

ONE

The car juddered as he took it over the railway lines too fast. Ahead was a stop sign, but he took the right-angled bend on two wheels into the main street. Now the surface was tarred again, after the dirt of the shortcut from Molteno. He put his foot down and roared through the quiet town.

Sterkstroom, at midnight, was all but a ghost town, except for the blaze of the main street lamps. He knew it well enough – even in daylight it barely showed any sign of life, aside from the farmer’s co-op through the week, and the hotel bar on a weekend. He knew. He did business in both places. John Stafford was a stock feed sales representative working for Cape Milling Company, in the city of East London, South Africa.

He pushed the needle on the company Peugeot’s speedometer up to 140 kph as he left Sterkstroom behind. At this time the speed limit in South Africa was 90 km per hour on the open road, but he was not worried about cops at that hour. In a few minutes he was wishing that he had been. In fact he wasn’t even in a hurry. It was true that he had had a hard week and he was tired, but it had been very successful and now, on Thursday night, he’d done his circuit for the week, and was headed home with a day to spare. There had been a small delay while he succumbed to an offer of a couple of beers, then supper, by a farmer near Steynsburg. It had been a small price to pay for the large order the farmer, starting a two-hundred-head cattle feedlot, had signed. This accounted for the late hour.

For John Stafford, twenty-six years old, home was a smallholding below the Amatola Mountains, ten kilometres west of the little town of Stutterheim, a bit over an hour's trip from East London.

His wife, Helen, would not be there. She had refused to stay there alone, even with the bull mastiffs for company. She would be with her mother in East London. In fact he didn't even think she called the smallholding home. It was a place where they met at week-ends; he felt a jolt of bitterness. He had just bought the place when they were married and she seemed to like it then. She'd wanted laying hens so he'd bought her a hundred day-old chicks and built her a run for them, but when they changed from little fluffy yellow balls into straggly messy half-grown chickens at six weeks, she was no longer interested and handed over their feeding to Jacob, the Xhosa farmhand. Likewise she attacked the garden with gusto for a month, then, slowly lost interest.

She missed the city and everything she had with it. He wanted to spend most of his weekends developing their little farm, but she got them involved in parties in East London. At first he hadn't mind because he was proud of her, and she of him. She wanted to show him off. In the city she was good company; she was charming and witty with a sharp mind, and she had to have people with a similar intellect to feed her ego. He liked to think that he was a match for her in that way, but he didn't need people the way she did. He wanted to get back to the peace of the Amatolas and the challenge of his own little patch. For the first couple of months he had managed to get home most nights and arranged his district visits to allow him to do so, but it meant neglecting his more distant areas.

"Getting settled down to married life, now, John, hey?" Chris van Eck had asked him, one day. Chris was the sales manager. He'd grinned, a bit embarrassed. He had guessed what Chris was going to

say. "Think you could tear yourself away from your good-looking wife sometime soon and do an Aliwal-Burgersdorp-Molteno trip, and Kallie van der Merwe phoned to say when the hell are you coming to see him in – where the hell is he? – Barkly?"

"I'm not staying here on my bloody own with you a whole week away, John bloody Stafford, " Helen had stormed. "I'll put up with a night or two now and then, but not a whole bloody week".

"Oh Christ, darling, you knew I'd have to be away sometimes. It's only a week a month. For my two northern areas"

"I don't give a shit. I don't like it here anyway, even when you are here with me, and I just bloody refuse to spend a week here on my own."

"It's only four nights".

"Only. Let me tell you something now. When you leave here on Monday morning, I'm taking the *bakkie* and going to Mum's. I'll be back when I know that you'll be here." The *bakkie* was the little one-ton pick-up truck that Stafford used on the farm.

And that was what she did. For the past year. Only, sometimes she stayed the weekends too, forcing him to go to East London if he wanted to see her.

Helen. Half the time he loved her to distraction and hated her for the rest. God, how they fought! There were times when he couldn't wait to get away from her. Like the last week. As usual it was about how lonely she was at Oakvale, the smallholding. Then it had developed into a slanging match, bitter and vicious. She had a quick temper and was not afraid to let it loose. He, too, had a nasty temper, and although it was, thank God, slower to rise, it could be murderous.

He could clearly remember when his mother was still alive. They had lived in a little house in Bezuidenhout Valley, Johannesburg, just the two of them. His mother had bought a bull terrier pup for his

birthday – he had just turned fifteen and was a big lad, even then – and he'd only had it about a fortnight, when it got out into the street. Dashing out right after it, he'd been in time to see it run over. The man had stopped immediately, and was bending over the pup before the youngster reached him. He wasn't very big and John beat him up badly before his mother pulled him off. Afterwards, he got her to take him to the hospital to see him, to say sorry, but the man wouldn't allow them to let him in. It was lucky that he didn't lay charges for assault. That was the sort of temper he had, so he did not ever want to lose it with Helen that way. This was hard when she started throwing things at him. He felt sick at the recollection so nearly losing control.

As he recalled later, that's what he was thinking about when it happened. He had a steady 140 kms on the speedometer when the blue light started flashing out of the darkness ahead. He braked hard without locking the wheels; totally dismayed.

"Well, you silly shit," he told himself, "You've been asking for this," even as he wondered what the bastards were doing, out trapping after midnight. It was a lonely bit of road, that piece between Sterkstroom and the T-junction with the main road to the north. He knew there was only one farm house near the road. Most of the others, the few that were there, were not even in sight of it. He was also terrified that the rumour that he had heard about the latest speed fines was true; that it was a minimum of R500 now, and if they caught you doing over 120 kph, they took your car away. As it was a company car, the confiscation would mean losing his job. He almost felt nausea rising and his heart was thudding.

Paying off on Oakvale and the bills that Helen was running up was keeping him in the red as it was, even with his sales commission. This would force him to sell Oakvale. Oh, Christ no!

The Traffic Department car, the standard Peugeot station

wagon, but unmarked, white instead of the standard blue, was backed into a threesome of bluegum trees beneath which were a concrete table and benches; a lay-by for the use of passing motorists. The blue revolving light on its roof threw an eerie glow, flaring and fading, on everything. It made the two cops look like creatures from outer space. Stafford wished that was what they were. On the bonnet facing the way he'd come was the radar antenna.

He stopped beyond the protruding bonnet just out of reach of their headlights. Shadows moved towards him, one huge, one thin. A torch blinded him.

"Alone". It was a mutter, in Afrikaans, that he barely heard. He was prepared to lick both their arses if he could get out of this one.

"Good evening," he said politely, in Afrikaans. It might as well have been the radiator cooling for all the notice they took of him. They let it drag on by walking around with their torches, taking the Peugeot's number, looking at the licence and third party discs. A wave of desperation came over him. Let the bastards tell him! Let them say something. Perhaps that was when he began to get angry.

He said, "Good evening." It wasn't quite a shout, but his own voice shocked him into being scared again. The blue light went on flashing like a desperate heartbeat.

"One hundred and thirty kilometres an hour." He thought it was the thin shadow that spoke. The car rocked as the bulky one leaned on the window frame. The smell of liquor and bad breath hit Stafford as the man sighed.

"You must have money to throw around, mister." He sniffed. "Something like a thousand rand, and of course you'll lose your car." He sniffed again and held out his hand. "Your keys. You are a menace on the roads." There was very little inflection in the voice; it sounded almost bored, but to Stafford it was the death knell to his little farm.

The thousand smacks he'd survive somehow, but the car, a company vehicle, would mean his job and they weren't that easy to come by.

"How do you know it'll be a thousand?" Stafford made no move to his keys.

"Minimum," the big cop said, "Hey, T.O.?"

The thin one was at his elbow. "At least, Senior."

"Your keys," the huge Senior Traffic Officer said again. The big puffy hand waited below Stafford's face. He didn't move. The fingers began to curl in a come-on movement. It seemed to him that when the keys were lost in that hand then everything was lost.

"Isn't there anything I can do to get out of it ... Officer?" Stafford couldn't help but say it, hating himself. Anything, not to lose Oakvale. One part of him was pleading, the other part loathing his lack of pride and hating the cop for doing this to him.

Finally, he tugged the keys out and dropped them into the waiting palm. Equally without haste, the fat fingers closed on them.

"Is there nothing I can do?" It was almost a whine and he felt sick with disgust.

The cop kept his hand on the window, holding Oakvale there, out of John's possession now. Then he spoke.

"You can go to jail for a long time for trying to bribe a traffic officer."

Stafford gaped and then fury came over him in a tidal wave.

"Jesus Christ," he hurled himself against the door which opened ten centimetres before the sheer weight slammed it closed again.

"And a traffic officer can be in serious trouble for accepting a bribe." His voice hardly changed at all. John Stafford was trembling with rage, but he heard him alright.

"I didn't try to bribe..."

"A thousand rand," the thin one said from the senior's side. "Ja, I also heard him. A thousand rand if we didn't give him a ticket. The same as the fine he'd get, but he wouldn't lose his car. That's what he said, Senior."

Stafford was speechless with amazement and anger. His mouth was opening and shutting like a goldfish's.

"I know," said the senior. "As if he isn't in enough trouble already."

Fury battled with a sneaky feeling of hope. He sat there, hating them and himself, hearing the senior officer continue in his monotone. Nothing seemed real.

"A thousand rand. Not so much really. D'you suppose the court will let him pay it off? Instalments? But he will be in jail for trying to bribe a traffic officer so he won't have a job anyway. He'll have to sell something. Like his hi-fi or his new lounge suite."

"Or his house," supplied the T.O.

"Or his house, but I expect he could mortgage it or something". The senior officer sniffed loudly and swallowed. "How do you think he would pay the bribe, T.O., hey? Instalments?"

"Would we be sticking our necks out if we accepted his, well, donation to the Poor Traffic Officer's Benevolent Fund?"

"Not at all, not at all. Perhaps any moment now he will offer his donation. We'll accept of course. Even instalments of, say, R200 a month for five months. Then we'd check our equipment and find it in error, maybe, and he would be free to go home to mommy. Otherwise, if there was no donation, we'd find no fault with our radar, would we, T.O.?" He was tapping a summons book meaningfully against the door.

"None."

"And we'd take his car away?"

"We would."

"And we'd take him to the Queenstown Police Station where he'd be charged with trying to bribe traffic officers?"

"Right away."

"And clutched in his hand would be a speeding ticket?"

"A hundred and thirty two kilometres an hour." The senior spoke directly to John for the first time since he'd taken the keys. "Good evening, sir. I wish to inform you that you have been exceeding the speed limit by forty-two kilometres an hour. I must take possession of your vehicle. If you'll come with me, the Traffic Officer will drive it. Here are the keys, T.O. ... "

"I wish to make a donation to the Poor Traffic Officers' Benevolent Fund." Stafford didn't recognise his own voice. A white cloud blotted everything in his brain except the silhouette in the flashing blue world in his window. Later, he knew what he must have done, but at the time he didn't know that he was doing it.

His left hand pulled the yellow duster cloth from the revolver between the seats, dropped it and gripped the butt. He shot the senior officer in the throat. The shutter of his mind's eye clicked, burning the picture of the man being thrown backwards, into his brain. He leaned upward through the window and shot the thin traffic officer twice in the chest as his right hand dug frantically at the hidden pistol in his belt. He swivelled, the eerie blue light bathing his gape-mouthed face. The shutter clicked again.

