# The Umbrella man

Reading the short story “The Umbrella man” by an author named Roald Dahl made me think about how little the scams have changed over the years. The story describing a man in his seventies approaching strangers on the streets of London tricking them into buying a stolen umbrella from him in order to get a pound that he would later spend in a pub on a treble whiskey was first published in 1982. Despite being published more than forty years ago, and despite all the advancements in technology that took place during the last 42 years, it remains surprisingly relevant to this day. For his uncomplicated scam the man uses a variety of means to make a good impression on the potential buyer of the stolen goods striving to appear a senior gentleman who got himself in a tough spot by having left his wallet at home before setting off to a long walk from which he just couldn’t return home on foot. These days information security experts would use a fancy term “social engineering” to describe what he did there. It gotta be one of the oldest tricks in the book.

It reminded me of a man I kept seeing on the streets of Saint-Petersburg this summer. I first met him on the corner of Razyezzhaya and Marata street in the city center. A man in a black tracksuit approached me and asked me for a lighter. I didn’t have one and told him that I was not a smoker, so I could not be of any help to him. “No worries”, he replied. He never needed a lighter, and it was merely a conversation starter for him. He would then proceed to tell me a story about how he was from a smaller town and came to Saint-Petersburg following a job advertisement he found online, but ended up being robbed of his wallet, phone and passport making it impossible for him to return to his hometown. After that he told me that his only option was to ask people on the streets for money to collect a sum enough for him to purchase a train ticket that would get him home. I had a gut feeling this could not be true and politely declined his request.

A few days later I met this man again near the Primorskaya metro station. In the same tracksuit he was approaching people on the street and making conversation with them. I could only see him from far away but I saw him using this familiar gesture of clicking an invisible lighter next to a cigarette in his teeth. I would then meet this man three more times in various locations throughout the following month. He even approached me once more near the Petrogradskaya metro station and asked me for a lighter and some spare change. I told him that he had approached me three weeks prior to that and that I didn’t buy into his little train ticket story. “I don’t remember”, he calmly replied and walked away.

Dahl’s short story is told from a twelve year old girl’s perspective. A girl describes a day she went to London with her mother to see a dentist. That day was concluded with a heavy rain that made the girl and her mother go on a sidewalk to catch a cab and this was where they met the trickster. There are three characters in this story, but we only get to see it through the little girl’s eyes. This is an interesting story to read, but the girl keeps wandering away telling the story and often adds unnecessary details that have nothing to do with the umbrella man.

However, it would likely be quite a different story had it been told from the mother’s perspective. She would probably be more concise and to the point with her version of the story, because adults are better at understanding what details are relevant to the plot and what should be rather left out. She would also probably leave out the part where she told her daughter how this was a lesson in speaking to strangers for her after incorrectly assuming the umbrella man was legit. While this would make the story shorter and easier to understand, I doubt it would be an improvement. At the end of the day, this is a short story people read for their pleasure and entertainment and not a police report that a mother would file describing how she was sold a stolen umbrella on the streets of London.

While both the girl and her mother come from the same point and their perspectives would probably be more or less the same, it would be a very different story had it been told from the umbrella man’s perspective. We would probably get to know more about the origins of the man, the story behind his weakness for treble whiskeys. Is it simply his alcohol addiction? Does he do this often, as the mother assumed, or is it that this was a really bad day for him and he was desperately looking for a way to drown his sorrows despite having no money? The way he chugged the entire glass in one go could mean he was trying to get drunk as quickly as possible. Could it be that he was running away from some terrible thoughts? How would he justify what he did to the little girl and her mother? The trickster would likely add all these details to his story.

Perhaps, the girl’s mother could go to a police station and report the umbrella man. She would also leave her newly-purchased silk umbrella there for the owner to pick up in case they turn to police while looking for their pricey umbrella. It may be that the police would ask her to appear on television in order to warn other people. She would then probably say something along the lines of “Be cautious when approached by strangers on the street. If they offer you to purchase something for way less than what it’s worth at the store, it might be a stolen item and you should not proceed with the purchase. Be sure to report such individuals to the police”. However, I doubt this would actually happen, as the police rarely come out with the announcements like that on public TV and the woman would probably be too embarrassed to talk about it anyway.

The umbrella man definitely chose one of the more elaborate ways to earn a pound. At least, compared to a regular job. However, there might be a few reasons for that. First of all, it would probably not be an easy task for a man his age to get a job, as the girl describes him as being at least seventy years old. Secondly, this might simply be the only skill he has - gaining people’s trust and exploiting them. People tend to do best at jobs that require them to do what they know how to do best, and there aren’t many jobs where such a trickster could apply their talents. Perhaps the man could become a sales representative of some sort, but, again, it’s unlikely that someone would hire a man of his age. Looking at his situation from this angle makes it somewhat rational for him to choose such a way of earning an extra pound to spend on a treble whiskey.

The short story reminded me of Gogol's play “The Government Inspector”. In it a man impersonates a government inspector coming into a small provincial town in Russia being fully aware that the corrupt local officials will try to bribe him in various ways so that he overlooks their own corruption and crimes. Those bribes are exactly what he is after. The imposter ends up successfully exploiting the town’s government and leaving the town never to be seen again His departure is followed by the arrival of an actual government inspector shortly after. Both the trickster from Dahl's story and Gogol's imposter use their social skills to gain trust and present themselves as someone who they are not. One could say that both of them performed social engineering in order to exploit their unsuspecting victims. Social engineering never gets old in the world of scams and it sums up the above pretty well.