

KEN LEASK

GOD BLESS ALL POLICEMEN

Otto Scholz pressed the radio button and listened for not more than ten seconds before silencing the woman who was singing about her lover far away. He grunted. The bitch. Not the sentimental soprano, the less-than-sentimental bitch at the office. And he had wasted a full hour on her! He had been told the girl was competent, had noted she was pretty and sexy in a sulky sort of way, and had presumed she was ambitious. They had talked all that time until finally he said, "Don't you trust me then?" and she answered, "No, Mr Scholz, frankly I don't."

Silly little bitch probably read too many stories about bosses and girls from the typing pool. Bad bastards who seduced innocent girls who were only trying to make an honest living. He thought, without much satisfaction: someone'll get her soon. Young McLennan, probably. He'd be more patient, take her out a few times, warm her up with plenty of food and wine, talk to her gently about life and love. But he'd get her pants down in the end.

Two hundred metres ahead, at the Fiveways, the lights turned green. His *Commodore* was the last car in the long line of traffic climbing the hill. He edged up closer to the *Falcon* ahead of him. Near the front of the line a semi-trailer groaned its way to the lights at the top of the hill, changed gears, and started on the long descent. The cars behind it speeded up. There were seven or eight in front of the *Commodore* when the lights turned amber. Otto hung on to the tail of the *Falcon*. Half way across the Fiveways he saw that the lights had turned red. Another second and he was safely through. His blood pressure eased down a point or two.

"Pull over, driver."

Where the hell had he come from?

Otto pulled over to the kerb. The motorcycle stopped in front of him and a heavily built sergeant of police dismounted. One of the stern and humourless variety, Otto thought, an

honest and dutiful hack full of his own importance. He walked over slowly, ponderously, looked unemotionally at Otto and asked to see his licence. No "please", no "sir".

Otto decided to play it cool and dignified. Leave this massive pillar of the law wondering about him. He handed him his licence. It was examined and handed back. No comments on either side. The sergeant produced a biro and a book of tickets.

"You went through a red light."

Otto shook his head. "No, the light was amber when I went through. I admit that. But it certainly wasn't red."

The sergeant began writing out the ticket.

"The light turned red five metres before you reached the stop line."

Otto knew his blood pressure was rising again. His head throbbed and his throat felt dry and sore. He coughed.

"The amber, I'm sure."

The sergeant ignored the comment, finished writing out his ticket and held it out. Otto took it. The sergeant looked at a spot over Otto's head and in a court-room voice made a long and formal statement concerning the rights and obligations of a driver in Otto's circumstances.

Otto stared. It was hard to believe that such a flow of words could proceed from this clod who might have reached the status of a floor janitor in his company. And now he was actually frowning at him.

"Have you been listening to me?"

There was a disagreeable tone of irritation in his voice.

"Of course."

"And do you understand your position?"

"Yes," Otto said, "I understand."

He should say something more, he knew, something at once witty and sarcastic that would put this sergeant/janitor in his place, but nothing occurred to him. He could only dream of the huge man dissolving into tears and cries for mercy while he applied some fiendish torture. . . .

The sergeant appeared to think enough had been said. He was already on his motorcycle and in another second had blasted off. No thank you sir, no goodbye, no bloody nothing.

Otto drove home through a mist of red fury.

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Isobel Scholz was reading a magazine when he went in. She looked up at him then back at her magazine. She turned a page.

“You know it’s nearly eight o’clock.”

Otto’s head throbbed, but he was glad she was going to be like this. He was in the mood for a fight. He poured himself a large whisky.

“What’s that statement supposed to mean?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? It’s customary to ring if you’re staying late at the office. You know we always dine at seven.”

Otto wagged his head from side to side. “ ‘You know we always dine at seven.’ ” He liked to parody what he thought of as Isobel’s pommy accent. “What’s the matter with you? Who the hell do you think you are, anyway? Lady Muck or something?”

“I’m trying to remain calm, Otto, in spite of your vulgarity.”

“Jesus Christ!” Otto swallowed his whisky and poured himself another. “Do you know what you sound like? Just like the bastard that gave me a ticket ten minutes ago for going through a yellow light.”

Isobel laughed quietly. “That must have been amusing.”

Otto sipped his whisky. All right, if she really wanted a fight, a bloody good fight this time, he was ready for her. He walked nearer to where his wife was sitting on the sofa and looked down at her.

“You know what you are?”

Isobel shrugged. “I’ve no doubt you have some disagreeable names ready.”

“I have,” Otto said. “You’re a bitch. Like that bloody policeman was the son of a bitch.”

“I see. But why am I a bitch? Because a policeman saw you racing the lights and did his duty?” Isobel glanced down at her magazine. “You really ought to control yourself, Otto. I can’t bear to look at you when you lose control of yourself.



You go purple in the face, and it's very ugly."

Otto made no reply and remained perfectly still for so long that Isobel reluctantly looked up again. She was mildly surprised. He had a strange look in his eyes, as if he were thinking of something far away, or was in pain. She said, "What's the matter?" Otto was staring at her. He seemed to be considering with some difficulty what she had said. Isobel said again, "What's the matter?" And when she saw he still had difficulty in speaking, added, "Aren't you well?"

"No," Otto said very faintly. "I'm not well. I feel funny."

Isobel put her magazine down. She was about to tell her husband that he looked funny, too, when he seemed to make a slow bow to her, then fell forward. His head struck the hard edge of the sofa, bounced off sharply, and his whole body came to rest in an untidy heap on the floor.

Isobel stared at her husband. Was he simply drunk and unconscious, or was he dead? She knelt beside him and put her hand on his chest. No heart beat that she could detect, but then he was a big man and there was a great deal of fatty tissue between his skin and his heart. She put two fingers across his wrist and pressed. No detectable pulse either.

Probably, Isobel thought, she should do something else. Heart massage, perhaps? But it seemed pointless over all that fat. Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation? But Otto's cheeks looked so blotched and his lips were grey and bloated. It would be very unpleasant. . . . Now she noticed that the eyelids were not completely closed. He was dead, no doubt about it. And he was not a pretty sight. She sat on the edge of the sofa again, stared at the body on the carpet, and for some time thought about Otto and their life together. They had been happy once. . . . Then she thought about Neil, and how, after a decent interval, they would be able to meet without all those vexatious subterfuges. She smiled slightly but remembered the body on the floor and said aloud, "God rest his soul". But the formula sounded ridiculous in her ears and she was ashamed of her hypocrisy. She stood up, felt a surge of excitement and blissful happiness, and added, "And God bless all policemen who do their duty nobly."

She smiled again, thinking of the days ahead, then walked slowly over to the telephone. For the look of the thing she would have to ring for the ambulance.

