

B



My WS1 book is taken and tossed to one side as if it were unimportant by Ms. M, who today is temporarily standing in for K, my usual advisor. M is all the time giving me an “I’m not going to stand for any nonsense” look.

“What kind of work is it you are looking for Mr. B**urden-on-the-taxpayer**?”

“Anything in the arts sector. Anything connected with art, video art in particular. That’s my background. That’s what I’ve always been involved with. I have a degree—”

“And have you any other skills? I’m saying this because what you are suggesting is a rather narrow area with limited opportunities. We need to widen the range of your job-search. Would you be interested in cleaning work for example?”

“I don’t think I could do that.”

“Would you consider training to become a cleaner?”

“Well, I don’t think—”

“Mr. B**one-idle**, you need to consider making changes to your work plan, and to your profile. It is no use waiting for a job ‘making films’ when the chances of that are highly unlikely.”

“But I was previously self-employed doing just such a job, for many years, as an artist and a film-maker. It’s one of the few things I am able to do. I went through seven years of college. I’ve got a—”

“But it’s very obviously not working out for you. You have been unemployed for over two years now. It’s maybe time to consider a change of direction.”

“I’m also looking for teaching jobs.”

M looks down, sighs, and then gives me a fixed stare: “Okay Mr. B**loody-useless**. What teaching have you done? Are you qualified to teach?”

“Well, I’ve done some days as a visiting lecturer in the past. I’m hoping to get some visits and maybe work towards getting my name around, which then could lead to more regular work and the possibility of a permanent position.”

“In schools?”

“No, in colleges.”

“You see, there again, it’s a highly speculative approach. And you are talking about a small sector with limited opportunities. You need to concentrate on something that has a practical chance of success. You’ve tried being an artist and it hasn’t worked. There are lots of other things I’m sure you could do. We need to get you off benefits and into work. There is no shame, Mr. B**een-lazing-about**, in changing from what you used to do to something more down to earth. Not everyone can do exactly what he or she would ‘like’ to do, or what they feel they ‘should’ be doing. And who knows, you might try something else and find out that you like it! Is there any other job you think you might be capable of doing?”

“Well, I have worked in shops.”

“There you go,” M starts tapping her keyboard and peering into the computer screen. “So I’ll just see if we have anything coming up in retail in the local area.”

“How are you doing Mr. B**owel-cancer**?” Dr. S speaks slowly, continuing to read what must be the results of my tests on his screen. “I haven’t seen you for some time.”

He taps the “enter” key, swivels round in his chair and gives me a formal smile.

My reply is unenthusiastic.

“Oh, I’m okay I suppose.”

"I have noticed that your cholesterol levels are quite high. They have gone up since your last checkup. And I think you are a bit overweight. Do you drink alcohol?"

"Yes."

"How often do you drink?"

"Nearly everyday."

"How much would you say you drink?"

"Oh, about 4 or 5 tins of beer."

"That's not good." He pauses to tap a few digits into the keypad. "And what about your diet Mr. **Budweiser**? Do you eat any fatty foods, chips, that kind of thing?"

"Not especially. Sometimes I do, usually when I've been drinking. And that's usually late at night. I know I shouldn't, but the booze weakens my resolve. I've been under a lot of stress lately."

"So we have to cut down your drinking," he mutters to himself. Then, looking at me, "What about exercise? Are you active would you say?"

"I ride my bicycle."

"How often do you do that?"

"Nearly everyday. I don't drive a car. I get all my shopping on the bike."

"That's good." He taps the keypad a few more times.

"And I see you were a smoker, but you stopped smoking?"

"Yes, I used to. I stopped over a year ago. Mind you I had to because I couldn't afford it anymore."

"Well that's good isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

Dr. S looks at my results again, then at me: "But you seem a bit down if I may say so. How are things generally? I haven't seen you for— How long is it? It's two, no, three years?"

"Yes, well—"

"And you still make the films and exhibitions isn't it?"

"I am almost completely broke. I don't get any commissions anymore. I've been signing on for nearly two years."

"Oh I see. Yes, it's difficult Mr. **Becoming-a-bit-boring**."

"It feels like I'm on a downward path. Realistically there hasn't been anything for about six years. I've tried to get other work but I'm not really qualified for anything else. All I've managed to get is a job in a supermarket, stacking shelves. I stuck it for eight months. It wore me out, but worse than that, it nearly drove me round the bend. I had to resign."

"So you feel low, in yourself?"

"I'm sixty years old this year. I've used up all the money from 18 years of self-employment. It feels like my whole life has come to nothing."

"Do you have any friends, a partner?"

"I used to, but we split up about 15 years ago."

"So you live alone?"

"Yes."

"But you have friends?"

"I meet with some people every couple of weeks or so. And I visit my Mother every weekend. But I don't bring up all this business. I don't want to worry her."

"So you are feeling a bit down, a bit depressed. Would you like to see anyone? I can give you a number to call for people who can help with this kind of thing."

"Well, it's not really—"

"They can be really quite helpful. It's a fairly common problem these days. It's nothing to be ashamed about Mr. **Bipolar**."

"I'll try to sort it out myself. I don't think it will take much. All I need is to get going on something. Once I'm working on something creative again it'll be like a therapy in itself."

"I'll give you the contact number anyway, then if you feel you want to, you can." He passes me a printed business card. "I'm giving you a prescription for getting your cholesterol down. Take

the pills twice a day before meals. And for this 'feeling depressed', I can give you something to help you calm down?"

"I'd rather not go on anti-depressants if you don't mind. I don't want my mood altered by chemicals."

"Well, it's not like that, Mr. **Beginning-to-fall-apart**. The drugs are much better these days."

"If it's all the same to you, please, I'd rather not. I've seen the effects on people I know. I'm an artist and I have to use my mind. I have to have a clear head. I'm worried my thoughts will be dulled down. I need to be having ideas if I'm going to get myself out of this mess."

"I can assure you—"

"I'd prefer not to go down that route."

"Okay. But if you do change your mind, just ask and I can give you something. I am also giving you some weak aspirin, which is advisable at your age. Take one tablet every day."

Dr. S leans over and retrieves a paper sheet as it trundles fresh from the printer.

"So, you need to lose a bit of weight and you need to cut down, I mean really cut down, on your drinking. See how you go on the tablets and come back in maybe a couple of month's time. Alright, Mr. **Bor-rowed-time**?"

He hands me the printed slip.

"This is a standing order so you don't need to keep coming back. Just keep it and show it to the chemist each time. Okay, Mr. **Better-off-dead**?"

I nod. I get up from my chair and back out of the room. As the door swings shut behind me, the mechanism controlling its speed forces it to slow down, prolonging the little gap of the last few inches before becoming sealed. My last glimpse of Dr. S is as he swivels back in his chair, his face losing expression and eyes fixed once more on the computer screen.

Mr. K remarks at the emptiness of the Jobcentre and how quiet it is. He tells me that this time last year there were over three thousand claimants signing on. He briefly gauges my reaction, and then writes something down on a sheet of paper. I watch him perform this little act and wait for the punch line.

"This is what it is now."

K slides the paper towards me, and on it is written the number "1230". The paper is quickly retracted. K rolls it into a small ball and drops it into the bin beside his desk. The performance is over.

"So Mr. **Begging-bowl**, how are you today?" he says breezily.

"Oh, okay."

"Just okay, is it? I thought you looked a bit quiet as you came in. So what's up?"

I tell him that nothing's changed, but that things are starting to get me down.

"It's important to stay positive."

K has a look of concern. Looking at K, I am remembering him telling me how his retirement is due in less than a month's time. To him, every day must feel like another step nearer to his release. He gets friendlier and less interrogatory every time I see him.

"My doctor says I should think about counselling."

"Well, if you are feeling like you say, it might be an idea."

"Things are mounting up. My chance of a comfortable old age is never going to happen. Time's running out and I'm going nowhere. People promise me things, build up my hopes and then they renege. They say, 'maybe in September'. I'm always getting the feeling I'm being fobbed off."

"Well, Mr. **Bleak-shall-inherit-the-earth**, if your doctor advises it, maybe that's what you should do. I mean, look at it this way, it wouldn't do any harm giving it a try."

"I had a friend who went for counselling and it didn't do him any good. Turned out to be a waste of time."

“Well everyone’s different. What works for one person doesn’t mean it’ll work for someone else. And after all,” K uses the same phrase again, “it wouldn’t do you any harm.”

I suddenly regret my pitiful outburst in front of K. Why am I coming out with all this stuff?

“It’s free on the NHS, so you wouldn’t be losing anything by going.”

I attempt to fortify my face against impending collapse. I clench my teeth together inside my mouth. I tighten my jaw and put on a grimly determined expression; a look of hardness instead of weakness.

K changes the subject. He mentions how the business of signing-on will soon be done online: “Soon you will be doing everything through the Universal Jobmatch site.”

I tell him I prefer writing entries in my WS1 book.

“Well, that’s all going to change. It will be a whole new system of benefits. What the government are calling “Universal Credit”. Soon everything will be amalgamated. Housing Benefit, Jobseeker’s Allowance and Incapacity Benefit will all be done using the one form and it will all be on the Internet. Offices like this one will very likely be closed down.”

“I’ve never minded having to come in here to sign on. I even preferred it that time when I was forced to come in on a daily basis. It kept me focussed. The way it is now, after a week goes by I start getting a bit lost.”

K seems to detect something wrong in my attitude: “Ah yes, but you do know you are expected to spend time looking for work every day, on a regular basis?”

“Believe me, every minute of every day I’m thinking about getting a job. That’s partly why I have all this, this sense of my own failure. All I’m saying is that I prefer to talk to a real person. I haven’t anyone else to confide in or who can put me back in a positive frame of mind.”

“Yes, well, again I think it might be a good idea to do what your doctor advised.”

The signing slip is pushed across to me. I sign and date it.

“What time shall I put you down for, for next time? Morning or afternoon, Mr. **Born-loser**?”

“Morning is fine.”

“9.40?”

“Yes, that time is alright.”

“Look after yourself Mr. **Breadline**.”

I get up and begin walking, on shaky legs, towards the twin automatic sliding doors.

Outside the skies are completely white. I turn right at first, as if heading for the Tesco supermarket. I walk a hundred yards or so, and then my sense of purpose diminishes. Why am I going to the supermarket when I have less than five pounds in my pocket? I stop. I act out a little “I’ve forgotten something” routine and do an about turn (just in case I’m being candidly observed). I go back the way I came, but avoid passing the Jobcentre. I turn left down the first side street and then turn right onto the High Road. After a few strides I remember what my original purpose had been and why I had been originally heading to Tesco’s. It was to buy a pot of ground white pepper. I also now realise why I had made the instinctive decision to abort the idea. Tesco’s are not particularly cheap on white pepper. White pepper is becoming harder to get these days. It has almost completely gone out of fashion. Black is now the dominant pepper. The only places that sell cheap quantities of white are Asian-style grocers.

I walk past the bland windows of Matalan, now probably the area’s most upmarket establishment. The High Road is full of cheap shops that have taken over premises where more dignified shops used to be. A few months ago Primark (formerly British Home Stores) closed down to make way for a Poundland. I am approaching Poundland now. I decide to go inside; this will be my first time. Maybe they have white pepper?

Poundland doesn’t appear to be designed for people who know what they want. It has the feeling of not being designed at all. The layout is completely chaotic and childishly colourful. Talcum powder is next to carpet cleaner. A pyramid of baked beans is stacked next to shelves

displaying bed linen. Snow shovels are by the children's crayons, just along from bin liners and chocolates. The colours are all sickeningly bright with a predominance of pink and lime green. I feel like I'm walking around in an insane person's head.

My stomach begins to hurt. After having taken an unthinkingly haphazard route, I find myself right in the middle of the store and can see no obvious way to the exit doors. The aisles in each direction seem to be clogged with plump squat people, all of whom are burdened down with contraptions and contrivances; wheelie baskets, walking frames, prams, or with children in tow. The shoppers seem to waddle, rocking from side to side. There is an eerie almost complete silence, with just the low-level rustling sound of artificial fabric rubbing against artificial fabric.

A panic attack is beginning to creep up on me. Through distant windows the bleached streets beckon, over and above the dark silhouettes of customers and clutter. I hold my breath and try to squeeze through the gaps between people.

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