

Suspicious Minds



The other day the present Mrs Smith and I staggered out of the gym at Edinburgh's Ocean Terminal (yes, dear reader, the gym – despite what my daughters may tell you, I'm not quite ready yet for the knacker's yard) and slumped on to the escalator of a well-known department store. As we shuffled our aching limbs through the shop we noticed what we thought was a suspicious package. There was a haversack which looked like it had been placed underneath a fold-up table. There was no one there and it certainly didn't appear to have just been dropped there by accident.

I'm a naturally cautious kind of fella so I had my concerns in any case but in the wake of recent events in Tunisia, I felt I just had to point this out to a member of the store's staff. I walked more briskly than was good for me, given my preceding hour at said gym, to a cash point and told the woman behind the counter.

'It may be nothing,' I began a little hesitantly, 'but I think someone may have left their bag over there'

'Where about, sir?' asked the shop assistant with a note of concern. I led her to where the bag was and explained that I didn't take it round personally as you never knew these days what was lying around and one couldn't be too careful.

She saw the offending haversack and I was a little taken aback when she bent down and lifted it from under the table. 'Shouldn't you call security first?' I asked, sorely tempted to bolt for the door in case there was an explosion – not that I would have got very far given my physical weariness. She smiled and showed me the tag which was attached to the bag – it was a price tag. The haversack was for sale and the reason it was underneath a picnic table was because it was part of a

summer display – alongside a picnic basket, summer chair and parasol...

In the words of Derek 'Del Boy' Trotter from television's Only Fools and Horses, I felt a right plonker. However, to her great credit, the store assistant told me I had nothing to be embarrassed about and, in fact, she wished more people were as wary as I. She added that staff had been trained to deal with such situations and she had a hunch my 'suspicious package' had been part of the shop display but had to check it out in any case.

The redness from my face had only recently faded after my hour of purgatory at the gym but now it had returned with a much deeper shade. However, recent events may well have turned more than just me into looking about them and wondering if there is any risk to what is, in reality, something completely innocent.

Until the last Friday in June, no one expected to go abroad for a week or two in the sun and expect to be mowed down by a terrorist when all they were doing was lying on a beach. Since the events of September 2001 in the United States of America, airport security can be a complex and lengthy affair and most of us accept this as part of the mechanism of holidaying abroad. Nonetheless, most of us expect to be safe when we reach our destination and the massacre of innocent people in Tunisia at the end of June was a callous reminder that we can no longer feel secure no matter where we are in the world.

This fear has created a climate of suspicion even in my adopted home town of Leith. Now I'm a Hearts supporter and, therefore, a Jambo abroad so I'm prone to suspicious looks anyway. But the spectre of terrorism was felt in Leith in April last year when bomb disposal officers removed suspect material from Persevere Court which followed a similar incident in Muirhouse a few days earlier. A former doctor from Syria, Faris al-Khori, was jailed for more than three years

after being suspected of making bombs at his Edinburgh addresses.

Now it seems that everyone is under suspicion – by everyone else. Caution and wariness loom like unwanted intruders. On my way home from said gym tonight, I was concerned to see a police officer patrolling the beat outside Ocean Terminal. My immediate reaction was something was wrong. But it wasn't too many years back when bobbies on the beat were part and parcel of life in Scotland. Nowadays they appear from nowhere in patrol cars with sirens screaming and lights flashing. When police officers are walking the streets, it's quite often after an 'incident' with the police opting for 'an increased presence to reassure the locals'.

Perhaps an increased police presence would help to partly alleviate this climate of suspicion, this constant feeling of wariness and doubting anyone who seems to be acting differently from the rest of us.

It's a sad reflection of life. But, sadly, it's the way of a troubled world in 2015, when even a delightful shop display aimed at attracting customers can cause alarm.