

Ardwell's Leaf



Ardwell's Leaf
A Mystery By
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ARDWELL'S LEAF

THE CARDS

CHAPTER 1 - THE RANSOM NOTE

A leaf from a tree in New York flutters to the ground settling on a slick of water. A man on his way to work slips on the leaf. He stumbles, losing his umbrella. The umbrella, caught by a gust of wind, blows into traffic. A taxi swerves to avoid the umbrella hitting a courier on his way to the UN. Unconscious, he is rushed to the hospital. His packages containing a time sensitive document do not get delivered, resulting in the collapse of an agreement affecting the lives of hundreds of people a continent away. And so it can be said that the falling leaf in New York has had a profound and unexpected effect on the matters of mice and men thousands of miles away.

I mention this in passing to illustrate how little I could have surmised the chain of events that would be set in motion through the simple act of disposing of my morning cup of coffee.

It was a bright and sunny Monday morning in June. The year was 2010, the temperature was in the low 70's (22C) accompanied by a light breeze and cloudless skies. Perfect weather for my day off with a tee time for 10 am at my favourite golf course. Skipping breakfast at home I headed out, grabbing a bite at a local restaurant on the way to my game.

Completing my meal, I sipped the last of my coffee, grabbed the cup and, passing the disposal bin, pushed the lid back to drop my cup in. Much to my chagrin, the bin was full and a flurry of papers and cups spilled out onto the floor including the following crumpled note:

**"Youve 3 days, no longer! All
25,000. Put it all into sootcase
and leave sootcase outside 1050
Fredonia Drive exactly 3 pm
thersday. Dont be late!"**

Clearly someone was in trouble, or at least was going to be in trouble, and I was holding the proof. My quandary was whether or not it could wait. After all, the ransom wasn't due until 3 days hence whereas my tee time was just 30 minutes away. That notwithstanding, they say that the probability of solving a crime diminishes exponentially as the crime grows older (or something to that effect). So there I was, note in one hand and golf beckoning on the other.

I put my cup in the bin, replaced the fallen papers (except of course the ransom note), stood up and, grasping the note, slowly walked out to my car. I still hadn't made up my mind as to which option to take, hesitating in front of my automobile, and apparently partly in the roadway, as a passing car was want to remind me with a harsh toot on the horn, accompanied by a, not terribly polite, hand gesture. Jolted from my daydream I decided the best course of

action would be to turn the note over to the police and be shed of the whole thing, possibly still making my tee time.

And that dear reader is how I ended up in a Mississauga police station on an otherwise perfect Monday morning, thinking, In my naivety, that I could just drop the note off and be gone.

The entrance to the Mississauga police station (technically the Peel Police) opened into a cavernous room with a counter bisecting the space, with the unwashed public in the entry way and a few police and clerical staff safely ensconced on the far side. At least the other half that was visible. Doorways and walkways disappeared into oblivion behind the staff. Our half, the unwashed public's, had seating along one wall to my right and a corridor that ended at a doorway along the other, to my left. All persons entering were confronted by the counter and the scowling officials guarding it, with no option but to approach. It was not a welcoming place. Aside from the austere architecture, I couldn't help but behold the personnel confronting me. They were all severe in the extreme, sizing me up as if I were a criminal of the most dire nature. I was sufficiently intimidated that I was turning to leave when one of the staff snidely growled "You here for some reason, or just lost?"

Both the reception and the tone irritated me and so I turned and responded "I thought that someone here might help me, but, by the looks of you lot, I expect not." And turned to leave. Mistake number two (the first being coming here at all).

“Just stop right there! You’d better explain yourself and it better be good.”

“This is just getting better and better” I mumbled, rolling my eyes. He caught it, not just the look, but also the innuendo, and was not pleased. About this time the door at the end of the corridor to my left opened and two police officers in full uniform and hands on the butts of their guns walked towards me. 'Well, there goes the golf game' I thought.

The two officers approached to within three feet and, gesturing towards the door, said “Please come with us sir.” Not unfriendly, but not encouraging comment or resistance, so I did as asked. I was led into a stark room with a table and two chairs where I was told to have a seat. The two officers then left, closing the door. I sat, waited about five minutes and decided to try the door. It was unlocked so I cracked it open and took a peek around. I was in a room in the middle of a short corridor with no obvious clues as to what lay at either end. I decided to wait a little longer and returned to my chair.

About five minutes later a plainclothes and one uniformed police entered, bringing an extra chair; then sat down facing me.

“So what’s your game?” From the plainclothes.

“No introductions? No what’s your name, I’m blah, blah, blah?” I responded.

“You’re in a police station. You enter here of your own free will, make sarcastic comments, turn to leave and think we’ll just ignore it? It doesn’t work that way. Our job is tough enough without having to deal with crackpots and crazies. So why don’t you just tell us what this is all about?” Again from the plainclothes. “And, for the record; I’m detective Spade and this is officer Harmon.” He said gesturing to the uniform, who, up until now had seemed to blend into the background. I guessed he’d be the good cop and Spade would be the bad. So that made me the ugly. “May we know your name please?” He continued with just a hint of sarcasm.

“The name’s Ardwell, George Ardwell, and I came in to drop off what appears to be a ransom note that I found in a restaurant earlier this morning. I was leaving because you don’t present a very welcoming ambience to walk-ins and I have a golf game that I don’t want to miss. If I hurry maybe I can still make my game, so why don’t I just leave you with the note and I’ll be on my way.” I replied pushing the note across the table.

“Listen, George. We’re serious people here and we don’t take lightly to having our chain yanked, so settle in. We are going to have ourselves a discussion.”

“Harmon. Bring in the recorder will you?”

“Yes sir.” Said Harmon leaving.

I sat staring at Spade, he returning it in silence until Harmon arrived with the recorder. Spade turned it on and announced the

participants in the room, the date and the fact that he was questioning a walk-in.

“So tell us George, what is on your mind?”

“As I mentioned earlier, while I was at my local eatery, I stumbled across a note that has all the earmarks of being a ransom note and felt that, as a responsible citizen, I should turn it over to the police. This, is that note.” I said, pushing the note further across the table towards Spade.

Ignoring both the note and the fact that I had been leaving the police station without dropping off the note he proceeded with “And where did you find this note?”

“I was disposing of my coffee cup at a local Tim Hortons when it fell out of the bin onto the floor.”

“Why did you bother to pick it up? Most people would have ignored it and left it for the staff to clean up.”

“Well I’m not one of those persons. I would like to think I was brought up with at least a modicum of manners.”

“So why not just return it to the bin?”

“Have you seen what it says? The way it’s written? Are you suggesting the responsible thing here would be to ignore it and get on with my day, throwing it back in the bin?”

“What makes you believe it’s real? It could be some wannabe author’s scribbles, it could be part of someone’s game. Who knows? In any event it was discarded so, even if it was real, the author presumably had second thoughts.”

“I didn’t think that was my call to make. That’s why I brought it down here.”

“Did it occur to you that picking it up, transporting it here and handling the note could be construed as tampering with evidence?”

“No.”

“Well it could. You have contaminated the note with your prints and DNA. You have removed it from the scene and on top of that disturbed the scene. The logical thing to do would have been to call a police officer and let him or her take care of it. I’m wondering why you didn’t do that?”

“Well, police work is not my business and none of that occurred to me. I was thinking that time was of the essence and so brought it here. And just so you know, calling the police, in my experience, can frequently be a lengthy process and so I decided to shorten that time by bringing the evidence to you. After all, the note was in a trash bin in a public restaurant. What could possibly be gleaned from that?”

“Actually, plenty. You’re sure you didn’t write this note? That this isn’t part of some elaborate scheme of yours?”

“And what possible reason could I have for doing such a thing?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking you.”

“You can’t be serious?”

“I told you, we’re serious people here, I never joke. So tell me, what was the plan.”

“This is ridiculous. You have the note. Do what you will with it. I’m leaving.”

“Not until I say so.”

“Are you charging me?”

“No, not yet.”

“Then let me leave or let me call my lawyer. I’m done.”

“No need to get upset.” Chimed in Harmon. “We are just trying to get to the bottom of this and you’re the only witness. We need your help.” I was right. Harmon was the good cop.

“Well you know everything I know about this and you have the note. There is nothing else I can add and I have a life to get on with. So, get me my lawyer or let me go.”

Spade this time. “OK, OK. We’re just having a bit of fun. This is what you get for being a smart ass with police officers. There’s nothing we can do about this. No crime has been committed and there’s no evidence that a crime will be committed. Next time, turn

the note over to the establishment and let them call the police. You can go.” And with that he stood up, crumpled the note and tossed it in the waste paper basket.

I certainly wasn't about to argue and so took him up on his suggestion. I was out of there in a flash and on my way. It was now noon, the golf game was dead and I needed a drink.

After leaving the cop shop I decided to head east to the Valley Bar and Grill. There was nothing particularly special about the Valley but the clientele were pleasant, the food was great and the prices even better. It was a family owned pub, the owner being a pleasant fellow with a hands on approach and a family that followed suit. Their technique in restauranting kept out the riff raff and resulted in a crowd that was generally comfortable together, like a large and loose knit extended family.

It was one pm by the time I arrived and the lunch crowd was just leaving, with the afternoon crowd (who start arriving about 3 pm) yet to enter, so I was not expecting to see any of the usual suspects.

I was, however, pleasantly surprised to see Joycelyn. Joycelyn worked as a salesperson in the food industry. She wasn't just good at her job she was outstanding. Her biggest flaw was a lack of contentment. Having an unrequited thirst for new experiences she became easily bored and was constantly striving for more, always on the lookout for an alternate career when new opportunities failed to present themselves in her current endeavour. A woman with energy to spare she successfully juggled a busy work schedule,

home life and extensive social activities, all with aplomb. She was an attractive woman of forty, married with two children, who had an always vibrant personality and a penchant to be curious about all and sundry, so if I could have chosen a friend I wanted to see at that moment it would have been her. She and I got along well and Joycelyn was a fan of conspiracy theories. I was willing to bet that my morning experience would pique her interest.

I slipped into the seat beside her with a “top of the afternoon to you”, ordered a beer and chicken wings and set about explaining my morning encounter. I was right. Joycelyn was drawn in, wanting more.

“So, are we going to be there for the drop?” She asked.

“What drop?”

“The ransom drop of course.”

“I’m not sure there will even be a drop. Probably just a waste of time.”

“Are you kidding, what have we got to lose? The police won’t be there, they threw the note out, so we won’t be interfering, and if the bandits show up we can follow them, or at least take pictures, or a video.”

“Are you serious?”

“Of course. We know the time and the place. We know what to look for so we won’t confuse it with the rest of the garbage (Thursday being garbage collection day in that area).”

I hesitated. I certainly didn’t want a run in with the police again. However, they *had* thrown the note out, so that was unlikely. “OK. You’re on!” I said, picking up on the mood. We set a time to catch up on Thursday to reconnoitre and establish a surveillance plan. Actually, that’s a bit of an exaggeration, we were simply going to park down the street from the drop and see what might transpire.

By this time the rest of the usual suspects started drifting in. There was Jimmy, he and I had known each other for the better part of four years. An Irishman with a successful business in the construction trade and at a point in his career where he could delegate, needing only to go in half a day to make sure the jobs were on track and to coddle the clients. He represented the focus of our little group. Other than business, his social activities were pretty much centred around darts and golf. Not for lack of time to pursue other venues, just a lack of interest. Don't get me wrong, he had a versatile mind that took in everything, along with a prodigious memory, so he was a deep well of information on most subjects including movies, of which it seemed he must have viewed every movie ever made. It's just when it came to activities he wanted to pursue it was darts (first) and golf (second and last). He had a wife, Wilma, with two older children who had, by the time I knew them, flown the coop. Wilma was an excellent dart player as well and very much part of the group. She was not with Jimmy today.

Then there was Brendon. He was the quintessential sales person working for a large computer firm. Since he only travelled occasionally, maybe twice a year to Texas and Kentucky, he was around most of the time. He would join us at the pub from four to six a few times a week. Being a long time friend of Jimmy's he was another core member of the group and an excellent dart player. His particular claim to fame were his Halloween parties, which were legend among those in the know. His wife Mimi was an Irish woman of considerable conviction and a kindergarten school teacher who kept Brendon on a short leash (which was just fine by Brendon). Although she was an excellent dart player she limited her trips to the pub to Fridays and weekends and so was not with Brendon this day.

Frank and Jordan drifted in about fifteen minutes later.

Frank, a retired banker and expert in fiduciary ethics, was divorced with two grown sons and had taken early retirement. His interests were trivia, golf and recently, darts. Over the years Frank and I had spent many an hour on the golf course together. He and I had met years earlier, before knowing Jimmy or Brendon, playing trivia in one of the local pubs, now extinct. After its demise we moved on to the Valley where we ingratiated ourselves into the current crowd. Frank was out most weekdays. He was the silent type but when he spoke he usually had something worthwhile to say.

Jordan was a retired British mining engineer in his fifties. He was a friend who I had met through a bridge crowd and the most recent

inductee to the group. In spite of being retired, he was probably the most active of the group maintaining a variety of volunteer activities, restaurant tours, wine tastings, and bridge nights, not to mention his love of opera, attending as many live events as he could find within a five hundred mile radius. His wife, not a dart player, was not a participant within this group.

In addition, there was Jabber and his wife Yasmine as well as Dan, all long time friends of Jimmy and Jordan, but none were here this day.

So these were the usual suspects, all dart aficionados who showed up this Monday afternoon. My morning's experience quickly became the main topic of conversation with the general consensus being we should leave it alone. No possible good could come of it. Jimmy said we'd be tempting the devil, Brendon said that it would pique our interest and following that road could only lead to trouble, Frank felt that following illicit financial transactions would surely get us mired in personalities best left to those in law enforcement and Jordan suggested that if anyone showed up it could only be an enticement to Pandora's box. And, everyone concurred that if the police were involved, then we might get arrested for interference and if the bandits saw us, who knew what they might do, and finally, if it was a no show we would have wasted precious time. It was hard to argue with their conclusions, other than the waste of time, considering that our time here was predictable enough that any change could hardly be deemed a waste.

While the group might not have agreed with our decision to stake out the drop, they were, nonetheless, keen to discuss the ins and outs of the actual drop. First off, the location of the drop was curious. This was an upper middle class residential area of Mississauga. An area that would have little, if any, vehicular traffic at three of an afternoon in the middle of the week, but *was* likely to sport any number of pedestrians, especially pre-schoolers and their moms. Furthermore the drop spot was on a dead-end street with but a single entrance and exit. It just didn't seem a very sharp choice for a ransom drop.

Coincidentally, Joycelyn lived no more than a couple of blocks away from the drop site and I about four or five more, so we were all familiar with the general area. Everyone agreed that we could be almost a full block away and still have an excellent view of the event, should it unfold. So it was accepted that we would stake out the drop and agreed that we would all meet again about five pm on Thursday, after the drop, to discuss the outcome of our venture.

The leaf was fluttering towards the ground!

CHAPTER 2 - THE DROP

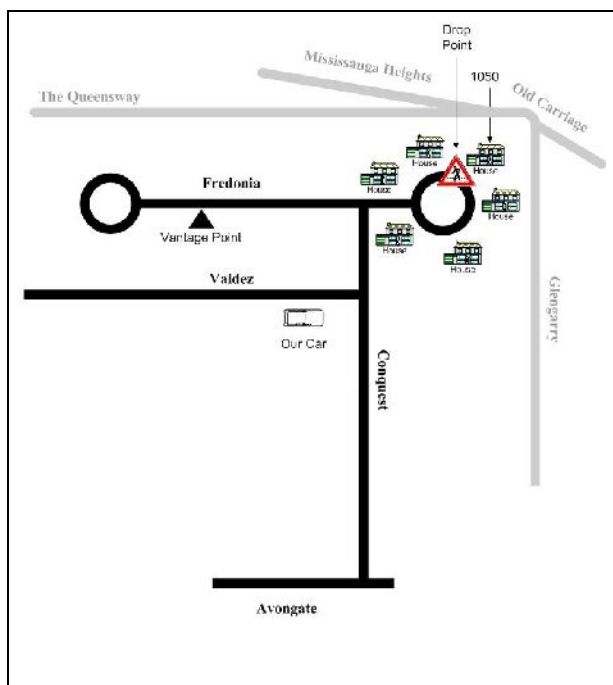
Originally from Montreal I became enmeshed in a case of my uncle's some ten or so years ago. At it's conclusion my uncle gifted me a very sizeable sum of money plus a large two bedroom condo in Mississauga, for which he was covering the maintenance fees and taxes. Realistically, downtown Toronto or even a return to Montreal would have been a more exciting choice for a single man in his fifties but the offer of free living was too good to pass up so I settled in Mississauga, a large suburb just west of Toronto. This also explains how I ended up on Dundas St. near Cedarglen, where I had been living for the past five years. It was adjacent to a bedroom community of middle-aged families in single family dwellings (where Joycelyn lived) but was still convenient to the main arteries in and out of Mississauga and not too distant from the City Centre and Square One, Mississauga's main shopping and cultural complex. It was also only about five or six kilometres from the lake (Lake Ontario), the heart of night life for this area of the city. That being said, my local haunts were a couple of pubs, the Valley Bar and Grill about 15 minutes drive east of my condo off Dundas and another in a mall within walking distance to the west. The accursed police station was a five minute drive west of my condo.

And so it was that Thursday morning dawned bleak, cool and sporting a persistent drizzle that had the potential to chill to the bone. Not an auspicious start to the day of our great adventure. By noon I had taken care of business for the day and set about dressing

for the stakeout. The unexpected weather threw a spanner into the works. Any thought of sitting in a comfortable car with snacks, background music and light conversation was out. In this weather the car would steam up in five minutes without the defrost on and a running car on the side of the road in a quiet residential neighbourhood would draw too much attention. That meant lurking about the streets in the cold and damp. No snacks, no background music and I was beginning to wonder about the light conversation.

Before proceeding let me explain the layout for the drop so you

can better understand what we did. Fredonia runs east/west and is a dead end street with courts, or circles, at each end. The only entrance is via Conquest which runs perpendicular to and into Fredonia a house or so shy of the western end of the court. The drop house was the last house in the western circle on the far side of Fredonia, away from Conquest



(see diagram). Two houses up from Fredonia, Valdez runs only east from Conquest, parallel to Fredonia. We decided to park our car on Valdez, allowing us to keep an inconspicuous eye on the only entrance to, and exit from, Fredonia. The route to both the drop and the exit from the drop point had to pass Valdez.

Parking the car a little after 2:45 on Thursday Joycelyn and I got out to walk down to Fredonia. By 2:50 (about the time the drizzle stopped) we were a little ways down Conquest scanning for whatever action might occur. Two minutes before 3:00 a car passed us turning right onto Fredonia and so we picked up our pace to observe the vehicle as it entered Fredonia. It was a brown Bentley and it turned right towards the western circle on Fredonia, emerging a minute later speeding past us heading north up Conquest.

Entering Fredonia we glanced back towards the drop zone and .. BEHOLD .. a suitcase was there! And it certainly had not been there on our earlier drive by. Heading east, away from the drop sight, we kept a cautious eye on the suitcase.

“All right!” Joycelyn whispered loudly. “We’re on to something. What shall we do? We can’t just stand here and we can’t move closer but I don’t want us to be too far away when they come to pick up the suitcase, in case we can follow them.”

“OK.” I responded. “Let’s keep walking to the end of the street then turn and walk back, slowly.” Which is what we did. Although not for long, as 2 minutes later a couple of young men in hoodies appeared from between the houses on the south of Fredonia, grabbed the suitcase and ran back between the houses from whence they had come. Almost immediately four undercover police rushed out from the houses across the street (the north side) with guns drawn and yelling for the bandits to halt. Unfortunately

the police were too slow and the bandits too fast, vanishing between the adjacent houses like ghosts, the suitcase with them.

Joycelyn and I stopped where we were, watching the proceedings. After all, it would be unusual that any people already on the street wouldn't stop and observe the goings on. We were far enough away from the action that we were not likely to be questioned so we just held our ground. Over the next 30 minutes police cars came and went, the undercovers and uniforms scouring the area for the criminals until they finally gave up, apparently empty handed.

Once the action died down Joycelyn grabbed my arm and turned to me saying "I don't know if you saw it or not but I'm sure that when they grabbed the suitcase something fell out. I don't think the police saw it because their view was obstructed by one of the garbage bins. Whatever it is, is in among the garbage and I'm pretty sure the police didn't pick it up. We should check it out." And so we approached the drop area to retrieve any lost spoils in as inconspicuous a manner as possible.

We didn't see any money but we did find were ten baseball cards caught between a couple of garbage bags. Easy to miss if you weren't looking for something right there. They didn't seem like refuse being encased in plastic wrap, almost as if they came out of the package that morning. I pocketed them as discretely as possible and we returned to the car, perplexed.

Clearly the police were lying in wait, so either detective Spade had not really thrown the note away or the police were on to the

ransom from another source. Additionally, the bandits obviously expected the police as they had a well planned escape that foiled the cops. But the baseball cards; that didn't scan. Maybe they *were* just garbage, although Joycelyn swore that they were right where she saw the contents fall.

By the time we reached the car we were still on an adrenaline rush. Joycelyn; "That was great! We witnessed a real live crime - in person, and even recovered evidence. What a rush! Gimmy five." I did. I have to admit I was also feeling the rush. Getting into the car we sat, absorbing the moment. Joycelyn punched my arm, commenting "That was insane, ... who would have thought ... we were there, actually there!" I had to agree, although there was something tugging at the back of my mind. I'm not sure what it was, but something was clawing away back there. Images of a missing persons case from the 1990's kept nagging at me.

It was now about four thirty so I started the car and we headed out for the Valley to meet 'the gang' and bring them up to date. About five minutes away I turned to Joycelyn and asked "Should we mention the cards?" Until then, this was an item that was hanging, not discussed, between us.

Uncharacteristically, Joycelyn hesitated for about 30 seconds before responding. "Ummm Good question. I suppose so. The more minds on this the better. You think?"

"Well, I agree, the more minds the better, however, is it wise to spread the word that we are in possession of the cards. If they're

related to the crime, and that is highly likely, we could be putting ourselves at risk. The criminal element might want them back and the police would certainly want them as evidence.”

“Wasn’t thinking of that. OK. Let’s leave that bit out. It’ll be our dirty little secret.” She concluded just as we were arriving at the Valley.

Jordan, Jimmy, Brendon, Frank, Wilma and Mimi were all waiting at the table near the dart boards, facing us with expectant looks.

Walking towards them Joycelyn broke the silence “What an adventure!” She exclaimed. “They dropped the suitcase, the bandits appeared from behind the houses to collect it, the police stormed out from across the street to arrest them and they escaped between the houses never to be seen again. It was a rush! And we were right there. We saw the whole thing!”

“Well, give us the blow by blow why don’t you.” This from Jimmy.

“It was cold and rainy as you know so Joycelyn and I decided to pass on staking out the spot from a car and monitored it on foot instead. The first thing we see is this Bentley come down the street onto Fredonia, drive round the circle and head back up Conquest. When we rounded the corner we saw a suitcase among the refuse and it hadn’t been there before. So it had to be the drop. We then moved further down the street away from the drop and not more than a minute or so later these two guys in hoodies, come out from between the buildings and grabbed the suitcase. Just then the

police rushed out from across the street, guns drawn, yelling for them halt, to get on the ground, however, the two of them had slipped away between the buildings before the cops could stop them.”

Joycelyn picked it up from there “We figure they were expecting the cops because the getaway went perfectly. At least a dozen cops and four or five cars showed up after but no one was caught. It was insane. Of course there was no way to follow them as they disappeared behind the houses.”

“What’s behind the houses?” Asked Frank.

“That’s what was so clever” I responded. “Everyone must have thought the ransomers were a bit slow with a drop on a dead-end street and only one exit. However, the Queensway runs behind the houses and curves north as Glengarry with two other streets that run off diagonally from that point. If a car was waiting on the Queensway it could take any one of four routes away from the scene. If more than one car was waiting they could all go in different directions and anyone chasing wouldn’t know which to follow.”

“Seems a rather elaborate and professional scheme for a mere \$25,000. By the way, you said Fredonia right? Isn’t that where one of the boys lived that disappeared off Marco Island back in the 1990’s?” Commented Jimmy.

That was it! That's what had been nagging at me. The coincidence of the ransom on the same street that one of the missing boys lived on. "Now that you mention it Jimmy, yes you're right. If I remember it was a fellow by the name of Omar Shearer."

"O my God, You're right. I remember that. The brother of one of the boys that disappeared with Omar was a school mate of mine. That would have been about 1994 give or take a year." Chimed in Joycelyn.

"What happened?" Asked Jordan. A reasonable question given that Jordan hadn't been around at the time. While it was true that I had not either, I remember it coming up in a conversation with Joycelyn a number of years ago. Joycelyn picked up the thread and related the story to Jordan and the rest of us.

It seems that in early November of 1994 Omar Shearer, his lifelong friend David Madott and a third friend, Kent Munro, went to Florida for a four day scuba diving trip. The three boys were from Mississauga and had a fourth friend (also from Mississauga) who was staying at his parents condo on Marco Island off the coast of Florida, not too far from Naples. On the morning of November 4th the four friends headed out to a dive site to explore an old wreck off the coast. When the boys did not return as expected the coast guard was called in and a search was initiated. Thirty six hours into the search Jeffrey Wandich (the fourth friend with the condo) was found clinging to a communication buoy roughly 3.5 miles from the wreck they went to explore.

Jeffrey explained that when they arrived at the dive site they split into two pairs and proceeded down to the wreck. Unfortunately one of the fellows had a problem with his gear and he and his partner, Omar, signalled that they were returning to the boat. When Jeffrey and his partner came up from their exploration they found that the boat had capsized and, together, decided that they would swim to one of the communications buoys where they expected they would be found. On the way, Jeffrey was separated from the other three. After trying, unsuccessfully, to locate his friends Jeffrey struck out on his own to the tower where he was eventually rescued.

Unfortunately, after one of the most extensive searches ever mounted on the gulf, no trace of the other three boys (men actually, as they were all about 25 years old) was ever found, even though various items from the sunken boat were recovered. This is a mystery that persists to this day and the families of the three missing lads are still hopeful that someday they will find answers to this tragedy.

It is noteworthy, for those who might be thinking that these were wild youths out to disappear or who got caught in some illegal activity, that all of these gentlemen were ideal citizens. Polite, hard working, holding down responsible jobs and absolutely not inclined to fringe activities. If you had a son, one of these boys was what you would hope for, concluded Joycelyn.

Well, that started a whole new conversation, which Joycelyn and I removed ourselves from. The less conversation the better lest we let something about the cards slip. And so we sat enjoying our drinks and listening to the speculation and opinions of the assembled group. Part way through this Joycelyn leaned over and quietly said to me “I think I know who owns the car that made the drop.”

“You do!?”

“Yeah, a girl I went to school with, her dad always drove a Bentley and it was always the same colour. A kind of brown.”

“You think he could be involved?”

“I don’t know, but how many brown Bentleys are there in Mississauga? I didn’t know the family well. The daughter, Bitsy Ambrose, was pretentious and stuck up. Always felt she was better than us. Used to speak with a British accent and limited her contact with us peons. Funny though, her family lived over on Old Carriage Road. Admittedly a better section of town than ours, but not by that much, and only a few blocks away.”

“Do you know if they still live in the same place?”

“I think so. I can ask around.”

“all right.”

It was now about 6:30 so we begged off and went our separate ways to contemplate what next. Joycelyn had to get home to cook diner. I was still working as a stringer for a couple of newspapers and

had articles that needed polishing off so it was already late by both our standards.

Back home, I pulled out the cards wondering if they might provide inspiration. I was vaguely aware that there was a brisk business in sports card trading and that some cards could be quite valuable, but couldn't see how this would relate to a meaningful ransom. Surely sports cards would be similar to art in that the owners of very valuable cards would be known and it would be hard to sell a very valuable card without generating suspicion or exposing yourself.

In the end I turned to my articles for the newspapers and put the ransom to rest for the evening. The next morning I checked all the newspapers and the wire service to see if there was any report of a robbery or kidnapping. Absolutely nothing. Strange. It should have generated some interest and if not by the media at least you'd think the police should have profiles of the suspects on the news to hasten their capture.

Well, it was, what it was, so I pulled up my articles and sent them off to their respective editors then thought I might investigate the sports card industry.

The next couple of days proved quite interesting. The card business was more than just a pastime, with its beginnings back in the late 1800's when advertisements were inserted into paper packs of cigarettes as stiffeners to protect the contents. The opposite side of the advertisement contained collectable images of ball players. The first companies to do so were Allen and Ginter in the US in 1886,

and the British company W.D. & H.O. Wills in 1888. The popularity of these inserts were such that within a few years cards of every nature from sports to war were being distributed along with cigarettes. By 1900, there were thousands of tobacco card sets manufactured by 300 different companies. In 1933 the Goudy Gum Company of Boston began putting baseball cards in its gum packages for kids and a serious industry was born. From that point forward bakeries, candy manufacturers, dairies and other trades jumped on the bandwagon and started inserting collectibles into their products. In fact, baseball cards are classified first by their industry origin (i.e. Tobacco, gum, etc.) and then by the company and series within that company, which is defined by the year and a series number.

Baseball cards are further grouped into six major eras in which they were produced. These eras are as follows:

Pre 1900

1900 to 1920

1920 to 1930

1930 to 1948

1948 to 1980 and

Post 1981

Generally speaking the older cards have greater value as they are rarer, although the specific card and its condition are also major factors in the card's value. For example a near mint condition Honus Wagner baseball card from the America Tobacco Company's T-206 series, issued between 1909 and 1911 sold for some \$2.8

million in 2007. Honus Wagner was a short stop for the Pittsburgh Pirates for 17 years between 1900 and 1917 and was one of the first five members voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame claiming the second highest vote count of any players behind Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth (tied for first). Only 50 of these cards were ever printed as Honus objected to being linked to smoking and had the company remove his card. While this is a natural event causing the card to be rare, the industry has since actually manufactured hard to find items, the most outrageous example being the Goudy Gum Company's 1933, 240 card set where one card was never even printed. Imagine the packs of gum they sold to collectors futilely looking for that elusive card. In fact it was so bad that consumers started writing in to complain. Goudy eventually issued the missing card featuring Napoleon Lajoie, yet only sent these cards to those who had complained. The card never made it into gum packs. While a company could never get away with such a stunt today, they do, nonetheless, manufacture rarity by adding signed cards and inserting intentional flaws or other occasional oddities into selected cards. One such example being a card featuring an image of President George W. Bush waving from the stands in the background.

That said, the key ingredient in a card's value is its condition. Older cards are generally graded from 'poor' through 'Mint' in nine steps. Newer cards (1950 and later) in about 5 steps from 'excellent' through 'mint'. To put this in perspective a card that sells for \$275,000 in mint condition will bring in only \$375 in poor

condition. In a very few cases a poor condition item can bring as much as \$135,000, however these are cards where none are known to exist in better than 'very good' condition (very good being 3rd from the bottom in the 9 levels of assessment).

In general, the older card series prices run about \$15 to \$125 for cards in 'very good' condition. Newer cards from the 1950s might run from about \$10 to \$50 for cards in 'excellent' condition with a very few cards running as high as \$900 (a mint version of the same card could draw upwards of \$375,000). Cards from the 1980s, and later, only have value if they are in 'near mint' or better condition.

So there you have a brief background in the business of baseball trading cards. Maybe more than you wanted to know, but relevant as we move forward in our tale. I was sitting with the ten cards which we had collected from the drop and all were plastic wrapped so the assumption was that all the cards would be in pretty good condition and that proved (as best I could tell) to be true of eight of the ten cards. Two were in what I assumed might pass for good to very good condition exhibiting scuffs and wear from age and handling. The next question would be if any of them were of particular value. While it is true that I spent a few days researching the industry I was far from an expert and so decided to find someone in the know who could be counted on to be discreet. I asked around among my newspaper contacts and came up with 'batman' Willie, supposedly both an expert in the business and 'discreet' in the extreme. Just what I was looking for.

In the meantime, Joycelyn had tracked down her old schoolmate and determined that her family still lived on Old Carriage Road and that, in fact, her dad still drove a brown Bentley - one that, would you believe, had been stolen the very day of the drop. Apparently someone came in off the street, opened the front door and grabbed the keys to the car from a tray on a table near the entrance and took off with the car. The theft was noticed within an hour, that being the period of time between the last use of the car and someone noticing it was missing. The theft was, of course, reported immediately and the hunt was on. The hunt started at about 3:00 to 3:10 pm the day of the drop and the car was found abandoned on Cedarglen (about five blocks from the drop and one block or so from my condo) by 3:30 that same afternoon. It appears that the car had been wiped clean and no clues were left behind to help identify the thieves. There was no damage to the car. The police wrote it off to kids on a joy ride. Pretty much a dead end, but nonetheless, very interesting. I didn't believe it was kids taking a joy ride; after all, what kid wipes the car down when done?

So, I set up a meeting with the 'batman'. All very clandestine and hush, hush. We met at a bar at the Brunswick Hotel on Bloor Street at about 7 pm. He had provided me with directions to a seat in the back corner of the room. It was quiet hour, after the 5 o'clock rush and before the evening crowd so even though the spot didn't look very private (for our very private meeting) it was probably just fine. Looking around I spotted the table he had described. As I approached I took in the rather scruffy character at the table, hair

long, dark, unkempt and sprouting wildly from his head. Clothing eclectic, Salvation Army casual, unpressed and all just a bit askew. Not quite skid row but a long, long way from Savile Row. With just a little trepidation I slid into a seat across from him and started to introduce myself. He held up a hand and uttered “No names, I don’t needs to know no names. I’ze the batman and youse’re client Q. That’s all we needs to know.”

“So, youse got something to show me?” He asked.

Now you have to understand the Brunswick House was not a very upscale place. In fact calling it seedy would be kind, and the place had a reputation for a certain lack of ‘stability’, setting something of a record amongst Toronto bars for the number of police calls to the establishment each and every year; or month for that matter. Because of that, I was loath to carry anything of any value into the place and so had left the cards in my car.

“Not with me” I responded, getting a look that was less than encouraging.

“What, youse donn trust me?”

“Not you so much as the establishment.”

“Hey, donn worry. This is my office, no one here’s gonna bother youse. So wheres the cards, I can’t help youse if I don’t see no cards.”

“I have them in my car. It’s parked on the street outside.”

“OK, OK, let’s go.” And with that he rose and we went out to my car. I opened the doors and we both got in closing and locking the doors. I pulled the cards from a storage spot in the armrest and turned on the overhead light, passing the cards to the batman. He took them with a slight hint of annoyance, started to glance quickly through them then slowed down, a frown gathering on his forehead and a look of surprise growing as he stopped and re-looked at the first card. He was completely silent for at least 10 minutes as he slowly and thoroughly examined each card in detail. He finally put the cards gently down on the armrest and looked up at me.

“Man! I donn know where youse gots these cards from and I ain’t gonna ast, but these babies are first class. Theys wert a lotta clams. If youse wanna sell these I’m gonna needs bring in some help. These is bigger than my pockets man.” He then pulled out a notepad and started making notes and muttered “Jesus, where these coming from? I ain’t heard ‘bout any of em.” Turning back to me he continued, “If youse just wanna estimate then I can give youse that now.”

“Well, let’s start with the estimate.”

“OK. Ize’ll need time to check these out, youse understant, and see what’s the going rate is, but off the top’s my head I’d say seven hunnert fifty thou to a cool mil, maybe more.”

I was stunned! Upwards of one million dollars! That’s like \$100,000/card. “Are you sure?” I asked.

“Course I’m sure. That’s whys I’m here. Cause I knows bout these things. Course they gotta gets authenticated but I gots a good eye. These’ll pass. When youse ready to move, youse call me. Youse got my number.” And with that he opened the door and left. I didn’t want to hang around with a million dollar stash in my car so I pulled out and headed home. A million bucks!

Then I started to think. If these were ten random cards that fell out of the suitcase, what must the entire contents be worth!?! Something didn’t add up here, and if it did, we were in way over our heads. Whoever took the suitcase is certainly going to miss a million bucks worth of cards and they *are* going to be looking for us. Let’s just hope they don’t know who *we* are.

CHAPTER 3 - BASEBALL CARDS

After the astounding meeting with Batman Willie I phoned Joycelyn immediately on arriving home and told her we had to meet. She agreed to get together for lunch the next day.

In the meantime I did a little more research. 25,000 cards seemed to be too many. Large baseball card sets numbered around 500 cards while more normal sets ran to 100 or 200 cards. If I took an average card set at 250 cards then the 25,000 cards would represent 100 complete card sets. That would be something like $\frac{1}{4}$ of the major baseball card sets ever published. That seemed improbable, but maybe not impossible. This raised the concept of complete sets and what added value that might bring. Surprisingly, and after a bit of research, not much, as complete sets generally exclude the most valuable cards. So, \$150,000 was about the highest price for a complete set, minus a few special cards. Bottom line, complete sets didn't add enough value to be a consideration. So that left me no further ahead. I decided next to assess my cards based on values published on the Internet and see where I stood on that basis.

Here is a list of the cards we had and their estimated value (HOF = Hall Of Fame):

Card and set	PSA Number	Est. Value
1895 Mayo's Cut Plug - Cap Anson (HOF)	67,811,997	46,500
1887 N172 Old Judge - Cap Anson Uniform (HOF)	54,721,243	80,000
1909 T-206 White border - Ty Cobb	69,931,425	415,000
1909 T-206 White border - Ty Cobb with bat (HOF)	60,011,310	275,000
1909 T-206 White border - Eddie Plank (HOF)	76,890,008	385,000
1915 Cracker Jack - Shoeless Joe Jackson (Black Sox)	71,691,705	75,000
1933 Goudy - Babe Ruth (HOF)	64,381,653	150,000
1933 Goudy - Napoleon Lajoie (HOF)	62,921,097	175,000
1948 Leaf - Jackie Robinson (R) (HOF)	66,830,120	350,000
1951 Bowman - Mickey Mantle (R) (HOF)	68,150,140	275,000
Total		2,226,500

Because I can't realistically judge the quality of the cards the figures could be considerably lower. Nonetheless I did not give top quality to many of the cards in an attempt to be conservative. But, wow! The total was staggering. Furthermore this looks like a selected list of some of the most valuable baseball cards of all time so what are the odds that the very best of the best were the only cards to fall from the suitcase? Pretty long I'd say. The more I investigated, the weirder the mystery became. Nothing added up (except of course those numbers above).

So I met Joycelyn at Fred's, a local sports bar and eatery not too far out of either of our way. I had my material and was ready for a meaty discussion on the merits of card trading. We grabbed a table in the back to minimize any intrusion or overhearing of our conversation and ordered drinks. I was about to speak when Joycelyn jumped in. "You know Ardwell" (why does everyone insist on calling me by my last name?) "I've been giving this a lot of

thought and the whole drop doesn't make any sense. Why use such a memorable car for the drop. Even if you steal one, why one like that? Unless you're trying to implicate someone. So I looked into the Ambrose family. They *are* originally from England. However the father's business is in airborne exploration for minerals and resource management. How can that possibly relate? Even more curious is that he operates mostly as a liaison between the UK and Brazil, and let me tell you, neither of those countries gives a hoot about baseball."

"So then I decided to see if *he* had any links to the Blue Jays or owned a box at Roger's Centre. I drew a blank there also. He doesn't seem to have any interest in baseball that I can find. Maybe I should speak to Bitsy again."

"Uhh, probably best not to Joycelyn. I'm starting to get nervous about this whole baseball card thing. That's why I called. The cards we found are worth a small fortune. To the point where none of it makes sense. We're sitting on over a million bucks worth of baseball cards! And .."

"A million dollars!!!" Joycelyn blurted out.

"Yeah, a million or more. So tell me, how does that happen? They asked for all 25,000. If that means 25,000 cards how can it be that just ten of those that fell out of the case can be worth so much. Let me tell you, these ten cards are the *creme de la creme* of baseball cards and represent probably ten in the top 50 cards in baseball trading card history. Something is way out of line here."

Joycelyn jumped in “What if they were the only cards and the 25,000 refers to something else?”

“I suppose it’s possible, however that doesn’t preclude the fact that someone must be looking for the missing cards.”

“That’s true. So where does that leave *us*? Maybe we should bring in the police” Joycelyn suggested.

“After my last experience. I don’t *think* so. But let’s leave the cards for the moment. Let’s focus on Ambrose, ‘cause I agree with you. Something there doesn’t ring true either.”

Our grilled calamari arrived at that point and so we dug in. Fred’s grilled calamari was far and away the best in town, maybe even the country, and we didn’t want to ruin it with serious conversation so we reverted to casual banter until we finished. It also gave us time to quietly mull over what we had just discussed. Joycelyn was the first to jump back in. “Let’s assume for the moment that the theft of the Bentley is a cover and that Ambrose is somehow involved. Next let’s assume that this has nothing to do with baseball and that the cards are just a medium for the transaction, whatever that might be. Where are we then?”

“Well, you spoke to Bitsy, so it wasn’t a kidnapping. If that’s true we have to assume that Ambrose is buying back something that was stolen from him, or his business, and it’s something that the ransomer believes he won’t be willing to go to the police about. It also follows that the cards are the medium of payment. The

question is, what could Ambrose be paying for? The police have, so far at least, not published anything relating to the ransom or any other crime in our area so they're keeping it under wraps or have abandoned it, and I don't believe they have abandoned it. Whatever it is, it's ongoing and we have to be careful not to get involved."

"Agreed. So how are the baseball cards a logical method of payment?" Joycelyn responded.

"That I don't get. I mean Ambrose is an international businessman. Why not just have him wire money to some offshore account and then drop the ransomed goods somewhere where he could pick it up. Assuming whatever they are ransoming is not mobile there's no need for all the cloak and dagger. Just have the money sent to XYZ bank in the Bahamas, or somewhere, and advise Ambrose where to pick up his goods after they get the money."

"OK, but that presumes our 'kidnappers' have access to offshore banking and some level of sophistication. What if they're just a couple of street hoods." She had a point.

"Then why baseball cards, why not money? Not only that but how does Ambrose get mixed up with local thugs when all of his business is off shore?"

"Point taken. Maybe it's some kind of dodge against traceable currency, or the kidnappers have a thing for baseball or the cards

that fell out were the only cards in the suitcase. Maybe the suitcase held something else.”

“And what might that be. Remember the note ‘all 25,000’. I can’t imagine what those 25,000 other items might be. Surely not money given the value of the cards. For the moment let’s stick with the cards.” I suggested.

Joycelyn hesitated a moment giving some thought to what she was going to say next. “We’re missing something here. If we go back to the ransom note it’s clear there had to be another conversation between the crooks and Ambrose. They don’t say 25,000 baseball cards, just ‘all 25,000’. Ambrose had to know what that referred to. The baseball cards could relate to something else in the original communication with an understanding that they be included with the 25,000, whatever that might be.”

“A valid point. Not sure how it helps.”

“I don’t know. Just throwing it out there. And while we’re at it, how did the police show up there? You said Spade threw out your note. If that’s true then they had another source of information for the drop and that would most likely be the ransomee, i.e. Ambrose. But if it was Ambrose, then why the subterfuge with the car?”

“The car is an interesting point. If Ambrose actually used the car himself then reports it stolen it can only be to deflect suspicion away from himself. That being the case, I think we can safely assume that Ambrose didn’t contact the police. If you give me that,

and if we like Ambrose for the ransomee, then it means he was trying to keep this all hush, hush. And where the hell did he get over a million dollars worth of baseball cards. Surely there must be some traceable activity on the cards we have. These are valuable cards and their sale or theft can't have gone unnoticed. Certainly not for all ten. Having said that, I can't find any recent notice of any such activity."

"Well, they might have been stolen. Such thefts often don't make the news for a variety of reasons."

"Which brings us to; what was being ransomed?" I threw in to get out of the conversation's downward spiral and change the subject.

"Not a clue. But if it's Ambrose then it can only relate to family, or business, as I see it. And those are both items that can be investigated." Said Joycelyn.

"It'd help to know who the criminals are." I suggested. "The note indicated a poor grasp of English, but that could have been faked. I wonder if we are dealing with a single set of criminals or more than one?"

"OK, let's go back to what's being ransomed. It apparently has tremendous value and a) can move around on its own or b) can be safely left somewhere for pickup without worrying about the theft of the article by others. I opt for b) as a self moving item would imply a person or an animal and it doesn't feel like that. If it were, the police would be involved." Said Joycelyn.

“Well they are, are they not?”

“Well, yes, but the level of competence and preparedness, judging by the fiasco at the drop, would indicate a lack of fear of, or consideration for, a life, so let's consider that it's an item - not a person. Having said that, one of the big problems in any ransom is how to return the item without being caught. The easiest way to do that is to stash the item somewhere in advance and when the money is paid to let the ransomee know where to pick up their property. Now we just concluded that the item involved here is worth in excess of a million dollars. Where would *you* leave such an item for retrieval where you could be sure it wouldn't be nicked by someone in the meantime?” She responded.

“I see your point.” I said.

“I hope so, because that's the problem that we now have.”

“How so!?”

“Well, we have a million or so dollars worth of cards that implicate us in whatever is going on. If we go to the police we look like the criminals and we'll get arrested. If we want to return the cards how do we do so without the criminals knowing who we are. And finally, if we go to Ambrose, we have no idea what we might be walking into.”

“Bugger. I hadn't thought that far ahead. So what do you suggest we do?”

“I don’t know Ardwell, I was hoping you might have an idea.”

“The only idea that comes to mind right now is to pay the bill and head to the Valley. Maybe one of the gang will have some thoughts.”

“Really Ardwell, and how do we go about that without letting them know about the cards?”

“Watch me.” I said with a slight smirk that I really wasn’t feeling. I hoped I’d think of something before we got to the Valley. The trip to the Valley was less than five minutes so we arrived together and headed for the door. It was now three pm and Frank, Jordan and Jimmy were at the dart board. We joined them and signalled for drinks.

Frank and Jimmy were in a heated discussion about some garbage truck. It seems that last Thursday about 4 pm a garbage truck in Mississauga had been hijacked. The driver and his two associates had been ordered out of the truck at gunpoint, tied up and left by the side of the road on the Queensway just west of Damian Way. The truck was found five hours later, abandoned down on the Lakeshore. The truck’s contents had been dumped, as it was empty when found, but not empty when abducted.

Jimmy’s contention was that it was linked to the drop that we had witnessed. Frank wasn’t so sure as he couldn’t see the connection.

“Look Jimmy, the crooks picked up the suitcase before the garbage was collected and just a few minutes after the drop. Why would

they then go toss the suitcase into a garbage truck they would have to subsequently hijack to pick up what they already were in possession of? It doesn't make sense. It's just coincidental that it happened the same day and near the same location."

"No, no Frank, you're missing the point. It's a very clever ruse for the very reason you put forward. One, if they planned it to occur at the time the truck was passing they could rid themselves of any evidence almost immediately after the pickup. That way if they were stopped they would have plausible deniability. A second group would then stop the truck and redeem the suitcase, removing the crime and criminals one step from the ransom. Emptying the truck was necessary to maintain the image of theft for something in the garbage. You see what I'm saying?"

Joycelyn broke into the conversation, "What's going on boys?"

"Hi Joycelyn, Jimmy and I are just commenting on the garbage truck hijacking and the coincidence of it occurring the same day and near the same place as your ransom. Jimmy thinks it's all part of the same operation. I'm saying I don't see it." Responded Frank.

"I'm not following?" Said Joycelyn. At which point Jimmy and Frank brought us up to date on the story of the garbage truck hijacking. It was the first either of us had heard of it. Joycelyn tossed her head indicating we should have a private conversation. I shook my head 'no'. I had my opening.

“I can think of another explanation. Maybe when they picked up the suitcase something fell out and they needed to retrieve it - assuming it fell into the garbage at the site.” I offered.

“Nah. The police would have found it, if that was the case.” From Frank.

“These guys were good. They wouldn’t have made such an amateurish mistake.” From Jimmy.

I tried again. “It raises some curiosities though, doesn’t it? One, if something fell out of the suitcase, would you go to that kind of trouble and added risk for a small portion of the ransom? After all, if they lost a big piece we would have seen it and so would the police, so at best it couldn’t have been a significant portion of the ransom. Two, if it’s as you speculate Jimmy, then it is a rather elaborate plan with too many fail points. The simple plan would work best, just as it did. I can’t see people who planned this well complicating it further for very little gain. However, the truck *was* hijacked and so it must have contained something valuable that someone wanted and they, presumably, knew where to look. How do you suppose something like that happened? If not as Jimmy claims then can we create a scenario that makes sense, I mean aside from the ones already on the table. Any ideas?”

Joycelyn caught on and jumped in: “Well, what if you came across something valuable and wanted to return it but couldn’t without getting in trouble. I mean if you went to the authorities they would nab you for theft and if you returned it to the owners they would

think you stole it from them. And, if they were bad people, you could be in worse trouble than with the authorities. You see the dilemma. How do you get the object back to the owner without them knowing you had it and without them being able to trace it back to you. Maybe you toss it in the garbage and make an anonymous call to the owner.”

Jordan entered the fray. “Seems rather complicated. Surely there is a simpler way to accomplish the same goal. If the object was small enough you could simply mail it to them. If too large for mail you could courier it to them. Simple, Safe and Anonymous.”

“But what if you didn’t have an address? Or a phone number for that matter.” Responded Joycelyn.

“Then I think I would be inclined to rub the object down to get rid of prints and DNA and put it back where it was found.” Said Jimmy.

Brendon had walked in during the conversation and said “Let’s assume for the moment that you have neither a phone number nor an address. That begs the question: how do you know this person or people? Surely that should provide some answers or options.”

“Like, if you knew friends of theirs or where they hang out.” Concluded Jordan.

This was starting to get too close to home so I decided to bring the conversation back to the hijacking. “All good points but how does that relate to the hijacking. As I see it, someone knew there was valuable cargo on that truck and couldn’t go to the police. So

where does that leave us? Either someone set out some valuable and ill gotten gain in the garbage by mistake and went to retrieve it or some third party knew that such a thing had happened and decided to collect the item or ... what?"

"I think we're back to Jimmy's idea." Said Joycelyn.

Conversation from that point forward took two separate avenues, one rambled around the complexity of the scheme and the other about darts. Joycelyn and I decided to follow the darts conversation until the group broke up about 5:30.

The evening was uneventful and I passed it reading a book. I was up early, to work on a couple of articles and was just finishing off a piece for the Toronto Star when I got a call from Joycelyn. It was about 9 am. "Ardwell, there's been a strange car parked on my street for the past two hours. You don't think it could be the guys do you? I mean no one knows we were there, do they?"

"Well the gang at the Valley does, but I can't see how that would get back to the ransomers. It's probably about something else. A city employee making notes on conditions on your street. Don't worry about it." We chatted for another few minutes and then rang off. I must confess I wasn't as calm as I had sounded. It could be coincidental but at the same time talk in a bar has a way of spreading to unknown realms.

As I headed out that morning I noticed a car following me. At the first opportunity I went into a mall and parked. The car followed

but parked about two aisles away. On exiting the mall I took the opportunity to scan the car. It was an unmarked police car!

I had stumbled and the wind had caught the umbrella.