

From Under my Brim

A short story by
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It took place on the 611 service of a national coach line, outbound from Victoria coach station. I'd been one of the first aboard for a change and had had time to arrange myself before most of the other passengers boarded. I hid under the brim of my hat and tried to lose myself in a book, having not yet learnt that a private seat was better ensured by smiling at new passengers.

For a while I thought my solitude would remain intact, until I was joined by the last to board and an accompanying sense of unease. While I had never been comfortable in the company of strangers it would be an exaggeration to claim that any before had aroused such strange apprehension, for while I continued to read in every attempt at submersion I could not escape the feeling that something within was struggling to climb out of the sealed window at my left. At first I put this down to my usual social anxiety, however I had also to acknowledge that the man himself created a unique and unwelcome impression.

He was a man of imposing stature, his head well in excess of a foot above my own despite the seated position of its owner. Such height was well matched by girth, though he was not rotund, and emphasised by a deep black suit.

Neither formal dress nor black fabric tend to unsettle me, I may frequently be found so attired myself. Rather it was the extent that caused my perturbation. His suit was fine of cut, perhaps the finest I have seen, with unusually high lapels which left revealed the merest slip of his perfectly white, high-collared shirt. Even more than his style of dress, the fabric itself has left a lasting impression; this was the truest black that I have encountered, so utterly black that one could barely make out the garment's contours and its weave was undetectable.

One might expect that the briefcase, which he kept constantly upon his lap, would normalise his appearance. Indeed, this item itself seemed quite innocuous and typical, yet his handling of it somehow bestowed gravitas upon its simple form.

By the time this impression had been burnt into my mind we had travelled far from Victoria, all the while my attempts to concentrate on the book in my hands being disrupted by furtive, sidelong glances at my imposing companion. Then and there I determined to put a stop to my own rudeness and keep my eyes upon the pages, thus some untold time passed before my attention was again drawn.

The light had begun to fail and I decided to switch on the reading lamp. As I lifted my head to look for the button I noticed a small, black bound pad in my

companion's hand and a slim, matching pen in the other. My curiosity rose once more and, having lit the lamp, I lifted my book so I might glance at his pad.

The tip of his pen hovered over a page bearing two columns; the right was clearly of numbers, four digits each, the left a column of words in short lines. They resembled names in the way they were written, no purpose for which could I conceive. Nor could I fathom, as I slowly read my own book, why his pen hovered motionless over them.

Eventually, as we pulled into the local bus station, the driver announced my stop. I put away my book as the coach turned toward its bay and, when it stopped, the man beside me stood wordlessly so that I may disembark. I thanked him for his courtesy, though in retrospect I realise that I failed to make eye contact. In fact, I do not think I ever saw his face.

I collected my suitcase and went to meet my lift, to whom I recounted the details of my time away. Once home I fell quickly into bed and to sleep, having barely managed to change out of my travel clothes.

Over breakfast I read the newspaper, much of which concerned the same grim events that had been the theme for some time. There was, however, a new headline that I could not help but notice.

A coach had crashed on the motorway, between my town and the next that my coach would have visited. I read the article and, as I expected, saw that it had been the 611 service. It went on to say that the driver had been killed along with all passengers but for a single, unnamed exception who remained unaccounted for. There was a request for information, but no picture.

A note from the author:

It is my fond hope, like that of any writer, that you have enjoyed this story. If you have I ask that you share it with others whom you judge likely to appreciate it. Finally, it would bring me great satisfaction to hear from any readers, with comments or constructive criticism. To contact me please e-mail solar.granulation@gmail.com and specify "Short story comment" as the subject.