

To Catch a Thief

It is 5 November. Today the real estate agent tells us that if all goes to plan with the sale of the house, we will need to be out by 27 November. If we move we will rent Mick and Jeannine Reid's 3-bedroom flat in central Katoomba, and put most of our stuff in storage until we're ready to buy.

This means that having already put 3000 books in Kennards Storage, I now have to reduce even more, and must conceptualise a portable library of no more than 250 books to keep me interested for an indeterminate period.

And then the phone rings a second time. It's my father who wants to know what time I'll be at the shop because he feels uneasy about someone he met last Thursday and wants to talk about it. It is a stranger who contacted him out of the blue about Bible Studies, then attempted to discuss his bank accounts. I tell him I'll be at the shop at 10.30.

It's going to rain today, it's one of those days where the till expects to be disappointed. However, I make a respectable total between 10.30-2.30 behind the counter, after which nothing at all happens. No Luke, no Dave McMahan, no Lisa, not the guy who calls me Bro, nobody... and yes – it rains. Chris has broken a shelf, all the Sport books are on the counter with a note saying, 'Would you...?' I've got nothing else to do today, I didn't bring my laptop so - sure Chris, I'll tidy. But I want to read a couple of chapters about Brett Whiteley from his bio first.

My father phones to check I'm at the shop and says he'll be there soon. He rides up on his old-person's scooter, walks pensively into the shop, sits on the high chair and tells me about this stranger.

His name is Allan John Quinn, my father hands me a slip of paper in his own handwriting, which reads 11 Argowan Road Schofield 2762, phone: 9627 7260.

The story goes that after phoning my father for Bible studies, my father agreed to see him. So Quinn called last Thursday and told him that he had spent seven years in jail. He showed my father a wad of press clippings. While in prison he didn't have much to read except a Bible, which he read and finished up more impressed than he expected. In fact, he has

decided to live for Christ and thinks my father should give him Bible studies. (That's odd, I note – my father is a former schoolteacher, not a Minister of Religion. Plus, I am always suspicious of new relationships with large age differentials.)

And so they chatted last Thursday in my father's retirement village flatette until Quinn suggested they go someplace for a coffee. Off they went to Westfield's and chatted about the Bible some more. Then on the way back, there was a very different conversation.

Quinn said there was just one thing he really felt he ought to put right – before the Lord – as it were. He owed \$19,000 to a woman, which was a terrible burden to his conscience. My father ignored the bait and stared out the car window. It pained Quinn to have such a thing between him and Jesus, and if only he could clear the matter up, then everything would be straight. My father didn't respond.

As they drove down William Street, Quinn almost became emotional as he poured out his predicament. When they pulled up outside the Seventh-day Adventist Retirement Village, Quinn dropped the money subject and talked instead about friendship, 'We're friends now,' he insisted, 'friends!' My father said, 'yes'. I mean, why not? My Dad hasn't got a lot to do all day.

Allan John Quinn is what my father is telling me about in the Bookshop as I sell three Feists to a customer. I am thinking of shelf space around F in Science Fiction. Feist books are never skinny, I reckon that gives us another four inches. And I'll do something about that after my father leaves.

'I think I'll phone him up,' I reply, seeking the slip of paper with the phone number beside the calculator on the desk.

'Would you? That would relieve me of a burden,' my father replies, as if I am doing him a big favour. (It's only a phone call, mate.) 'I can't understand how he got my name?' Throughout this saga, this question is never answered.

Two hours later, while I'm tidying Sport, my father phones.

'Have you called him yet?'

'I've tried twice, no response. I'll see you after work.'

I call around 5.30 and report I've tried the number six times, no answer – it went to an answering machine.

'Did you leave your details on it?'

'No, he doesn't know that I exist.'

'Good.'

I confirm that I'll be present next time my father sees Quinn, which is Thursday 1.00. I suggest that I vanish into the toilet as soon as he knocks and not come out until the conversation has settled down – maybe on the subject of money. This will surprise Quinn, he'll say something like, 'I didn't know anyone else was here'. Then I'll say 'What were we all talking about?' and join the conversation with a view to questioning him as to why he is so interested in my father's assets. *Secret Detective Lowell on the job, suh!*

Next morning I search the Net, and look what comes up!:

15 April 2005 - Helpful Conman Has Jail Term Cut: A confessed conman who preyed on the elderly in three states will walk from prison next week as a reward for helping catch a Queensland serial killer. Allan John Quinn, 53, pretended to be a bank official so he could steal money from the accounts of the victims. In a case quoted by an appeal court judge yesterday, Quinn swapped a passbook he was carrying with one owned by a 92-year old man. Over two days Quinn withdrew more than \$18,000 from the man's account before a suspicious bank teller stopped an attempt to take another \$4400. Quinn obtained more than \$60,000 in Victoria, \$300,000 in NSW, plus \$100,000 from various fraudulent schemes...the decision means Quinn is eligible to leave prison within the next week, but will potentially have 14 months to serve if he reoffends'.

Robbie wants me to contact the Police immediately; I want to think about it for 10 minutes because I'm not confident. Think, think, think, yep - she's right – I'll give it a shot. So I drive to Hornsby Police, park in a 15 minute zone, and ask to speak to someone 'about a crime which is about to be committed'. The lady behind the counter looks startled, as if I might be about to do something crazy, she glances at my red shoulder bag and asks what this is all about. I tell her in a sentence something about my father. She seems slightly relieved and asks me to take a seat.

I sit beside a mother and daughter and read the Sandra McGrath *Brett Whiteley* paperback but I'm up-and-down every 15 minutes checking the car. Who knows how long this is going to take? After 45 minutes the two women on the bench are now taken into a side room by a uniformed Police Officer, and from the little I overhear it sounds like a domestic dispute.

Suddenly the door bursts open and this really big smiling guy, Det Snr Constable Steve Hungerford invites me to come on through. He takes me past a hallway with Award Certificates on display along the wall, a water dispenser and lots of doors. *Men's* – that's the door I'm looking for right now, after drinking that Red Bull. He invites me into a small interrogation room where I explain that although nothing has happened, a crime is about to be committed. I expect him to reply, 'If no crime has been committed, I've got better things to do with my time'. But he doesn't say anything like that, he says he'll decide whether or not this is the case and he studies the Internet entry I pass him, hears me out and I get the feeling he loathes people like Quinn. He mutters phrases like, 'preying on old people' and 'let's put this guy behind bars *where he belongs*'. I can't thank him enough.

Although I describe everything that I reckon happened, there are certain questions I can't properly answer, so I tell him I could go fetch my father who lives only five minutes away. 'Absolutely,' says the detective, 'I want to talk to him'. I phone my father – 'The Police?' he says in a quavering voice. 'Yes Dad, the Police, and I'm coming round to get you now'. Well, he's not sure about the Police. He insists no crime has been committed. Nevertheless he agrees for me to fetch him. And now there are two of us in the room with Det Hungerford. I try to say as little as possible, because I don't want to feed my father lines.

The detective asks my father whether Quinn opened any drawers or looked around his flat. My father says no. I interject that the flat is so small that if Quinn went to the toilet he'd be walking through the bedroom where some valuable are kept. 'No,' my father replies, 'He didn't go to the toilet'.

'Did you go to the kitchen and get him something to drink?' says the detective. 'No,' replies my father, 'we went to Westfield's for a drink'.

'What was the name of the café?'

'I can't recall.'

‘This guy, what did he look like?’

‘Well he was big...’, says my father.

‘Hair colour?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘Age?’

‘Maybe my son’s age...’.

‘Which is?’

‘Mid-50s’.

‘What kind of car did he drive?’

‘Don’t know – maybe something late model Japanese.’

‘What colour was it?’

‘Don’t know.’

Det Hungerford picks up a road map and checks out Argowan Road Schofield and notes it doesn’t appear to be a built-up area. ‘The address is fake, you can count on it’, he slaps the book shut.

Having heard us out, Det Hungerford pauses for thought, flicks through his notes then looks at us candidly and says, ‘I think we’ll pick this bloke up. When did you say he was coming around?’

‘1.00 Thursday,’ my father replies. ‘But I really must stress, no crime has been committed’.

Det Hungerford is unmoved, ‘We’ll get a couple of plain clothes officers around there around 12.30.’

Now I get jumpy, ‘And what will happen then? Will he come to the door? Do you want me to hide in the toilet? What do I do?’

I don't think that he much cares what I do. How do I tape it? How can I photograph it? Should I write it up in the Past Tense or the Present Continuous? 'And how do I work the Bookplate into the story?' I must have said that aloud, because he asks me to repeat what I just said.

'The Bookplate,' I explain – 'I work there on Sundays'.

Big grin: 'The secondhand bookshop! I go there sometimes!' I now want to know what he reads, but there isn't time to ask – Sci-Fi, I bet.

So I drop my father outside his place and drive home. The mobile rings, I pull over. It's my father who says Quinn was at his door when he arrived home 10 minutes ago but my father dismissed him saying 'Thursday was the agreed day' and he is tired right now. I phone Det Snr Constable Hungerford to tell him this. He seems appreciative of the call, also surprised.

Three hours later my father is back on the phone saying Quinn just phoned wanting to know if everything is all right, and are they still friends? My father said yes, but explained to Quinn that when he got home he needed a sleep and was so tired that he can't remember anything about the house call. Quinn then asked about my father's situation with credit cards, to which my father said he didn't use them. Bank accounts? My father explained that he was not rich, 'But what about the units,' said Quinn, 'You've got three of those'.

'How did he know about the units?' I burst.

'I probably told him,' my father replies. 'But what I can't understand is how did he know to contact me?'

'That's what we aim to find out, Dad, on Thursday'.

My cunning plan hasn't changed much since I first thought of it, it is to arrive at 12.30, hide in the toilet when Quinn knocks, come out when the conversation has settled down, then say 'Oh you're my father's new friend - let me snap your photograph' – do it early, because the more he gets to know me, the easier it becomes to say no to a snap. And the Police? Well, I'm not sure - they'll probably arrest him when he leaves the premises. That's the plan, I reckon.

Three days later, on Thursday – around 10.00 - I phone Hornsby Police and am assigned to Det Snr Constable Sally Johnston who knows all

about the case and will be at my father's place at 12.30. 'I'll be there too!' I reply.

Then Det Snr Constable Steve Hungerford phones to tell me he has other business to attend to this morning and that Det Snr Constable Sally Johnston will take care of the matter. I tell him I just spoke with Sally only five minutes ago, so that's all right. But he hangs onto the conversation, clearly he can't stand people who rip off oldies. 'What a bastard!' he says leaving me with the impression that anyone who wants to cheat oldies would do themselves a favour if they gave this cop a very wide berth.

Around 11.30 I say goodbye to Robbie and drive to St Ives to buy two pens. The phone rings around 11.50 while I'm in the newsagency, it's my father who says, 'He's coming earlier than expected, he's on his way now'. 'How long do you reckon before he arrives?' '10-15 minutes'. I dial Hornsby Police, wrong number. I dial 9476 9799: it just rings and rings and rings. I redial and this time I get through to Sally. 'We'll be there immediately!' And they are.

Meanwhile I take longer than normal to drive from St Ives to Hornsby, there is a traffic incident at Hornsby at the major intersection near the Bridge, so I have plenty of time to think about what to do when I get to the house.

Hiding in the toilet - a must for every amateur detective. Next, how to confront Quinn? Maybe I'll have to do a Citizen's Arrest - which I don't know anything about. And what if he tries to run off? I know - I'll close the glass doors to the whole complex which would delay his escape for long enough for the Police to grab him. But how can I close those outside doors if I'm hiding in the inside toilet? A plan, a plan, a cunning plan - what is it? The Policeman waves me through the Hornsby traffic, I drive into William Street and arrive at the house. I park behind a 4-wheel drive maroon Mitsubishi, I write the numberplate Y66 272 in my diary - well you never know, it might be a 'clue'.

As I walk up the steps I see one of the elderly women standing on the upper verandah watching the door of my father's unit. Knock knock, my father opens up to a roomful of four people. Kevin Willow - the manager of the flats - is in the room laughing uproariously and proclaiming in a big voice, 'Wow, the Police!' That's no way to catch Quinn by surprise, even I know that.

Sally – *we meet at last* – she shakes my hand, and introduces me to Det Snr Constable Steve Houston who is a very solidly built severe looking guy. I'd be scared of him, if he didn't like me. Meanwhile Kevin is generating heaps of sound, 'I didn't think we'd have the Police here!'

'Do you think you could say "The Police" any louder Kevin? Let's go mate,' I tug his arm. 'Let's go, go', and he leaves with me, chuckling of course. Walking towards the front of the building Kevin is still talking loudly, 'They weren't even in uniform!' (Oh please be quiet Kevin, I am about to turn into my secret identity of detective and spy.) He goes upstairs to his unit, no doubt peering over the verandah because of what is about to happen next.

I walk out the front of the building, checking out the glass door that I might have to dramatically close to hold Quinn up if he does a runner. I'm writing down all numberplates for no reason, and hanging around the front trying not to look conspicuous. Here comes a car, could this be Quinn? Nope, it drives straight past. Another car - *Detective Lowell* on the case, looking casual – whistling in fact – could this be the car? Nope, it picks up speed and whizzes past. After about 10 of these it occurs to me that I am one possibly one of the least conspicuous people in Hornsby. I am carrying a bright red shoulder bag depicting a colourful picture of Jesus with a bleeding heart. I wear red/blue glasses, plus I am walking up and down the front of the retirement village, whistling. And most people don't do that.

Another car – too new – blasts past.

I know what I'll do, Secret Detective Lowell will hide in the foliage, as in the movies. This is most uncomfortable, so I try to think of yet another way of hanging out the front, looking casual.

I walk across to the car park, sit on a stack of bricks, put the bag out of sight and write in my diary whatever happens next, which is, 'A gold-coloured car drives past cautiously – it looks that this might be the car, but it drives past like all the others. After a few minutes it drives back, pulls up behind mine. And a guy in a singlet gets out'. Being convinced this is surely Allan John Quinn, I stop writing.

He takes ages before he gets out of the car. Eventually he opens backdoor and spends ages organising something. He then closes that door, walks up the steps, pushes open the glass door of the retirement village and heads towards my father's unit. I follow from afar, maybe as much as a minute

and a half behind. Certain that he is inside I walk up to my father's door, push it open and find that Quinn has already been introduced to Detectives Sally Johnston and Steve Houston. In fact, they're straight into the biz to hand:

***Det Steven Houston:** How did you know to contact Rowland Tarling?*

Quinn: Oh, through some guys I know.

Who are they?

They go to church over Wahroonga somewhere.

Which church is that?

The Seventh-day Adventist one.

***Dad:** This is my son, Lowell.*

(shakes hands) Allan Quinn.

***Lowell:** Hello Allan*

Quinn: (to the Police) And his son, he is an author, so I wanted to show him my book.

***Houston:** What's your background Allan?*

Why? What's the problem?

Well we're a bit concerned with you just turning up out of the blue here.

I phoned him, I said, I said, I said, do you want me to come and talk to you? Last time I saw him I said, 'Do you want to see me and talk to me?' and he said yeah, so there's no problem.

Have you got some ID on you mate?

Yeah. I've done nothing wrong, I don't have to talk to you.

Well, we think different.

Johnston: *We need to check who you are first Allan, see - we deal with people like you all the time.*

What do you mean 'people like me'?

Well we've read your rough sheet. You do this quite a bit, don't you?

Yeah, but what do you mean?

Come and speak to elderly people in nursing homes and churches and places like that?

Yes, but I've done nothing here.

Houston: *Is that the address you gave this fella? (pointing at my Dad).*

You've got my name and address, telephone number, everything.

Lowell: *Your address is not in a built-up area on the map though?*

What's that?

If you look on a map - where you live is in a green area, it doesn't look like a housing area? Do you live in an industrial zone?

No, residential. I just wanted to get some information about you for a book I'm doing.

How did you come across my father's name?

Someone told me he's got a son who's a successful author and that sort of thing...

What guy were you talking to?

Some guys over coffee.

What sort of guys were these?

Houston: *What's their names?*

I can't remember names. I just wanted to get some tips for my book, that's why I brought the book here today.

* (The book has a title with the word *Predator* in it and seems like a 'jail book', I am quite curious about it.)

What's that then? Says Det Houston pointing to the book and CD-Rom Quinn holds in his hand.

A book I wrote.

Really?

Yeah, I'm an author.

Johnston: *You can understand the concerns we have about you, can't you? Coming to see old people and then you start questioning about Visa accounts.*

I didn't do that.

You didn't do that over the phone?

No.

No?

Not at all.

Lowell: *Yes you did. You asked my father about his credit cards and bank accounts.*

No I didn't.

Then how do I know that detail?

A hundred per cent I didn't ask him about Visa accounts, credit cards or anything.

Houston: *(looming above Quinn) All right – we're placing you under arrest for intent to repeat an indictable offence, do you understand that? Anything you say or do may later be used as evidence, do you understand that Allan?*

But I've done nothing wrong sir.

Johnston: *For intent to repeat an indictable offence you've been charged...*

Houston: *You've been seeing this old fella over here with the intent to commit another fraud offence, that's what we're alleging, okay?*

But I ain't done nothing wrong.

You have a talk to the Courts about that, okay?

(raised voices)

You're also circulated on our system for being suspect for other matters mate.

What matters?

We'll explain it back at the Police Station. Have you got your car keys there, we'll have a look through your car as well.

Det Steve Houston takes him out, Sally Johnston turns to us and says, 'We're going to take him back to the Police Station now, I'll give you a ring on your mobile when we get there and have a chat to you then'.

Come on Allan, says Steve, nodding at me and saying, 'We'll give you a call.'

Sally Johnston took down my statement. She told me Quinn had appeared on the *Australia's Most Wanted* TV show then she talked about attending a wedding in Bermagui (where we used to live) and I liked the way she wrote the Statement.

Once he'd got his man, Steve Houston was totally genial. Plus I saw Steve Hungerford again, he came in from another job just as we were leaving and asked how things panned out.

As for my father, I said goodbye to him in a room where Det Houston was trying to take his Statement. Sally warned me they were going to take ages, and if I needed to get away, they would drive my father home.

I ask Steve Houston whether my father told him that he was an Interrogator in World War 2. 'Yes, he has actually.' And about his high

school, St Walter St John's?' 'Er...yes.' And has he sung any Gilbert & Sullivan?' Steve starts to laugh.

As for Quinn, right up to the last my father was worried that he had done an injustice to someone who might have genuinely wanted to turn to Jesus and had never committed an actual crime. 'What if he really *did* want Bible studies?' said my father who phoned me later in the afternoon.

The final outcome: Quinn will be released today; if he contacts my father again, he will be imprisoned.

Back home, my wife Robbie says, 'Last week you were complaining there wasn't any action in your bookshop stories!'

'This isn't a story about the bookshop.'

'It is,' she replies, 'if you tie it in at the end'.

'What? By saying: *I passed the Bookplate and thought I should call in and tell this story to Chris, because he's there on Thursdays...*'.

'Yes,' says Robbie, 'That'll do'.

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