



Losing it all ... *... at gunpoint*

I watched as the light approached from out of the rain-soaked night, then within seconds the motorbike had stopped directly in front of us. “OK”, I thought, “*Must be dropping someone off.*” Then as the pillion passenger began to alight, I saw the gun! The assailant took a pot-shot at the nightguard, beside me. My brain went into overdrive. This was no joke!

Robbery, of any description, is never a nice thing for the victim, but robbery at gunpoint brings a whole new dimension to the table. I was caught by chance at the wrong time and in the wrong place, doing something, which in retrospect, and from experience of living in Nairobi, I knew I should never do.

It was a dark and rainy evening and I had walked down the long drive to the main road, accompanied by the night guard (or *askari* as known locally). We stood side by side, waiting for my car which was being returned after repair. In the murky conditions, the driver was having difficulty finding the place. I handed my phone to the guard so he could talk directly to the driver in the local language, *Kiswahili*.

We were both wearing jackets to ward off the rain and the cold. I was carrying a large umbrella and had a backpack slung over my left shoulder. The helmeted man with the gun grabbed my phone from the guard, then motioned to me to give him my bag.

Not a word was spoken. I put up some resistance by trying to strike the gunman with the umbrella. He grabbed my bag then shot two more bullets, one which grazed the arm of the guard and the other which just missed me. With that, he was gone. From start to finish this whole robbery-with-violence event had taken less than one minute!

The nightguard, who had dived into hiding behind a bush, got to his feet as I surveyed the tangled mess of fabric and metal that was once my umbrella. For a few seconds we stared at each other in disbelief. The first thought I suppose was one of relief, that we were both still alive. Then he began examining his jacket sleeve - which like the umbrella, was a bit of a tattered mess - to see if in fact the bullet had gone into his arm. But no, apart from needing a new jacket, he was okay. We were in shock but would both live to see another day.

The guard lost his phone and a wallet; I parted company with phone, passport and more importantly, as it turned out, my laptop, along with the small daypack and a few other small items. At the time I was relieved that the gunman had not gone for my jacket, which held my wallet with cash and cards and my keys for both house and car. Perhaps my rather weak resistance with the umbrella scared him enough to get back on the motorbike and make his getaway, while the going for him was good.

Looking back to that night, I often asked myself whether I could have done anything differently to prevent - what seemed in the instant it happened - the inevitable. I consider myself reasonably intelligent, but not incredibly streetwise. If I had grasped the moment more quickly, I could have lunged at the gunman, as he dismounted, or knocked the gun out of his hand when I handed him my backpack. Then, would that have brought the driver of the bike into play, or was he just the driver and not an accomplice? Some might say I did more than I should have by trying to resist a gunman, with an umbrella. If I had realised what I was about to lose, I might have shown even more defiance, but then I may have been shot! The aggressor in these situations always has the secret weapon of surprise on his side, and that can be hard to combat and come to terms with, in the space of a minute or two.

So it was not until the next morning, as I sat in the phone shop, waiting for a replacement simcard, that I suddenly realised the enormity of my loss: the laptop. The hardware itself was not important; it was the information that it held which was so critical. The hard disk contained the draft material for two almost completed books: I guessed around 200,000 words in total! The thought of this loss hit me abruptly ... and well below the belt. I was devastated! At the desk, while obtaining the new sim, I could hardly put sentences together, because of the revelation which had come into my mind a few minutes before. Days, weeks, months of my time had gone into developing those manuscripts; now they were gone, and even worse, that laptop would be wiped of its information and sold on the black-market, for a pittance!

Everything would have been fine if it wasn't for the fact, that as well as not saving to *The Cloud*, I had contrived to lose my back-up for all this information just a couple of days before the robbery. For a long time, I had been saving the writing to a remote memory device: miniscule in size and attached to my keyring. But this is where Murphy's law came into operation, for as chance would have it, I had removed this tiny gadget from the keyring a couple of days before, and to compound matters, then managed to lose it at a local shopping mall. It was an almost unbelievable coincidence of incidents, which left me bereft and utterly dismayed.

At the time, the loss was devastating, but now with a couple of years hindsight, I can truthfully say there was one very positive outcome, in that it forced me to re-write much of the original material. The end result was that the second version turned out to be significantly better than the first. A big plus was that much of the re-write coincided with the corona virus pandemic, thus the writing provided a really good focus during a lengthy period of semi-isolation, without which I may have gone stark raving mad! In fact, corona gave me a conduit to developing a new folio website, where I was able to store all the material, in logical sequence, adding images and making everything look much more appealing than it had ever been before.

So in retrospect, should I thank my two-wheeled attacker for the service he gave in the cause of better writing?

Well perhaps I would not go that far. He was a desperate thug who used all his guile to steal from me and I would wish to see him behind bars for his blatant crime and the distress it caused. Unfortunately, that would be extremely unlikely to happen in Kenya, where the police are to-a-large-extent ineffective, and even worse, quite often working in tandem with the criminals.

One regret which still lingers, is that part of the writing – about 70,000 words in fact – was a draft for a work of fiction, which I had put a lot of time into developing, and was really quite pleased with. It was a story set not so far into the future, but just enough to witness disastrous impacts from climate change. Chapters oscillated between four global arenas, including India, Kenya, England and a terrorist group whose base was unknown. For this, I really worked quite intensely to develop the appropriate dialogue, and though I can remember some of the lines, to reproduce it all, word-for-word, seems now, an almost impossible task.

In one way or another I have thwarted the gunman, by using his invasive acts to improve on what he took away from me. So taking that thought through to its logical conclusion, perhaps if there is time, I should return to that work of fiction to complete the story and provide a full release from the memory of that moment of terror, and subsequent anguish, caused by an armed attacker on a dark and dismal night.

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