disliked.”*

She lets the title sit in her mind: *“The Courage to Be Disliked.”* What was her sister discerning in her? The sickly feeling of shame washes through her gut. Her shoulders and head slump slightly. What if the gift of the book was a gesture of compassion – a message to say, *“I know that you are always frantically trying to distract me from who you really are. I have always known who you really are, and I am still here. I am not going anywhere.”* Maybe her sister and Rupert are joined in this respect?

Her mind snaps out of this pondering with a bit of a jolt: *“Who would she be without the show anyway?”* She has honed her showmanship over years of training now. There is a sense of mastery – even a sense of being “special” – in knowing that, in most circumstances, she can capture and hold an audience. She knows that the Big Top Performer is widely liked.

She can feel Rupert snuggled heavily in her lap. He purrs. He is content. He likes being nestled in her folded legs. Similarly, over the entirety of their lives, her sister and she gravitate toward one another. They seek each other out. They find comfort in one another.

Both Rupert and her sister seem to have a knowing of the different facets of the depths of her, yet they continue to seek her out. She continues to experience a deep sense of pleasure in being in their presence, and it appears the sense is mutual.

She doesn't "perform" for Rupert. She just *is as she is*, and Rupert wanders in from under the nasturtiums to furl around her standing legs or nestle in her folded legs. She just *is as she is*, and she and her sister linger over a shared pot of tea.

When she *is as she is*, she feels connected to the beings around her; she feels at home in herself. It feels good, even when the feelings are bad.

When she is Performer *Par Excellence*, she feels excited. She feels that she is commanding her audience. There is a sense of power and of being visible. However, when the show is over and the audience has gone home, there is a sense of being discarded. She only feels full during the show, and after the show is over, she is left with a flimsy sense of self wrapped around something shameful.

The Performer *Par Excellence* is caught in an entangled, messy dance with all that she hates about herself. Hating herself and Performer *Par Excellence* are one and the same. The cheers of her audience breathe a temporary sense of value into an otherwise bankrupt inner world.

Without the show, without being the Star Performer, without being exceptional, she would be left with what remains — some creature that is inherently not likeable. And where would that leave her? It would leave her as she is now, in this very moment. It would leave her with a sense that, at the core, she is rotten, and with the terror that she will be discarded by the world around her for her rottenness.

As she ponders these thoughts, she can feel Rupert's weight in her lap. He is still purring. He keeps her company. He isn't repelled by some inner core that is rotten. Her sister, through the gift of the book, is encouraging her to step into that part of herself that she perceives to be bad. What if, at the core, she isn't rotten at all? What if, at the core, there is some vulnerable, fragile part of her onto which she has imposed the idea of "rotten"?

With these ideas swimming in her mind, she exhales and drops her shoulders. Maybe Rupert and her sister are connecting to that vulnerable, fragile part that lies deep within her. Maybe it is only herself who spits venomous curses upon what is deep within her. She draws her shoulders in slightly and gathers her composure a little. She strokes Rupert tenderly on the head and considers that this little creature may have shown her how to keep that vulnerable, fragile part of herself company — to sit with her pain without judgment.

Her mind pivots back to the social media feed: "*Treat yourself like someone you love.*" She thinks, "*That is off point. It should be: 'Wrap the dark, shameful inner parts of yourself in soft, tender company, as a cat keeps its human company in times of suffering.'*"