

A Notice of Infraction

The punishments of everyday life.

Robert Smith, better known as “Smithy” to his mates (few of them left) lived quietly in his small unit on Walker street in a small seaside village called Anglesea. Not the one in England, the one in Victoria, Australia. He was a widower of twenty years and counting, and had come to enjoy in a quiet way his solitary life, his two bedroom apartment with small kitchen and open living room spacious for his meager needs. His period hi-fi set was the largest piece of furniture in the apartment, which he enjoyed daily listening to his tapes and old LP records of his favorite musical shows, especially those of Rogers and Hammerstein. Even better, he had hooked up his vintage color TV to the hi-fi set so he could watch his videos of the musicals. He rarely watched ordinary TV, though, because he found most of it, especially the news, to be from another world, one he had no knowledge of, nor interest in. Inside his unit he had constructed his own world where everything was predictable, and every day would be like every other day. A perfect environment for an admittedly old man, though he would be offended if someone referred to him as such.

His daily routine consisted of waking at 8 am. on the dot, no alarm necessary. To the bathroom for ablutions in the following strict order: toilet (standing not sitting), shave with electric shaver (rotary only), then shower, no shampoo (waste of money). Drying quickly in front of the space heater that he had connected to a timer (a tinkerer, he was always handy with mechanical things, having once been a mechanic), powder all bodily crevices, (he did not believe in deodorant), check for ear wax with a match stick (forbidden by doctors), combing hair of which he still had a reasonable amount for a man of ninety, applying a little hair oil. Switch on the electric jug, return to the bedroom to dress, then to the kitchen where the jug has finished boiling. Pour a little hot water into the little brown two-cup teapot, rinse and tip out, then add a spoonful of tea, fill pot to the top, replace the lid, cover with the tea cozy (rather stained after years of use). Pour a little milk into the waiting teacup, then pour the tea through a tea strainer. Sip the tea and take his daily aspirin, then pour hot water into the

bowl into which the night before he had tipped half a cup of Uncle Toby's oats. Stir then sprinkle a little salt and sugar, and add a little milk.

By the time he finished his oats and drank his tea and washed the breakfast bowl it was 9.30 am. Back to the bedroom for his wallet that he kept beside his bed, then his hat hanging up behind the bedroom door. Time to walk to the local store to get the daily paper. Step out of his apartment, lock both the regular door and the screen door, place the keys under the third rock from the edge in the cactus rockery, walk out to the street, check the mail box for junk mail, then on to the shops, cross Walker street at the driveway to avoid stepping off the curb, walk on the shops side of Walker street on the grassy strip, to the corner at Camp road, then down the hill keeping to the left of the footpath, past the Post Office (a quick wave to the post lady), past the Chemist, to the News Agent for the paper. Then a careful retracing of his steps back to Walker Street and his welcoming home. All the while he walked, back straight (required constant effort) head up, and hat pulled well down over his forehead. Should anyone he knew say hello, he would tip his hat and say g'day, but never stop. There was a time when he would stop and chat, which was when he played bowls with the local club for several years. But he had quit a few years ago when he was dropped from one of the pennant teams because, they said, he was too old. This daily routine Smithy repeated every day except Sundays when there was no paper. His paper, The Geelong Advertiser, was not printed on Sundays. There were Sunday papers, The Age and The Australian, neither paper did he find at all relevant to his life. In truth, the only pages of the Addy he read were the births and deaths, mainly the deaths.

On this particular day, January 15 2015, Smithy was returning from the News Agent and had just turned the corner where the mobile library often set up shop, when a group of three teenage boys, late teens he guessed, jostled past him, full of laughter and banter, each carrying armfuls of soda and fast food. One had taken a red shopping basket from the local IGA supermarket full of chips and soda. For some reason, still inexplicable to Smithy, he found himself staring at the young lout with the basket, certainly not minding his own business as he

always did. The lout grinned at him, but really, took little notice of his glare, and a glare it was. The young bugger was blatantly stealing the basket. And before he knew it, he heard himself saying, "I hope you are going to return that basket."

The three boys laughed and one of them said, "what's it to you, you old fart!"

Smithy was shaken to the core. His day had been disturbed as though lightening had struck the tree next to him. He looked the other way, quickly turned the corner and hurried as fast as he could walk back to his haven on Walker Street.

The boys kept walking as though little had happened. The boy with the basket had, in fact, intended to return the basket after they had carried their groceries to their house. They had just borrowed it, though it is true that they had not asked for permission. In any case, the brief encounter with Smithy was enough to invoke the obstreperous inclinations of teenagers, to do the very thing that Smithy had accused them of. Once at home, they had no use for the basket, and the boy who took it mentioned that he might get around some day to returning it.

This encounter weighed heavily on Smithy. It had disturbed the order of his day and, after a couple of days brooding, he decided to phone the supermarket and report the incident. The manager of the supermarket was very courteous and thanked him several times for reporting the theft. Smithy gave a reasonable description of the three boys, and the one who carried off the basket. The manager said he thought he knew who they were and would have his security people look into it.

As luck would have it, the boys did get around to returning the basket, though no one at the supermarket noticed, and in fact there were no "security people" employed at the super market. It was too small a market to employ separate security. So there the matter lay, the theft eradicated by time and circumstance.

The next day was the day on which every month, Smithy drove into Geelong to do his grocery shopping. He had done this for years because he thought that the prices were lower in Geelong. This presumption was doubtful, given that he had to pay top dollar for the petrol that ran his 1988 BMW. In any case, he drove, being careful to obey all speed limit signs, to the supermarket some twenty six kilometers from Anglesea. There he stocked up on all his groceries for the month, including litres

of milk that he would keep in his freezer and use as needed. And lots more. He had a strict routine of supermarket shopping. It would take many pages to outline the procedures, sequences and particular routines. Suffice it to say that this was a typical monthly supermarket day in which nothing out of the ordinary happened. He arrived home after a regular uneventful drive to Anglesea, unloaded his car, all the chilled or frozen things first, placed in their appropriate places in his refrigerator. Satisfied, he made a cup of tea and sat down at his kitchen table and played his usual game of poker (playing both sides) in which of course one of him had to win!

Two weeks went by until the order of his day was once more disturbed by an unexpected and shocking event. He collected his mail and found a letter from the Victoria Police. What on earth could it be? And when he opened the machine-folded and printed letter, he gasped in horror. It was an infringement notice for driving four km. per hour over the speed limit of seventy, the exact location listed in the machine printed notice, Princes Highway in Waurn Ponds, just after the turn-off to Epworth Hospital. But there was more. Apart from the fine of \$207, there was also a requirement that he report to VicRoads and do a driving test. The notice sternly informed him that this contravention had automatically tripped a requirement that drivers over the age of ninety who broke any traffic law, be required to undergo medical and driver examination to determine whether it was safe for them to drive. His license had therefore been suspended until he fulfilled the requirements.

This was too much for Smithy. How could this be resolved? How could he get to VicRoads without a car? He became dizzy and plonked down in his armchair. What are these people doing to him, spying on him with cameras? What right do they have? It seemed like every right. And how could he fight this false charge? And false it was. He had a very carefully worked out routine for driving into Geelong to the supermarket. He drove very carefully, kept to the speed limit exactly, never deviated.

The next day he phoned up the VicRoads who were very nice to him, once he managed to talk to someone. They told him to read the back of the notice where it said how to appeal the fine. He had done that. It looked impossible. And besides, it still meant that he could not drive his car anywhere until the appeal was

processed. And what chance was there of winning? Zero.

There were two weeks until his next trip to Geelong was due. He then took what for him was a momentous decision. He would pay the fine and drive in there anyway and be damned about the license. So he paid the fine online following exactly the directions printed on the infringement notice. He found this all very unsettling. He was a dutiful law abiding citizen. He had never knowingly broken any law or even rule for that matter. He absolutely never, ever walked on the grass even when there was no sign that he should not.

As the day for his drive to Geelong drew nearer, he became extremely nervous. His hand shook when he poured his tea in the mornings. He even forgot to pour the milk into the cup first, before pouring the tea. Nevertheless he was so upset with the government for torturing him in this way that he held fast, though he did stop taking his daily aspirin, thinking that maybe it was the aspirin that was making him jittery. Of course, this was simply silly. He had taken aspirin daily for twenty years or more, ever since they had said it thinned your blood and prevented heart attacks.

The trouble was, though, that when he stopped taking the aspirin he began to notice that his short term memory was not quite so good. It had never been too good for many years, but now he seemed to be forgetting silly little things, like not putting the milk in his tea, or putting it in again forgetting that he had already done it. So a few days before the big trip, he started taking the aspirin again and by the time the day of his trip arrived, he had more or less calmed down.

He was about to step out of his apartment and into his car when the phone rang, a most infrequent event in itself, as he had only one relative, a son who lived in New York, and rarely called. He almost did not answer it, but finally turned back and took the call. And very lucky that he did. It was a call from VicRoads saying that there had been a mistake and that his license had not been suspended and that he did not need to submit to another driving test, though the nice lady added that for a person his age it was strongly recommended that he visit his GP and get tested. She also thanked him for his payment of the fine, and no, it was not a mistake. Smithy said no word at all, until the lady had

finished talking. He then said “thank you” and banged down the receiver. He was very angry, even red in the face. He went out to his car slamming the door behind him.

Strangely, though perhaps not that strange, sitting in his car in the garage, all silent, no light on, he felt secure and cared for. This old car had done sterling service. It was like an old friend.. He even talked to it when he was stressed out over something. He started the car, then switched it off, and sat silently, thinking some more. “That’s the way old girl,” he muttered to his car. That’s the way.” He took out his handkerchief and wiped a little dust from the dashboard. Then he backed the car out. He was a man of resolve. The cameras had picked on him. He would take steps to even up the score.

So far, you could be forgiven for assuming that Smithy was a silly old man whose life was stuck somewhere in the 1970s. But that would be a mistake. He had always been a tinkerer of mechanical things. When radios first appeared, he tinkered with those and could fix any radio there was. The same with clocks, the same with cameras, still and movie. Anything that was mechanical. So it was a logical step when he bought a computer as soon as they appeared on the market, and upgraded his computers frequently to keep up with the amazingly rapid development. And the appearance of the Internet also piqued his natural curiosity. He started watching YouTube videos that taught how to repair computers, how to manipulate and exploit the huge potential of the Internet. He became something of an expert, and no one knew it.

As he backed the car out of the garage, still deep in thought, he backed into the fence that separated his drive from the next door neighbor. He got out to look at it, and was pleased to see that the damage was slight, although the fence had been pushed over a little. A voice called out from his neighbor on the other side of the fence. “That was close, mate! You should get a rear camera for that old jalopy of yours!”

Smithy occasionally chatted with his neighbor, though he truly found any such conversations stressful. He was courteous, but really much preferred his own company. “Maybe you’re right,” he answered. And as he drove out the driveway, he headed straight for the auto store and bought a rear view camera, which he would install himself. And on his way into Geelong and back,

he carefully noted where all the speed and red light cameras were. There were so many! How could you avoid becoming one of their digital victims? And with some, admittedly twisted satisfaction, he made a point of driving everywhere at exactly the speed limit indicated, and just to make sure, he drove at five Ks below that limit. After all, the rules stated that these were speed limits, so you could drive at any speed under the limit specified, was that not correct?

But now, his compulsive nature was slowly taking a new turn, or perhaps one should call it adaptation. The cameras fascinated him. He watched videos on the internet that explained how they were controlled. He joined so-called “dark web” groups to discover how to hack into wireless devices. It turned out to be not so difficult. All one needed were the right devices and a little tweaking of them if one knew how to do it. And probably the most sure thing he learned from these dark web sources was that the majority of installations of camera and other surveillance devices, some security systems and the like, were relatively easy to hack, that those manning them tended to not really believe that someone wanted to hack into their systems. The passwords were therefore easy to crack, if you had the persistence and the right tools and a little information about the target.

Some of Smithy’s routines had to give a little. His afternoon poker games stopped. He no longer walked down to the news agent. He stopped reading the daily paper. Instead, he spent all his time huddled in a corner of his garage, a bright light shining over his shoulder, tinkering away, finding his way through the labyrinths of the Internet, until after many weeks, perhaps several months, he sat back with a sigh of great satisfaction. He had completed his task. It was now time to test it.

In Smithy’s opinion the trouble with speed cameras was that they only caught speeding infractions. But few such catches were related to any serious car accidents. Red light cameras were a little better, but the trouble with them was that they too often snared drivers who were caught half way through an orange light. The nearly innocent were therefore treated the same as the clearly guilty. That contravened Smithy’s refined sense of justice. There was not a lot he could do about that, but there was plenty he could do now that he could hack into the speed cameras. It was,

however, going to take up a great deal of his time. He was sorely tempted to simply sit at his computer in the garage and randomly pick innocent victims by sending the image of their license plate along with a speed that he made up, to the Victoria Police computer that received all the wireless infractions. But of course, he did not yield to such a temptation. He was a rules man, through and through. No, he would drive slowly to Geelong and all about Geelong and watch for what he considered louts driving dangerously. And there were always plenty of them. He was of the opinion that speed limit was not necessarily in itself dangerous.

So, he would station himself in the vicinity of a camera, hack into its operation, wait for a dangerous driver, then transmit the license plate number and an outrageous speed to the Victoria Police. That would ensure that the offender received a truly heavy fine. Over the weeks and months that followed he developed an extensive list of types of dangerous driving and the appropriate illegal speeds he would submit. And then he had an even better idea. Why limit himself to speeding infractions?

Smithy guessed that had probably made an error or two in his little game with Victoria Police. He had awaited with eager anticipation for a knock on his door, or more likely an infraction notice in the mail, to appear at the police station to answer for all the speeding reports he was sending to them via their cameras. Several months went by, and nothing happened. He had foolishly assumed that the computerized bureaucracy that received the speeding data and spewed out the infraction notices would sooner or later send someone an error message. Nothing of the sort happened. In fact, one had to assume that all the infraction notices that Smithy had caused to be sent out must have been either not paid by the offenders, or more likely paid without any appeal, eager as such offenders would be to get rid of the threats delivered by those infraction notices. So they would, in effect, plead “guilty” even though they were innocent of the specific infraction listed in the notice.

And so Smithy returned to his daily routine, all except his poker games in the afternoon. Instead he would park himself anywhere near a camera and send infraction notices to all kinds of drivers whose behavior he disapproved. All he needed to do that was the license plate number. So, he enjoyed sending notices

to those who parked in no parking zones, those who parked in spots reserved for disabled, if in his opinion the driver was not disabled. Then he spread his reach to those individuals who behaved rudely to him anywhere, in the supermarket, or even in the street. He would follow them to their cars, note the license number, and shazam! Case closed!

Unfortunately, after some months, Smithy began to realize that he was not getting as much fun or satisfaction out of these mischievous punishments that he was delivering to unsuspecting persons. In fact, it was not long until he started playing his poker games in the afternoon, just could not be bothered getting into the car and driving somewhere where there was a camera. There was no fun in it any more. Why was this? He looked back to the days of labor he put into developing his hacking skills, what joy it was the first time he sent a fake infraction notice! But then it slowly sank into him that he was not enjoying his delivery of punishments by notice because there had been no response from the Victoria Police bureaucracy at all! He then realized that the true satisfaction of punishment was to see the offender actually punished. In this technological infraction bureaucracy the punishment remained hidden. There was nothing to see. The notice arrived in the mail. The recipients swore and complained to themselves. But then paid the fine. He now saw that he had unwittingly contributed to this enormous hidden machine of punishment that wasn't. He had become a cog in the machine of big brother.

Moral: Punishment hidden is punishment denied

