

Sitting on the Street

by J. L. Symonds Patel

The bread's run out. I'll have to get some
from Sainsbury's up the road. Walking along
Ravensdale Avenue, which takes me to the high street,
I see the small-leaved limes swaying in the wind, and
the birds skipping the branches.

Putting my mask on, I enter the supermarket,
walk down the aisle, grab the bread, then walk
up to the self-checkout. I pull out my card.
Slide it into the machine. Type in my pin. Take back my card.
And so the bread is mine. Still wearing my mask, I head outside.

Then, sitting by the brick arch entrance, is a man,
middle-aged, unshaven, wearing an old cap, a rather ragged
dark puffer jacket with equally rugged jeans, and some aged trainers.
Hands linked, arms atop his lifted knees, facing the road, as I walk on.

Further down the high street, another man, with a full grey beard,
Sitting in front of a wide sycamore, wearing an aged black
low crown top hat, and a worn coat. A rugged blanket covers
his raised knees, and cushions his arms atop it, as he faces the shops,
as I walk on.

Taking my mask off, I go home—not the same way, this time
down Friern Park road. But it gnaws at me. I've seen them before
many times. It must be that they really are homeless. Surely.
But what if they aren't? Wait, no, hang on. It wouldn't matter.
They can't be in a good situation if they're sitting on
hard concrete all day, when I do see them, not to mention
when I don't. And, well, I'll be damned if I walk past them again
and don't even try to give them something.

And then again, the bread's run out. I collect my things,
and head out the door, and begin to walk up Friern Park road.
Slipping my mask on, I get to the cash point at Natwest. Put the card in.
Type my pin. Select £10 in cash. And there it comes. I put my card back
in my wallet, and keep the note in my pocket. I walk down the road
toward the top hat man, and enter the newsagent just opposite him.
I get a bottle of water for 60p, a set of coins, £4.40, and a note, £5.

Pocketing the note, I head out the shop door holding the water and coins.
I get to him. He looks up as I ask if he wants the water, and expressively
gives a gesture to say "Well, sure, thanks," and I hand him the cool bottle.
Then, in the slightly torn Costa coffee cup in front of him, I drop the £4.40,
just as he drops two energetic thank-yous, paired with two slight bows
while sitting. He smiles, and I give a final "Take care," along with a slight bow.

Next is Sainsbury's. Walking past a parade of shops on the same
side of the road, I reach the entrance, and there sits he,
wearing his cap. I walk past him, as he looks to the road,
and enter the supermarket. I go to the aisle for bread, and take
up a packet. Then, at the self-checkout, I pull out my card.
Slide it into the machine. Type in my pin. Take back my card.
And so the bread is mine. Still wearing my mask, I head outside.

Passing the arch, I see him still there, and approach him. I hold the note
in my pocket, and raise it out to hand it to him. He sees me and looks up,
with eyes that turned from looking to the ground, and receives the note.
He says, "Thank you very much," with a good-hearted smile and a slight bow,
as I give a final "Take care," along with a slight bow.

I then walk on to Ravensdale Avenue, and then head down the road
where the small-leaved limes sway, and the birds skip the trees. I take
off my mask. Well. Surely. There is nothing we need to do but
that. Surely. What more can anyone say, beyond that we must help each other.
My God! How could there be a better way to spend our short lives!
Even if they are like brief candles, are we not to use them to relight others?
Surely. If I am to run out of bread, ought I not to give them bread?

But it gnaws at me. It's just giving. Don't we need to do more?
Wait, one moment. Surely. We can do nothing more.
So simple—too simple. How can there be such strength
in as small an act as this. Surely. I'll be damned if I see and look over. So I must do,
not out of the fear of seeing the Bad in the Bad, but out of the love of seeing the Good
in the Good.