

THE CITY GENT

John Patrick Bell

ONE CONSOLATION about starting later in the day was I missed the worst of the morning traffic, the downside was I got home late, so the town multi-storey was just about empty when I'd finished at the office. My footsteps echoing across the concrete top floor, at least at this time of the evening no mad rush, no young 'Schumachers or Lewis Hamiltons' tailgating all the way down the spiral drive to the exit. As I walked across to my car I noticed an apparently well-dressed gentleman looking perplexed beside the only other car left on the top level.

As I approached he stopped. Fumbling in his pockets he called across in a very polite manner; "Look I'm terribly sorry to bother you but I've misplaced my keys somewhere? I do have another set at the office but the security man will be locking up shortly. Would it be such an imposition if you could drop me off at the corner of Station Road, my office is just around the corner and if I hurry I might just catch him." As all the traffic leaving the car park entrance entered a one way traffic flow, I had to pass Station Road not two minutes away. A reasonable enough request, who amongst us has not misled or forgotten their keys? Although the floor lighting was dim, he looked well dressed,

a somewhat elderly type gent, very well spoken, probably a visiting insurance executive from one of the big high street names judging by his accent. I nodded and smiled, replying "I'm not the fastest driver but with all the traffic gone we should make it in a few minutes". "That is so kind of you", he said as he sat in the passenger seat, "Of all the nights to forget my keys, I have a dinner engagement at eight o'clock, must get home and get dressed, one of these formal affairs, bit of a bore really"

He sat down putting his briefcase on his knee. It was the briefcase that caught my eye, something was wrong here, what I thought was a briefcase wasn't at all but a tawdry cheap school satchel. The green canvas type edged with brown plastic with a plastic carrying handle that were so common a few years ago before kids got all cool and wanted backpacks and shoulder bags with brand names. I know for I had one myself and hated it! It didn't add up! No city gent would be seen dead carrying a cheap plastic school bag but then maybe he kept it for sentimental reasons. Then as I started the car I glanced across at him still wearing my Good Samaritan smile. I noticed his shirt collar was dirty, very dirty, it hadn't been washed in weeks and the

overcoat he wore was frayed. And this man had just told me he was hurrying home to a formal dinner engagement!

Alarm bells starting ringing. This man was no insurance executive, no city gent! This man was in my car, in my space, and my life was in danger, of that I had no doubt! He had waited-how long? This was a well laid trap, to entice a solitary woman and I'd fallen for it. He may have been watching my movements for weeks - who knows, who would ever know? I thought of my daughter at home, my beautiful little girl that needed me so much and my elderly mother - how could she cope if anything happened to me, it would kill her surely. Was she not always warning me to take care; no lifts to strange people. "You're not in Connacht now daughter, there is all types in the city and always phone if you're going to be late.' If only I'd taken her advice. I realized that if he was as dangerous as I suspected, attempting to phone would only antagonize him. My heart was pounding, my mouth had gone dry, had he noticed? I must keep my nerve,

I must think, but all I could think off was my daughter, my beautiful daughter and mother patiently

waiting at home. How long have I got? Perhaps I'm over reacting, I tried to reassure myself, and perhaps he's just a harmless deluded character

wandering the streets and really believing he's an executive. But then why climb to the top of a multi-storey car park if he just wanted a two minute lift?

My car was now moving down the spiral to the exit, too many sharp turns for him to try anything. No he'd wait until we got onto the level road before making a move. He would certainly have to make his move when I got to where he was supposed to get off at the corner of Station Road and I knew for sure that this 'city gent' wouldn't be getting out at his stop. I tried to think as each concrete pillar passed as the car sped downwards towards the street below. The place was empty; few cars remained on the lower levels, no sign of anyone to call for help.

I had to remain calm for the sake of my daughter and elderly mother. If I ever wanted to see them again I must keep my composure and the pretense that I suspected nothing was amiss.

We were now on ground level. I approached the exit barrier reaching into my glove compartment to get my parking pass. One of my job perks was a paid parking pass, but at that moment with my life in danger that benefit somehow escaped me. I inserted the card into the machine slot activating the barrier, and as it

raised I purposely jerked the card letting it fall to the ground. "Oh I've dropped my card, how silly of me and I'm too close to open my door, would you be so kind," maintaining my composure and sounding more like a geriatric Miss Marples than a terrified young mother in danger of her life.

Of course with his polite act of the perfect gentleman, he had to comply. "Allow me," he uttered, undoing his seat belt and getting out of the car. The barrier was up; I put my foot down on the accelerator. As the car screeched out of the exit bay, I glanced in the rear view mirror. He stood with the card in his hand, a look of surprise on his face and, I thought, almost a look of sadness.

The city police station just past that corner of Station Road would be my first stop instead. I grabbed the 'Briefcase' which was still on my seat. Perhaps that would give them a clue to his identity. I raced up the main steps leaving my car outside, indifferent to the double yellow lines. A young Garda fetched a strong cup of tea as the desk sergeant showed me into the interview room. A plain-clothes officer who seemed very unconvinced about my ordeal joined the sergeant. After all, I wasn't harmed in any way, a bit scared and shook up perhaps. "Maybe he was just a harmless old crank, sure the city was full of auld fella's like that wanderin' about."

I could see the disbelief on their faces, "He even got out of the car

to retrieve your card Madam, wasn't he the perfect gent."

Had I misjudged? Did that explain the look of sadness on his face as I drove off?

I was becoming unsure myself was it my overactive imagination? As they said, he hadn't molested me in any way, always the gentleman

"We can hardly arrest him for his self delusions, dirty shirt and all, now can we Madam?" A patronizing grin spread across the detective's face. Then I remembered the 'briefcase'. It still sat forgotten on my lap

"Perhaps this will tell us something about this man," I said handing the detective the satchel.

"Well now what's the old boy got here then?" He said, reaching into the satchel, "Maybe a clean shirt?"

His jaw dropped as he peered inside. He withdrew the largest of carving knives, with the sharpest of polished blades, that caught and flashed the last of the evening sun across that dingy room.

They caught our bogus gent shortly afterwards thanks to my description. They knew it was him alright he still had my parking pass in his pocket. Apparently there was a European wide alert for his capture, with even Interpol involved. He had escaped from a 'secure mental institution' across the water in the UK where he was confined indefinitely for the ghastly stabbing of his wife and daughter!