

One Woman's Life of Crime.

By Alison Rooks

Before I was sixty, I lead a completely blameless life. I never so much as stole a paperclip from work or lied about my age to get in half price at the cinema. The ideal subject – that was me, no trouble to anyone. That all changed one day, when I came to realise that, as a woman of a certain age, I had become completely invisible.

The gamechanger came at the railway station one sunny Monday morning. A rail employee was examining our tickets as we stepped onto the platform – our local station hadn't developed as far as automated ticket barriers. I was fumbling in my bag for my perfectly legitimate, full-price ticket, when the railway worker nodded me through. Of course, a respectable grandma like me couldn't possibly be trying to pull a fast one! No need to examine my ticket.

After that I never paid for another train ticket. It was always 'in my bag', or I was in the toilet when the guard came round, or I'd dropped it somewhere. No-one ever suspected a thing! Inconceivable that this silver-haired old dear in M & S slacks might be trying it on! It became an exciting game to think up new and ingenious ways to dodge my fare. One time I stuck headphones on and gazed out of the window when the guard came into the carriage – pretending I hadn't seen him. There was no sound coming through them but it worked a treat. He just carried on past, didn't even break his stride.

After a while the game started to pall and I found myself getting a little bored. How to think of new and exciting ways to continue getting my new-found kicks?

Shoplifting came easily. A bar of chocolate here and a packet of biscuits there. No-one ever guessed. My daily haul got bigger and more exciting but still no-one gave me a second glance. There was one slightly hair-raising day when a shop assistant ran after me as I was leaving – I was quickly running ideas and excuses through my head when he caught up with me. It turned out I'd left my change for the legitimate purchase I'd made on the counter. I rather enjoyed the thrill of having to think on my feet and decided it was time to up my game a little.

I was in one of our town's more up-market department stores when I decided to go for a rather expensive and glamorous silk dress. The sort of outfit I always rather fancied but thought was too showy and rich for someone like me. Leaving with my spoils, I waited until I could walk through the door scanners at the same time as a large, noisy family with a pram and several kids running round. Of course when the scanner went off it was the family who were stopped by the store detective – invisible granny just sailed through with the dress hidden under her coat.

Now I had the dress I needed an occasion to wear it. I wasn't one of those sad old dears who steal things they don't really need in the pathetic hope of being caught. So I booked a table at a restaurant in the next village – somewhere I had never been before and where no-one would know me – let's face it, I'd never really been

anywhere like this before, with its 2 michelin starred head chef. I had to use a false name of course and chose the most innocuous one I could think of. Ann Smith booked a table for one for Friday evening at 8pm. Hopefully busy enough to maintain my invisibility, but not so busy they wouldn't have space.

Naturally as a woman on my own, they parked me at a poky little table just near the toilets. Well that alone strengthened my resolve. I ordered well I think – expensive dishes but not ostentatious to draw attention. Good wine, but not too much of it as I knew it might make me careless if I overdid it. No waiter came by to top up my glass or ask how my meal was. As usual – no-one paid me the slightest attention.

Halfway through my desert I popped to the ladies. I was rather sad to leave behind half of a delicious raspberry Eton Mess and almost half a bottle for Sancere but needs must. I had a light jacket stashed in my (stolen) Mulberry bag which I put on before walking out of the ladies and straight on out of the restaurant. The secret being to walk with confidence, head high but looking at no-one, meeting no eye. And of course no-one looked at me – why would they? I could just imagine them trying in vain to remember who had been sitting at that table and skipped it without settling the bill. I was sorely tempted to book again the following week, using a different name, just to see if anyone recognised me. I suspected they wouldn't but decided the risk wasn't worth it.

It was raining as I stepped outside the restaurant and I didn't fancy waiting for a bus, so I flagged down a passing taxi. I rarely travel in taxis as I have always seen it as a luxury but I was having a rather luxurious night out, so why not? How could any gentleman taxi driver resist a poor old lady in floods of tears, who had left her purse behind in the restaurant? I asked him to pull up outside a non-descript house a couple of streets away from where I live. No point his waiting for me to go inside for money – my purse was in the restaurant – and I couldn't go all the way back with my dog waiting to be let out – if you listened you could hear him barking furiously from inside the house. The driver was quite happy for Ann Smith to write her name and a spurious telephone number on a bit of paper, with a promise to settle up with the cab firm the next day. After all – he knew exactly where I live – or so he believed.

Rather annoyingly he hung around to make sure I got into the house safely. I'm not sure what he thought was going to happen to me. I had to walk a little way up the drive, which really set the unknown dog off barking furiously. Fingers crossed the owner wouldn't come out to investigate but as usual, luck was with me and no-one appeared. My first taxi-fare dodge was a success! These extra unexpected moments really added to the thrill of success.

My next foray into crime might surprise you, but then that is rather the point of the whole thing – no-one expects this kind of behaviour from bland, unassuming women of my age. This made things so much easier for me. Car crime seemed to me to be the obvious next step. I usually drive a red Honda Civic. A boring car (sorry Honda) when what I really wanted to be driving was a silver BMW series 2 convertible, or some such sporty vehicle. Obviously I couldn't steal one properly but I could certainly take one for a test drive – and who knew what would happen from there?

In the end I really went for it and took a canary-yellow Lotus Elise for a spin. The sales assistant wanted to come with me but I persuaded him there was no need. I showed him my points-free driving licence, my thumb 'accidentally' obscuring my name and left my Cartier watch (stolen) as collateral. He said it wasn't necessary but I felt it showed good will, apart from which I didn't care if I never saw it again.

I tied a plain yellow scarf around my hair – making me look (I thought) like Grace Kelly, although actually it served to make me even more anonymous than I already was, and off I went.

I can't describe to you how thrilling it was to drive that car. I took it onto the moors and zipped along almost empty roads, faster than I had ever driven in my life. I raced around bends and tore up the tarmac. This was almost more exciting than committing crimes – although technically, driving at the speeds I was doing, I was actually breaking the law.

I drove for as long as I thought it would take for the sales assistant to start getting a little anxious and then drove for another 2 hours, before I thought it was getting near time to give it up. I abandoned the car on the edge of the moors and set off home. I could have returned it but that would have detracted from the thrill and anyway, I wanted to continue to punish the world for ignoring me. I think some lads found it, had their own fun and then torched it – maybe something to think about for next time, although not really my style.

The first text message came three days later. It simply said "Thank you for the Cartier watch!" Ridiculously I looked round as if someone had crept up on me from behind. I didn't know what to think or do but two days after that a second text arrived. "A good start but not nearly good enough" Oh lord – was this going to be blackmail? Hoist by my own petard as Shakespeare puts it?

The next text said – "We need to meet – I'm looking for a further £200,000."

We certainly did need to meet – for a start I needed to know how my cover had been blown. Then I needed to think what I could do next.

When he came to my home, it turned out that he hadn't been foolish in letting me go out in the Lotus by myself, as I'd thought. There was a dashcam in the front of the car, sending film directly back to the salesroom. He'd watched everything and still had the film as evidence, having retrieved it before setting fire to the car himself. I'd also been careless in covering up my name on my driving licence – he'd seen enough to work it out. He'd wrongly assumed I was rich and could afford to give him a further £200,000 but in the end I had to agree to put my home on the market to be able to meet his demand.

We agreed that, on the day of the sale, he would come round to my home, just when the money came through from the solicitor and I would hand it over before we went our separate ways.

Now, you're probably wondering why I gave in so easily to his demands. Well the answer to that is that it suited my own purpose admirably.

The house was indeed sold very quickly and with no chain. The day of the sale completion arrived – all my furniture had been sold in advance – there was nothing I wanted to keep except the old chest freezer in the cellar. He brought round a bottle of champagne and insisted we toast the deal, even though he expected me to be distraught. I went along with it, although I had far more to celebrate than he did, unbeknownst to him. Fortunately he'd also brought glasses, so I let him pour the drink and then slipped in a tablet I'd kept hidden in my pocket. The poison would work quickly but to be sure, I plunged a hypodermic syringe full of insulin I just happened to have with me into his arm. Then I dragged him to the chest freezer and tipped him in – a little hello present for the new owners and my first murder!

My taxi to the airport was just pulling up – not one of the companies from which I'd stolen free rides. The money from the sale of the house was already transferred to a bank account in Tajikistan – a country which has no extradition agreement with the UK, and my flight would have me there by the following day – before he was missed or the body found.

So here I am on the balcony of my hotel – I have almost £300,000 in the bank and no intention of going back to the UK, where no-one will have missed me anyway – and if the money runs out – well, we know what I can do.....