

Richards Bay

I presented my workshop on industrial and automotive lubrication several times in a huge aluminium smelter at the other end of South Africa in Richards Bay. It became a routine. At that time, the smelter had a policy of empowering their employees which included a number of courses and workshops for their artisans.

One day flying to Durban to go to Richards Bay, I realized that I forgot my driver's licence at home. What now? Without a driver's license they won't rent me a car in Durban. How do I get to Richards Bay 150 km away?

It scared me, but at the same time I was glad for a number of reasons. For example, I realized what happened only at the end of the flight so it didn't agonize me too long. Good that I didn't realize it at the airport in Cape Town—I would have chased Shani like a bloated goat to get it for me, which she might or might not manage. Also, I had a rush of adrenaline, which is rare for phlegmatic me. Finally and most importantly, it reminded me that I could be an idiot—that is always useful.

I knew why it happened. It was because I had a lot of time for packing that time. Normally I end up packing at home when I should already be at the airport so I must be devilishly focused. This time I took it too casually.

I had several options. I could ask Shani to go to the airport and give my driver's license to someone who would fly to Durban later.

Or I could hire someone to take me to Richards Bay. The workshop is lucrative so I could afford it. But how would I get to a factory 6 km away from my bed-and-breakfast? I did not expect to find any good taxis in Richards Bay.

I went to the rental and when they wanted my driver's license I made a show of looking into my purse and not finding it there. They saw my driver's license three months ago but that did not help. However, they said they were willing to accept a copy sent by email.

Fortunately, Andrea was at home and she managed to find the driver's license and sent it to a wrong email address which the rent people gave me. This

was finally resolved but the rent people did not accept it. Instead they sent me to the police station at the other side of the airport to have it certified.

I thought that the police would just certify that they saw the copy and that I could use it but they gave me a stamp that the copy matched the original they hadn't seen. It can only happen in Africa. I thanked them profusely and sincerely and went to pick up the car.

This time, the course was in a 'bay side' plant. Although I was not going anywhere near the plant, I had to change into overalls with the jacket that had to be buttoned, not flapping, and wear a safety helmet and goggles. It was very silly.

I was pleased that I brought my own old safety boots. When I was leaving the change room, I noticed that the shoes were leaving marks on the polished floor. What can I do, I thought, I would just go to the lawn and wrap my sticky soles in the sand.

As I dragged my shoes in the sand, the sole began to crumble and soon completely disintegrated. I ended up with only a thin leatherette under my feet. But the upper part was fine and the damage was not visible so I walked like that for two days. I had a pleasant feeling that I fooled them—with all their ridiculous safety regulations.

The meeting room, where the course was, is almost 2 km from the gate, the plant hall is that long and the meeting room is for some stupid reason near the end of it. A small bus for about 15 people goes there. The maximum permissible speed is 20 km/h everywhere there and everybody observes it. All passengers must be strapped with safety belts and have a helmet on—at the speed of 20 km/h!

There is virtually no traffic, there is no vehicle in sight but staff crosses the road only at zebra crossings that are quite far from each other.

The second day after the course ended, I waited for the bus for about half an hour. I thought that I had enough time to catch my aircraft as I had a ticket for 8pm. I would just drive as I normally do, that is 10 km/h above the speed limit.

In my life, I missed a plane about five times, including once from London to

Prague and once from London to Las Vegas.

So I was not in a hurry but suddenly, still in town, there was a traffic jam. I got stuck there, there was no other option. It took me over an hour and a half to cover 7 km.

There were two reasons: the road was being repaired leaving only one lane open. In the opposite direction, where there was almost no traffic, there were two lanes open. They did not think of letting us use one of them.

A colossal stupidity was at the end. There were traffic lights that in our direction let only a few vehicles pass through while across, where there was no traffic, it was green all the time. There were two police cars parked next to the road with cops standing around them. So no one dared to go when the light was red. The cops didn't think of stepping into the intersection and letting us cross.

Now it was necessary to drive really fast, at least 140 km/h. The speed limit on the highway is 120 km/h. It was getting dark, then it was pitch dark. I saw someone waving a red light. I stopped, traffic police!

"You have exceeded the speed limit."

"That's possible, I'm trying to catch a plane."

"Show me your ticket."

"Here, look."

"You were driving 140, come to look at the machine."

"I believe you."

"You must see it."

"All right, but I must go."

"Show me your driver's licence." - I pulled out my certified copy.

"It's an offence to copy a driver's license." (I don't know if that is true.)

"Where is the original?"

"In Cape Town."

"How come that they gave you a stamp when they didn't see the original?"

"They wanted to please me."

"Do you realize that you made a mistake?"

"I make many mistakes!"

"For driving 140, the fine of 375 rands, look here in the book."

"Well, if I have to pay...but I have to go now."

"You want to pay?"

"No, I don't."

"So go!"

"Thank you!"

As you see, I did not think that it would be a good idea to tell them that I was speeding because of police stupidity.

The whole incident made me laugh so much that I laughed all the way to the airport, of course again at 140 km/h.

Little Hyundai drove well, just towards the end, approaching the airport, I thought that I might be hearing some mechanical noises that weren't there before.

During another visit, I was glad that venue was in the plant called 'hill side' so everything was done in the administrative building and I didn't have to change to overalls.

I always stayed in a bed-and-wonderful English breakfast. The lunch was provided by the client and for my simple dinner in my room, I bought a quarter-litre bottle of wine. It occurred to me that if I dropped the bottle in the trash, the house lady would think that I had taken the wine from the fridge and that I should pay for it. So I took it to the factory and threw it to the nearest rubbish bin.

I came to the classroom, put things on the table, and there was a man in the door. Wanted to talk discreetly to me. So we went to the empty office where he took out my bottle and asked me if I threw it in the trash.

"Yes."

"Then you have to go to the clinic."

"But I have to present a course here!"

"You can't do that."

At the clinic in the next building, I was completing a questionnaire, blowing into a tube and urinating into a transparent box with a detector mounted in it. Of course, they found nothing, but it took about half an hour to complete the protocol.

I turned to the man who was guarding me there and said in a serious voice that he was also holding the empty bottle in his hand, so he must also be examined. To my great surprise, he did not take it as a joke. I went to give my presentation and he was sitting there blowing into a tube. I turned to him, smiled, and said, "Next time I'll bring a bigger bottle!"

Blanka Kubešová: Lahvinka na zahřátí (2011)