

A suitable case for rediscovery

By BERWYN LEWIS

"DO NOT leave valuables in your car," said the sign on Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre entrance.

I had looked at it so many times the message had lost its meaning and sure enough it was brought home to me when I returned to the car.

The lock had been savaged by a screwdriver (not another screwdriver story), the door hung half open, the car interior light on.

My briefcase was gone, along with my address book (all my personal and professional contacts around the world, a most hideous loss for a journalist), as well as bills and make-up bag, not to mention hairbrush.

Luckily I still had my wallet, credit cards and cheque book with me but the loss of the new lipstick and the address book was more than depressing. It was a personal attack. An act of urban aggression. A vicious and meaningless crime.

I called the police at Darlinghurst: "Don't tell me about your briefcase, lady. I've got murders," said the on-duty cop.

"Murder has absolutely nothing to do with this. I'm talking about the theft of a briefcase," I replied.

"We haven't got the cars to patrol the area. Now, do you mind if I attend to some work. Why don't you look for it in the bushes," said this noble and sensitive protector of people and property.

His cardrums could still be ringing from my slamming down the phone.

In the dark I searched bushes, street garbage bins, gutters and lanes to no avail and then I called off the search till daylight.

The next day I remained dejected and slightly dishevelled. I refused to invest in a new hairbrush or a lipstick. It was unbearable being deprived of my friends' telephone numbers, particularly in this hour of need.

I stormed back towards the theatre and, at the peak of the lunch hour, resumed my search.

The staff of the Chinese Consulate nearby wondered who the spy was poking among the shrubbery in their forecourt. Bus passengers must have thought hard times had struck very suddenly as the atypical bag woman sifted through piles of garbage.

The afternoon heat, the noise, the congested traffic and pollution did not deter me. I was floating in a state of acute semi-consciousness somewhere between psychic intuition and lust for revenge.

I knew I would find my briefcase. I thought of all the times I had found my lost wallet, ring, bag and coat in spite of the most hopeless odds and logical events. I wandered into a narrow lane.

From the upper balcony of a tiny and flaking terrace a tattooed hoon with shaven skull and a few missing teeth watched. This was the border between the straight world and the underworld. He may well have been Cerberus. Seeing him there was an opportunity to prevail upon his obvious watchdog qualities and possible connections.

"Watcha doin' darlin'?" Cerberus called down.

"My briefcase was stolen from a car and I'm looking for it," I explained.

"Wait there," he said and disappeared. A few seconds later he



emerged from what appeared to be more of a kennel opening than a front door on the street level.

"Listen, I know who did it and I'll knock their blocks off," said Cerberus, turning from watchdog to dobber, obviously eager to settle some business which had nothing to do with my loss.

"I'd really prefer to get back my briefcase," I said with a sinking feeling, knowing someone's block would be knocked off regardless of whether I was reunited with my briefcase.

"How much money did you have in it? Did you have any credit cards? Anything of value?" Cerberus's eyes narrowed to calculating slits.

"No, nothing valuable," I said.

"Oh well, you won't find it round here. You might as well go back," said Cerberus.

Taking a final glance at the narrow, deserted and garbage-laden lanes ahead I accepted his advice. Who knows, perhaps this was a sign, a direction from an angel, a fallen but nevertheless helpful agent of women in search of stolen briefcases.

Curious stares and joy

Back in the main street I retraced my steps towards a block of townhouses. Suddenly, I felt that the stairway which led from the raised courtyard to the street level was beaming me in.

As I ducked under the dank, concrete, cobweb-draped vault created by the overhead staircase, avoiding the stares of curious and innocent bystanders, I saw my hairbrush lying among some mouldy trash.

Heart pounding, antennae quivering, I moved into the depths of the vault and there it was, flung into the furthest recesses, in the angle where the stairs met the ground.

The joy of rescuing my beloved briefcase from its abduction and unimaginable fate outweighed the loss of my appointment and address books until I returned home and began to drag out telephone books and look up friends' phone numbers.

"You can stop looking. I found it!" I announced.

"Stop looking for what?" came the reply.

Perhaps it's time to start a new address book.