

ONE BORN EVERY MINUTE

He didn't look like a con artist.

He was tall and gangly, in t-shirt and shorts, carrying a backpack – the basic student getup. He was walking by as I pulled into my laneway and got out of my car. He hesitated, then approached with seeming reluctance. "I wonder if you can help me."

His story went like this. He'd dropped his girlfriend off nearby and had locked his keys in his car. He had to go to a professor's house for a gathering that evening, but needed his car to get there and didn't want to go dressed as he was. That rang true because he certainly wasn't dressed in go-to-the-professor's-and-make-a-good impression clothes.

So, he said, he had to catch a bus to the west end of town to his mother's house where he could get a second set of keys and a change of clothes, and then return by bus, retrieve his car, and get to the prof's house by eight o'clock. His problem was he didn't have bus fare – not a penny. But, I asked, don't students ride free on city buses? Oh yes, he said. But you need your student card, and he'd left his wallet at his apartment. If he had to go all the way there – a twenty minute walk – and then take the bus to the other end of town, he'd never get back in time. And besides, he probably wouldn't be able to get into his apartment because he didn't have a key and his roommate might not be there.

"Why not get some money from your girlfriend?" I asked. He had an answer for that too. He'd just dropped her off at the corner. There are a lot of

student houses in our neighborhood – some would say too many – and he didn't notice which one she'd gone into. When I came along he was actually walking the street peering into windows trying to spot her – or so he said.

His story was so convoluted that I asked, half jokingly, "You're not making this up, are you?" He seemed genuinely taken aback. And he mentioned, twice, that his mother was a professor at Queen's as if to say "Look at my bloodlines! I cannot tell a lie!"

Recounting this now, it's clear that certain elements of his story didn't quite add up. Why, for example, if he was just dropping his girlfriend off, had he gotten out of his car at all? – let alone locked it with his keys inside? And where was the car anyway? I didn't see any parked on the street at that moment. But I didn't question him about that, assuming, I guess, that it was somewhere around the corner. Some detective I'd make. And, in fact, at the time, I didn't really doubt him. Combined with his slightly sheepish, extremely polite manner, it was all just ridiculous and yes, human enough, to be true. After all, who hasn't lost their keys, or their wallet, invariably at the most inopportune time?

So I gave him what change I had in my pocket – about three dollars – and he was ready to be on his way. But now, fully involved in his plight, I became concerned that this might not be enough to cover two bus fares, and went into the house and got him another toonie. At this point my wife appeared and asked what was going on. Normally a more generous soul than I,

she was immediately suspicious, and whispered "Don't give him that." But I did.

Thanking me effusively, he promised to return with a five dollar bill later that evening. I said there was no rush, wished him luck and urged him on his way so he wouldn't be late for his professor's soiree. I only had a slight flicker of, not even doubt, but puzzlement when I saw that he strolled away across the park at a leisurely pace, and not in the direction of the nearest bus stop.

You can guess the end of the story. I wasn't surprised when he didn't return that night, but, foolish me, I fully expected him to show up in the next day or two, bearing thanks and apologies. And five dollars. It never happened.

Checking the Queen's web site, I couldn't find his mother, the supposed professor. He'd given me a name but there was no sign of her. But the other prof he'd named was actually listed. It occurred to me to phone him and ask if, in fact, he'd held a get together that evening, and if he had a student fitting the description of my culprit. But he would surely ask why I was calling, and I would have felt foolish explaining how "He stole five dollars from me!" Of course, it wasn't just the loss of five dollars that bothered me. It was the fact that I'd believed him. That I'd been played for a fool. A sucker.

And I was left wondering. Did he really concoct his elaborate scenario just to scam someone (well, me) out of *bus fare*? Was this a one-off thing, or does he go around town systematically using this bus fare story on gullible strangers? Sort of a low rent

version of the Nigerian Prince scam? Pretty hard to believe.

Or maybe his story was actually true and he just couldn't be bothered to return the money. There's long been an ongoing discussion in this town about the sense of entitlement and thoughtless behaviour of students, who sometimes seem to have precious little consideration for their neighbours or their community, particularly when they're in large groups coming home from the bar at two o'clock in the morning. Maybe this was an example of that. Maybe he just didn't give a damn.

Live and learn my mother would have said, but what, precisely, was I to learn from this? "People can't be trusted?" "Students are jerks?" "A fool and his money are soon parted?" "There's a sucker born every minute?" And this was my minute. This odd little incident seemed too slight to support any weighty life lesson. But it stayed in my mind.

A few days later, going into the LCBO, I encountered two young guys trying to raise money for supplies "for orphans in Africa." Or so they said. "Are you Queen's students?" I asked. They were, and I found myself saying "So, is the money really going to Africa? Or are you guys going to pocket it and buy beer?" They sort of laughed at my sort of joke, and assured me with almost painful earnestness that every penny would go to this obviously worthy cause. So I gave them a paltry smattering of small coins – less than a dollar – for which they thanked me with evident sincerity.

Coming out, I passed them again. They didn't seem to be having much luck and they gave me a cheery "Thanks again". And walking to my car, lugging a boxful of wine worth well over \$100, I thought – I really should go back and at least give them a couple of loonies. Or five dollars.

But I didn't.

Maybe it was a hangover from the other encounter. Maybe it had it soured me on panhandlers in general – or student panhandlers in particular. I wasn't going to be taken for a sucker again. Not me. But I drove off feeling a bit cheap.

Of course, we all encounter situations like this – well, not exactly like this – all the time. People sitting huddled on a cold, dirty sidewalk with a hat in front of them. Maybe a scruffy sign saying "Spare change?" Unless we have a firm policy of, say, never giving to panhandlers, ever, these situations require a tiny little moral calculation each time – a balancing act of inner voices between "Don't be cheap and greedy, they need it more than I do." on the one hand with "Don't be a sucker. It's not my problem and they could earn an honest day's living if they wanted to." on the other.

So what do we do? Cross the street to avoid them? Simply ignore them as if they're not there and hurry past? I've never really had what you could call a policy on this. Sometimes I'll pause, drop a coin or two, perhaps say "Good luck" and move on. More often, like many people, I'll just avert my eyes and quickly pass by.

Generally, I prefer panhandlers who sing or play for their supper. The London underground has all sorts of them and on our visits there I willingly toss 50p or so into the hat. There's a guy like that on Ontario Street and I'll often drop some change there too. But they're not really panhandlers. They're performers. They're offering us something in return for our coins.

But it seems unreasonable to expect everyone to be able to knock off a swinging version of Autumn Leaves on the sax. Maybe just being cold and broke and alone should be enough.

Another evening. Some time after these incidents. Late fall now. A raw chill in the air. I was again going into the LCBO on Barrack St.

"Spare some change?"

He was standing there in the dark and cold – not a student this time but an older, slightly grizzled guy, much more likely to have attended the School of Hard Knocks than Queen's. He was in no way aggressive or threatening so I stopped. But fishing in my pocket I found I had no change at all – not a nickel. Slightly embarrassed, I apologized.

"No problem," he said. "Have a good night."

A few minutes later I came out lugging a heavy box of wine. (Is this starting to sound familiar? Am I drinking too much wine? Maybe that's another column.)

I was sort of hoping he wouldn't still be there. But he was. "Have a nice evening," he said as I passed. I wrestled the wine into the trunk and got into the car, hesitated ...

"Oh, what the hell."

I got out and went back.

"Have you got any change?" Me speaking.

He looked confused. I was asking *him* for change?
Wasn't that *his* line?

"I'll make you a deal," I said.

I took out a ten from my wallet.

"Give me five back and it's yours."

His puzzlement gave way to a slight smile. He dug out a handful of change and started handing me quarters and dimes. After a few I said "That's fine."
"No, no," he said. "I've got it." And he insisted on counting out five dollars exactly. Maybe he liked the idea that it wasn't like panhandling any more. It was a business transaction.

I gave him the ten.

We exchanged well wishes – a tiny little human interaction – and I went on my way, our transaction completed. But if it had been a transaction, what had been exchanged? He'd got the five bucks and I'd got – what exactly? Nothing tangible but ... something.

And, sure, there's a sucker born every minute – and call me one if you like – but for some reason I felt good about it.

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