

'There you are,' he said. 'Here it is. Now give me the football and get off the pitch!'

Bill Simpson looked down.

'What's this?' he asked.

'It's what you wanted,' Martin said. 'My very last 1p chew.'

In silence, Bill Simpson handed over the football. Where he'd been clutching it tightly against his chest, there was now an enormous brown smudge.

In silence, Bill Simpson turned and walked away. If all the girls had not been standing around the edges of the playground watching him, he would have cried.



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## PINK, PINK, NOTHING BUT PINK

After break, it was art. Everyone helped to unfold the large plastic sheets and lay them over the table tops, and spread old newspapers over them. Then Mrs Collins sent Leila into the dark cupboard at the back of the classroom to see what was left in the art supplies box.

'Are there any coloured chalks left?'

'No, they're all gone.'

'Pastels, then.'

'They're still too damp to use after the roof leak.'

'What about clay?'

'It's all dried up.'

'There must be crayons. *Every* class has crayons.'

'The infants came and borrowed ours last week, and haven't brought them back yet.'

'Right, then. It will just have to be paint, as usual.'

So Leila dragged the heavy cardboard box full of paint tubs out of the cupboard, and everyone crowded round to choose their colours.

'Here's a pink.'

'What's that one?'

'Pink.'

'More pink.'



'Pink.'

'I've found some blue – no, I haven't. It's empty.'

'I thought I'd found some green, but it's dried up.'

'There's no white. There's never any white. We haven't had white for years and years.'

'There's some pink here.'

'And this one's pink.'

'Pink, pink, nothing but pink!'

Everyone stood up, disappointed. Kirsty voiced everyone's disgust.

'What can you do with pink?' she demanded. 'You can't paint pink dogs or pink cats or pink cows or pink grass or pink space vehicles or pink trees or pink battlefields, can you? If you can only find one colour, it's difficult enough. But if you've only got pink, it's practically *impossible*. What is there in the world that's all pink?'

'Yes. What's all pink?'

Everyone gazed around the room, looking for something that was all pink so they could paint it. Some of them stared at the pictures and posters pinned on the classroom walls. Others gazed out of the window, across the playground to the street and the shops. One or two of them glanced at one another –

And Kirsty looked at Bill.

'No!' Bill said. 'No, no, no! Not me! Absolutely not! You can't!'

Now everyone turned to look at Bill.

'No!' Bill insisted. 'I am *not all pink*!'

Now Mrs Collins, too, was inspecting Bill closely.





'Pink frock,' she admitted slowly. 'And fiery hair. Rich rosy freckles and a nice deep blush. Yes, you'll do beautifully, dear. You're all pink.'

'I am *not* pink.'

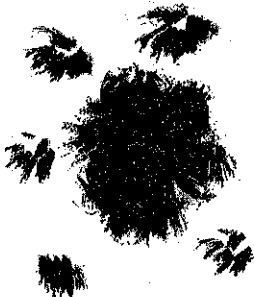
But he was getting pinker by the minute. And by the time everyone had wandered back to their seats clutching their little plastic tubs of paint, you wouldn't have needed any other colour to do a really fine portrait of him.

'Perfect!' said Mrs Collins.

And taking Bill Simpson firmly by the hand, she tried to lead him over towards a chair in the middle of the room, where everyone would be able to see him clearly while they were painting him.

Bill tried to pull back. Mrs Collins

turned in astonishment at his unwillingness, and let go of his hand quite suddenly. Bill staggered back – straight into Nick who had just prised the top off his paint tub.

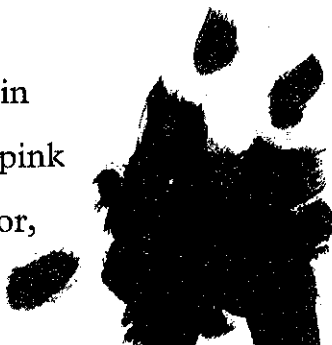


A huge glob of pink paint flew up in the air and landed on Bill Simpson's frock. As everyone watched, it gathered itself, all fat and heavy at the bottom.



Then, slowly, it slithered down between the folds of material, leaving a thick pink slug trail.

Bill Simpson watched in silence as a small pool of pink paint appeared on the floor, beside his left foot.



Grubby fingerprints round the hem; a huge muddy smudge on the front; a great slimy paint smear down the side. What next?

Mrs Collins inspected the damage, and shrugged.

'Well, never mind,' she said. 'It's only poster paint. I'm sure the frock will wash out beautifully.'

And, once again, she took his hand.

There was no fight left in Bill Simpson. Meekly, he allowed himself to be led to the middle of the room.

Mrs Collins arranged him neatly and comfortably on the little wooden chair.

'There,' she said triumphantly, placing a cherry-coloured exercise book in one of his hands as a last touch. 'All pink!'

She stepped back to admire her handiwork.

'Perfect!' she said again. 'Now is everyone happy?'

Bill Simpson could have tried to say something then, but he didn't bother. He reckoned there was no point. He knew that, whatever he said and whatever he did, this awful day would just keep sailing on in its own way, as in a dream. A curse was on him. A pink curse. He was, of all things, haunted by a pretty pink frock with fiddly shell buttons. He might as well give up struggling. Like poor Rapunzel trapped in her high stone tower, he'd just sit quietly, waiting to see what happened, hoping for rescue.

Meanwhile, the rest of the class had begun to complain.

'If we've only got pink to paint with, how are we supposed to do that great big football-

shaped smudge on the front of the frock? It's brown!



'I can't paint all those grubby little fingerprints right round the hem of the dress, because they're *grey*.'

'Those shell buttons are a bit fiddly to paint!'

'I've done far too many freckles. What shall I do?'

'Wait till they're dry, then chip some off!'

Bill ignored everyone. He just sat there, waiting for time to go by. Even a bad dream couldn't last forever. His torment had to end some time, surely.

After half an hour or so, Mrs Collins came by, carrying a fresh jar of water over to table two.

'Do try not to look quite so *gloomy*, dear,' she murmured in Bill's ear as she walked past. 'You're spoiling people's paintings.'



And Bill was too miserable and defeated even to bother to scowl at the back of her head, as she moved off.

