

The Story

by James Whyte

Frank was slightly stoned and he drove up to the dump and thought about work and Pringle Bay. Pringle Bay was a great setting for a story. The quiet little seaside village in the fynbos on the southern tip of Africa. There'd be a body, a dead woman, and as the story progressed it would transpire that beneath the waters lurked great white sharks and abalone poachers who traded their product for heroin across the Indian Ocean and the story would also include a lithe blonde dancer in her late thirties with a startling bikini tan and blue eyes.

Frank was smiling as he drove into the dump and a woman was driving out and she looked at him strangely. Like she was puzzled by something Frank was doing or he brought back to her some terrible memory. Frank pondered over her look as he took the rubbish bags out of the Nissan and walked across the gravel and placed them in the big steel cage designed to keep out the baboons. Maybe the look was nothing. Maybe he was just stoned. He got back in the vehicle and started it and drove back round towards the entrance. The road was blocked by a police van and a small Japanese car and there was a cop talking to the woman who had just driven out.

Frank got out of the Nissan and walked up to the police van and waited. The cop finished his conversation with the woman and turned back. Frank was waiting in his shorts and his black T-shirt. He was in his early forties and he had some lines on his face and his hair was starting to grey. The cop look at Frank and Frank gestured to the cars.

Can I get out, he said.

The cop looked at his vehicle blocking the road. He was chunky in his uniform and his skin was a deep walnut brown and he carried a Z88 9mm pistol in a holster on his belt and he was perhaps twenty four years old. He looked at Frank a little more carefully.

No, he said.

Frank stared at him.

Can I see your driver's licence, said the cop.

Frank sighed and the cop looked at him.

It's back at the house.

The cop looked at Frank and nodded and then he walked up to Frank's white Nissan double cab and he did a slow assessing circuit of it and he looked at the vehicle licence disc on the windscreen.

This is out of date, he said.

Frank lifted his arms and groaned and the cop looked at him and then Frank remembered and he pointed.

It's in the cubbyhole, he said. The new one is in the cubbyhole.

Okay, said the cop.

Frank got into the driver's seat and leaned across and opened the cubbyhole and rummaged through it. There was a yellow plastic container for a chamois and some Fisherman's Friend lozenges and two ballpoint pens and a cheap imitation Leatherman. There was his ID book and a couple of petrol receipts from the drive down and a small black plastic film canister containing a little milled marijuana and a touch of fragrant pipe tobacco to mask the ganja's peppery aroma. Frank stared at the cubbyhole and the cop waited at the window.

My wife said it was here, said Frank.

He moved back and sat upright in the driver's seat. It was hot and still and there were insects singing in the fynbos and the steep dark stony olive hills were baking in the heat.

So your car's not licensed, said the cop.

No, it is. I just forgot to put it up.

Why?

Dunno. I realized at the last moment and we were travelling and the kids ... I never got round to it.

So where is it?

Must be at the house.

Driving without a licence. Unlicensed vehicle ... Five grand?

Frank stared at the cop and then he leaned over and took his ID document out of the cubbyhole and offered it.

Why don't you keep this and I'll drive down quickly and get my driver's licence and the new disc.

No can do, said the cop.

Why not?

Because you'd be driving an unlicensed vehicle and you don't have a licence. Breaking the law.

Frank stared at him.

It's Christmas Eve, he said. I just came up quickly to do the dumping. I didn't even get out of Pringle Bay. I didn't even get onto the main road.

The cop looked at him for a long time and then he turned and walked to his vehicle and got in. Frank followed him and stood at the window. The cop looked tired. He picked up the microphone from its place on the dash and toyed with it.

Phone your wife, he said.

Frank looked at him for a moment.

I don't know her number.

The cop looked at him and shook his head.

I mean ... my phone knows it. The number's on my phone.

So phone her.

Frank patted his pockets and felt about and then he lifted his arms and shoulders in the air and let them fall again in a gesture of resignation.

I haven't got my phone.

Where is it?

Must be at the house.

The cop stared at him.

Like your vehicle licence was in the cubbyhole.

I'm sorry, said Frank.

Me too.

Frank stood there and looked at the cop and the cop returned the look and they were connected by an ancient and visceral instinct.

They might, for all their accouterments of urban life and provincial writ, have been apes.

Get in the vehicle, said the cop.

Frank shook his head. He lifted his eyes to the hills.

Can I just get my car out the way?

The cop looked at Frank for a time and then he nodded.

Frank walked back to the Nissan. He got in and reversed it back onto the edge of the gravel parking area and he got out and clicked the key and the automatic locking device flashed the indicator lights. Frank turned and walked across to the cop car and got into the passenger seat and closed the door and the cop stared at him.

So, said Frank. What do we do now? Take me to Kleinmond? Lock me up?

No, said the cop.

He started the vehicle.

Must be your lucky day.

They drove out of the dump and turned left into Pringle Bay.

The cop picked up his microphone and spoke into it.

What's the fine for not carrying a licence?

There was discussion on the other end. A man and a woman talking Afrikaans. Frank rubbed his jaw. He pulled down the seat belt and felt for the slot but couldn't find it so he held the seat-belt across him in a kind of ridiculous pantomime with the cop sitting next to him. The cop didn't have his seat-belt on. The crackling discussion on the radio came to a close and the cop lifted the microphone back to his mouth and said thanks and he put it back in its cradle on the dash.

Two grand for yours and two grand for the car's.

Well, said Frank. There you go.

Everyone knows that you have to carry a licence when you driving you car. It's not a secret.

I know.

So why don't you do it?

I was just going up to the dump for five minutes.

It's against the law.

I know. I made a mistake.

Why you so stupid?

Frank looked at him.

Because sometimes, he said, I'm a doos.

He pronounced the Afrikaans word with the vowel sound like the vowel in dour. It meant box, but it also meant cunt.

The cop looked at Frank and nodded. He drove on and he looked about at the big new houses built as high as possible by people from Johannesburg so that they got a view of the bay and the Peninsula rising up into the sky on the other side like you could swim there.

What you do, said the cop.

Frank glanced at him and looked back at the road.

What do I do?

Yes.

I write, said Frank. I'm a writer. He named a television series.

The cop looked at him.

You write that?

Yes.

Just you?

No. There's probably twelve, fifteen people. Doing different things. It's a factory.

They drove on slowly and Frank looked out of the window at the sheer face of The Hangklip that loomed over the village and guarded the eastern entrance to the bay. He liked to think of baboons sitting up there on the cliffs with long philosophical faces and watching the sun go down over the western oceans.

So how do you write it?

It's a big process. It's complicated.

Not something a policeman would understand.

Frank looked at him.

That's not what I meant, he said.

They drove on in silence.

So you got a house, said the cop.

Yes, said Frank.

And you got a phone.

Yes.

And a wife.

Frank looked at him.

I'm just a holidaymaker who was going to do the dumping.

Either way you in trouble, said the cop.

They drove on. They passed a group of kids walking to the beach with towels over their shoulders. They passed a woman walking a small dog.

How far, said the cop.

You turn right at the shops. Look, if you got to fine me, then fine me.

The cop looked at Frank and then he looked at the road and he pointed at the turn-off coming up.

Here?

No. The next one.

They came to Boundary Road and Frank pointed and said here and the cop turned right. They drove down through the houses. A few were old holiday shacks but most were big and new and only about a quarter of them were occupied because of the recession.

It's just there on the left, said Frank.

The cop parked the car on the grass and they got out and walked up the steps onto the patio area in front of the veranda. The cop looked around at the bare cracked concrete and the places where the weeds that grew in the cracks had been recently scraped off with a spade. There were plastic chairs with damp beach towels on them and a pair of flippers and a bellyboard against the wall and some sandy slip-ons and sandals were scattered on an old asbestos table. Frank lifted the rubber mat in front of the door and took the keys from beneath and the cop was watching him as he opened the door.

Frank glanced at him.

Come in, he said.

He walked into the house and headed left on the new red tiles past the fifties' chairs and into the new melamine kitchen and dining area. The cop came in and stayed close to the entrance and looked about. Frank saw his phone where it lay charging on the rickety white display cabinet.

Come in, he said. Sit down. You want some coffee?

The cop looked around him.

You been doing it up, he said.

Yes, said Frank. You want some coffee?

The cop looked at Frank and then he stepped forward.

Coffee would be good, he said. So who owns this place?

My wife's family. Her grandmother lived here. She lived here when you weren't allowed to build that side of Boundary Road.

Frank pointed down across the village to the beach where his wife and daughter were lying in the sun with their books and the dogs.

Then somebody bribed the architect of apartheid.

Who?

John Vorster. He had a place here somewhere.

Betty's Bay, said the cop. Where's your licence?

He sat with his back to the window and he watched as Frank went into the bedroom and came out again with his wallet in his hand.

Frank opened the wallet and started looking through the cards, but there were many of them and he took out the bank cards and laid them on the table and the cop looked at them. Frank took out other cards for the library and various stores and a roadside assistance service and he put them on the table and looked through them and he found his licence.

Here, he said.

The cop took it and looked at it and he seemed a little disappointed.

This is going expire next year, he said.

Frank shrugged.

And the car?

Frank went back into the bedroom and found his wife's bag on the bed and looked through it. There were many things in there and the closest thing to a licence document was folded up and had a recipe for carrot cake written on the back of it. He went back into the other room.

I can't find it.

Better phone your wife.

Frank picked up his phone and stood at the table in front of the cop and dialed. He held the phone to his ear and he waited for a long time. Then he lowered the phone.

The cop looked at him.

I'll try my daughter.

Frank dialed and listened as before. There was a beach bag lying on the table and it beeped.

Maybe her phone's in here, said the cop.

Frank looked in the bag and found his wife's phone and held it up.

The cop looked at him. He had a certain authority for one so young.

What am I going to do with you, he said.

Do what you have to.

Four grand is a lot of money.

Ja.

How much you earn? For writing.

Enough. If you type fast. We're not rich, if that's what you mean.

The cop looked around.

Maybe you don't flash it, he said. Lot of guys have money they don't flash around.

His face displayed no intention at all.

What about that coffee, he said.

Frank looked at him and then he picked up the kettle and took it to the sink and filled it and brought it back and put it on its stand.

The cop watched him.

What am I going to do with you?

Frank worked his tongue in his mouth and he went to the sink and poured a glass of water and drank it. He looked out the window at the line of north-facing mansions under the nature reserve fire break on the dark green of the hill. View sites, looking right across the bay, two million a shot before you even started building.

Tell me about this writing thing, said the cop.

What about it?

You make up those stories yourself?

No, said Frank.

So what you do?

I write episodes.

Who writes the stories?

We all do.

How?

Frank looked at him.

What's your name, he said.

The cop's eyes narrowed slightly.

Deon.

Surname?

Du Plessis.

Okay, so say you're in the story. We've got this character, Deon du Plessis, and his wife maybe, and his kid. You got a wife?

Ja?

Name?

Denise.

Kids?

No.

We'll give him a kid. Deon and his wife Denise. That's great. It's a great little family. Great that he's a policeman. He's real. Lives in the real world. We've got a little colored family unit there. We'll be able to tell colored stories. So we'll sit around once a year and discuss them. Plan for their next year. Deon and Denise. What's going to happen to them. And stories come when people make mistakes or do something wrong. So ... is Deon straight?

The cop stared at Frank.

How's that coffee doing, he said.

Frank went to the kettle and checked the switch and found that it wasn't on.

You know what, he said. I'm changing my mind about the coffee.

I've got some filter here from this morning.

He poured two cups from the cafetiere and he put them in the aged microwave on top of the rusted fridge.

You see, Deon probably came in as a hero, because you can't have your main colored guy as a villain. If you have a colored family it's

because you want to build colored audience. But we've been struggling to find story for him. So someone will say, what if his wife's cousin is crooked. This cousin is working with guys in Joburg who have dinner sometimes with the commissioner of police. They swap perlemoen for heroin in Hong Kong. And this cousin pays Deon to look the other way.

The cop stared at Frank.

When you generating story in television, you need people to make mistakes. You need them to do something wrong.

The microwave beeped and Frank took the mugs of coffee out.

Sugar?

Two, said the cop.

Frank spooned sugar and stirred and handed a mug to the cop. But we also got to think about the real country. Because what the country needs, especially now the real commissioner of police is in court because his best friend is a drug dealer who just murdered a crooked mining magnate, what the fucking real country needs, not the television country, is fucking straight cops. And we like hero stories in the series. We got a rainbow nation thing going there. We're believers. So we'd think very carefully about making Deon crooked.

Frank was standing with his finger in the air and he was declaiming with great passion like a politician at the hustings.

We would think fucking carefully about that, he said.

The cop drank his coffee.

What we going to do about the licence?

Frank stared at him and then he turned and went back into the bedroom and looked in his wife's bag again. His mouth was still very dry. He took out the recipe for carrot cake and unfolded it and it was a licence document and he looked again and there on the cutout disc was the registration number of the Nissan. He walked out of the bedroom and handed it to the cop and he sat down with his coffee and took a long tug on it. Then he took out a Rizla and some tobacco and began to roll a cigarette.

Where was it, said the cop.

In my wife's bag.

The cop looked at the licence document and then he turned it over and looked at the back.

Two cups flour, he said. That's why it was in her bag.

Ja.

I'd like to meet this wife of yours.

When they drove back to the dump Frank had his driver's licence in his wallet and he was holding the vehicle licence. At the stop street they waited as a double cab approached. It was a big black Toyota with off-road tires and it pulled a trailer with a rubber duck with a 500cc outboard motor attached. There were four men inside the cab. They were dark bulky men with hard faces and close-cropped hair and the cop raised his hand to them and waved them across and then he turned left to towards the dump.

I can still fine you, he said.

Frank didn't say anything. He pulled the seat-belt down and tried again to find the slot for it.

Don't use a seat-belt, said the cop.

Why not?

Because then people will say I'm not using mine.

Frank looked at him.

What do you want, Deon?

Want?

Ja.

The policeman stared ahead.

What do you want?

The cop stared at the road and drove. There was a mongoose sitting straight up on the verge with its head turned at 90 degrees to its front. It was watching them approach and its eyes were bright in its head and very intelligent. It stared for a moment and then it changed its mode of articulation and disappeared into the fynbos four-footed and low to the ground like a different kind of animal altogether.

I want to come to the dump tomorrow, said the cop, and I want to see you there with your licence. I want you to show it to me and I want you to say, good morning Constable Du Plessis.

They drove on and when they got to the dump the cop stopped the car in the parking area and looked at Frank. Frank put out his hand.

Happy Christmas, Constable Du Plessis.

The cop stared at Frank's hand for a moment and then he took it and shook it.

Happy Christmas, Mr Fourie.

When Frank got back to the house there was a baboon sitting on the asbestos table. It had a prominent shocking-pink erection rising from the grey hair of its groin. Frank got out of the car and stepped forward and the baboon looked at him and lifted its lip to show long white teeth. Frank stopped.

This is not your veranda, he said.

The baboon looked at him and then it looked down at its member. Frank took up a sandal and slapped it hard against a pillar.

Fuck off, he said.

