

'I was surrounded by
eight officers, read my
rights and arrested'

Spike Watson, whose
eight-month nightmare
began at airport security

'THE DAY I WAS BRANDED A TERRORIST'

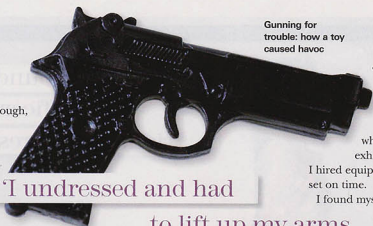
When photographer Spike Watson, from Newquay, packed her bags to head to the airport, she had no idea of the bizarre turn her life was about to take

Crying, I sat in the airport trying to take in what was happening: security blocking every exit; four police cars screeching to a halt at the airport door and the words: 'I am arresting you...' But I just couldn't believe it. In the blink of an eye my perfect world had shattered. My husband had put a toy gun in my bag and now I was being treated like a terrorist.

Life had been so sweet when I set off for Newquay airport that morning, destined for

an ad shoot in London. I have a successful photographic agency and love my job, shooting everything from adverts to celebrities, including Kate Moss and Emma Bunton.

I lived in London until I married James, 35, a gorgeous South African surfer. We decided to set up an organic B&B in Cornwall, so he could be near the waves, while I jetted to shoots from Newquay Airport. It seemed the perfect compromise and, five years into our marriage, I was happy. Then came >



Gunning for trouble: how a toy caused havoc

the day that changed everything.

James dropped me at the airport on 8 October 2005, and I headed into check-in. My hold bag went through, no problem. Then came my hand luggage with all my photographic gear, and I knew they'd make me unpack it all. Since 9/11, they were extra vigilant, and it was only three months after the London tube and bus bombings. Security was a huge issue and I knew the rules.

The security woman frowned as my bag went through X-ray. 'There's something here...' she said. 'I'll just re-X-ray.' She came back, poker-faced. They'd found 'something' but she couldn't say what and would I go with her to the office?

HANDCUFFED AND STRIPPED

Inside, a male security guard held up a toy gun. 'What's this?' he demanded. 'It's from Disneyland,' I managed to reply. 'I bought it 17 years ago!' I was stunned. What on earth was that doing in my bag? I'd bought it for my son from the Indiana Jones toy range, along with the hat and whip. I was told to wait in the lounge and I slumped in a café in a daze. I rang James on my mobile. 'What the hell is that doing in my bag?' I said. 'I put it there,' he replied. 'Why?!' I yelled back.

He didn't explain, but said not to worry. That's when I looked up and saw the security by the doors, the patrol cars and the police pouring into the airport. I found out later they'd quickly discounted me as a terrorist. But they had other ideas. I was led back into the office and, surrounded by eight officers, read my rights and told I was being arrested. I went into total shock as I was handcuffed and put in the back of a police van.

Then followed a hellish journey along a winding coastal road in the middle of a police convoy, where I was thrown around in a cage, unable to steady myself because my hands were cuffed. Just as I thought I'd be sick, we arrived at Newquay police station.

That's when I was told that I was being arrested for possession of an imitation firearm at an airport. I said I didn't know it was there and that it was a toy. I refused a lawyer, thinking, 'This is mad. They'll check me out and realise it's all a hideous mistake. James will explain.'

I used my one call to ask James to bring some rice cakes and bananas in because I have a special diet. They took my earrings, cut off my shell necklace and went through

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my wallet before I ended up in a video cell because of the 'nature of the crime'. Two policewomen came in and it dawned on me what was coming. But I was damned if I was going to be strip-searched on video, so I heaved the mattress upright in front of the camera and no one stopped me.

I undressed as they pulled on plastic gloves. There was no internal search, but I had to lift my arms, then my breasts, so they could see underneath. I forced myself to shut down and simply cooperate. I was worried sick about the shoot, too. I had to get to London.

I dressed and was given tea, then I was left, with someone doing a 'suicide check' every so often. I meditated to keep myself calm, telling myself I had nothing to fear.

THE 'THAT'S LIFE' LINK

At around 4.30pm, I was taken into an interview room and sat opposite a detective constable, the toy gun lay tagged among other items of my kit on the table between us. That's when I discovered what they thought was going on. 'We think you're a journalist and you're trying to pull a fast one to test airport security,' he said. They'd found an old BBC card in my wallet from when I worked on *That's Life* 19 years ago and decided I was a journalist. My whole new life as a B&B owner was a cover, apparently. That's when reality hit. 'If that's what you think,' I said, 'I am going to need a lawyer.'

After a gruelling hour and a half, it was finally over. At 7pm, I was released on bail and handed back my empty rucksack and trainers, without the laces. Their parting shot was that I wasn't allowed to approach the airport and I wasn't allowed to fly.

I strode out in an absolute fury. James came to collect me and I climbed into the car. As he set off I exploded at him and he

exploded back. It was a ferocious row. He got out as we reached home, but I just slid over into the driver's seat and set off for London. I sobbed for the whole journey and arrived exhausted. But, next morning,

I hired equipment and turned up on the ad set on time.

I found myself a good lawyer and laid low in Newquay to avoid the looks and the gossip - everyone had read about me in the local papers. But the whole thing put an intolerable strain on our marriage. James and I went round in circles. Why? Why?

Why? The best I got from him was that he'd placed the gun in the bag in the upheaval of moving from London to Newquay. The gun had actually been placed underneath the lining at the bottom of the bag. He said to the police that he'd told me about it being there. But he hadn't, and that was my whole defence. I simply did not know it was in there.

I endured five court hearings over eight months before the actual trial at Truro Crown Court in May 2006. I faced up to five years in jail if convicted. For two days, I sat behind a glass screen, alone but for a guard, listening to a version of events where I was a thrill-seeker who was playing 'a press game to thumb their noses at provincial airport security'. It was like being in one of the film sets I mocked up, watching my whole life being thrown through the air between two barristers, like legal tennis. I didn't break down until it came to my counsel's summing up. Then the tears rolled down my cheeks as I heard him describe who I really was. The good, hard-working, community-minded, respectable person. Someone who had no idea there was a toy gun in her bag.

The jury returned after an hour and a half. As I heard the words 'Not guilty', I simply felt numb. I bowed and said, 'Thank you.' But that wasn't the end of it. That day in the airport and the harrowing aftermath had ripped apart my marriage and James and I are now getting divorced. And recently I was stopped from boarding a plane, despite being found innocent. My life has been turned upside down by the incident. I felt emotionally drained after the court case, but later came the fury. Fury that I was plunged into such a terrifying situation through no fault of my own.

Now I'm more cautious in life. I'm not the same, trusting person I used to be. □