

It wasn't so hard to get up that morning because I knew that trouble was on the way. It was a stupidly warm winter morning; out-of-place warm; like a slimy warning that chaos was brewing thick and tangible, chewy like my thick coffee. I hadn't slept well the night before, and my bed hadn't been the refuge I'd expected.

I put on my uniform; the ridiculous royal blue suit boasting pseudo stripes of rank on its lapels. Stripes of power, asserting my official status as Security Officer for the Jaricuda Vehicle Sales Company. My cap was sweaty and well-worn, a thing with its own long history, and together with my patent leather shoes it miraculously wrought me into an imposing figure of authority: a man you don't mess with. The uniform was cleverly designed and could transform any wimp into a tough and namelessly brutal gladiator. The whole effect was a pantomime designed to make customers feel secure that the used cars they were buying had been well looked after. Being tall and ruddy, I added to this impression by blanking my expression and holding my head erect as I patrolled the showroom.

Thursday. A stupid day to have this type of auction if ever there was a bad day. I broke the filter off my cigarette, lit the ragged end, and sipped the rough coffee till there remained only the sludge at the bottom of the pot to chew on. My nerves were shot. I craved a drink. At six thirty in the morning.

Instead I forced myself to shave; the cold water on my rusty face livened me and braced me for day. An unusual day, fraught with uncertainty and labour. My world was small, and even the most trivial-appearing changes persecuted me.

Those days I was living in a small room attached to the company's huge motor showroom. The room was originally built to store cleaning equipment, but my bosses Jimmy and Syd Jaricuda had converted it into a flatlet for me since it was situated next to a shower and toilet. The deal was that I could live there for free whilst providing them with a measure of security - they had a body on the premises at night. The bargain cut advantageous both ways. I never went anywhere.

One of my duties as Security Officer was to open the doors at seven in the morning. This was stupid because nothing ever happened before nine but my bosses were very insistent about it. I actually think that one of my councillors must have told them it was essential for me to have some sort of responsibility and routine to keep me on the rails. I guess they were right, and the Jaricudas were good people who actually cared about their staff.

At ten to seven I was breakfasted and fully window-dressed. I left my room to proceed with the ritualistic door-opening ceremony, swinging the huge bunch of keys casually from side to side. As I rounded the corner my attention was caught by a figure in the glass front doors. I stopped in my tracks to absorb what confronted me. There was someone already waiting to get inside. This was extremely odd because during the past seven months I had been working for the company nobody had ever been three hours too early. And there he stood, leaning his slight frame against the glass.

A little bloke, about fifty five, fat guts, wig, grey checked trousers, overpasted white shoes, fragile round glasses. A rep. Very definitely a travelling salesman. A model straight from the mould, the most typical example I'd ever seen. He looked like he'd just stepped out of the Bumsteads cartoon. Very agitated.

A fast talker with a self-effacing, ingratiating tone: "Can I test drive the Mercedes 230TE right now?" he inquired, not even giving me a chance to put the first key in its hole.

This decision was not at all difficult. My authority did not cover allowing early birds to test-drive the cars, so I simply shook my head negative. However, I could have allowed him in to preview the merchandise if I so chose. But I sensed that if I let him in he would cling to me and bear unfair pressure upon me, so I swung away from the door and ignored him. Don't think me cruel, this was really self-preservation: it was almost a miracle that I could cope with my job as it was. I had specifically chosen that sort of work because there was wasn't any burden of responsibility.

In any case the fun would begin at ten thirty. He could read the poster on the wall. Being this early was his problem, not mine. Nonetheless, I was surprised that he didn't amble off to his car and return three hours later. He just stood there stuffed with purpose, a man held by a mission that nothing, not even an earthquake could budge.

Slowly the staff began trickling in and I opened one of the side doors for them. Jimmy and Syd, my bosses, were togged out in their most impressive pin-striped suits, both beaming feverishly with excitement, ready for business. Two youngsters, they certainly did not cut figures of used-car traders and this perhaps was the secret of their success. Their ideas were unconventional and naive - they did clean, honest deals for which they became known very quickly. Their advertising splash was that they were launching a totally new marketing concept but in effect it was really a simple sale disguised as an auction.

Both men sported airs of super-confidence to hide their fear of failure to keep the morale of the staff high. All smiles of assuredness, they fooled everyone except me; firstly because I knew them better, and secondly because I'd had a crack at the big time once myself. I too had experienced the dread that suddenly overwhelms you when you realise that you've gone further than half way; when you discover in shock that retreat is absolutely impossible and liberation is a misty remote ungraspable ghost. This auction could make or break my them and I really empathised with their angst. I prayed that everything would turn out well for them. These boys had done a lot for me.

As opening time drew near, the sales people began boil with excitement. In all the hustle and bustle I was the only one with nothing to do so I manoeuvred myself over to the invoice clerk's desk. I made an exaggerated show of extinguishing my cigarette in her ashtray so as to cover my real purpose, which was to chat with her whilst stretching a glimpse down her blouse.

This girl, Gillian Teedy was a nut if ever I met one. Black-haired, blue-eyed, and cream-skinned she appealed to every man who laid eyes on her. But she had a personality problem which cancelled all her physical attractiveness: she was forever trying to withdraw and make contact at the same time. She withdrew from people by being either peircingly rude or neurotically shy. She reached out to them by flashing.

Gillian did not believe in in underwear - her good nipples always strained the see-through shirts she wormed into. And you could often catch a glimpse of the dark patch beneath her very short miniskirts which she wore come rain, sunshine, ice or snow. Physically she was very attractive in the cheapest way possible and she un-nerved the Hell out of me. I had no affect on her at all, because I didn't fit into the only two categories of people she could see: men she had a desire to devour and bitches who competed with her for those men.

But men gravitated to her like moths and each one in turn was repelled immediately; either by her insane shyness or her wild temper. My own assessment was that she was testing each suitor: she needed a man who was strong enough to resist her moods, was impervious to her jabs at his sensitivity whilst being utterly accomodating to hers; a knight who radiated power and independence and at the same time had to be totally overcome by her.

In all the time I worked with her no-one had come near sweeping her off her feet. In fact, I was sure she was a virgin.

Anycase, she accomodated my curiosity and allowed me a small thrill by leaning forward. After a regulation quantity of small talk had passed between the two of us, I sauntered off to chat to Jimmy Jaricuda. At forty nine I was like a father to him - he was only twenty eight and already a multi-millionaire. His wild energy helped him pack a thousand minutes into an hour and he had maturity well beyond his years. He looked tired to me.

"Doc," he said "I haven't slept a wink. Some crazy lunatic phoned me at least twenty times last night about the Mercedes 230TE. He kept trying to make me sell him the car before opening time. He begged and pleaded, and pleaded some more. After I'd refused point blank at least six times, he demanded to speak to Syd hoping he'd be able to convince him to override my decision."

"Out of sheer mercy to my brother I never put him through, so he kept phoning throughout the night hoping that Syd would answer. Eventually he would hang up as soon as he heard it was me; he even tried to disguise his voice and ask for Syd. I didn't want to leave the phone off the hook because I was also expecting a call from my girlfriend who is on holiday in Australia. I'm totally drained."

My mind flashed back to the little guy who had been waiting at the front door earlier that morning. I hurried back to reception and sure enough, there he stood, Horatio defending his position. His delicate arms were spread out wide against the glass door, aggressively declaring that he was in the front of the line and that no-one dare try and push in front of him. A considerable crowd had built up behind him.

Leering over his shoulder was a tall, pot bellied character with an expression of fierce determination burnt into the creases on his face. This man needed something so badly that he sucked in all the warmth of the showroom. At all costs I avoided looking him the eye. Without claiming to be psychic, I knew that it had to be one of those two guys who'd been pestering Jimmy on the phone the night before.

Let me explain how this new style of merchandising cars differed from the normal auctioneering. Usually the cars were driven one by one in front of a podium and were bid for by the customers who sat on a grand stand. Each sale lasted about five minutes, and on some occasions could take up to twenty minutes. In order to achieve more sales per hour, Jimmy had come up with this brilliant idea that instead of auctioning the cars one by one they would be sold on a first come, first serve basis; free-market style. A definite price was stuck on each windscreen so bidding for the cars was obviated, and clients could simply roam around the hall and choose whichever cars they wanted. Test driving the cars was also permitted.

The sale was hugely attractive because of the vast stock of vehicles on hand: close to a thousand of them. These were cars that dealers, private individuals, bank repossession agencies, and a host of others wanted to sell. Every type of car was represented, from the cheapest junk, to the top of the range luxuries. Anyone who needed wheels was sure to find something he wanted.

To draw in the crowds huge advertisements were placed in all the newspapers as well as the popular radio stations. Management used the true and tested trick of promoting a few loss leaders: a few of the cars were priced ridiculously low. A dozen or so were going for a tenth of their true value.

One of the best buys was a three year old Mercedes 230TE station wagon priced at five thousand Rand, about eight times too cheap. The car had actually been a factory unit on which upholstery apprentices had been trained. In other words, the carpeting and seats had been put in and taken out thousands of times by young students who had been taught their trade on it. The car had become known as the "whore" and was wanted by no-one. The Mercedes management had turned it over to our company to liquidate.

If my drivers' licence had not been revoked I would have bought the "whore" myself, because it was a super buy, especially since the seats and upholstery were in such good nick. The car was the number one drawcard and was the object of desire which drove that unsleeping pest to disturb Jimmy throughout the previous night.

By ten thirty the crowd had developed into a mass of humanity. Regular individuals had become transformed into obsessively greedy vultures thirsty for bargains. The air reeked of gluttony and cash.

Our small staff of about twenty people had been bolstered to about fifty by the rounding up of family and friends who accepted one-day jobs as car sales people. These were all folk who had called in sick for the day at their normal jobs. The Jaricudas offered an excellent on-the-spot commission for any car sold. They were lined up and "sworn in" like sheriff's deputies. When the authority of each temporary salesman had been formalised by a badge on his chest, I was instructed to open the doors.

Before I tell you how I did that, let me first describe the showroom. It was actually a huge metal building, very similar to an aeroplane hanger, and it was BIG. It held a thousand cars which all had to be parked in such a way that any particular one could be easily driven out for test driving. Visualise six football fields covered with motorcars.

I knew that if I simply unlocked the doors and let everyone in there would be a stampede. Obviously the first person to get killed would be ME. Six months earlier I would have welcomed that sort of fate, but now things had changed. I just could throw in the towel and waste all those bitter struggles against the bottle. Too much sacrifice and sweat had gone into my rehabilitation. Life could not be that futile. I owed it to myself to keep up the fight. So I chose not to be crushed and decided to figure out some other way of letting the customers in.

Diversion.

Responding to a pre-arranged signal the company mechanic roared a Porsche wildly out of the side roller-shutter door, and at the same instant Jimmy Jarricuda flicked on the burglar alarm siren. Howling wails and screeching tyres paralysed the mob for a split second, giving me enough time to fling the doors open and run to my post near the auctioneering podium, escaping the frenzy.

Slowly the anesthesia vaporised and the multitudes poured into the showroom like hungry ants. But unlike these sensible insects which always have such a perfect sense purpose and direction the bargain-starved fools rushed around hither and thither befuddled as to which way to go, utterly overwhelmed by variety and choice. The hysterical panic that the deal of a lifetime might be missed rose in the breast of each soul.

And amid this uncertainty two people sallied forth more visible than the rest. They were the first two customers in the line: the little sales representative right at the front, and the large, fierce looking guy behind him. Both left their starting blocks like Olympic sprinters, literally tearing up and down the lines of cars. Searching, searching, searching for their prey: the Mercedes 230TE station wagon. They were hunters, brash, fearless warriors, brazenly attacking that showroom: unstoppable centurians on a critical quest. Choosing different routes they raced up and down the rows oblivious to the world.

My attention focussed on the bigger man and and I realised that he too was a travelling salesman. His white trousers, white shoes, bright red sweater and his mock-gangster hat publicised his desire to sell and promote products, while his thick eyebrows and creased cheeks were evidence of a million jokes in the pub. When I saw the hat go flying off, I yelled to Gillian Teedy to watch the spectacle.

And the really funny thing was that the holy Mercedes was parked right near to where I was standing. In a minute or two they would reach it and some sub-conscious force drew me to position myself near its front door. Tension build-up was knotting in my stomach and my hand kept reaching for my back pocket, searching for the little silver flask of brandy that used to live there. Rationally I knew that the my pocket was empty, but I just could not control my impulses.

I was trembling because this was the same tension that had driven me from my lofty post as District Surgeon to the depths of Hell. Horror flashes of the appalling court case in which I'd lost my nerve shot through me. Blind recollections of the burning self-doubt and the loss of confidence that had crippled me overcame me and I almost fainted. It was the same sinking feeling that had lead me to the bottle. I began to swagger in my need for a drink. Help me. Help me.

It was Gillian Teedy who rescued me with a peppermint. Strange that someone who appeared so remote and untouchable could be sensitive enough to recognise my plight. Her gesture wrenched me back into the world not a second too late. The two crazies had both spotted the Mercedes at the same time and were converging on me at a fearsome pace. I drew in a huge breath to make me large again, while Gillian backed off to her invoicing desk.

The small guy got to me first.

"My car!" he managed to squeeze out, then threw his arms around it protectively, as if he'd just been re-united with his soul after being in a jail for a decade. Suddenly he discovered that he'd actually succeeded and relief burst all over his being. His short life as Roger Bannister came to an end when he realised that he needed to breathe and he began to pant heavily like Husky in a sauna.

Five seconds later his world was up-ended by his rival. The burly man ripped him off the car and staked his own claim on it, slinging five thousand Rand cash in my hand.

The little guy, dispossessed of his prize, flung himself at his enemy in a volcanic rage. He was stopped mid-air by a spiteful punch that echoed with a crack around the huge hall. The left lens of his glasses went milky while the frame contorted into an impossible shape. A fountain of blood gushed from his cheek. But the supercharged adrenalin spurting through his light frame prevented him from noticing.

Instincts unknown to me surfaced from the bottom of my psyche, from beneath all my troubles and problems, through my fear and self-loathing. Automatic reflex caused me to jump between the two of them and push them apart. All three of us were statues rooted to the ground for a few seconds, hearts racing furiously.

Gradually I recognised that I was the first one to emerge from the stupor.

And there I was again, thrust into the middle of other peoples' lives: A JUDGE. Once again it was up to me to decide again who would live and who would not.

The larger competitor, who had earlier been so fierce and aggressive, turned to mash and folded into himself like a wet paper bag. His shoulders slumped in shame, while he reached out his hand to apologise. This gesture was interpreted as another attempt to harm and the little guy cowered behind my back, though still bravely making the motions of shaking his fist. I had to act quickly: my sovereignty in the impasse was unquestioned by throng of people who surrounded us, and I was under the spotlight.

The dilemma was this: the pile of cash in my hand belonged to the larger man and this gave his claim some strength, but the other chap had won the race and furthermore he'd been assaulted. But this was also the one who'd been pestering my boss the whole night before. He deserved some punishment for that. Who was I going to choose?

I opened my mouth and these words came out:

"What's the capital of Japan?"

A quiz. From what compartment in my mind that came years of probing would never expose. But I suddenly discovered that there was more to my personality than I ever could have dreamed.

If I had surprised myself, everyone else was totally knocked out. No-one even considered the absurdity of ending the problem in this way.

The immediacy of the situation caught everyone off guard. The two foes stood like blocks of salt, their whole lives flashing in front of their minds, kamikaze pilots bidding farewell to no-one the second before their planes hit the deck. The little one shook uncontrollably, his head nodding vigorously back and forth, his tongue flapping in and out of its hole, brain frozen stiff:- he knew the answer but could not get his voice to operate. The word would not emerge.

His enemy's face suddenly burst out into a flood of sweat. Doom shrivelled him:- he did not know the answer.

The inner circle of the surrounding crowd suddenly roared in appreciation as the little guy suddenly managed to expel the word "Tokyo!"

He was hoisted onto someone's shoulders and carried to Gillian Teedy's where he could officiate his triumph. The simple paperwork was much more than that, it was a certificate, a medal, a Magna Carta attesting that the conqueror had vanquished his mortal foe.

Realising that he had no hope of retrieving the lost prize, the big guy began puffing up his pride. Gesticulating this way and that he demonstrated the infamous punch to the few straggling customers, showing them how his hand wasn't sore even though the skin on his knuckles was torn. He was adamant that "Tokyo" had been on the tip of his tongue, he would have said it if he hadn't been distracted by the blood, and such things. I waved his money at him and ushered him to another car which I believed was also a good buy. To save face he bought it without hesitation.

I, too, was entitled to commission from the sale of the two cars, so I proceeded to Gillian Teedy's desk to register them. I wiped some of the residual blood off the green leather inlay with my hankchief. Next to me leaned the big travelling salesman, carefully handing his details into Gillian. He was using the opportunity to charm her, taking extra care to tell her his side of the story. His version was becoming increasingly more valliant, and to my surprise she was completely taken in by him. She pointed him to the men's room and arranged some coffee for him when he came back. Actually, he sat there the whole day, helping her with all the forms and entries and whatever she did.

Anycase, I went back to my post and arrived just in time to watch the little guy start the engine of his new object joy. Blood was caked on his cheek which was so swollen he could only see out of one eye. He hadn't even bothered to bend his glasses back to normal. But through the Gates of Heaven he drove, where pain and physical discomfort were irrelevant. As he motored out of the showroom I saw his broad grin metamorphasize into a manic mask of mirth and hysterical guffaws of laughter errupted from his guts.

I watched the tail lights of the Mercedes recede out the hangar and turned my head to Gillian Teedy. She was totally absorbed in her new friend, thunderstruck for the first time in her life. Hell if they could make it, then so could I.