

From the Kitchen

25 November 2009

It's easy to get carried away over things that are free, such as briefcases stuffed with money or being offered seats in the pointy end of an aeroplane. Stories can be woven around simple incidents, but often the truth will suffice.



Still in New Zealand, my wife and I were following signs to an historic village museum in Auckland. A wrong turn and there it stood – a lone briefcase. It occupied the edge of a car space, right in the middle of a car park. There were a few cars parked around the periphery. We looked at each other. I decided I'd better relieve the briefcase of its loneliness.

I drove in a wide circle to end up next to the case, opened the door and backed slowly. I stopped, snatched the thing inside and closed the door. I checked all my mirrors. No black cars with tinted windows; no guns poking out of bushes.

We looked at each other. “Did you have to?”

Yes, I did. It was the appropriate way to handle such a situation. What now? I looked at my wife. “It'll be full of money.”

“Or it could be a bomb.” I hesitated, then pushed aside the catches. The hasps flipped up. No explosion. We both breathed out and craned our necks as I slowly lifted the lid.

The contents looked disappointingly mundane: bank deposit book, cheque book, receipts, invoices, a cloth bag, pens ... A cloth bag! I opened it. Five bags of coins.

“That's not going to get us into business class on Sunday. It might buy one of us some lunch.” I felt deflated. I'd already played a scenario in my head of returning tens of thousands of dollars to their rightful owner and receiving a 20% reward. Upgrade to business class *plus* change for duty-free spirits. I absentmindedly looked in the pocket in the lid. A torn envelope with a wad of paper in it. I pulled it out and gasped.

It was stuffed with coloured notes, of the kind you can exchange for goods and services. I handed the envelope to my wife as I again checked in all the mirrors and peered into the greenery in front of us. People were coming out of a building behind trees and ... they all went to various cars and drove off. Ours was the only car left.

“Twenties and fifties,” my wife said. “Must be over a thousand here.”

What to do with it? I looked through the documents and found an invoice made out to a sporting club with an address and phone number. I dialled. A recorded message gave me three names and numbers. The first of these didn't answer; the second had an answering machine; the third number answered.

I put the briefcase in the boot and we waited. My wife at this stage thought I was being a little dramatic about the whole thing. Ten minutes later a car drove up with three young men in it. It drove around the car park as the driver scanned the surroundings. He pulled up two spots away and wound down his window. Had I seen a briefcase? I was tempted to say ‘no’ and make him sweat. I got out of the car and told him, yes, I had and I was waiting to hand it over to someone responsible. The three men were quiet, almost sheepish. What I learned I had in the boot was many thousands of dollars – the week's takings of the sports club bar.

When my phone contact drove up, I could see an accusing look through the windscreen, aimed at the young men. I turned and saw consternation and contrition on their faces. I confirmed some identity details and handed over the case. There were half-hearted attempts at humour and some banter. There were effusive thanks and a promise to be in touch with us as I handed over my card.

Such honesty and effort is supposed to bring good karma. At least it brought good feelings and a realisation that we'd had an adventure.

The next afternoon, Sunday, we packed and made our way to the airport. We dragged our heavy cases towards the check-in. An enormous queue inched painfully forward. We handed over our passports and e-tickets. Our luggage came in just within weight limits. The check-in person asked us to wait as she made a phone call. I ungraciously turned away as I heard her ask someone if they were full. My heart sank. I was tired. I closed my eyes. My wife remained friendlier and talked with her. The check-in person put the phone down.

“I’m sorry folks. Would you mind if we upgraded you to business class?”