

DÉJÀ VU

As we crested the Franschoek Pass we drove straight into the storm's full fury. Winds, gusting at gale force, rocked the car. The rain, which had drummed steadily on the roof all the way up the lee of the mountain, now lashed us in great blinding handfuls as if flung by a vicious weather god in a foul mood. In over half an hour's driving we had not seen a living soul — unless you count the solitary, soaked cat we had seen cowering under a car as we splashed through the main street of Franschoek at the foot of the pass. On this side of the village, at a height of barely three hundred feet, the valley floor, patchworked with drab green and ochre vineyards, had faded from our sight as we ascended into thick cloud. I had switched on the headlights as we climbed cautiously through the gloom to the summit.

Now, ahead of us, lay the arduous descent to Villiersdorp. An exhilarating drive in fine weather, scary in these conditions, the road clung to the steep mountainside as it wound down through dozens of sharp bends, some of them almost overhanging the dizzying drop to the rocky floor of the gorge far below. I set the windscreen wipers to full speed — but their impotent “thlack, thlack, thlack” could hardly be heard over the driving rain and thundering gusts of wind, some of which were strong enough to lift the blades from the glass.

Changing down to second gear, we started down the slope at little more than walking speed. Across the valley, through a rift in the clouds, loomed the black mountainside, silver-streaked by scores of transitory waterfalls tumbling down ancient gullies to swell the Smalblaar River surging down its rocky bed deep in the gorge. At the first hazardous bend, where we were separated from thin air only by an alarmingly low stone wall, I caught a glimpse of the river – a white ribbon of foam hundreds of feet below. Its distant roar was lost in the clamour of the storm. My wife Betty in the passenger seat, who was after all closer to the edge than I, refused to look. She simply stared straight ahead, her fists clenched, her face almost as white as her hair.

Suddenly the mist around us flickered with a dazzling blue luminescence. Not a second later a sharp crack preluded a deafening rumble which echoed across the sky like a ten-ton boulder being trundled along the stone floor of a cathedral. I turned to Betty.

“Are you thinking what I'm thinking?” I said.

“You mean about that time with the Panhard?” she replied.

I did indeed. The silver-grey Dyna Panhard had been our first car. We had bought it in 1957 shortly after emigrating to South Africa. It was a remarkable little vehicle for its time. It was a sporty, comfortable four-seater. It had front wheel drive and an aluminium body designed in a wind tunnel – both unusual features for an inexpensive family car in those days. Its tiny air-cooled engine was quite a talking point. Two horizontally opposed cylinders, amounting to a mere 850cc, could propel it, whining like a jet engine, at ninety miles per hour on a flat road. The French had designed it as an aircraft engine. At the time, wiser, car-owning friends had advised us against the purchase.

"Choose a well-known make like a Ford or a Chevrolet," they said. "Something with some backup that's manufactured in this country. You'll have problems with servicing and spare parts."

With all the starry-eyed enthusiasm of a youthful first-time buyer I had not listened. They were right as it turned out.

On the occasion we were referring to we had been crossing this very pass. But we had been coming up from the opposite direction. That was well over forty years ago. With Betty heavily pregnant, we had been returning to Cape Town from a holiday along the Cape Garden Route. The skies were cloudless, we had time on our hands, so we decided on a circuitous route back to Cape Town to enjoy the splendid mountain scenery. It was not to be. A mile or two before Villiersdorp a dark curtain was drawn across the sky. We were assailed by a torrential rainstorm.

As we started up the pass the wind had risen. At first it was behind us but, as we turned the first steep bend, it had savaged us from all directions. That was the moment the Panhard chose to prove the wisdom of our friends' advice. Abruptly it lost power. On the first straight bit of road I had pulled over and climbed out. Peering under the bonnet, with the engine running and the rain drenching me through my thin shirt, I could ascertain nothing beyond the obvious fact that one cylinder had gone on strike. A cloud of smoke puffing from the exhaust told me that the fault was more than merely electrical.

Easing myself back into the car like a drowned rat, I decided to take a chance and press on with the remaining cylinder. So, with headlights ablaze, we crept on through the fog and driving rain. Neither of us will ever forget the sound of that sick little engine. *Put, put, put* it went. *Put, put, put*, as it toiled bravely on and up towards the summit.

Now here we were again, white-haired and wiser, travelling the same road in

the same atrocious weather. This time we were driving a luxury vehicle with a Japanese name — something unheard of in those far-off days before the Japanese had entered the world car market. True, it was bigger, more comfortable and much safer thanks to such features as abs braking and airbags. But in these conditions, and at our age, this was no reason to relax. At the next bend we encountered one of those graphic road signs that everybody gets right first time at their driving test. A solid black triangle with small black irregular chunks cascading down its sloping side. Its menace was confirmed when, further round the bend, I had to steer carefully around a few shattered rocks strewn across the roadway. I glanced warily at the streaming rock face on our right.

Further down the road, the wind died a little. Into the relative quietness came a faint sound. A sound that stirred an echo among a rubble of rusty memories. I wound down the window. The sound came closer. It could have been the steady pulse of a farmer's irrigation pump. Or it could have been a car running on one cylinder.

Ahead, through the fog, the glow of headlights appeared. Then a grey shape emerged. A silver-grey shape. A silver-grey Panhard was coming up the pass towards us. It was travelling as slowly as we were, and I was able to get a good look at the driver. He was a young, slim man of about twenty-five wearing his hair in a crew cut. His passenger was an attractive, round-faced girl with an unruly shock of jet black hair, fashioned into a 1950's page boy bob. She looked straight at me. She gave no sign of recognition of course. But I recognised her all right. There was no doubt about it. The eyes I was looking into were Betty's eyes. I recognised him too — and the crewcut that Betty had talked me into wearing all those years ago. Then they were past us — put-put-putting away steadily up the pass as the storm came clamouring back. Struck dumb by what I had seen, I must have sat open-mouthed for several seconds. Then, before I could speak, the weird events took another turn. All sound ceased. I don't just mean that the rain and wind stopped. I mean that suddenly, absolute, total silence reigned. Then the fog got whiter and thicker, forming itself into a tunnel down which we glided, then spiralled — moving faster and faster towards an intense white light that had appeared up ahead. The light came closer and closer until we were enveloped in a dazzling radiance. With it came sound. An unbearably intense, ultra-high-frequency note that sang like a million cicadas. I took Betty's hand as we melded with the sound and the light into a continuum of pure energy.

Put, put, put went our brave little engine as it toiled up the slope. The storm had returned in its full ferocity. I gave a little frown and a shiver.

"What's the matter?" Betty asked.

"Dunno," I said. "I thought I saw a bright light and had an eerie ringing in my ears. I felt as if someone walked over my grave."

I noticed that Betty was holding her swollen belly with both hands.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

"Oh yes. It's just that little Henry is getting a bit restless".

"Henrietta, you mean."

"If you insist."

As we proceeded up the pass the wind relented a little. But the rain redoubled its assault — overwhelming the windscreen wipers and hiding the road as it bounced knee-high off the surface. At times I had to put my head out of the window to steer. I was worried about Betty. She was seven and a half months pregnant. I hoped that the stress and discomfort of this journey would have no ill effects.

To our relief the little car made it to the top of the pass. Then it was plain sailing downhill to Franschoek. Down in the valley the wind eased. But not the rain, which continued to drift down in veils from the dark shroud of the cloud base. It was two and a half hours since we had left Villiersdorp — a journey that should take no more than thirty minutes in a sound vehicle in good weather.

We found a service station next door to a restaurant where we sat nursing cups of coffee for an hour while we awaited the mechanic's verdict.

"Bad news, I'm afraid," he said examining his oil-blackened fingernails. "Looks like you'll need a new piston. I've been on the phone to the agents in Cape Town. They will have to order one from France. Could take at least a fortnight." At last I saw the wisdom of my friends' advice on the choice of a car. So did Betty, but she didn't rub it in.

"Do you think we can make it back to Cape Town?" I asked him.

"Can't guarantee it," he said. "But if you take it easy, especially up the hills, you should be OK."

As we were getting back into the car we heard the sound of approaching sirens. Through the rain we saw flashing lights — one blue, one red. And then a police car followed by a fire-and-rescue vehicle came racing up the village street towards us. They roared past in a mist of spray, sending two women sharing an umbrella scuttling towards the pavement.

"They are heading back up the pass," said Betty. "I can't imagine where they are going. A fire couldn't last ten minutes in this weather."

We made it back to our home in Vredehoek on the lower slopes of Table Mountain. Halfway up our driveway, which was exceptionally steep, the Panhard's engine finally expired. It was still raining heavily. Leaving our bags in the car we hurried into a cold and gloomy house. I gathered firelighters and wood while Betty put the kettle on. Soon we were huddled round a crackling fire sipping mugs of hot sweet tea. I felt the raindrops on Betty's hair as she rested her head on my shoulder.

"You know something," I said, holding her close. "You may think I'm silly but right at this moment it feels good to be alive."

She gave me a little kiss on the cheek. "You're not silly," she said.

Next evening, after a hectic day at the office, I sat relaxing with a whisky and the evening paper. On page two a headline caught my eye.

"Betty, come and look at this."

Over my shoulder she read:

Mystery Couple Killed in Rock Fall

Yesterday, in the Cape's worst storm for twenty-two years, a car was swept off the road by a rock fall on the Franschoek Pass. The two occupants were burned beyond recognition when the vehicle burst into flames at the bottom of the gorge 90 m below. Fire and Rescue vehicles from Paarl and Stellenbosch rushed to the scene. The bodies were extricated in dangerous conditions by members of the Mountain Club. Their identity remains a mystery. No one has been reported missing. The crushed vehicle, which was almost buried by tons of rock, was of a make that could not be identified by the rescuers. The number plates had apparently been made of some plastic material and were burnt to a cinder. The word TOYOTA, which is believed to be a Japanese name, was attached to the boot in the form of a metal badge. This has led to speculation that the couple could be Japanese

tourists. Enquiries with the Dept. of Immigration have, however, yielded no results. The pass will be closed to traffic for at least three days.

"That's what the fire engine rushing through Franschoek was all about," I said. "You know, we only encountered one car on the pass. I wonder if was them."

"I don't think so," said Betty. "I got a good look at them. That car was driven by an elderly couple. And they were definitely not Japanese."

Anonymous