

This tale may seem bizarre, but it is based on a true story - though the names and some details have been changed.

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Head hunt

“Hey you! Stop flashing. I’m going as fast as I can. Can’t you see all this traffic? Motorways are bad enough without maniacs like you throwing your weight around.”

Phil was in rush-hour mode, fighting for survival. It was a long journey and it was becoming competitive. He tightened his grip on the wheel, and glared at the motorist in the mirror. Then the radio crackled, warning of an impending phone call. At the first ring he flicked the radio to mute and swung the car into the middle lane. At the second ring, he pulled into the slow lane and answered. It was his wife.

“There’s a man trying to get hold of you to talk about a job... They’re looking for someone with your plastics experience to do some big job on the Continent and he wants you to meet him on your way home. Call me when you get to the services and I’ll give you his number.”

Phil was in business mode now - upright, composed and clear thinking.

“I’ll be at Corley on the M6 in half an hour. Will that be soon enough?”

“That’s fine, Phil; I told him you’d call this evening. Speak to you later. Drive carefully!”

Philip Martin relaxed back into the leather seat. He felt good - enjoying the flattery of a head-hunter’s call. He turned the radio off properly to free his mind for contemplation. He enjoyed interviews, but he had been driving the long road home from a week away, thinking that meetings were over for the weekend. Head-hunting calls usually came when he was in the office...

“Good morning, Mr Martin, this is Tracey from *Very Discreet Head-hunters*, is it OK to talk to you now, or should I call you later?” - They’re always a bit cloak-and-dagger about it, which adds spice to the experience...

But he wasn’t in the office, and they were talking about work in the plastics industry. That was the trade he *used* to work in, so this must be his past coming back to haunt him. How intriguing. How gratifying that his reputation in Europe still counted for something.

He was warming to the opportunity and settled into a comfortable cruising speed, with his thoughts running back over past successes. He felt important and looked forward to this unexpected opportunity to sell himself. He ran through a mental rehearsal for his performance. Mind you, he wasn’t going to be carried away by it all. After all, he’d landed a good job at EDL and was getting on well, even though it was a new industry to him. The staff were OK, the pay was good and he fitted in well with the rest of the management team. Still, you can’t ignore a chance to better yourself.

By this time he had driven round the sweeping intersection from the M42 to the M6, manoeuvred into the outside lane and was cresting the long hill just before Corley services. He’d talked himself up to a state of readiness and was relishing the interview. He called his wife to check the details of who had called and how to contact him, then phoned Mr Lammers at his hotel. Strange that. Lammers is a Dutch name, but his voice had a hint of Liverpool about it. Ah well... He checked the map, re-planned his route and drove back onto the motorway...

This Lammers chap wasn’t one to treat himself. He’d avoided the smart hotels and chosen a Travelodge for his venue. Phil pulled into the car park, adjusted his tie and walked into the motel. Yes, they had got a Mr Lammers there, and he’d left a message for Phil to go straight to the room when he got there. He knocked on the door.

“Hello, Mr Martin. Come right in.”

That accent *was* Scouse. And the man wasn't on his own. A young lad was lounging untidily on one end of the sofa-bed.

"Sit over there on the sofa. That's my son, Jason. He's travelling with me on this trip. Can I pour you a cup of tea?"

Phil tried to analyse his host as they chatted about Phil's past work on the Continent... Holland, France, Italy, Austria, *Germany*... Germany seemed to be important to him. The man had back hair - sparse, but not bald. His complexion spoke of Spanish holidays, his leather jacket and well-tailored trousers suggested moderate affluence, but not wealth. Two rings on his right hand. Open necked shirt revealing a gold neck-chain. Pointed face. Brown eyes. And that accent. This was no prototypical entrepreneur *or* head-hunter.

He asked about the German companies Phil had dealt with. Yes, Phil knew Steinebergs, and he'd sold to Hardtmanns - no, that company was hard to get into - but ah, yes, that was a nice one to do business with... Paderborn Feltz? Sure Phil knew them, but he didn't think much of them. They'd messed up one of his customers with some sub-standard product. Really caused problems, and he'd done them a favour making the introduction. Payment? Of course he hadn't paid them. They'd cost him money and almost lost him a major contract. Anyway, what was that to do with Lammers?

Something was very wrong with this meeting. Phil had come to talk about a job, but his interrogator was raking up matters he would rather forget. Phil's former business had struggled through the months of recession. Customers were tumbling around him and he'd desperately tried to create new liaisons to keep things going.

"Paderborn Feltz almost ruined me with their crass inefficiency and, if they think they can get back at me with threats they've got another think coming. They should think themselves lucky my customer didn't sue them for the problems they caused."

"So you admit the debt?"

Lammers leaned forwards.

"No way! They owe *me* if anything, but they can take it to court if they want. It was two years ago, but I've still got all the evidence I need."

"I don't think you understand us, Mr Martin." Lammers sounded threatening. "I'm not interested in courts or evidence. It's quite simple, as I see it. You owe the money and I'm here to collect it."

Phil stood up.

"Look, I don't think there's any point in continuing this conversation."

As he walked across the room, the bathroom door swung open with a bang. Two heavily-built men appeared. Phil tried to slip past them, but they pushed him down on the sofa.

"You're going to write me a cheque."

Lammers had dropped his affable manner and thrust his face towards him - eyes glaring with discomfoting intensity. Jason and the two heavies stood guard, alert for Phil's response.

"I don't know who you are or how you think you've got the right to do this kind of thing, but I'm not gonna be threatened by anyone. There's laws about these things. If Paderborn's have got a problem they can sue me!"

Phil tried to get up again, but they pushed him down, knocking off his glasses. He struggled and shouted for help. A hand gripped his mouth. He bit the hand, kicked the heavy in front and flailed at the two beside him. He damaged them, but they won. Phil sat back, subdued, frustrated and panting. Lammers spoke...

“I’m not going to debate the ethics with you Mr Martin, and I suggest you don’t try and shout any more. You can write me a cheque for £3,000 and then we’ll be on our way.!”

A plan was forming in Phil’s head. Were they stupid? He could write a cheque for his aggressors, but he could stop payment at the bank in the morning. And a cheque is traceable.

“OK, who should I make it out to?”

He wrote the pointless document, signed it and handed it over. Lammers inspected the cheque and slipped it into an inside pocket of the leather jacket.

“Right now, Mr Martin, We’re going to leave you here, and I don’t want you following us. Give me your car keys.”

“You can’t take that, it’s a company car.” Phil still had some fight in him.

“We’re not taking the car. I want the keys to make sure you don’t try to follow us. Don’t worry, we’ll put the keys on top of your front wheel, so you can pick them up when we’re well away. Stay here and don’t move for a quarter of an hour, ‘cause if we see you coming out we’ll be watching. Have you got that?”

Phil nodded. Submission was humiliating, but he knew he was beaten. As they slammed the door behind them he slumped back on the sofa. How could he have got into such a bizarre situation? He scolded himself for his gullibility - his vanity - for missing the clues - for giving way to cheap threats. He stiffened as he heard a noise in the corridor. The door opened.

“I’m sorry”, said one of the Receptionists, leaning round the door. “We thought the room was empty.” She backed away.

“No, please don’t leave me”, He pleaded, “I’ve been attacked.”

Both women came into the room.

“We thought something was wrong when those men rushed out of the front door like they were being chased. Do you want us to call the police?”

A policeman came and took details. No, the car keys were not on the wheel, so the car had been stolen, together with everything Phil had with him for his week away on business. The constable was helpful. After inspecting the room and taking evidence from the motel staff, he took Phil back to the police station to take a formal statement. *No*, they wouldn’t have helped if this had just been a matter of business debt. *Yes*, this was an exceptional case, and there was no doubt that a crime had been committed. They classed it as kidnapping, and it would be treated as serious. Phil’s home was fitted with a security device and a watch was kept on the house. But, they never caught the gang and the car was never traced, even though the cheque turned up showing a perfect set of fingerprints.

Phil got over the experience and he’s much less nervous now. He doesn’t carry a personal alarm any more and he uses car parks and hotels without fear. But he is much more careful about who he meets, and where. And he is very suspicious of head-hunters.

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