

**First the  
Madness.**

**Hokum\***

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Micklewhite liked to think of the asylum as a human being: The wide metal doors at its entrance were its mouth, the mesh of corridors its veins and the great vaulted meeting hall at its centre was its flabby, ravenous belly. Something about being inside another creature made Micklewhite feel at peace with his lot. It was as if it let him abolish responsibility for his own existence. He took the Mayor's hand and pumped it up and down enthusiastically.

“Welcome, Your Honour.”

The Mayor looked a little disorientated. He swivelled his head three hundred and sixty degrees and nodded. The air was stale as though it had been trapped in a bottle for years.

“You'll love it here. It's full of the most wonderful characters,” Micklewhite beamed. The Mayor appeared less sure. Micklewhite could sense his apprehension. He placed a hand gently on the crook of his arm and turned him to face the double doors that led into the main building.

“Don't worry, they're mostly harmless.” He leaned in close to the Mayor.

“Mostly,” he laughed and slapped his guest on his back. Was that appropriate? Or a little too informal? These dignitaries could be very prickly people in his experience. Well here, more than anywhere, life was a level playing field. There was no hierarchy to madness. “Just my little joke. You mustn’t heed me any attention.”

Micklewhite had a face for these occasions; wide eyes and big teeth. It was like he had slipped a cardboard mask over his head. He grinned at the Mayor in an attempt to put him at his ease. The Mayor just stared at him blankly as though he was talking in a foreign language. Today was going to be a long day, Micklewhite mused.

A lady wearing a hat of yellow straw and carrying a small plant pot cupped in her hands appeared at the doorway.

“Ah, here’s Mary,” he boomed, grateful for the distraction. “Mary Mary, quite contrary, how does your salix sepulcralis grow?” Micklewhite sang playfully.

Mary stared at the plant in her hand like a disappointed mother with a miscreant child. The pot was filled to the lip with damp soil from which a single dry stick pointed skywards. It was completely smooth but for one snapped tributary half way up the stem. Mary sighed.

“I think he’s sulking,” she said sadly. “I gave him a spoonful of blood meal this morning but I don’t think he liked it.”

“No, maybe not,” Micklewhite replied. He turned to his guest and, in a hushed voice that Mary couldn’t hear, breathed; “Poor girl. Can’t fathom the concept of roots. Found that stick in the garden outside and has been trying to get it to grow for six months.” The Mayor looked bemused by this revelation. Micklewhite couldn’t be sure whether he was going to burst out giggling, so he widened his eyes in warning. The Mayor seemed to get the signal and kept his thoughts to himself.

Micklewhite took his responsibility to his guests very seriously. There was no gauging how his visitors might react to what they witnessed in this ‘sanitorium for the mentally incompetent’ as the board liked to call it. But to Micklewhite it was just a nuthouse by a fancy name. He was pragmatic on matters such as these. He was surrounded by oddball deviants and nutters. There it was said and the Mayor’s tour could continue. Micklewhite saw no merit in sugar coating life’s darker moments. Some visitors were shocked speechless, like the Mayor, whilst others chatted nervously, but what they all had in common was a mutual relief that it wasn’t them dribbling behind locked doors on stale, soiled mattresses.

Mary lowered her face to the top of the twig and blew on it.

“Mary had a large garden ‘out there’, I believe,” Micklewhite said, “a sight to behold I’m told.”

The woman raised her head and studied the Mayor from head to toe. It was as if she had only just noticed there was a stranger in the room.

“Looks like your friend could do with something to eat,” she said rattling a small tin watering can. Water splashed from its spout.

“Thank you Mary, but no thank you, his Honour isn’t hungry.” He ushered the Mayor away before Mary could do irrevocable damage to the mayor’s regal gowns.

“Heaven knows what’s in that can,” he hissed when they were at a safe distance. “Lovely lady, but mad as they come. And they come quite mad in here I can tell you.”

Micklewhite guided his guest along the building’s twisting capillaries. “There’s long-term residents here and short-term guests,” he explained as they walked. “Mary is what we call ‘a stayer’. She’ll probably end her days here, poor mad fool.”

The walls were the colour of blood. The red dust left pink finger lines on their clothes as they brushed by. The windows were covered with thick black iron bars. Micklewhite noticed the Mayor look cautiously towards them.

“They’re for the residents own safety,” he tried to explain. The Mayor didn’t look convinced. “Many of those in here wouldn’t last a minute beyond these walls. They’ve been here too long.” Micklewhite stopped and straightened a paper notice that reminded guests to guard the contents of their pockets. The corridor felt like someone had sucked all the oxygen from it and Micklewhite dry coughed into the ball of his fist.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” he spluttered. “They won’t open the windows. Fresh air gets the residents a little excitable.” He rubbed the ball of flesh at the end of his nose. “Of course I help them here as best I can to keep a link with ‘out there’. I tell them all the news - I have to be a little, shall we say, selective, of course. Some things it’s best for the patients not to know. But, you know, there’s no harm in them knowing that there’s bad things out there. I think it comforts them, makes them feel better – do you see what I mean? People often need reminding that the grass isn’t always greener.”

The windows were so high that the Mayor had to stand on tiptoe to see any

green at all.

The more the visit continued, the more Micklewhite grew concerned about his guest's strangely subdued demeanour. He expected so much more from one of such high office. But maybe that wasn't such a surprise. Rarely in life had he felt those in power deserved their accolades. The Mayor was so decidedly unassuming. He was a painfully thin figure of a man with a shocking mop of grey hair sprouting from the top of his head. Micklewhite wondered if he poked him in the stomach whether he would snap in half like Mary's pathetic twig in a pot.

"Come on, there's still plenty to show you," he said. "Don't worry they're not all as... um, eccentric, as Mary."

How did someone like the Mayor become elected? The greasing of many greedy palms, perhaps? Really the man was something of a disappointment. As they walked, Micklewhite felt his own enthusiasm begin to drain. He had walked these corridors so many times, shown so many different people the faces that covered behind each door: Arnold the Snitch, 23b. Bald Carlo, 17a. Ratboy, Multiple Minnie. The Long Twins. They were all here waiting to hiss, or spit, or laugh, or cry, or tell you they loved you and wanted to buy you an umbrella. How could anyone not find this eclectic mix of souls fascinating? Micklewhite looked at his guest. He tried a sympathetic smile, but the Mayor just shrugged and looked past him. Cry, scream, shout or laugh, the one thing this place never failed to do was illicit emotion. Micklewhite shook his head and pointed at the solid grey doors dotted intermittently along each side of the corridor.

"Every resident has their own room. A bed. Sink. Toilet bowl, of sorts. Not that they all think to use it."

Each door had a small rectangle spy hatch at chest height. Micklewhite stooped to peer into room 12b and beckoned the Mayor to take a look.

"Meet Midge," he said. The Mayor found it difficult to bend. Too many state lunches and not enough exercise, Micklewhite smirked to himself.

"You see, each guest is quite comfortable," Micklewhite continued. In the middle of the room a teenage boy sat in a big wicker chair on wheels. He had dark puddles of grey around his eyes and a thin trail of luminous snot running down his face. Where there should have hung playful kicking legs there was just fresh air. His chair was facing one of the walls and he appeared to be looking longingly at something only he could see. Micklewhite noticed the doubt in the Mayor's expression.

“Midge lives in his own world. He’s outgrown that name now, as you can see. But that’s what we called him when he first arrived here. He was only three. Parents didn’t want a cripple.”

Micklewhite noticed a tiny comb-footed spider that was busily constructing a web of quite amazing detail in the corner of the room. He wondered whether the poor creature realised it was incarcerated just like the boy in the wheelchair. Or whether it considered itself to be free. How evil of nature to give the spider eight legs and Midge none, he sighed.

“He’s not a mute. But he doesn’t speak. Not got a lot to say anyway.” Micklewhite scratched the skin at the back of his neck. The stubble itched where the barber had roughly trimmed his nape earlier that day. He was a professional; he had prepared himself methodically for the big visit. “I don’t think he’s technically mad,” he continued, “But this place is all he’s ever known. We do everything for him. He can’t even blow his own nose.” Micklewhite grimaced suddenly as a fetid stench teased his nostrils. “Or clean himself,” he added swiftly closing the tiny hatch.

A man wearing a billowing nightgown and wooden clogs ran towards them waving his arms above his head. His gown was stained with blotches of brown, red and yellow. He had grey hair that grew in bunches in every direction and big bulging eyes. He stopped momentarily to take in the sight of Micklewhite and his guest, then pointed the way he had come, shouting:

“Save yourselves,” before running off. Micklewhite and the Mayor looked down the black throat of the corridor. They listened carefully for a minute before the man suddenly reappeared and ran back past them. His clogs were missing and his nightgown was in his hand.

“Wrong way!” he shouted urgently over his shoulder and disappeared from view. Micklewhite took the Mayor by the shoulder and turned him around.

“I do apologise Your Honour, you shouldn’t have to see such things. There are some, dare I say, unsettling sights to be had here. But, I’m sure you’re a man of the world. I know you understand.” The Mayor didn’t look at all pleased with what he had just seen Micklewhite noted. He knew he needed to distract him. “Come, let us find some refreshment. I’m sure you could do with a nice cup of tea?” He took the Mayor’s stoic silence as confirmation. May be a drink would relax him and loosen his tongue.

The air in the refectory was kept the temperature of ice. To prevent the residents lingering in there longer than they should, Micklewhite explained. A fat matron with puffy fingers scooped mush into bowls. Micklewhite didn't like her. She gave him the same condescending frown she did the residents, peering down her tiny snout as though he had just broken wind. He deserved more respect from a mere orderly. So he gave her his best dismissive stare as she handed him two chipped cups of soil-coloured tea.

"Sorry, it tastes foul," he said placing a cup in front of his guest, "but it just about knocks the edge off a thirst." The Mayor was studying him thoughtfully. "I know what you're thinking," Micklewhite laughed at last. "Why on earth do I do this job? That's what you're thinking, isn't it? Well, it's what I ask myself - every day. But it's not so bad. When you get to know everybody." He sipped at his tea and grimaced. It tasted of pig fat and cardboard.

"Who would want to spend their life in this mad place? With all these... these," he flicked his hands like he was swatting a bug. No one in the room seemed to notice or indeed care at his rant. He leant across the table and whispered. "Maybe it's a little self-therapy." He sniggered again. But this time it was a dry, soulless laugh, as though he had practiced it many times. "You know, there but for... That kind of thing. Truth is..." He paused to look about him and give the moment as much gravitas as possible. "The truth is I did spend a little time in here myself. As a resident," he clarified. He could see the Mayor was intrigued. "A long, long time ago now you understand." He stopped to reflect on what he had just revealed, leaning back in his chair and stroking the fabric of his knee. "That's probably surprised you. But aren't we all capable of a little madness." Micklewhite was sure he saw the Mayor nod.

"My wife had just passed away." Micklewhite continued. He knew his words sounded matter-of-fact, it was after all a story he had told many times to his visitors. He felt it helped them understand the link between the real world 'out there' and this false fantasy world of insanity that so few of them were able to appreciate. "Madness comes in degrees," he said. "And in bursts. I was mad, but only for a while. It was as though I had to escape myself briefly. Does that make sense?" Micklewhite was watching the matron busy herself behind the counter as he spoke. Her cheeks were the colour of ruby port and she was panting heavily lifting a china dish of slop into the oven.

He was surprised her heart hadn't given up on her long ago. "I wasn't myself – I can see that now, of course. Grace was my rock. She was the other half of me." He sighed. "Cancer it was – the Devil's own disease. Nasty, very nasty. She was less than six stone at the... well, you see I've always thought with the right motivation we're all capable of a little, what shall we call it? derailment?" The Mayor had averted his eyes from him and was looking towards the window. "Oh, look, I've upset you." The Mayor was silent again. Micklewhite worried he had gone too far with his tale. Perhaps his guest was considering some tragedy in his own life. Micklewhite had to admit the Mayor did have the slightly scribbled, hand-drawn expression of a man laboured by the weightier concerns of life. It probably wasn't easy holding such a responsible office. He wondered what it was that lured a man to the lights of public life. Adulation, maybe, a desire to be adored by many, perhaps. Certainly not the demons of responsibility that a damaged place like this must bring, he thought.

Micklewhite considered asking the Mayor something about himself. What did he see when he stood in these corridors and looked around? Did he see what Micklewhite saw? He had learned from experience that very few of his visitors wanted to admit their reservations and he wondered how many of them thought again of these people the moment they had left the doors of the asylum swinging behind them. But wasn't that the same with life - wherever you were: that reticence to talk about the darker, deeper, crueller edge to life? Those shadows waiting for all of us around the corner - madness, illness and death? Better to ignore it all and carry on. After all, it might just drive you mad if you considered it all a little too long.

The Mayor was staring at a picture of a woodland stream on one of the refectory walls. Two girls paddled in the blue water, their hems hitched to their knees. A kingfisher looked on quizzically from a hanging branch.

"Meant to be calming, I suppose," Micklewhite said. "Bit distracting I say. Bit like putting pictures of cream cakes on the walls of an anorexic's bedroom don't you think?" Was that a smile? Some spark of warmth at last from His Honour?

"Still the folks in here make their own scenes inside their heads. The mind has some intriguing devices to block out reality. That chap over there – Laurence – he thinks he's Antonio Lucio Vivaldi. Every morning he wakes up convinced he's just composed the opening allegro for *Le Quattro Stagioni*. Poor, poor fool."

The matron snatched away their cups. The Mayor hadn't touched his tea. He

was probably more used to a fine hand-picked leaf than the rancid ditch water they served here, Micklewhite guessed.

“Your friend doesn’t say much,” the matron sneered, the cups chattering in a pile in her palms. Micklewhite ignored her and continued to address his guest.

“Maybe being mad, isn’t so bad. What do you think? Maybe they’re the lucky ones, hey? Lucky that they barely know what time of day it is. Ignorance and all that.”

The Mayor was growing irritable, he could tell. Micklewhite scrapped back his chair. There were giggles from the twins in the corner and he scowled at them.

“Come on,” he hissed, “Let me show you the rest of the building.”

Micklewhite had an itinerary that he liked to stick to. It was the same order he used for all his guests - the sick bay, the chapel, the library. As they walked, Micklewhite became more and more concerned by the Mayor’s introspection. It was clear now that the visit had brought feelings to the fore for the man that he maybe didn’t wish to admit. Micklewhite wondered whether he had shown him too much. Some people just couldn’t handle the realities that cowered in the dark corners of life. Whether the Mayor liked it or not there was illness and deformity, madness and death all around. Just because you stuck it behind bricks and bars didn’t mean it didn’t exist. It did. As surely as the nail on your thumb.

They sat side by side beneath a large pink magnolia bush in the exercise yard and gratefully breathed in the fresh, unfetid air. The bush had shed its petals in a puddle by their feet. It reminded Micklewhite of churchyard confetti.

“Grace and I married in the month of December,” he said. “I told her that was a foolish time of year to get married. The guests nearly caught their deaths.” He picked up a petal. It looked like a little velvet boat. “I was too happy to feel cold though. We had jugglers. Can you imagine that? And a harpist. Just being with her was enough to keep me warm.” He placed the boat on the ground and trod it flat. “Ah, here comes Nanny.” An old woman the height of an armchair wrapped her arms about Micklewhite’s knees. “A sweet lady, Nanny.” He explained over his shoulder as she hung on like he was a rope dangling over a cliff. He gently stroked her thinning scalp. “We’ll be stuck like this for a while, you just watch.” Micklewhite spoke from the corner of his mouth. “Her three sons died in the war. Three body bags. Three funerals. Don’t say r-a-

b-b-i-t b-r-o-t-h out loud. It was their favourite – she'll bite your kneecaps." Eventually the old woman pulled away. She tapped Micklewhite's arm and stared up at him.

"I like your friend," she said. "Can I hug him?"

"This is the Mayor, Nanny. The town's Mayor. I don't think it would be very appropriate."

"I've never met a Mayor before," she said leaning across and giving him a big squeeze. Micklewhite stared at the Mayor worried that he would be offended. But he didn't seem to mind, sitting back and letting her hold on tightly. Micklewhite sighed with relief. It was more than his job was worth to offend a civil dignitary. Previous visitors hadn't always been so willing to interact with the patients, he knew.

"Have you seen Dougie today, Nanny?" He asked in an attempt to distract her. But the mention of Dougie's name just annoyed her. She made a hissing noise between her teeth.

"It's nearly tablet time, isn't it?" Micklewhite said. Nanny shook like a charge had just shot through her body. Tablet time was like 'walkies' at a kennels. She unpeeled her fingers from the Mayor's waist.

"Have we had the bell?" She said excitedly, her little blue eyes spinning like marbles. "I didn't hear the bell."

Mary walked across the courtyard, the pot outstretched in her hands. It was upside down and its contents were missing.

"Come on Your Honour, let me show you what happens at medication time. Ever seen crocs being fed chunks of meat?"

A bell sounded from one of the Asylum's four pointed towers. Birds scattered into the sky. The chime could be heard far beyond the hills that circled the building.

In the central hall the residents began to gather. Those that could make their own way shuffled into a twisting line that snaked from a single old wooden table at the back of the room. Behind the table sat a doctor and a nurse. He was tall and thin with a nose the shape of a coat hook and she was pale skinned with a down curled mouth. Neither of them spoke as they studied each patient in turn and handed them tiny paper bowls of little coloured tablets. They watched as the residents gulped them down and the nurse ticked their names in a large black ledger on the table in front of her.

Midge was pushed into line in his chair, Mary was guided away from the win-

dow and back in place. Arnold the Snitch was crying and Multiple Minnie was arguing with herself.

“Watch this, this is the highlight of the day for these people. Let’s stand at the end of the queue and follow them.” In front of them Laurence was humming ‘La Primavera’ loudly. Micklewhite tapped him on the shoulder and put a finger to his lips. The line moved slowly forwards.

“You must meet Dr. Spence,” Micklewhite said. “He’s a fantastic doctor. Does wonders. The residents love him.”

Micklewhite rocked from foot to foot impatiently. Eventually Laurence took his pot of tablets and moved out of the way leaving Micklewhite and the Mayor in front of the table.

“Dr. Spence,” he announced proudly, “let me introduce you to the Mayor. He’s spent the day with us. I’ve shown him all around.” The doctor didn’t look up; he nodded and studied his notes. “If we’re lucky,” Micklewhite continued, “He may be able to get us some more funding. I don’t think he’ll mind me saying he seems very impressed with the work we’re doing here.” He grinned and winked at the Mayor. The doctor drummed his fingers on the table.

“That’s excellent news Mr. Micklewhite,” he said handing him a small paper pot containing two green pills and one red one.

“Make sure you take the red one today. Nurse says you spat it out yesterday.” Micklewhite lowered his head like a scalded puppy. He placed the red tablet on his tongue and swallowed.

“And maybe give that mop back to the caretaker when you see him – he’s going to be looking for it,” the doctor said nodding at the pole in Micklewhite’s hand. The shock of rope on its tip was grey and chewed. Micklewhite gently shook it in his palm. Still the Mayor had nothing to say for himself, so Micklewhite swallowed the two green pills.

Things felt so much better all of a sudden, as though even though she wasn’t with him he could feel Grace take up his hand and lead him to the door. The Mayor was leaning against the table. Maybe they’d commit him, as well, another mute resigned to the dark side of existence. Maybe he’d been too harsh with him – shown him too much. But was it really his fault? He hadn’t made the world such a sad, sad place, had he?

Micklewhite sat on the edge of his bed and tried to remember what he had done with his day. Grace was sat next to him and he patted her hand, it felt soft and warm just like a pillow and he sighed with relief that she was there with him. He picked her up and gave her a long, slow hug.

“I must show you around sometime my dear,” he said softly, “You’ll love it here. It’s full of the most wonderful characters. Don’t worry, they’re mostly harmless.” He leaned in close to her, and whispered with a smile, “Mostly.”