

# I

## Mister Pink



Mister Pink sat on the porch of the old house. Now a weathered grey, it hadn't been painted for well over a century, probably not since before the war, as people around these parts still referred to the era of the 1850s. Then came the war itself, with the loss of so many men in four hard years of conflict and the resulting gradual collapse of the farming economy, given its final coup in the 1930s and '40s. All had been connected events that brought the old man to this place and spot in time. 30 July 1975. A bright summer day. He sat on his porch alone.

Of late, Mister Pink had been thinking more and more of old times. He would better remember what happened to him or was told him as a little lad than what had taken place just yesterday. Old folks had said that's what it would be like with memory when you got their age, and now he knew they were telling him true.

His pa and ma had been slaves on this very land. Its geography was all Mister Pink knew—a rich, high, flat

bluff along the Broad River, a thickly wooded plateau that dropped off precipitously, and ran down to a flood plain that was incredibly rich and made the very best sweet potatoes and corn.

The natives, before the white man came, called the big stream *Eswapudeenah*, meaning the boundary between the hunting grounds of Catawba and Cherokee. The land where Pink lived was on the Cherokee side. He found evidences of them in the arrowheads that looked like giant teeth—and in little pieces of clay pottery he turned up with his plough. From the time he was a boy, he thought about the presence of these ancient people on the ground he walked and hoed. Sometimes they seemed to be talking to him when the wind passed through the trees.

Pink's pa was a master teller of stories in a land known for this gift. In a time that was demanding flat statement and statistics, Mister Pink had still tried to teach his children that way, though they often got impatient with him.

Mister Pink had a rich fund of history, the gift of his pa, an eyewitness to stirring big times. Mister Pink remembered that his pa was serene in old age because during his day, he'd faced about every sort of desperate trouble a man could imagine and had still survived. There was no terror left that could try him at all. Yes, Pink remembered well.

Better than statistics, his pa's stories told who they were. The stories would abide longer too than any casual fact. The people here would be revealed and known, not so much by statements, but by the stories they told and how

they were told, and what they chose as important to tell. These were the registers that finally mattered most in the big span of things.

In Pink's father's day, the young master, whose name was Berry Richards and whose land it would have become, had been killed in the last battle of the Virginia campaign. Pink's pa had been with Richards as his body servant, cooking for the two of them and caring for their horses, and at times shouldering a rifle too. Dutiful to the last, his final act in caring for his master's person was to bring the empty shell of it home to the young missus and their two little girls.

Berry Richards and Pink's pa had been born on the same day in 1839. Mr. Richards made much of the fact, and when the lads were old enough to understand the solemn nature of the ritual, he gave Pink's pa to his son, saying, as Pink's pa often recounted, "Suber, you belongs to Marse Berry now. Y'all are bonded for all time."

And so it was. Suber and Berry were devoted playmates, engaging in the usual horseplay of children and growing up together in a precious time of plenty and no hunger or want. Suber used to tell Pink about their games of acting horse and mule on all fours, each child riding the other in turn, on the deep wool plush of fine rose-colored Belgian carpets, or the cool velvet smooth of bright Aubusson weave, while the old master would sit in his great brocaded armchair by the deep hearth and guffaw.

It was a capacious time. Old Master and Missus would raise their cut crystal stem glasses and smile and wink at

the lads as they sipped. The firelight made the sherry a rich golden red, the colour of the old master's favourite roan mare, Guenevere.

Death broke the bond, Marse Berry getting hit with the invader's lead full square in the right shoulder so as nearly to sunder it from the trunk and with such velocity as to spin him halfway around. The blood spattered Suber's own coat, so close they were. For all his doing, Suber couldn't stop the scarlet flow, and his master died there on the battlefield where Suber had pulled him beneath the shelter of a giant walnut tree.

Suber's mind must have gone blank in the shock and agony of all this, and the battle's din, for when dark came and the gleaners of the scene of carnage came to take away those who were still groaning and wailing in pain, Suber, by the side of his master realised the whole right shoulder and back of his grey wool coat was cold and stiff with his master's blood. At some time during his getting him to safety, he must have put him over his shoulder to carry him. He never even recollected doing this though. Next thing he knew he was sitting with his back to the tree, crying like a little child.

Suber brought him home, and now Richards' grave had its modest marble marker, shrunken small by the poverty and desolation of all around in that time. Still, as was the custom of the countryside, the important thing was that the grave, fancy or plain or indeed unmarked, faced east; and from off its high bluff, one could easily picture the last day when the first streaks of dawn would come across the grey mirror-slick river and illumine the

faces of the resurrected, the flawed flesh burned away in its frailness and replaced by the incorruptible form.

Suber had now taken his place there as well, still at his master's side, a large fieldstone marking his head, and a small one his feet—with his grave also facing east to the rising sun. At certain times, when a slant of light fell a certain way through the thick covering of trees that sheltered these graves, the mica and quartz in Suber's stone shone like a thousand diamonds, and the carved rose on Richards' marble marker glowed as if from within.

Mister Pink often visited these lonely plots there on this part of the windy high river bluff within sight of the old house, and thought how it might be in the end, when his pa and Marse Berry would rise and regard one another with a long look of satisfaction of things well done and complete, before taking their own flights on wings of silver and gold. It was something important to keep one's bond, maybe the essential thing. Yes, that and the duty of man to be just, forgiving, and to walk humbly before his God.

Mister Pink thought long and long about all this, and about this ragged out old place, so fallen into disrepair and ruin, and of the collapse and inevitable decay of things.

Born close to two decades after the war, Mister Pink knew more than a little about the way things went to smash around here. Ruin and the death of young Berry killed the old master prematurely, and his wife soon followed behind. Berry's widow and the two girls lost the homeplace, and the young missus remarrying, they all

moved away, far across the great river to a place Mister Pink did not know.

They and their descendants had all vanished now, never to be seen again, like even the living were gone from the very face of the earth. For Mister Pink, they moved into the dark void, a nameless empty region like his idea of death.

Suber and his wife Mamie Lou, and Pink's seven siblings, stayed on as tenants of new owners, who were not from these parts and lived in town. They were city folks by birth and inclination, from the North, coming South seeking cheap real estate and escaping the cold. They took up land as a diversion, having bought the acres in a bargain, as they thought, from a forced tax sale on the courthouse steps. The place had thus passed out of the Richards family name. These new owners had in turn sold the place to friends from back home, as they themselves moved on farther South, following the sun.

Mister Pink didn't see much of any of these new folks. They came around only to get their portion share of what Suber and his family raised, and the best of their salt-cured hams, which they particularly relished as centerpieces for their dinner parties and each year's big Christmas affair. Vegetables of Pink's make, they'd declare to their town neighbours, to be "fresh from the farm." Otherwise, the new ones took little interest. They left their tenants to their own devices, and Suber and Mamie Lou finally preferred it that way.

All was friendly enough, but in a formal business manner. Mamie Lou tried to soften the situation with gifts of a

peach cobbler, a pecan or blackberry pie, with berries picked by the children out of the snake-haunted thickets from off the land; but still there was the distance, like across a gully or in a deep well. Suber, who had no last name when the war came to an end, had to have a surname to attach to tax and tenantry documents. So, close by the X of his mark, he had the clerk write "Suber," thus making his first name his last. He left it at that and never chose a Christian first name, though he'd been taught Scripture by old Master and Miss. With this, they had taken pains.

So what would have been his son's just plain Pink in slave days became Pink Suber in times after the war.

Pink was a tall, strong-limbed fellow, whose skin had the blue-black sheen of coal. The harsh, hardscrabble nature of the times had sometimes made his eyes as hard as coal too. Still they were alert eyes that didn't miss much. They had to be, he knew, if he was to survive. And his gentle, pleasant nature stood him in good stead and softened his life. He was a good, careful, hardworking farmer, and he and his wife Goldie relished the life.

Indeed, it was all that he and Goldie knew, but they'd gained wisdom deep enough to view labour, the details and discipline of it, as purifying ritual. Digging, ploughing, hoeing, chopping, harvesting, butchering, sawing, sewing, mending, quilting—there was a kind of primitive drama in all this necessity that brought catharsis besides. Sweat from hard work was a kind of baptism too.

Today though, Mister Pink sat at rest on a straight

chair, stained blue with copperas and indigo dye. He'd cut the poplar and oak for the chair from the woods himself, turned the posts with his own lathe, and caned its bottom with long split white oak splints he drew from the moist, fragrant wood with his drawing knife.

There on the warp-boarded floor of the porch and beneath the triangle of its grey-weathered classical pediment, he would sit at dusk. This time every day, you could count on him there.

From the vantage of the old porch, he had a lot of time to consider things. His world was mainly the sweeping arc of great white oaks that fanned out as the semicircular carriage drive in former days, arching out in front of the house.

Their giant dark limbs were larger than a big man's torso, and on them grew the delicate tendrils of resurrection ferns. During the dry spells of July and August, the ferns appeared completely dead. Their fronds shrivelled, drawn up like bows; but brown as they were, it would only take a shower or a good morning fog in the coming fall to revive and unfurl them and turn them a luxuriant and emerald green. They cheered grey winter days with their freshness.

The old carriage building, a little temple itself, stood nearby in a grove of rowan and ash trees, its design echoing the classical lines in miniature of the dwelling house itself. The days of carriages were done, and Mister Pink had no money for a car. He walked everywhere he went, which was seldom and not far. In all his days, he'd never left the county, or wished very much to. Someone asked him if he didn't want



to view the broad sea. It wasn't but a four-hour's drive away. His answer was simple and brief. "If the Lord wills it, I'll see it in heaven."

With the roof of the carriage building gone, the structure was quickly dissolving back into the ground from which it had arisen like a dream. A column lay fallen to one side on the ground. Another still clung akimbo to the cornice frieze. Giant honeysuckle vines and Virginia creeper had long been engulfing its walls and hastening the wood's decay. In spring, the honeysuckle perfumed the air; in the late fall, the burgundy red of the splayed leaves of creeper lent bright beauty to the wood's grey.

Pink's pa had told him that the rowan trees had been planted by the old master himself. The Richards kin in the mother country had known them to be a protection against evil, and the family carried the tradition into the new land.

All the rest of Mister Pink's view from his blue chair was sparse fields and mostly forest. Each year that rolled round, the field plots shrank in size, as the woods grew taller and darker, deeper and closer too. As the strength gradually left his limbs and his will to do waned, wild nature seemed to be reclaiming its own. It was slowly, but surely, approaching his door.

There was that old, inexorable tug of the land, the very soil itself, or something deep buried at the core inside, that kept on beckoning to Pink to come and lie down in it, to sleep long, a long winter's sleep. Sometimes it sang him a deep earth song.

Goldie had died three years ago and long before that, all their children had long since moved away to various far distant cities he'd only heard of or dreamed of in sleep. Now, he was alone in a silent world whose deep woods got nearer and nearer and whose soil spoke each year with a louder and more distinct voice. Pink had begun to imagine it had now taken to calling him by name. *Pink. Pink Suber. Pink. Come lie down and rest.* Its tone had got more insistent these days.

Perhaps one not born of this place would fail to understand the curious air of dilapidation that lay over Mister Pink's world. At first maybe his impulse might be to hustle in and feverishly clean and tidy things up. He might work and work until his very soul cried out. Then, his mission accomplished, and straightening his back, he would look around with an expression of delight to think he had shaped things to his liking, had conquered the wildness of the country, brought it under his iron will. But how quickly that expression would vanish, would change to bewilderment straight. True, the stranger had been told by those longer and wiser on the land—those folks like Mister Pink himself—that the minute he'd turn his back on this tidied up world, it would return to its quiet disorder, its lush rank growth and mellow decay. But the stranger not bred to the rhythm of this place just thought this was local talk and local laziness—an excuse not to be bustling about and doing.

But now with some experience and wisdom, the stranger would learn that indeed this was not just talk, for he soon comprehended that born in the body, and bred in

the inexorable bare bone of this land was always an air of transience, of the passing and fleeting, and that this same flux of slow time suffused all.

Here great trees fell, their rotted skeletons soon to be host to man-tall cinnamon ferns. Smaller shield and autumn and hay-scented ferns grew in their shade. Thick mosses grew; books mildewed, their leather bindings warping beyond repair; gravestones weathered, crumbled, and turned lichen-grey. No paint would ever stay on any wood; no vines ever give up their tindred hold. The very clapboards themselves would warp and pull through their nails from house's frame. Brick walls, seemingly so solid, would ooze wet, and plaster walls crack and crumble with moisture, run and drip. Earthworms would digest their velvet fare in the rich fall of leaves. A leaf drifted down, and silent forces at once began gathering it in.

It was simply a place too fertile for the hands and will of man to shape and keep penned within man-imposed bounds. Things grew too rapidly for that in an almost yearlong growing season; there was no white frozen landscape to aid man's proscription and keep life tidy and its process at bay.

Here in Mister Pink's world, and for Mister Pink himself, wisdom brought the realisation that existence was not tidy, and its deep nature would never be. This was a truth not to be seen so easily on asphalt and concrete, of which Mister Pink knew next to none.

Indeed, Pink was born to this deeper understanding and did not have to be told. As in the land itself, it was

born in his body, bred in his bone. He took life as it came and did not beat against the incoming tide, for the tide brought myriad life in its unfathomable deep brine.

He had no illusions about modern times and its much-vaunted progress. He was once heard to say that with every advancement, there's an equal or greater backpeddling in time. Of modern gains, he'd often declare, "Improvements makes straight fast roads, but it's by the crooked roads that's the best places to live." He'd learned in his life that it was usually by the winding and indirect paths that he'd found his way. He expected it to be the same way with mankind.

This day on his cane-bottomed chair, he had near fallen into a drowse. The hazy spell of memory was upon him, and in these moments, he didn't like much to be disturbed.

A line of sandhill cranes lazily flew their way westward with the river as guide. They moved in ragged, but determined style, their line moving up and down like waves at sea. They looked at ease with the world. Contented, Pink followed the familiar sight with practised eye.

Few could get away with breaking Mister Pink's reverie and drowse, but one was Preacher Jones. Not that the Reverend often came this way or that Mister Pink had any great love of him or the church he lorded over like emperor or king.

Goldie had been big in the church, sang in the choir, and perhaps this was one reason that Reverend Jones was making his call. Another no doubt was his recollection of

Mister Pink's quality hams, true excellence in a community that knew hams.

Reverend Jones was a big man, impressively big, with a large girth of paunch to match his height. Truth to say, he carried his weight well. He had on his Sunday-go-to-meeting best, and sported a pink shirt and big rhinestone pin as a tie tac on his plum-purple tie. Of the splendiddness of this, Mister Pink made his usual note.

A gold eyetooth glinted each time the Reverend spoke or smiled. He drove a big shiny black Cadillac car. Its engine's roar and the tires' scrape on the hard rutted red clay announced his arrival with fanfare that would have been appropriate for a modern-day Caesar.

Reverend Jones lost no time in steering the conversation round to the topic he was most interested in.

"Pink, is that a smokehouse I sees back behind them big popular trees?"

"Yessir, Preacher, you've said true. You got eagle eyes."

"Bet that smokehouse has plenty of prime cured hams."

"Not so many as when my Goldie was here, but I always still butchers me my share of hogs in butchering time. I likes to have a-plenty at Christmas, when the chaps all visits me here."

"Lucky chilrens. Bet your hams are the best around. My mouth waters just at the thought and a mention of them."

Well, this conversation didn't take the route the Reverend tried, nor ended at the intended destination. At the preacher's last comment, Pink stayed silent, and

watched the great black and white pileated woodpecker dip heavily across the cirque of giant trees in front of them. Its raucous call startled and changed the subject complete.

The Reverend soon scraped chair and was gone, leaving a powdering of dust from his car wheels. Mister Pink returned to his reverie again. The preacher had gotten no hams.

The car's dust reminded him of his father's favourite saying of dry spells like these. "Rather feel the mud 'tween my toes than the dust up my nose," he'd say of a drought. Pink mused on his pa and ma as he'd known them in the pride of their strength. Then his thought drifted back to the undulating line of cranes he'd seen before Reverend Jones had come, and he fell back to his musing.

Finally, breaking from his drowse and sandhill crane reverie, Pink *harrumphed* once or twice and finally broke silence with words that addressed the air around.

"One thing for sure, like taxes and death. Preacher Jones won't get no ham from me, lessen he puts his footses under my table here."

But Reverend Jones was not likely to do that. He held himself higher than Pink, a mighty man in the world, and had city-folks' ways. Ham or no ham, he'd not settle so low.

The red sun was brooding heavy with the summer heat and was drooping now in the west across a scraggly half-harvested peanut patch and the bedraggled line of spindly stalks of okra with their hibiscus-like bloom. Funny how from such a stark and leafless, dried-up cane, the exotic cream yellow flowers blossomed. They opened

wide, revealing their dark purple eye, lasted a day, and fell. Here again was the spendthrift nature of this land, this rag-tag forgotten land of the precious and few. Where the yellow blossom had been, a green nub formed, then the miraculous emerald pod. It elongated and grew big in the space of a day.

The fig trees in the yard were heavy with fruit. Sugar dripped from the bud end of them in their fecundness. The little red openings wept like eyes.

*Not like that fig tree Scripture tells us about, that wouldn't give nothing to our hungry Lord, Pink thought. And Him on his way to die too and needin' all the strength he could get, knowin' what he was about to have to do. I'd shorely bloomed into fruit, if I'd 'a been that tree. When you're needed that way, there's no good reason to wait.*

Pink watched the redbirds fly in and out of the fig trees' cool green recesses, greedily slashing the ripe brown jackets with their sharp yellow beaks so that the fruit hung down in red tatters and shreds like torn and defeated flags.

Reminded by the Reverend's talk of food, and the greedily feeding birds, Mister Pink bethought him of ham, and grits and redeye gravy too, all easy to cook up in a simple supper, and easier to eat. Tonight with the biscuits he'd baked this morning, he'd have honey in the comb, taken just yesterday from a hive of his bees in the sourwood trees.

But first he'd just watch the unfolding play of the sun's display, with its saffrons and purples and lemon yellows and lavenders and shades of rose, and a coral light pink he'd seen only in the insides of a giant seashell (a conch they

called it) brought back two hundred miles from the sea by Marse Richards in the golden old days, as Pink's pa had told, and which still sat on the floor at the many-lighted transom and sidelights that surrounded the old house's heavy double front doors.

Some of the little diamond-shaped panes were now gone, and Pink had stuffed rags in the spaces to keep out the cold, but the dying sun caught the wavy, hand-poured crystalline glass of the panes that remained and irradiated the gloom of the deep hall behind. It lit up the levitation of dust motes that hung thickly and frozen as if by magic in its still air.

There in the shadows of the wide cool hall and into what had once been the drawing room, Pink had strung a crisscross of clotheslines for his pitiful plain garments, grown thin and soft from many washings in the big black iron pot outside, and which now hung crazily in lines like soldiers scattered in rout after fierce enemy assault.

Now the sun's bottom rim just fell below the tree line; and taking that as a direct cue and sign, Mister Pink bestirred himself to come inside, marking the conclusion of yet another day. As it always began, so it ended, with Pink giving heartfelt thanks to his Maker for being able still to move and breathe and be, taking one day at a time.

"The sun is God's own candle. When He puts it out, He rests for awhile, like we does after a long day's work in the field," Mister Pink said aloud. "One day He'll put me out too, but only to light me again."



The mumble of his words sounded in rhythmical even-song accompaniment to the *taptaptaptap* of his stout, hand-whittled cane on the bone-dry boards of the old porch floor. After a good day's labour, it was painful for him now just to straighten himself out and walk.

"Going home," Mister Pink said, as he entered the heavy door that shut behind him with a creak and slam. It had the sound of finality that echoed to the depths of the great empty hall.

Then suddenly from the orange west, the diamond panes of the transom caught fire from a ray of the sun's last coppery radiance and just for a brief moment made all the hall full and golden with light.

"My soul is lit by the lantern of God," Mister Pink said in salute and reply.

His clothes hanging there in the hall on the chaos of lines moved uneasily in the draft of the closing door, which also made the dust motes fly as leaves before a great storm. To Mister Pink, the empty clothes were like the ghosts of all of those gone before. There was his pa and ma, and the young master who lay buried on the windswept hill, a man he'd never seen, leastways in life, and the old master and missus before him, stepping out of deep legend and oft-repeated tale.

The golden light faded away into gloom, and was quickly gone, as if never there. The clothes returned to being clothes, needed taking down, folding, and putting away. He'd wait till tomorrow to do them. Now supper needed making, and preparations for night.

Here, in what the old people used to call early candle-lighting time, Pink would eat his modest repast and commune once again with this legion of the dead, made palpable present in all that he touched, smelled, and saw, so that his final question would always recur to him as he drifted to doze in his chair by the hearth: "Who then are the living, and who the dead? God fixin' to take me, and then I will know." But for now, Mister Pink knew that the deep central mystery would remain.