A Semi Autobiographical Approach to Being Broke in Kensington

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"I spent my last pound on the jukebox. Funny little coins that they are, I never actually thought I was spending anything. I'm built like that. Full of good ideas. Suppose that is why I decided to become a poet and move to London. Of course it is also how I ended up getting stuck here broke in Kensington."

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"You can hear it in my accent when I talk, I'm an Englishman in New York." But I still can't argue with the jukebox. Change the words around a little bit and I claim the song to be about me. A New Yorker in England. At least as far as anyone here is concerned. Syracuse is right next to Queens, sure it is. Better than saying where I really am from since Liverpool throws their geography further off balance.

"Oh, so you're English then?" Eyebrows raised since I don't have a trace of a Liverpudlian accent. Other than the one of the Central New York variety of course.

"No, I'm from New York." And the Queens question usually follows shortly after.
"If you buy me a drink, I'll give you a geography lesson." You have to attempt these things when broke. More usual than not a rude rebuff follows. Still, it doesn't change my situation. Nothing more than I had before, nothing.

After this most recent conversation, I find myself at a table somewhere near the back of the pub that I have been at for a while now. Clearing smoke, I arise and begin my trek to the opposite side of the tiny building to ask a stranger for 20p. I pick up the phone, fumbling through the digits until I have reached my friend Sweeney.

"Sweeney!"
"Yeah?"
"What you doing?"
"Well I was thinking about going to work. I'll be there in ten minutes."

So after a fleeting few words, I again find myself alone among the masses. No longer than ten minutes later Sweeney walks through the door. This less than striking man dressed as though he belongs in the 20's glances around the room and noting the seemingly infinite amount of ethnicity in the room mouths the words, "How cosmopolitan!" to me and strides over to my all too empty table.

As a job Sweeney writes down our conversations and sells them. Unfortunately, since my half of the lines are not the interesting half, I get no share of the money. Still, we have plenty of conversations and I tend to be more in control of the ones where he is not involved.

"So Sweeney, how's the job?"
"I think you're the one who should be telling me that. Any news in your life?"

"Why don't you buy me a drink?"
The man smiles as he stands, and in motions not similar to walking, he glides over to the bar and returns with two pints of beer.
"Words now John. I want to hear words from you."
"Are you crazy? You can't possibly expect me to come up with a decent story when I have a deadline for it?" Sweeney sighs, obviously annoyed.

"So you're not going to tell me anything?"

"I don't see why I should." Sweeney stands to leave, but I grab his coat and plead with him not to leave, as I look frantically around the room for something to say. The news is on the bar TV. "Says here to expect some moisture in the air tonight, Sweeney. Mist is rising off our new Island in the north. Funny thing it is since two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time, but this mist is both water and air at once." Sweeney sits back down.

"Yes, strange thing indeed." He takes out his pen and paper and starts writing down what we say. I start working on my beer. Casually, I attempt to see what he is writing, but to no avail.

"Umm, yeah so Sweeney, did I ever tell you about my desire to be a chain-smoking Buddhist monk?"

"No, John, as a matter of fact, you never have. Why don't you tell me about that?" He continues writing and never looks up from the paper.

"Yeah so, I wanted to be a Buddhist monk and a chain smoker. Get it? Buddhist monk. Chain smoker. Come on man that's classic."

"Do you have anything of meaning to say, John?" Sweeney continues writing despite the fact that there are little words being spoken. Every now and then he takes a large gulp of his beer. Minutes pass, and in silence I look around the room struggling for something to say.

"Umm, I'm broke and my Visa runs out in two months. I have no plane ticket home, so I was considering various methods of deportation." Sweeney finally looks up disgustedly and begins to drink more rapidly. In an attempt to avoid his stare, I place my eyes intently on my beer.

In years past, I would sit at night, pretending to play him in chess so that I would have a chance at beating him in something since my words were not his equal. His presence is near mine now, jotting down what I say, but still leaving out my words. I want to ask him for order. What word goes where, what should I say? I look up from my beer and at Sweeney. He has finished his pint and motions towards the door. I see him crumple our conversation and shove it deep into his coat.

"Finish this pint and we'll be off." I say and turn back to the glass. Our words occupy the same space. I have not spoken of me, but him; the mine underneath stuck somewhere that is not its own, gathering below the mist sheltering the north. By the time I am done, Sweeney has already walked outside and I follow his trail towards the door.

Outside the air has grown dark and Sweeney's skin glows through its thickness. For a second I forget he is here and think that if I concentrate hard enough he would disappear. He lights a cigarette and turns toward me, his body one with the smoke.

"Why don't you ask me how it is done?" The heat escaping his body adds warmth to the air around him, steadily getting cooler as it radiates away. I stare into his eyes and try to make him disappear, but don't say anything.

"Well, I think it is time for me to leave then." But I feel that will never happen. His presence was already here. It cannot be escaped. He finishes his cigarette, walks across the street and turns around. Sweeney eyes me from across the street. His glare will not escape me. I cannot even whisper the words I know he wants to hear from me. If I could scream, I would shout.
across the ocean and hear my words echo over the water and reverberate against all shores that it comes into contact with. But my words fall just outside, caught on Sweeney's paper crumpled somewhere in his ancient coat. With a vengeance my eyes lock onto his figure. This time the conversation will be mine.

-Mark Bowers *