

No Place To Park

by Alexander McCall Smith

It started as a challenge, the unforeseen outcome of an absurd conversation at a writers' festival in Western Australia. There was the usual panel on stage, and an audience made up of the sort of people who frequent crime panels—predominantly women with a sprinkling of men, highly educated, highly literate, and highly imaginative. They were a group bound together by a fascination with the gory details of behaviours in which they themselves would never engage. These people would never commit murder, not in their wildest dreams. Nor would they mix with people who did such things, no matter how fascinating they might find their company on the page. But they loved to read about murder, about the sudden, violent termination of human life, and of how it was done.

The panel was discussing realism in crime fiction. Two practitioners of the art, writers of well-received *Policières*, had been pitted against the literary critic of a local paper. The critic, who read very little of such fiction expressed the view that there was a surfeit of realistic gore in the contemporary mystery.

'Look at the average crime novel these days,' he pointed out, stabbing at the air with an accusing finger. 'Look at the body count. Look at the compulsory autopsy scenes. Some actually start with the autopsy, would you believe it! The autopsy room, so familiar, so comforting! Organs are extracted and weighed, wounds examined for angle-of-entry, and it's all so ... well, it's all so graphic.' He paused. From the audience came a brief outbreak of laughter. It could not be graphic enough for them.

The critic warmed to his theme. 'But there are crimes other than murder, aren't there? There's fraud and theft and extortion. There's tax evasion, for heaven's sake! And yet all we read about in books of this genre is murder. Murder, murder, murder.' He paused, then looked accusingly at the two authors beside him. 'Why not write about more mundane offences? Why not write about things that actually happen? Murder's very rare, you know. Not that one would think so to read your books.'

One of the authors grinned at the audience. 'Weak stomach,' he said, gesturing to the critic. 'Can't take it.'

The audience laughed. They had no difficulty taking it.

‘Seriously, though,’ said the critic. ‘How about it? How about a realistic crime novel dealing with something day-to-day, some commonplace low-level offence.’

‘Such as?’ asked one of the authors.

The critic waved a hand in the air. ‘Oh, anything,’ he said lightly. ‘Parking violations, perhaps. Those happen all the time.’

Everybody joined in the laughter, even the critic. ‘Go on,’ he said to the authors. ‘Why don’t one of you people do something like that? Give up murder. Get real. Start a new genre.’

One of the authors, George Harris, a successful crime writer from Perth, stared at him. He had been laughing, but now he looked thoughtful.

George shared a small bungalow with his girlfriend, Frizzie, who ran a tie-and-dye tee-shirt store in Fremantle. They had lived together for five years now, in a narrow house near Cottesloe Beach. George liked to surf and Cottesloe was a good place for it, as the Indian Ocean broke directly on the broad expanse of sand there, hindered only by the tiny sliver of Rocknest Island.

Whenever he went surfing nowadays, thoughts of what might be in the water beneath him were always on his mind, nagging fears, repressed but still there, somewhere below the surface. Eight months earlier somebody whom he knew, although only vaguely, had been taken by a great white within a stone’s throw of the edge of the beach. The incident had brought home to him the fact that surfing in Australia had its perils—one was in their habitat, after all—and it had also given him an idea for his next book. The plot would involve rivalry amongst surfers—something having to do with a lover or a motorbike—which would lead to one surfer planning to dispose of another. And what better way to do so than to fake a shark attack? The killing strike would be administered from below the waves by a large knife which the murderer had specially made in his garage. The knife would have a number of serrations along the edge, each carefully honed to the shape of a shark’s tooth, in order to leave just the right wounds for the coroner to come to the inevitable conclusion—death by shark attack. It would be carried out at a time when nobody else was about and certainly nobody would see the diver down below, with his knife glinting in the water like a silver fish. It was a good plot, even if it would not make comfortable reading for surfers, or comfortable writing, for that matter, for a crime novelist who also happened to be a surfer.

He had barely started this new novel, this surfing story, and was tempted to give it up. He had once before persisted with a book his heart was not in, and

he had wasted eight months in the gestation of something that did not work and that had to be abandoned. Determined not to make the same mistake again, he had been open to new ideas when the critic at the panel had made his comments. The suggestion that a crime novel should concern itself with something as minor as illegal parking had been made in jest, of course, but when one thought about it, why not? It was such an outrageously silly idea that it could well end up making its mark in a genre of fiction that was becoming increasingly crowded. It was different, and people wanted something different. There were so many police procedural, all dealing with hard-bitten homicide squads on the mean streets. Here was something that was at the completely opposite end of the spectrum, and it would register with people. They needed a smile, and he would give it to them. It would be gentle, whimsical stuff, devoid of violence and mayhem.

He could set it in Western Australia, on his own doorstep, and it could be full of local color.

As he warmed to the idea, he began to imagine a plot. There would be tension within the parking department. There would be rivalry as to who managed to give motorists the most tickets. There would be a budding love affair between two parking officers which would be frowned upon by the police superintendent. The lovers would have to meet in secret, at the busy end of the street, perhaps, where motorists were always parking in the wrong places and getting ticketed.

George smiled at the thought of it. But there was a serious matter to consider—he would have to get the world of parking officers right. He would have to go to the traffic department at his local police headquarters and get permission to tag along for a day or two with one of the officers. He should have no difficulties there. The Perth police had always cooperated with him and he, in turn, had always painted a flattering picture of them. In George's books, the Perth police always outsmarted visiting detectives from Sydney or Melbourne. They liked that.

He told his Frizzie about his new plot. She was the only person who he discussed his stories with before they were published. She was a surfer, like him, and they would sometimes lie on their boards, out beyond the waves, talking about the ins and outs of whatever book he was working on at the time. It was a comfortable relationship. As they chatted, the water lapping against their boards, George hoped that there was nothing down below, listening, so to speak.

The police department arranged for him to go out with a parking officer on a Friday. Fridays were good days, they explained to him, as farmers often came into town then and parked illegally.

‘They forget that they’re in a city,’ joked the officer he was with. ‘They think they’re still out in the bush and can park anywhere! We sort them out for sure!’

George noted the vindictive edge to his remark. Farmers deserved sympathy, he thought, with their struggles against drought and pests and low agricultural prices. But he did not say anything; he just filed the comment away for future use. He looked at the officer. He was a small man with a rather defeated look about him. Obviously parking duty was not for the high flier. High fliers went to homicide, he imagined.

They spent the morning going up and down a busy shopping street. The officer took note of several violations, explaining each of them to him in great detail.

‘This driver is a serious offender,’ the officer said, pointing to a battered Holden. ‘Tax disc is out-of-date. He hasn’t even bothered to put money in the machine, and . . .’ The ‘and’ was stressed, as the final word in a litany of sins might be given extra weight. ‘And he’s way over the line. Look at that! Creating a hazard for other drivers. Shameless!’

‘What are you going to do?’ asked George, staring at the offending car. It was a homely vehicle, much-loved, he suspected. On the back seat was a child’s toy, a teddy bear.

‘I’m going to book him for the lot,’ said the officer, taking out his notebook and beginning to write down the list of violations.

After the officer finished his paperwork, they moved off, on foot, down a side street. It was a narrow access lane with prominently displayed signs stating that parking was forbidden. Yet there was a car parked halfway down the street.

‘Look at that,’ said the officer. ‘Blatant. And they’re sitting in the vehicle too. Bold as brass.’

The two men in the car, deep in what appeared to be a heated conversation, had not seen them and started in surprise when the officer tapped smartly on the half-lowered window on the driver’s side.

‘Do you realise that you’re illegally parked, sir?’ said the officer firmly. ‘Would you show me your driver’s license, please.’

The driver opened his mouth to say something, but no sound came out. He looked shocked.

‘Come on, sir,’ said the officer. ‘Don’t hold me up.’

Things happened rather quickly after that. The driver reached forward, started the engine, and thrust the car into gear. Then, with a roar, he pulled away. George reeled back in surprise, while the officer fumbled for his radio.

It was then that they saw the body under the car, lying with arms stretched out, an ugly red-black stain on the front of the shirt. It was the sort of body which crime writers like to describe in graphic detail. Eyes open but unseeing. Fingers clenched. Hair tousled. Feet at an odd angle. And so on.

The officer had managed to get the registration number of the car, which helped the police make a rapid arrest. The driver and his companion, it emerged, were well-known members of the Perth criminal underworld. One of them, the passenger, was in fact the brother of somebody from George and Frizzie's surfing circle. He sometimes helped Frizzie take her board off the car if George was not around, and George had seen him exchange a few casual words with her from time to time on the beach. Perth was like that. It was a friendly city, intimate. People could get to know one another.

George was called as a witness in the murder trial. There was not much that he could say, of course, other than that he had seen the two men at the scene of the crime. This was enough to worry the passengers surfer brother, however, who came to George and asked him whether he would be kind enough not to give evidence.

'But I have to,' said George. 'It's my civic duty. I have to give evidence. I'm sorry it's your brother.'

'In that case, mate,' said the surfer, 'watch your back. Something unpleasant could happen to you, you know, if you do my brother in. Just remember that.'

George contemplated going to the police to report that rather unsubtle attempt at intimidation, but decided against it. It would be difficult to prove that a threat had been made, as there were no witnesses to the occurrence. He knew all about that particular problem, having used it once as a plot device in a novel. It was strange, he thought, how truth sometimes emulated fiction.

Frizzie was uncomfortable. She urged him to either not give evidence, or to be a bit vague about the identification.

He said to her, 'Anyone would think that you wanted that guy to get off just because his brother helps you with your surfboard. What am I to think? That you're having an affair with him or something?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' she said.

Two weeks before the trial was due to take place, he went surfing. It was early in the morning, the time he liked best, when there was virtually nobody around at Cottesloe Beach other than the occasional dog owner taking a dog for a run along the sand. Such beauty, he thought. The sky so wide. The sea. The sand. Such beauty in this country. All around one.

He paddled out and rode one or two waves in. The surf was quite high and the water was warmer than usual. He spotted another surfer, some way off, then lost sight of him. It was very quiet. George paddled his board back out, looked up at the perfect pale blue sky, and sighed with contentment.

Then he looked down. His heart gave a lurch as he caught a glimpse of something in the water. He peered into the depths. It was easy to mistake shadows or fronds of seaweed for something they were not. One had to control one's imagination. He searched the water. A flash of metal, from down below it seemed. Impossible, he thought. Impossible. I told nobody.

And he thought, as he slipped into the water, that life was not supposed to be like this, that it was absurd that parking of all things should have this result. Absurd and unlikely. But now there was only water, and regret.