



When You Don't Suspect You're the Suspect

Making a Statement to the Gardai.

BY PATRICK HORAN

The scent and smoke of a Garda station are nauseating at 4 in the morning. It isn't much better when you arrive at 7pm.

You ring the buzzer at what you suppose to be a sort of reception. Ahead of you are two small folding doors with frosted glass mounted on a wooden countertop. Through the glass you can make out voices, easily three or four. They're laughing. Behind you a man is lying on the only seating area, a long varnished wooden bench.

He is about 60 years of age, heavily bearded and snoring loudly. He is wearing a three-quarter length dark green coat of the ex-military variety that covers his knees which are curled up in the foetal position underneath. Beneath this coat are two or three other collars, from two or three other coats that he is also

wearing. The hem of the green coat is dirty and frayed. You can just about make out the shape of a plastic bag which his hands, heavily yellowed from cigarette smoke, are clutching tight to his stomach. He is wearing heavy boots that look two sizes too big for him. The sales tags from the store are still visible.

The place reeks of urine. You ring the bell again, more impatiently this time. A Guard materialises from behind the miasma of impenetrable glass and you tell him your business. He looks past you and grimaces as if the smell you've had to endure is only now invading his nostrils. He closes the doors and ushers you into a hallway inside. You're asked to wait and you're glad to, anything to get away from where you'd just come.

You were asked to come to the station to "assist the Gardai with their investigations". You had asked what this was all about, but the detective had been a little hazy on detail, '*something about an accident*' he had said.

He had seemed pleasant enough on the phone though, disarming actually. You'd spoken about your job, where you'd grown up. As it happened, he knew someone from your town. You'd both laughed at that. Yours had been a sort of short, staccato laugh. You'd thought about that afterwards.

Yes, you had agreed, it was a small world. Just a few questions he'd said. Well, why not?

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TO "ASSIST THE GARDAI WITH THEIR INVESTIGATIONS".
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And so here you are, coming in to assist with an investigation. You're suddenly aware of another smell. It's a pungent, sort of disinfectant odour, and it triggers a memory from your childhood, about visiting a dying relative in a hospital somewhere. That had been horrible.

You shake it out of your mind and instead look at the multitudes of posters next to you. One of them implores you to report a crime if you have seen or experienced one. There's an 1850-number. You must remember that. That's what good citizens do.

There had been a bad accident a few weeks back. Terrible mess really. You had been driving your car, carefully as you recall. You had made a perfectly normal overtaking manoeuvre and some idiot had come flying around the bend,

straight at you. You'd avoided him but he'd crashed into another car behind you. You'd got quite a shock. You rang the ambulance and the Gardai and stayed at the scene. You'd tried to help the man in the other car, but he wasn't very responsive. For a second, you'd thought...

Your nose twitches. Anyway, you'd been asked to come to the station to make a statement. You certainly had nothing to hide so you'd agreed. Although you're not entirely 100% clear on whether you had overtaken on a broken white line or whether it had been a continuous white line, you're pretty sure you hadn't been at fault.

You see, it had all happened so fast. Anyway, the detective had asked you to come down to the station just to help them "close the file". That sounded perfectly reasonable to you.

THE SMELL IN HERE IS EVEN WORSE THAN OUTSIDE. IT'S AN ANTISEPTIC SMELL, LIKE BLEACH, NOT THE EXPENSIVE TYPE, SORT OF A LOW-GRADE INDUSTRIAL CLEANER

Detective. That had seemed a little odd afterwards you remembered. The Garda you had spoken to at the scene had been a uniformed Guard. You'd assumed you'd be speaking to him at some point. Why was the detective ringing you? Still, he seemed quite nice on the phone, maybe that's how these things were done.

And so here you are. The detective has opened the door and welcomed you in. He shakes your hand and smiles, though he doesn't make eye contact.

He mutters something which you take to mean you should follow him. He walks ahead of you down a very long dimly lit corridor. Throughout, an unseen telephone rings in some office.

The smell in here is even worse than outside. It's an antiseptic smell, sort of like bleach, not the expensive type, sort of a low-grade industrial cleaner. Yes, that's it, it's bleach.

You automatically look down at the linoleum floor as you walk, as if you'd almost expected to be walking in the stuff. The floor sparkles back at you. On the walls are signs which warn of wet paint. The beige walls appear to be in the process of being painted another more dreary shade of beige.

The place seems to be busy with workmen, constantly painting, cleaning, polishing. You find the obsession with hygiene uncomfortable.

A new smell, this time revolting. Your nose practically winces in pain. A dormant memory stirs in your head, of changing rooms in school decades ago. It's the smell of socks, socks that have been worn on feet that haven't been washed in eons.

The stench is overpowering. You almost gag. You quicken your step.

The detective is leading you down this long narrow hall with no natural light overhead or to the sides, just row after row of strip lights on the ceiling above.

As you walk down the hall the disinfectant smell seems to practically envelop you. You just can't seem to shake it. It's a strange sort of smell in a Garda Station. Sure, in a hospital you'd expect to smell disinfectant but in a Garda station?

Why would they need disinfectant?

**YOUR NOSE DETECTS SOMETHING ELSE,
SOMETHING QUITE HORRIBLE. IT'S THE
SMELL OF SOCKS, SOCKS THAT HAVE
BEEN WORN ON FEET THAT HAVEN'T BEEN WASHED IN
EONS. THE STENCH IS OVERPOWERING.
YOU ALMOST GAG.**

There's shouting coming from somewhere. Not shouting, bellowing, deep and angry. You almost leap out of your skin. You have never heard a noise like that in your entire life.

It's coming from somewhere close by, somewhere close to your left, down another hallway, this time much shorter. You can hear laughter, guffaws of laughter.

Then the shouting again. An enormous banging starts, and you almost freeze. It's a slow, methodical banging. Somebody is kicking something metallic. It's a cell door. They're kicking so loudly that for a second you think that they might kick the door down, and then what?

You look ahead of you, at the detective walking nonchalantly in front of you. He doesn't miss a beat, doesn't look back. It's like he's used to it. But how could you get used to something like that? Do people work in offices here? How could you work with this sort of noise? Is this normal? Suddenly you can't wait to get out of this place.

There's that smell again. It seems even more pungent.

The corridor seems endless, like walking down an aisle in an enormous supermarket. Offices lead off of it. You catch the names as you pass, not really, but just to distract yourself from the deafening noise. And still the relentless banging continues somewhere. You hear a muffled voice, guttural, swearing. Somebody is shouting at somebody else.

The banging stops. There's laughter now, a couple of people laughing. A door slams shut, and the banging and shouting starts again.

"Doctors Room", "Drying Room", "Drugs Unit", "Scenes of Crime", "JLO". You have no idea what these even mean. A doctor's room in a Garda station? Does a doctor work here? Why?

THERE'S SHOUTING COMING FROM SOMEWHERE.
NOT SHOUTING, BELLOWING, DEEP AND ANGRY.
YOU ALMOST LEAP OUT OF YOUR SKIN. YOU HAVE
NEVER HEARD A NOISE LIKE THAT
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The detective in front of you passes an office to his left. The sign on the open door reads “Detective Branch”. There seems to be activity here. A couple of voices. He nods at somebody inside as he passes.

This person inside is dressed in plain clothes. He’s sitting down in a sort of recliner chair with his legs up on a desk. He’s a man in his early fifties. The others, younger than him, are all gathered around him in a sort of circle, eager expressions on their faces.

You stare at this strange sight and then something catches your attention. He’s got a dark moustache and is wearing a gun on his hip. You’ve never seen a gun in your life before. This is real life.

Out of the corner of your eye you see this other detective in front of you nod back at him as he passes. As you pass the door all of the detectives glance quickly at you before turning away. None make eye-contact.

But the older one with his legs on the desk does. He stares deeply back at you, and you notice his eyes. They are dark grey and appear dead and lifeless, like a

machine staring at you, staring right through you. You look away, smiling weakly. The unanswered telephone continues to ring.

**A DOCTOR'S ROOM IN A GARDA STATION?
DOES A DOCTOR WORK HERE?
WHY?**

And still that awful smell. It's really quite revolting. It seems to be everywhere, as if the entire station had been dipped in it, as if these people were constantly trying to cleanse everything.

A uniformed Garda passes you. You nod respectfully at him. That's what good citizens do, right? He looks at you quickly as you pass, dispassionately, even curiously.

Somewhere a shriek starts. A female voice now. She's screaming too but you can't make out the words. Can nobody hear it except you? Is that person alright? Why does nobody seem to care? Your hands feel clammy. Do they have water here?

It's distracting isn't it? You haven't even sat down in the chair in the interview room and already your senses are overwhelmed by stimuli you've never experienced in your life.

And just ahead of you in a small brightly lit square-sized room you're about to experience another new sensation, something you're decidedly unprepared for. Ideas from earlier, plans from earlier are being squeezed out of your mind like a sponge being wringed and instead your brain is filling with anxiety.

Why is this room so small? Alarm has set in.

Can you think straight? No, really can you think straight? You need to because you're about to be interviewed and unbeknownst to you, you're the suspect.

As you sit down a second person enters the interview room. It's the detective with the moustache from the room next door. He takes a seat next to his colleague opposite you and those cold mercury eyes meet yours again and you know he's done this before, has sat in this room many times before, is impossibly comfortable in this hideous environment.

Your mind swims.

The man with the moustache begins to speak. It is a quiet voice, no lilt, no mirth, no warmth. Your ears are straining to hear him.

Without formalities he begins: “We want to speak to you about...”



Credit: TheRenderFish / Shutterstock

Not every Garda interview is like this, but some are. If a serious charge

Regardless of the circumstances always seek legal advice before you attend at a Garda station to give a statement. The majority of Gardai take their job seriously and will advise people that they should obtain legal advice beforehand. This is highly commendable.

**WHY IS THE INTERVIEW ROOM SO SMALL?
BECAUSE INTERROGATIONS CARRIED OUT
IN CRAMPED SPACES HAVE BEEN SHOWN TO
HEIGHTEN ANXIETY.
THAT'S WHY.**

But there is a small but influential substratum for whom the rights of citizens are an abstract concept to be disregarded.

I have known such people in my time in the Force. They are generally disliked by their colleagues. They are ambitious and ruthless careerists who always seem to flourish and advance through the ranks.

Every time one of their number rises higher, he brings up from the dregs other like-minded careerists as himself to fill the void he leaves. These men can at best be described as “unthinking” and cunning. Their lives are spent in pursuit of outcomes they imagine will please their superiors.

These are men who have long ago internalised certain traits: do what you’re told, always follow orders and never ask questions. No act, no matter how morally or ethically questionable, is beneath them.

These men -and they are usually men- are to be avoided. At all costs.

Why is the interview room so small? Because interrogations carried out in cramped spaces have been shown to heighten anxiety among those being questioned.

That’s why.

- PATRICK HORAN 2020.