

Mister.

The South Bank.

The warmth of the long summer day was starting to leak into the concrete beneath him. He shifted, trying to make himself comfortable. After all, this was his bedroom – his lounge, his dining room, his everything. Failing to settle, he sat up and watched the passers-by as they went about their early evening routines. He watched the brisk business folk, stiff in their sharp suits, heading for the underground, laptops over shoulders, mobiles at their mouths, working still as the riverside lights came on. And as they were heading home, to all places north and south, others were emerging for the night; some less welcome than others.

‘What’s your name?’

He twisted, looking around. Was the question addressed to him?

‘Mister. What’s your name?’

The boy was standing a little way off, hands on hips, his head to one side.

‘Me?’ He struggled to think how to answer. Such a simple question. How could he not..?

‘It’s Mr...no, it’s Frank. Yes, *Frank*.’ He frowned, relieved - perversely pleased with his performance.

‘And yours? Who are you?’

‘Can’t say. Me muvver says I mustn’t. ‘Specially down ‘ere.’

Frank nodded, serious. You couldn’t be too careful. Not down here. Next to the river.

‘That’s ‘er, just over there. She’s talkin’ to Vera. She’s my nan. Always comes down ‘ere with us. Likes to make sure we’re ok, y’ know?’

Frank nodded again, and looked over to the two women talking, a stone’s throw away from where he sat. The younger of the two turned, smiled, and gave him a small wave of acknowledgement.

‘What about dad? Does he mind you talking to strangers?’

‘Don’t know. Ain’t seen ‘im for ages now.’

The boy was staring into the distance. Maybe, Frank thought, looking for the father who had left them. Or maybe, just staring. *He* knew all about staring since he had landed down here.

He was a world champion.

‘Here. Mum says you can have this.’ The boy thrust out his hand, and dropped a two-pound coin onto the flagstones.

Frank grabbed at the rolling coin and put it away, sharpish, quickly hiding it inside his jacket.

‘Don’t worry! I don’t want it back,’ then, ‘Mum says you’ve got to have a cuppa, or a sandwich. No drink though. Muvver’s ruin.’

Frank smiled – embarrassed.

‘You got any kids?’

‘No – yes, I mean-’

'Sorry – gotta go. Be safe.'

The boy ran over and joined his mother and nan and disappeared into the evening.

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An hour passed, and with his shadow lengthening, Frank stopped walking. Looking back, he saw the sun dropping fast behind Waterloo Bridge and, finding a bin, finally rid himself of all that he carried: sleeping bag, blanket, malodourous pillow. Then, spotting something, he crossed the road, to the underground station, and pressed the warm coin into the outstretched hand of a figure squatting in the shadows.

'Bless you, sir.'

'You're welcome'.

He wouldn't be needing that cuppa.

He was going home.

(495 words)

'Waterloo Sunset'