

The Portrait Painter

A somatic tale about talent, change and wisdom

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We say you have your answers within; everything is there. And so the journey is one of exploration rather than invention, of synthesis and reunion rather than intervention. And at the same time we all yearn for touch, aspire to be held, to be contained. Can you be contained? And this touch; how is it that you are carried away with it, drifting inside? Pulsating into the tissues, listen: you are here. The texture is that of skin - smooth or rough, soft or bony, warm or cool, sweaty or dry. The journey is that of touch - exploring the connections, you are here; I am with you and I SEE YOU.

In the process of somatic storytelling you may seem very passive. All you do is lay down, receive a massage and listen. Yet your cells celebrate changes, your tissues flex with anticipation; your heart learns new languages. Changes really happen. The politics of change is relatively unimportant or unknown. Only the senses and the heart can tell a good artist. In somatic storytelling, you are finding this artist. Welcome to the world of actualised fantasies, where words and touch meet and magic wands are waved. You are invited to let this story in, to make sense of it through your own senses.

Before the days of camcorders and cameras, people had to work harder to seize a precious moment or to capture the looks of their loved ones. In those days, an honorary place in society was kept for the portrait painter. Not everybody could afford to have their portrait taken, and indeed good portrait painters were well sought after by the rich and the royal. In those days, in a small village within a big empire, a young girl was blessed with the gift of painting. When she was merely sixteen people came from afar to have their portrait taken by her; they came from distant villages and cities, and they were always welcomed. Her parents were very proud of her, because their daughter was extremely talented, and because she was the only portrait painter in the entire empire who was a woman.

The girl's parents were also happy because their daughter brought them honour and fame, and the gifts she received from the people she painted helped them maintain a better lifestyle. The young girl had a very clear vision; she could see things in people that nobody has, and when she captured their essence on the canvas it was as if the painting was vibrating with life. At times people weren't very happy with what they saw, but mostly they realised it was true, as the girl could not lie. And one day, a day that was as ordinary and as extraordinary as any other day in her life, the girl was invited to the emperor's palace.

Was it fate, and what is the role of therapy in facilitating fate? If we believe that life has needs of expansion, then fate is the inevitable expansion of life; if we believe that fate is eliminating our choices, then we shall have no choice. But what if we do?

She was so excited, and at the same time terrified - the emperor! A seventeen-year-old girl, and the emperor. Brushes and colours, shades of green and hues of blue, she is going to meet the emperor. When she left her home, her parents knew that things will have to change now, and when they looked at the imperial carriage leaving, they could see the slight dusk-tail of her childhood staying behind. And there she was, by the palace; so huge and extravagant, so shining and rich. After dinner the girl was called to meet the emperor. "I have heard a lot about you," said the emperor to the young woman, "and I want you to paint my portrait." But as soon as the young girl set her eyes on the mighty emperor she stopped breathing. I cannot do it, she thought, the emperor has so much sadness and vulnerability, so much fear and loneliness. If anyone is ever to see his portrait, they will know his weaknesses and our empire will be destroyed and lost.

The young woman needed time, and in a second of confusion, something wiser has guided her to say: "my emperor, I cannot take your portrait now. You have a personality of many faces, and I need to know them all. To capture the essence of your highness's look I need to see the way you look after you have woken up from a long sleep, and the way you look when you have not slept for days; I wish to see you after you have eaten a delicious meal and observe your face when you are angry; I need to see the way you look after you have wisely judged in a trial, and the way you look after you made love to a woman. To be truthful to your face, my emperor, let me

spend some time with you until I know my brush wouldn't lie." After some weeks or months, the young woman hoped, something will happen. The emperor might forget about her altogether, or she might think of another solution; or maybe he will change. And the emperor smiled and agreed, and the young woman was given the most beautiful room she has ever had and permission to join the emperor at any time.

On the first night in the palace the girl sat on her wide bed and shivered. All alone in the vast spaces of a big palace, her parents are far and so are her friends, and she is terrified of her brush, of her colours. She lied on her bed and tried to fall asleep but thoughts were drawing crazy arabesques inside her mind. And then, a knock on the door. Upon her answer the door opened quietly and an old woman stood there. The woman's hair was so long, the longest she has ever seen, and so white - the whitest she has even seen.

"You have *seen* the emperor, my child," said the old woman, "so I have come to help you." The old woman had wise eyes and soothing voice, her hands were slowly moving in the air. The girl immediately felt she could trust this woman. "What shall I do?" she asked, "the emperor has so much sadness, so much loneliness, I cannot possibly portray him like this, it would be devastating for our empire." The old woman sat besides the girl and held her hand, "hush, my child," she said. "You have *seen* the emperor because you have a gift. I have been with the emperor since he was born, as I am his made, and never before had anyone *seen* him." "But what use is there for my gift if what I see is sorrow and pain?" the young woman asked. The old woman looked at her fiercely, "The gods do not like their gifts unused and the gift of vision also carries the gift of movement; the one who can see could also change." "But I don't know how to help him," cried the girl, "I don't know how to change." "This is why I am here," the old woman answered, "I came here to teach you."

And so she did. On the very first night the old woman stayed and started teaching the young woman, and although the teaching was anything but familiar, the young woman got strength from her studies every day. Sometimes the old woman showed her how to sew, at other times she helped her applying the perfect nail varnish; sometimes they would sing together in tune and there were nights when they went outside and looked at the stars or picked up wild mushrooms. Sometimes the young

woman didn't understand how exactly is she benefiting from her studies, but she always knew it was very helpful.

And while she is learning, can we remember the practice of trust? Can you close your eyes and let your body lead you? Can you do the same with your breath? A change can sometimes be nothing but noticing the sameness, the stillness. Under loving hands your body pulsates, your mind - a foetus - is held. Inside this beat, an egg is incubated and what will be born is yet to remain a secret.

So in the first few months of her stay in the palace, the young woman led a double life. In the days she watched the emperor and made hundreds of sketches, joining him on his different activities and getting to know him better. At the same time, of course, the emperor got to know the painter too, and it gave him great pleasure to learn her ways. In the nights she would return to her room, and the knock would be followed by the entrance of an old woman. The young girl began to anticipate her mentor's appearance and enjoyed her studies more and more. Her teaching became more internalised and slower, albeit more intense. The two would often sit together in silence, holding hands. Some nights there was nothing but this mutual presence. Weeks and months have past, and something in her ripened.

And then one night the young woman fell asleep and when she woke up it was morning and she wasn't sure whether there was a knock the night before. Throughout her day she was somewhat distracted, and when she left to her room, she sat on her bed and eagerly waited for time to pass, for the old woman to come. But she didn't. No knock, no silent steps, no warm hands.

In the morning, the young woman planned, I will wake up earlier than usual, and go to the maids' quarter, to ask for her. At dawn, before the palace had its morning yawn, someone knocked on the young woman's door. A solemn looking servant told the young woman that the emperor is ready for his portrait to be taken; now.

"The time has come," he said, and looked at her in a way he never has before. "You have seen me after I woke up from a long sleep, and after many sleepless nights; you have seen my face at times of great satisfaction, and at times of great frustration. You have seen me happy, angry and sad; you have seen me after I made love to a woman

and after I have fairly judged in a trial. You are ready to portray me, and both of us know it."

The emperor was right, and so she began. At first, the picture didn't look anything like the emperor; it had charm and happiness, groundedness and serenity, which the emperor lacked. But something quite peculiar happened as the young woman kept painting, it was as if with each and every sitting the emperor was becoming more and more like his portrait - his face lightened up and his movements became more cheerful, elegant and bright; his eyes had more glimmering and life dancing in them; the emperor was smiling more frequently. For many days the young woman woke up before sunrise and spent long hours portraying the emperor. Exhausted she came back to her room with neither the time nor the strength to enquire about her mentor.

It was a beautiful morning when the young woman finished the emperor's portrait. When she allowed her brush to lightly glide over a face she once knew well, the smile became solid; the heart softened. And then, she had a glimpse into wisdom far greater than hers and she understood. Once the portrait was ready she ran to her room and the smile became a giggle, and the giggle turned into laughter. In her room the woman laughed for the longest time she ever had, and then ran to the servants' quarter to verify her suspicion. Indeed, no one has ever heard of such a woman. The emperor never had a maid, only servants, they told her. The portrait painter went back to her room and found the emperor sitting on her bed, exactly where the old woman used to sit.

But how, we ask, can we find it? What are the procedures, the politics and the ways that lead to this place? Give me a map and a compass, and I shall find the treasure. But no. This time we go blindfolded, this time is about trust. Soon we can choose new colours, new perspectives, new texture. Now, just see, hear and feel what is.

"I would like you to stay in my palace and be the royal portrait painter," said the emperor to the young woman and when she smiled, they both burst out laughing. "I need to think about it," she said. The emperor left the room and the young woman noticed how different he was. And so was she. She stayed awake in her room all

night, alternating between bursts of laughter and crying. And when the skies brightened up and movement began in the palace, she knew.

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Integrative Massage Therapy (IMT) is a body-hypnotherapy approach. It combines conscious cognitive work with unconscious work and bodywork. IMT aims at supplying a safe space to expand and shift, and within the therapeutic framework we do our best to invite magic. IMT draws knowledge and experience from various sources, including massage and bodywork approaches, Reichian bodywork, hypnotherapy, NLP, shamanic work, various psychotherapeutic schools, stress management, Buddhism and healing.

This particular process of somatic storytelling is one magical way to encourage inner resources for spontaneous change. The client is in trance, the story is being told and a bodily journey is guided through massage. At times, it is like stepping in a fantasy, at others - like rewriting your life story.

I offer IMT, hypnotherapy, stress-management and NLP in London and St.Albans.

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