

“Where's Clapham Junction?”

It was one of those rare warm sunny English afternoons. Rufus, my King Charles Spaniel mix, trotted along happily, occasionally pausing to investigate an interesting sniff. Warmth and a light breeze on my skin, the rustling of leaves, the distant chirping of parakeets—all of it remained unnoticed as my eyes drifted absently along the grey concrete pavement, deep in thought.

Ruminating about what? I can't remember. Perhaps fuming at some cutting comment from the previous week, rehearsing a snappy retort that would have made me look clever. Or perhaps anxious about the future, conjuring disasters that would likely never unfold.

"Excuse me, sir." A voice snapped me back to the present. "Where is..." He looked down at a scrap of paper. "...Clapham Junction?"

A tall, thin man in an oversized hoodie stood before me, grey streaking through his beard.

"Sure." I looked up from the pavement "Just go straight, then turn right on East Hill"—I gestured back the way I came—"about fifteen, twenty minutes. Big station. You can't miss it."

The man looked up at the sun, squinting, then gently closed his eyes, smiling, soaking in the bright afternoon sunlight.

"So, it's a long walk?" he asked, his eyes still shut, almost hopefully.

"Sometimes." I shrugged. "But it's a nice walk."

"Thank you." The man smiled as he gently ruffled Rufus behind the ears.

"Where're you coming from?" I called out as he started to walk away.

"Prison." He smiled and paused for effect. "I just got out. Eight years." He waved and walked on.

I watched him go, a slight skip in his step. My eyes drifted back to the grey concrete pavement, deep in thought. Then I paused, looked up at the sun, squinted, closed my eyes, and smiled, soaking in the bright afternoon sunlight.

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