

Bum A Shot

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086

(201) 770-0550; m.bett@verizon.net;

<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

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CHARACTERS

- STEEL EYE, vagrant, female, age hard to determine but certainly a veteran of the streets
- RONALD BITTERS, tourist with camera

SETTING

- Major American city

TIME

- Present, cold weather

Two large hand-scrawled signs propped up against a shopping cart or a flock of filled bags.

Sign 1:

- Victim of global downsizing = McFucked
- Victim of religion = stigmata 20% off
- Victim of advertising = seeking mental enema
- Victim of credit cards = plastic is Death
- Victim of gender = penises 20% off
- Victim of coffee = Starsucks corporate swill
- Victim of clothing = no off the rack body
- Other categories of victimhood on request.

Sign 2:

The Sayings of Steel Eye, Street Savant

- What you see before you is a full human being. Do not forget this.
- The only difference between begging and brokering stocks is office location -- possibly deodorant.
- When poor people beg, they call it begging; when rich people beg, they call it fundraising.
- Street person's motto: Longevity need not apply.
- Pick up on me and you pick up the clue phone.
- First rule of paranoids: You hide. They seek.
- A Rolls Royce covered in astroturf is still a Rolls Royce.
- You don't need to give; just acknowledge. However, I can't eat smiles.
- What you see before you is a full human being. Do not forget this.

Bum A Shot

STEEL EYE is out trolling for change. She has a coffee can at her feet. As she begins speaking, she will acknowledge the contributions of people. Half way through her first spiel, BITTERS enters, camera around his neck. It's not an expensive camera -- something like a Pentax K-1000 or a point-and-shoot -- and he's taking tourist photos.

STEEL EYE

Practice your Catholic charity, Muslim piety, Sufi mysticism, Buddhist mindfulness, Lutheran -- whatever you do -- thank you -- drop some dough in my can below. -- Praise be! -- I don't take contributions from United Way, Amway, the Eightfold Way, or curds and whey. I just hit the highway, the byway, and do it my way. -- Much appreciated. -- No middle man here, no overhead -- all funds expended directly for recipients. -- Thanks. -- Help me make it through the night - and day. Just do it.

BITTERS takes a picture of STEEL EYE, prepares to move on.

STEEL EYE

Hey, what do you think you're doing?

BITTERS

What?

STEEL EYE

What do you think you're doing?

BITTERS

Taking pictures.

STEEL EYE

No, no, no, no, no. Stand to one side for a second.

BITTERS hesitates, clearly uncomfortable.

STEEL EYE

Stand over here. We have to talk. Just watch.

BITTERS stands to one side.

STEEL EYE

Charity begins at home -- my home. Which you're walking on. Make these mean streets sweeter. -- Have a nice day, too. --

(to BITTERS)

I have to work the lunch crowd here, best money during the day. Rush hour sucks -- everyone's like a razor through butter.

(to crowd, in rhythm)

I'm a refugee in a democracy -- there is no lunch that's free for me. Make sure I have my balanced nutrition.

(to BITTERS)

What's your name?

BITTERS

Ronald Bitters.

STEEL EYE

Well, Roland --

BITTERS

Ronald.

STEEL EYE

What's a couple of letters? -- Thanks for the pennies. --

(to crowd)

Legal tender makes me tender. Render some tender here. Money may not buy happiness -- but poverty sucks. Some march for dimes -- I sashay for quarters. -- Thanks. --

(to BITTERS)

Roland --

BITTERS

Ronald.

STEEL EYE

Daffy. If you're going to be picky about a couple of letters, then it's Daffy. You are seeing an artist in action, Daffy. Consummate.

(to crowd)

If money grew on trees, poor people wouldn't have axes. I don't want your social change, just your spare change. -- Gracias. Gracias. -- Don't give me your tired, your poor, your hoodoo masses - just

STEEL EYE breaks into rendition of last phrase of the Beatles' tune.

STEEL EYE

-- money / That's what I want. Money makes my world go around. Make it turn faster. -- Bottom of the day to you. --

STEEL EYE looks up and down the street and sees a break in the action.

STEEL EYE

Almost one o'clock. Force-fed, they scoot back to their cubicles.

STEEL EYE picks up the can, inspects the contents.

STEEL EYE

Daffy, there is an endless stream of cash on the hoof here. They're going to part with it some place, so why not here. I give them a little performance, they feel I've earned their money. It's no different than what they do over in the theatre district. Now, you. Give me that film.

BITTERS

What?

STEEL EYE

Really deaf, or just convenient deaf? Give me the film.

BITTERS

Why?

STEEL EYE

You have my picture on it. I'm copyrighted.

BITTERS

No, you're not.

STEEL EYE makes a "C" with her hand on her forehead.

STEEL EYE

If I say I am, I am. Now, give me the film or give me ten dollars.

BITTERS

Ten dollars?

STEEL EYE

Don't you bring any original conversation to the table?

Empties the can and puts it back down.

STEEL EYE

My face is my property. You took my property. So you either pay me for what you took or give me the film.

BITTERS

You're just part of the street.

STEEL EYE

Yeah?

BITTERS

I was taking a picture of that building over there --

STEEL EYE

Oh, really? That lovely anonymous heap of chrome and crap --

BITTERS

-- you just happened to be in the picture --

STEEL EYE

-- is so over-photographed --

BITTERS

-- and you were right there --

STEEL EYE

-- I just have to shoo them away --

BITTERS

-- so the picture wasn't about you --

STEEL EYE

-- the photographers get so thick around here --
And you still want to maintain that I just
"happened" to be in the picture?

BITTERS

Yes. So I don't owe you anything.

STEEL EYE

I'm going to assume by that pause that you are
too honest a man to lie very well. Just wait.

(to the crowd)

Shekels, lira, marks, pounds -- we take it all.
We're multi-denominational here. Money is the
root of all evil -- give me a chance to go to
hell. Shit. Petered out. I shouldn't have been
talking to you. Oh well, enough for a hot and a
cot.

Turns to BITTERS. In these following lines, BITTERS can barely get his responses in.

STEEL EYE

Now, like I said, I'm going to assume honesty on
your part because you really don't have enough
poker in your face to make a lie stick. So,
since I, and not the building, was the subject of

your clickery, I want the film -- or the sawbuck. I'd ask for the camera, but it's a piece of dreck. Ding! You've had enough time to consider.

BITTERS

I'm late. I have to meet --

STEEL EYE

You don't get it, do you? This is not a polite request. You stole something from me.

BITTERS

Look, I'm just here for the day.

STEEL EYE

Day tripper, in for a show and a nice place to go. Come hear a tune and then back to the cocoon.

BITTERS

Please, I have to go --

STEEL EYE

The film or a tenner -- which will it be?

BITTERS

I can't give you the film.

STEEL EYE

Yes, that film must have those deathless photos of the missus in front of the fountain, the missus in front of the peep show, the missus --

BITTERS

Five dollars.

STEEL EYE

Ten -- the going rate for street-level intellectual property.

BITTERS looks around, as if for a police officer.

STEEL EYE

Look, you're free to go if you want. I can't force you to own up to your responsibilities. But let me ask you this, Daffy, before you scoot, before you abdicate: what do you do for work in your cocoon?

BITTERS

I'm an accountant.

STEEL EYE

Hmm. And if the books don't balance -- Work with me here, Daffy.

BITTERS

I have to balance them.

STEEL EYE

Which means you're in the honesty business, right? Right?

BITTERS

Right.

STEEL EYE

If you dive away with the money, you'll never invoice in this town again -- correct?

BITTERS

Yes.

STEEL EYE

Consider yourself an honest man?

BITTERS

Yes.

STEEL EYE

So what's the problem here, Daffy? If I paint a picture, if I write a book -- let's say an accounting textbook! -- and I sell it, I get paid for the product, right?

BITTERS

Right.

STEEL EYE

This face -- the textbook of a lifetime. Some people put faces on canvas; I paste it on my bones. Just a different way to stretch it. Look at it, Daffy, look at it closely. Have you ever been this close to a streetperson before, Daffy? Sensually speaking? All senses hooked? Look. Closely.

BITTERS looks.

STEEL EYE

The work of a lifetime, right? Like a map, huh? See, your skin is smooth -- floppy wattles, to be sure, the result of too much laxness in your own life -- but mine -- like deltas, escarpments,

faults, exfoliations. A whole life inscribed here. My property.

BITTERS

Um --

STEEL EYE

A fullness, a combustionary complexity --

BITTERS

Please --

STEEL EYE

Can you truthfully say you aren't you the least bit interested?

BITTERS

Look -- !!

STEEL EYE

That's all I'm asking you to do. When you took your picture, Daffy, were you thinking, "She has the face that launched a thousand quips" and not only do I want to know about it, I will pay the price for the knowledge?

BITTERS

You don't have the right --

STEEL EYE

I'll spare you the embarrassment of lying again: No, you weren't, Daffy. You told yourself you were just taking a picture of a "street scene," a thing. But it's my face that made the whole thing interest you in the first place. Created after a lifetime of debauch and redemption, riches and rags, tastes great/less filling -- you were drawn to it, even if you won't admit it.

BITTERS

I'm leaving.

STEEL EYE

Before you do, answer me one question: Do I not bleed, Daffy?

BITTERS

Theoretically.

STEEL EYE

Two more. Do I not have -- urges, artistic and otherwise, like you?

BITTERS

Well --

STEEL EYE

Last one. Aren't you and I, really, kin under the skin?

BITTERS

Not really --

STEEL EYE

So with peace in your heart you can cut our common tether to protect some lousy film with pictures on it you'll never look at more than once, or a ten-spot you're going to waste on some street-vendor sweatshirt that will unthread in the first wash. I am insulted and made de trop by your betrayal. So, pay up now.

BITTERS

I won't.

STEEL EYE

Then reap the whirlwind. I'm calling a cop.

BITTERS

For what?

STEEL EYE

Theft. I told you -- my face is my commodity.

BITTERS

I'm leaving.

STEEL EYE picks up her can and says in a very loud but measured tone.

STEEL EYE

Help. Help. This man is trying to steal my money. Someone save me.

BITTERS

Stop this!

STEEL EYE

(in a whisper)

Only you can stop this.

(loudly)

Help. Help. Damsel in distress, right here.

BITTERS

All right! Enough. Put it down. I said five dollars. I'll pay five dollars.

STEEL EYE

Ten the minimum bid. Help.

BITTERS

Five. I only have five on me.

STEEL EYE

Oh, doing that city thang, not a lot of cash in your pockets. Sad, but wise.

STEEL EYE goes to say "Help" again to get BITTERS to respond, then stops.

STEEL EYE

Okay, five dollars. But you have to work off your debt.

BITTERS

My debt?

STEEL EYE

The rump five dollars. I'd prefer money, of course, since good will buys no food, but we can work something out. First, the fiver.

BITTERS

(hands her \$5)

I can't believe --

STEEL EYE

A man of honor. Now, Daffy, stand right here.

STEEL EYE leans the two signs against him and puts the can on the ground.

STEEL EYE

Okay, earn me fifty cents.

STEEL EYE backs off slightly, then speaks as if to a passerby.

STEEL EYE

It's a student film project. Oops, you had a chance right there. Too late.

BITTERS

I can't do this.

STEEL EYE

C'mon, begging's not hard. Just use a little style, a little of that panache lurking beneath your wobbly wattles. Just fifty cents, two measly heads of Washington. Then your debt is paid.

BITTERS

I can't.

STEEL EYE

Jeez, the quality of the help these days! All right, Daffy, I'll make it easy for you. Convince me to give you two quarters.

(takes two coins from her pocket)

Starting now.

BITTERS

I'm hungry --

STEEL EYE

I don't think so.

BITTERS

I am hungry, and I need a place to stay tonight. Won't you give me some money?

STEEL EYE

Okay, okay, bricks are made from mud. We can work with this. A performance review: Didn't convince me -- why? So what. Lots of hungry and homeless people around -- a dime for a double dozen. Go get a job -- lazy, worthless bum. No, your average turista -- like this guy I met one time -- Daffy, I think his name was -- is not moved by simple want or blatant need. They require a return on investment. So beggars need an angle, a hook, a shtick. I got mine. What's yours?

BITTERS

I don't have an angle.

STEEL EYE

This is getting to be a long afternoon. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?

BITTERS

I have money at the hotel. I'll come back --

STEEL EYE

But you're so close! C'mon, one more try. I know you have it in you, somewhere in that fatted-calf body of yours. A little force, a little -- sizzle, a little show biz.

BITTERS looks like he's concentrating mightily, then he bursts into a clownish rendition of a bit of doggerel: spastic soft shoe, e.g.

BITTERS

"I don't care if it's a nickel or a dime / I'll take the money if you'll take the time."

STEEL EYE looks at him with what looks like admiration.

STEEL EYE

Bravo, Herr Daffy. Bravo.

STEEL EYE takes out two quarters and hands them to BITTERS.

STEEL EYE

Now I know that I have spent my money well for I have been entertained by the masses. I can put the cocoon back on and off I go. Bravo.

STEEL EYE bundles up her things.

STEEL EYE

You are released. I have to go to my late afternoon location. Enjoy the picture.

BITTERS stands there confused.

STEEL EYE

What?

BITTERS

I'm sorry.

STEEL EYE

For what?

(steps close to him)

This face? This face was once where you were. It doesn't take much. It doesn't take much at all. Dismissed.

BITTERS leaves.

STEEL EYE

Oh, life in the city can be so interesting! Now he'll have quite the story to tell when he goes into the orifice on Monday. He survived the urban arcade.

(picks up her belongings)

I only hope the same can be said for all of us.

STEEL EYE leaves, carting off her materials.

Blackout