

Three word story
Traffic warden, Matjiesfontein, bikini

Love at First Sight

Traffic Warden Gysbert Stoffel Denys Reitz Labuschagne was a handsome and imposing figure in his uniform, worth most of the Rands he brought into the coffers of the Matjiesfontein Town Council, despite the cost of maintaining his enormous motorcycle, and the need to placate those whom his over-zealous *modus operandii* offended on the road where his position offered a golden opportunity for payback. And Labuschagne harboured a smouldering resentment against the distant past.

His grandfather had served time in one of the British labour gangs intended to deter errant inhabitants from repeating a variety of offences. Oupa Gysbert's speciality was boarding the moving train from horseback between Worcester and the empty expanses of the Great Karoo to relieve the passengers of their valuables before an athletic return to the saddle of his galloping horse and a rapid disappearance into the surrounding countryside. Labuschagne still thrilled to think of it – a daring redistribution of wealth - as he thought of it.

An unfortunate miscalculation resulted in Oupa's choice of a stretch of line that crossed the Dubbeltjies River on a bridge, where faithful old Bles slid to a neighing halt on the edge of the chasm, unable to follow the train, leaving Oupa to be overwhelmed by British troops en route to garrison Matjiesfontein. His trial was a formality, with no shortage of identifying witnesses, the sentence of 5 years in hard labour ending Oupa's swashbuckling career in the world of free enterprise although the ignominy of his incarceration was to rankle many decades later.

A familiar sight was Traffic Officer Labuschagne in heated debate with the driver (usually white haired and prosperous) of some luxury (usually open-top) model that he had pulled over on the access road to Matjiesfontein, as they turned off the N1 on a whim to explore this historic feature. Only slightly less provocative was any station-wagon or microbus with curtains on the windows, an affront that Labuschagne could not let pass. Locals removed them and let their upholstery, produce and children take their chances in the harsh climate.

Passing freeway custom at the few Matjiesfontein eateries was adversely affected by a warning spread among well-off, regular, provincial travellers, but sufficient blissfully ignorant tourists continued to fuel Labuschagne's conviction that only money laundering, syndicate crime or drug-running could account for their affluence, and they left their thirty minute roadside ordeals, shaken and bewildered, counting themselves fortunate to be let off with a dark warning not to trifle with South African law enforcement agencies, Avis or Hertz stickers and supporting documentation signed with a huge and illegible signature - with many initials.

An incident where Labuschagne's leaking black ballpoint pen was thrust into the startled earhole of a non-English speaking Swiss driver to improve his hearing was difficult to deal with when that victim finally found someone to complain to about his treatment by the police state. Fortunately, Councillor Bezuidenhout was also owner of The Cottages resort and a

night's accommodation and a bottle of Klipdrift with a traditional Karoo lamb braai went some way towards placating him. And his wife and 3 traumatised children.

He left early next morning, hung-over, but in search of a pharmacy and some sort of solvent for the viscous black mess still seeping from the affected ear. The replacement of his ruined pillow was added to the overall cost of the peace offering and deducted from Labuschagne's salary to his disgust.

Labuschagne's off-duty time was spent in the Rinkhals bar at the Lord Milner Hotel where he began watching "Britain's Got Talent" on the cheap satellite TV channel that ran re-run after re-run, enjoying the humiliation of English hopefuls who could neither sing, dance, play nor entertain very well. That was until he saw Lettice Rowbotham's first audition.

At first sight of her, he set down his glass on the counter before him, folded his arms and leaned forward intently, his Calvinistic upbringing forgotten as he stared with unbridled and instant lust at the leggy young woman on the screen. Drinking in her every word and giggled response to the judges, his eyes roamed over her artfully tousled mane of hair, voluptuous mouth and statuesque, sequin encased body. The violin and bow in her hands were background to the most British English voice Labuschagne had ever heard, but when she began to play, the hair on his forearms rose in conjunction with his blood pressure.

Since train robbery tends to be a hand to mouth profession, Oupa had left little in this world besides a violin that nobody else could play, least of all Pa or Gysbert, but it had hung on a nail since the old man's last mangled tune in the little sitkamer of the modest cottage that was still his home - its moulting horsehair bow beside it.

When Lettice, still giggling and flashing those superb teeth, first left the stage to thunderous applause, she took Gysbert's accelerated heart with her. He sat there for a long time. But his days thereafter revolved around the next on- screen appearance of his fantasy, and luxury sports cars and curtained station wagons passed him without disturbing his reveries - there in the aromatic shade of the few petrified gumtrees that marked the turn-off into Matjiesfontein.

Some of his thoughts involved guilt at his own perfidious turnabout, but these evaporated as the time for his next fix drew closer and disappeared altogether as Lettice progressed through the rounds, each time in a more revealing or spectacular and flattering outfit. Her considerable music skills were mostly lost on Labuschagne, other than to heighten his adoration and lust by the passionate gyrations and contortions of a top violinist at full stretch.

When she finally emerged as the ecstatic winner, Labuschagne shared in her joy – until he realised that he would not see her again. It plunged him into despair, a despair that played havoc on the roads that he patrolled, with more tickets bearing his clumsy signature than ever before flooding into the drop-box at the Council offices.

It was a blistering November day, with the noon sun directly overhead, and Labuschagne's patch of shade had shrunk to the base of the gums. He steeled himself to issue one more

ticket before seeking shelter elsewhere, perhaps under the overhang of the Post Office building, although the infrequent passing traffic would yield no more prey, residents having even removed the rails and fittings that had supported any sort of blind or sun-screen that might arouse his suspicions that the owner was transporting contraband.

Mopping his streaming brow, Labuschagne set about leaving his post, folding the collapsible skeleton triangles that marked his lair and, snapping shut the plastic writing case that contained his ticket-book and other documents, he became aware of a subdued mechanical growl and looked up to see the prize of the week, perhaps the year. The car pulling in sedately enough at his excited waving seemed to be all engine bonnet with its crouching hindquarters an afterthought. Open to the sky behind the raked windscreen, the driver wore enormous sunglasses and Labuschagne took in the mass of hair piled under a baseball cap. Obviously a disguise. He squared his shoulders and strode forward, re-opening his writing case and clicking his ballpoint officiously. Hanging from the central rear view mirror was some sort of garment, green, with strings dangling down into the footwall, clearly an impediment to the driver's view of the road behind.

"Contravening Section 5 (2) (b) *"Drive motor vehicle on a public road without a clear view of the road and other traffic"* he growled, inserting a fresh carbon sheet under the top notice in his pad.

"**Reahilly** officer? I had no **ideah!** I have these two simply **ENORMOUS** sayd mirrahs that seem to do the job. It's only **TEMP**orary . . . just until the thing drays! It's **neahly** dray **NOW!** I swam **ages** ago."

Reflecting on when he had last ticketed a woman, and Intent on starting his traffic notice, Labuschagne almost bit off his protruding tongue when an altogether too familiar giggle followed the driver's genteel protest. His pen froze above the page, and he willed himself not to look at the driver. It was like a dog caught sniffing at forbidden food on a table. "Name?" he croaked

"Name? Oh, Lettice – like the salad, **Row**botham, like row the **boat** and ham - you know? What's yours?"

Labuschagne could not believe his ears. Especially when a man's voice, clearly not his own, replied, after two attempts to clear a throat.

"Traffic Warden Gisbert Labushane. Destination?"

"**WELL**, I so **loved** the name of the hotel heah – I **MEAN** . . . The **Lord Milner!** I just **HAD** to see it for myself. So I booked myself a week there! **Sooo** different from back home! So **colonial!** To tell the truth, that old TV series was just **TOO** nerve-racking and I needed a holiday! So **heah** I am! In sunny **AFFFRICA!** Just **HAD** to take a dip along the road – I was **ABSOL**utely boiling!" She felt the garment dangling from the mirror and then bundled it into the glovebox.

Labuschagne's stomach lurched as he realised it was a bikini, green and brief, as, for just a moment, his upbringing flooded back and in his mind's eye, a huge celestial banner wreathed in flickering flames proclaimed "JEZEBEL" in the sky over a placid river in which a tiny, near-naked figure cavorted and splashed below the Dubbeltjies River bridge.

Then again, that delightful, self-conscious giggle and Labuschagne braced himself to look at her. She had slid the sunglasses down her perfect nose and was looking him over in an unmistakable fashion, those magnificent eyes and splendid teeth in a wide, lascivious grin.

For the first time in memory, Labuschagne closed his writing case without writing a traffic notice, his mind in turmoil. This wasn't happening to him. "Please adhere to the rules of the road." someone said, using his voice as he turned his back and busied himself to hide his confusion. Behind him the sleek sports-car rumbled into life and pulled away, showering him with gravel. "**Byyyyyeeee**" floated back as a slim brown arm waved a farewell.

The rest of the day passed in a daze. When the sun sank over the distant mountains, he stirred himself and thumbed his motorcycle into life. A leisurely trundle down the access road took him to his cottage and a tepid shower under the 44-gallon drum perched in the rafters. He was towelling himself dry when the unmistakable note of a high-powered car set the window-panes a-tremble. It stopped and was replaced by the sound of heels on the paved stoep. Labuschagne wound the towel around his middle and peered through a hole in the curtains at Lettice's loud, confident knocking.

"I'm coming, hang on!" he shouted, clawing clothes out of his cupboard and struggling into them before opening the door.

"HULLO Gisbert. . ." cooed the vision on his stoep with a giggle. "I thought we may have started off on the **wrong** foot. So to **speak**! Can I ask you for a drink? Or two? The Lord Milner is **delightful** with this quaint little bar on one side . . ." "Then her voice faded as her eye caught sight of something over Labuschagne's right shoulder. "Is that . . . is that . . . is it what I think it is . . . **could** be? Her hand was cool on his bare chest as she urged him aside and glided into the sitkamer towards Oupa's violin. She lifted it down, turning it reverently this way and that in her strong, elegant violinist's hands, peering into the sound-holes. A moment later, she lowered it - eyes closed.

"It is . . . it bloody **IS**! It's a bloody Strad!"

"Ummm, no . . . it's a viool – a violin." murmured a nonplussed Labuschagne.

"But a **Stradivarius** – my ever so suddenly even more attractive parochial friend. You've just written your last ticket. Drinks are on me!"

Mike Job