

"Freelance professor, eh?" he said, sticking the pipe back in. "Interesting you should say that, since I'm one of those, too. Exploring, educating folks in all of these parts, I'm sure that counts. By George, it's true. Look at me! I've got freelance professor written all over me! I'm definitely of that breed. You should go back to it, it's a fine profession. You know what I flew here on?" He smacked his knee. "A fiberglass balloon? Ever heard of them? I flew it from the city! You should have seen it!" He laughed heartily, slamming the pipe loudly against the butt of his fist. "You would have loved it, mate! I think I'll go to the Sahara next, though I'd like to take a microlight, if you know what I mean, if I'm headed that way." He darted his head up, suspiciously, "Dusk is coming on. Say, don't look like that, you just need some confidence, that's all." He put his hand on my shoulder. "You need to believe in yourself, try and see yourself in the light that only you were made to live in. Don't just wallow in self-pity, that's not what it's all about, is it? Is it?" He held my shoulder firmly, sometimes shaking it, sometimes pushing it rhythmically, sometimes taking his hand off to gesture quickly before slapping it down on me again, saying, "Is it? Is it? It is? It is? It is?" He let go of me. "We freelance professors need to stick together, am I right?" He winked. "Aw, it's a big world, but make of it what you will."

"So you're really a freelance professor, too?" I said. "I thought I made that up."

"No way," he said. "I've been a freelance professor for a long time, mate. Remember when I said I was back in the city, chasing girls, you remember? I was freelance professorin' as far back as then, actually!"

"Oh, wow," I said. "Well that's longer than I have." This was probably unnecessarily sarcastic. There's no reason to talk like this. "What's your name?"

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