



Benched

(more from David's adventures in London ...)

In most of these stories about my year in England, I have probably left the impression that I had a pretty easy time of things, and completely enjoyed myself. Well, I did actually, but if I pretended that there were no bumps along the way I would be misleading you. Perhaps the biggest 'bump' during that year was my decision that December to move out of the room that I had been renting for a few months.

There were no problems with the room itself; it was just a place to sleep each night, and actually I spent most days out and about exploring London. But I began to feel uncomfortable with the landlord. I saw him each morning at breakfast time, and usually that was our only contact. He kept to his own rooms, and I was never invited there.

He lived alone, but had frequent visitors, always men. I hadn't thought anything of this, but one day, when I was talking with the woman who lived in the flat upstairs about a parcel that had been delivered when I was out, she said something about 'that disgusting man downstairs'. I had no idea what she was talking about, but as time went by, and more visitors came and went, I put two and two together, and understood what she had been bothered about; he was gay.

At that point in my life, I had never met such a person, and didn't really know what to think about this. Those things were not as open and free as they are today, and her attitude was certainly the prevailing one. I started to feel that staying there longer might not be such a good idea, so prepared to move out and find another room somewhere. (In fairness to the landlord, I have to mention that my discomfort was completely baseless; he never made even the slightest 'approach' to me during my time there.)

This was happening just at the time of my visit to my grandmother in Yorkshire at Christmas time, so when I left for that trip, I left the room permanently. I still had no other possessions than would fit in a single bag, so 'moving' was no problem at all. I made no arrangements for another place to stay, thinking that I would just find another room when I came back down to London after the Yorkshire visit.

When I did get back to London, it was during the week between Christmas and New Year. I tried to replicate the experience of the previous September - strolling around until I saw a poster advertising a room for rent. Stroll as I might though, I came across no such poster. Evening approached, and with time running out, I went into a local hotel to get a room for the night.

Full up.

When I asked the clerk about suggestions, he just shrugged his shoulders; apparently this was still 'holiday season', and the hotels were all booked. Now, there must actually have been rooms available somewhere in London, but at that point, I had no idea how to find one. I hit the streets again and continued walking.

I had dinner somewhere, and then thought about where I could get out of the cold. Euston Station was nearby, and I went in and sat on one of the benches under the cavernous roof. I wasn't alone, and realized that a number of the other denizens were obviously people in a similar position; they were apparently intending to spend the night there. Well, so be it. It wasn't going to be comfortable, but at least it was better than a park bench.

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As it became late, the trains finished running, and the activities of the terminus shut down. Men lay on the benches here and there, some with newspapers draped over them. I soon fell asleep on my bench, but was awakened in short order by a guard. I assumed that I was being thrown out, but he simply told me to get my foot back on the floor. I was learning the rules; 'sleeping' on the benches wasn't officially permitted, but as long as you kept at least one foot on the floor, they left you alone. So I did what all the rest were doing, and fell asleep with one leg hanging down touching the ground.

I don't remember if - in later years - I ever told my parents about this episode; perhaps they are now hearing about it for the first time. Their son was 'homeless' ... sleeping in a train station. And if that wasn't bad enough - the place I stayed the next night was ... But let's save that story for another day!

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