

Suspicion

Background. His father had been a terrorist, or at least that was the opinion of the government. His father had volunteered, graduated training camp and on graduation ambushed a mobile patrol. When the opportunity for a truce had come, his father had joined those who refused to compromise. His father had been forced to leave the country and had never gone back.¹

The young man had grown up in a household to which a clandestine newspaper was delivered by hand. It could neither be sold openly nor put through the mail. All of this was in the past. He was now going to visit his father's land, a country where the police had been replaced by the soldiers and where the soldiers were not even enough.

The Visit. The young man did fit the profile of a terrorist. He looked like the sort who was causing trouble; he shared their religion, was the right age and both his dress and manner made him instantly suspect.

The young man and his female companion looked wrong to the hard-eyed men standing by the gate to the airplane. They did not stop him at that gate but they did signal ahead to his destination. When he landed, there was extra security waiting.

The young man took the situation in stride. He did not stand on the line of annoyed passengers being screened carefully. Instead, he sat quietly, reading a book contentedly for nearly an hour. Once the line had been processed, he rose and

brought his "baggage" (a paper shopping bag) to the Customs officers.

He engaged the officers in conversation immediately, asking if it always took so long to exit this airport. No, he was told, word had been forwarded from the place of departure that there was someone who looked suspicious on this particular flight. "Oh", he responded, "I bet that suspicious person was me. All the other passengers were dressed like regular commuters, but I just came from another country so I'm not dressed right for this climate."² The Customs Agents agreed that he was probably right and cleared him through.

In the airport itself, he approached two tall soldiers carrying automatic rifles. They politely pointed him to the proper area to catch the bus into the city.

On the way in from the airport, there were speed bumps and road blocks every so often. Finally, as it was getting dark, he reached the city. On the way to the central bus station, his bus passed a burning bus surrounded by fire equipment and soldiers and police. His driver did not offer any explanation but simply steered around the obstacles. The other passengers coming from the airport all looked at the burning bus but did not seem very excited.

By the time the bus station was reached, it was night and the rain had begun to fall steadily. There were very few people about, but a hotel sign appeared a few blocks off. The young couple set off for the hotel.

At the hotel, there was a pipe fencing that

channeled visitors towards a pair of wooden shacks outside the entrance to the large modern multistory building. At the entrance, the couple was parted, each taken to a different shack.

The young man was soon alone with a far smaller and older man who carried out a mere pretense of searching him.

Cleared, the young man waited outside and was eventually joined by his companion. She was plainly distressed from having been thoroughly searched by the female searcher.

The hotel lobby was not very crowded and the desk clerks were incensed that the young couple had no reservation. Even so, after discussion, a room was offered at a fairly steep price. The bellman then took the couple's slight luggage and escorted them into the elevator. The young man marveled out loud at the search before entry and the lack of welcome at the front desk of an obviously less than filled-to-capacity luxury hotel. The bellman explained that since there had been, to date, seven unsuccessful attempts to blow the hotel up, it stood to reason that things might not be normal.

The room was fine. The local news on TV was dominated by stories of the day's disturbances in the city and the region. Various government spokespersons explained that everything was calm. Film footage of various neighborhoods made the opposite story abundantly clear. And so, to bed.

The very next day accommodations were located at one third the price (plus breakfast included) a block away. The new place, a religious hostel, was less elegant but did not require guests to be searched upon arrival.

The activities on the first day started with a visit to a voluntary organization greatly disapproved of by the authorities.³ This was followed by a day of orientation and sightseeing.

On the second day, the young man paid a visit to a government office surrounded by sandbags and barbed wire. He talked his way past the guard at the door and requested to meet with the chief officer for the city. Again, the lack of prior arrangements delayed matters a bit. The young man's explanation of why he had come was so intriguing that the Chief Minister put aside his other appointments and invited the young man in. Tea was served. The discussion lasted for nearly an hour and was of great interest to both parties.⁴

Thereafter, the young man left the building and returned to the hostel to pick up his companion. They went shopping in the main business section of the city. They were stopped a half dozen times by soldiers or police, their bags searched and then returned each time very politely.

That evening they returned by appointment to the voluntary organization and were given instructions and the name of a contact for the next day.

On the third day, avoiding public transport as directed, the young man went to a neighborhood in the outlying suburb. The houses were neat and attractive but extremely crowded and, instead of stores, supplies were sold out of the back of trucks. A squad of soldiers in full combat gear ran warily from point to point, using any cover available even though no one was shooting at them. They were ignored by the shopping

housewives and the children at play in the street.

The young man's contact was not at home so he was asked to return later. He asked about the crouching soldiers and was told that a local sniper had badly wounded one of them the day before. In revenge, the soldiers had stopped all the local young men returning from work that evening. At seemingly random, some of the local youth had been beaten and kicked in payment for the wounded soldier. Such acts of gratuitous revenge upon the innocent usually led to still more shooting, so the soldiers were being extra careful.

The young man wandered about for a bit killing time. He happened upon an unusual sight, a double decker bus sitting alone in a field. The bus was now only a steel framework since at some previous time it had been burned clean of all fabric, glass, rubber and paper. The bus just sat there, starkly, in the field in the middle of the suburb. In the background, there was a long row of small homes with green lawns and, passing by, a bright yellow armored car, fresh from the desert and not yet repainted to match the urban landscape.

The young man could not resist. He took out his camera and slowly circled the burned out bus, taking pictures from every angle. Three quarters of the way through his circuit, he froze. Through the camera viewfinder, he had noticed something strange way off in the distance. Lowering the camera, he saw soldiers vaulting out of a machine gun nest about five hundred yards away. The soldiers were running in his direction and they were carrying their

assault rifles at ready. He decided it would be an ideal time to stand very still.

Moments later, a group of eight soldiers stood in a circle around the young man. Since each was pointing his rifle at the young man, an overhead photo would have resembled a cart wheel with the rifles as spokes and the young man as the hub. It was a small consolation but he reflected that if any one of the soldiers was trigger happy, not only would the young man die but one or more of the soldiers would also be hit as the rounds passed through him.

The soldiers were upset over the fact that the young man was taking pictures of their sandbagged emplacement. He said his focus had been on the bus. They insisted that taking any photos in that war-torn city was forbidden. He argued that if that was so, he should have been warned by the authorities at the airport on arrival.

He was asked his identity and then to prove his identity with passport or other papers. He stated that his passport was back at the religious hostel and, if necessary, they could go and check. All he did have in his pocket was a free ticket to a tour of the catacombs, offered in return for his being willing to listen to a sales pitch on an offered time share for an apartment in the City of Rome.

It is not clear if it was the mention of the religious hostel or else the absurdity of presenting a stale dated offer of a free tour of the catacombs that caused the soldiers to relax, but they did.⁵ At that point, the young man asked about the yellow armored car and when it would reappear because it would make a really great picture against

the green lawn and burned out bus. The soldiers decided that anyone innocent enough to ask that question had to be harmless although perhaps a bit demented. They went away. An hour later, the young man had met his contact person and was having another cup of tea. The information he received was sad but of value.

On the fourth day, the young man and his companion took a bus to the border. At the crossing point, the bus parked next to a machine gun nest with the gun placed to sweep the bus at window height. A red-faced man with white hair got on, carrying a submachine gun that he, almost by reflex, swung to point at anyone he addressed. He wore a nearly black high-necked tunic and a peaked cap. On each of the gold buttons of his uniform, there was embossed a crown. He went through the bus, glaring

with suspicion at each passenger, in turn, and checking each passport with great care. Finally, without another word, he turned and left the bus.

The bus crossed the street and arrived at the second check point. Another red-faced man with white hair boarded the bus, the man was either a twin, or at least a close relation to the first border guard. This man, however, did not carry a gun in his hand. His uniform was nearly identical, but there was one difference. The gold buttons spilling down the front of his tunic were each imprinted with a harp and not a crown. He looked briefly at the young man's passport, smiled a big grin and said "A hundred thousand welcomes to Ireland, Mr. Croghan. Is it your family you'll be visiting?"⁶

Notes

1. His IRA activities qualified him to be considered a terrorist by the British government, but he never actually killed anyone. It was very brave of him to stand against the British Empire and to ambush truckloads of troops and seize their weapons. He thought of himself as a soldier and he did vote against partition, but, finally, he lost interest in the IRA when in later years, they began planting bombs and hurting civilians. By the 1960's, the IRA had pretty much become irrelevant in both Ireland and New York.

It took an act of brutal response by the Northern Irish government to demands for Catholic civil rights to resurrect the IRA in the 1970's. At first, British troops were welcomed as peacekeepers by Catholics terrified of sectarian violence. By 1972, the tendency of the British troops to tilt unfairly towards the Protestant cause had renewed a civil war that had been quiet for half a century.

2. The year was 1972, and my wife Kathleen and I were going to a Social Work Conference in Holland. I had been asked by the Social Service Employees Union to report on the troubles in Belfast. First, Kathy and I flew to Rome and Florence since she was Italian on her father's side, then to England. In England, I learned the cheapest way to fly to Ireland was by a commuter flight to Belfast. The other passengers were mostly dour-looking men in charcoal gray suits and carrying umbrellas. Kathy and I stood out a mile in our bright summer outfits from Rome. I could tell that none of those men standing at the door of the airplane liked our looks.
3. The voluntary organization was the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association run by a courageous and non-violent English volunteer. He sent me to Ballymurphy housing estate to interview a mother whose son had been killed, by accident, by the British Army, while on the way home from a dance.
4. The government office was the Belfast main Welfare Office and since I was then Chairperson of the 8000 member Caseworker Chapter of the SSEU, it was no great surprise that the top official from Income Maintenance for Northern Ireland was willing to spend an hour comparing notes with me.
5. It was while I was at Ballymurphy that I was surrounded by nervous soldiers who relaxed when I mentioned staying at the Presbyterian Hostel.
6. It was.

