

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Duel

Ready or not, judgment day is dawning. It is no longer a case of designing, planning or training. We are going to “run what we brung.” John unloaded the car off Max’s truck and along with Manfred gave it a final check. I was sure glad it was John doing the last check. His eyes don’t miss anything and he remembers everything. I was too excited to concentrate on preparation details and besides I have to get myself ready. They loaded the last of the precious Formula One racing fuel into the fuel cell and double checked the pressure in the nitrous bottles. I heard John pulse the solenoids in a short burst. We are ready.

I put Doug’s helmet out of sight behind the racing seat in the car and slipped back into the Gasthaus to put on his Nomex driving suit and shoes. I will put on the balaclava after I get in the car. As I walk out into the dawn’s early light I feel a sense of exhilaration as I look at the car. It is beautiful in a strange way. You have to know how it is built to appreciate the beauty. It is kind of like the plain looking girl with ill fitting clothes who, when things become intimate, turns into a sex goddess beyond compare. You have to judge by performance, not appearance. It is one of the all time great street, sleeper machines. The flamed paint job gives it a slightly comical appearance while the flushed out plastic windows screwed into place look more than a little crude. Only the blacked out OZ wheels with their new Perelli P-zero tires give a hint of the sophistication to be found in the rest of the car. The Ardun heads with their Weber carbs will be invisible to the prying eyes of Heinz and his buddies.

About that time I hear a low rumble and look up as the jet black Mercedes pulls into the parking lot. The BMW guys were right, the car has been given the full AMG treatment. The exhaust is coming out of straight through pipes making the engine sound both mean and magnificent. The suspension is lowered and a chin spoiler is almost dragging the pavement. Here is the bell of the ball, beautiful in her sleek new clothes with a haughty attitude that says you are going to have to pay a high price to dance with me. I surely will need a whole handful of brave pills to face this beauty.

The doors of the Mercedes open and Heinz and his henchmen step out. I almost burst out laughing as they look like characters out of a grade B war movie. They are wearing black leather trench coats and black snap-brim hats. The only thing they lack is swastika armbands. It was not hard to imagine the cold fear their victims felt when this crew in its prime made an appearance. Where is the little guy with the shrill voice and a pug-nose? Probably at the finish line. Intimidation was clearly going to be part of the game plan. They stride over to me and, after giving me a cold once-over, Heinz asks if I was going to change out of my pajamas before getting in the car. I said that if he couldn’t appreciate a good pair of Doctor Dentons when he sees them it is just too bad.

“And this is your great old American car. Do they all look so funny?”

“No, not all of them, just the ones I own.”

“So a clown’s suit in a clown’s car.” I could see John’s powerful shoulders start to bulge. If I didn’t act quickly Heinz was going to be talking through a wired jaw after he gets out of the hospital. Not many people know that mild mannered John with his mutton chop beard is a fully qualified military policeman. Heinz was going to learn the hard way.

“Well Heinz, old buddy, there is a saying in my country that the bullshit stops when the green flag drops, and the flag is about to drop on this race. I have some business to attend to. See you

in twenty minutes on the starting line.” Heinz all but clicked his heels as he turned and stalked away. Good, he seems overconfident. I am counting on his arrogance to be my ally.

Timing now is critical. The engine must be up to full operating temperature or it will come apart under full power. The high viscosity oil gives maximum lubrication at 250° F and this requires 15 minutes of idle speed. Also the gear box must be loosened up so that it will be perfectly smooth when shifting under maximum load. Too much time and the engine will overheat. Even though the cars are at a standstill, the race has actually started.

Manfred reaches inside the driver’s window and starts the engine. After a few blips of the throttle it settles down to a rough idle due to the radical cam profile. The removable mufflers are in place so to the unknowing observer the engine sounds like it is running very poorly. Black, unburned mixture is coming out the back due to the over-rich carburation of the race-tuned Webers. I could see Heinz and his crowd snickering at the pathetic sight. I did not want Heinz to suspect that the body had been welded into one rigid structure so I make a show of trying to force open the driver’s side door. The only way it is going to come open is with a cutting torch. In mock disgust John and Manfred boost me through the window. German beer does bad things to your waistline and my stiff back didn’t make the job any easier. By the time I was in the seat, Heinz was pointing and laughing at the foolish spectacle.

OK, enough psyche out, time to get down to serious business. I pull the Nomex balaclava over my head and carefully tuck it into the top of the driving suit and make sure my hair is brushed back. It is the minor details that matter now. Speaking of which I need to take a pee. Too late! Well if things get too bad I guess I won’t be the first driver to finish a race with a warm wet feeling in his driving suit. The helmet fits perfectly and I am glad for the sense of isolation it brings to me when I put it on. This will help focus my concentration.

The oil temperature gage reads 150 degrees F with a water temperature of 180 degrees F. It wouldn’t be long now before I have to get going. John pulls off the mufflers and I bring up the RPMs to keep the plugs from fouling. I can see the heads of the bystanders snap to look in my direction. The engine comes alive with a razor sharp rap that hurts the ears. The shabby pussycat is now a full grown tiger. Heinz the hunter is about to become the hunted.

It suddenly dawned on me that I hadn’t seen any traffic in the south bound lane. In fact the last car I saw go up the on-ramp was about an hour ago. It was an old Citroen 2CV “duck” that I learned later was driven by Michel Renault with his wife Marianne at his side. They were on holiday and returning from the wine country to their home in Strasbourg, France. Marianne was complaining bitterly about the poor quality of the German wines and how much she preferred the wines of Burgundy. Michel listened with one ear to this complaint that he had heard many times before. In his own mind he was thinking about an important customer in Marseilles and how he could get the medical equipment he sold modified by the U.S. factory so they would buy it. The Americans were so insensitive to his market requirements he mused to himself. The old duck went plowing monotonously down the road.

I motioned to John to lean over. “Hey, John, what’s going on with the autobahn? Where are the south bound cars?”

“Manfred just heard over the radio that they are holding south bound traffic due to fog at the river. You should have an empty road ahead. Manfred thinks that the fog is just a cover story being used by the police. They all drive BMW patrol cars and know the guys at the factory, if you get my drift.” So the fix was in.

Who else knew about this race? John stuck his head in again. "Don't watch the starter too closely. Keep your eyes on that kraut in the wiener wagon over there. I'll bet money he jumps the start. And hey, Charlie, take care, there are more important things in this world than pride and money; don't hurt yourself. Just back off and let him go if it gets too dangerous out there."

What could I say? I just shook his hand and looked him in the eye. He got the message. With a big thumbs up to Manfred, I fastened the Lexan window tight and concentrated on the gages.

Up ahead, the Price-Waterhouse representative is holding a green flag in his hand and looking at his chronometer—05:59:43. Another quick glance at the gages and I almost panic. The oil temp is now 260 and the water temp is right at 200. I am going to burn up the engine if I don't move. I ease out the clutch and start to roll.

Just as John suspected, Heinz floored his accelerator and shot up the ramp before the flag dropped. I let the clutch all the way out and floored my gas pedal. The old Ford leapt forward like a dragster. The wheels were spinning as I passed the starter still intently looking at his chronometer. In the rear view mirror I see him drop the flag. There is always the ten percent that never gets the word. The small guy with the glasses, flag, watch and puzzled expression on his face is one of them.

At 40 mph I shift into second and run up to 75 before shifting to third. At 105 I hit fourth. I am shifting about as fast as I can move my hands, but even at that I can't match the Mercedes' automatic shift. Heinz is about ten car lengths ahead of me as I shift to fifth at 140. Aerodynamics now govern speed and the Mercedes has the clear advantage. If I don't pick up his draft right now he will pull away from me and I probably can't catch him. Fortunately the light Ford can accelerate faster than the big sedan so I make up the interval and shift to sixth one car length off his back bumper. The tach reads 5300 RPM, oil temp is 255F and water temperature is 185F; I have made it up to speed. And what a speed it is! We were now cruising at 155 mph. My car feels great. Those BMW engineers leave no doubt in my mind that they are the world's best.

Concentrate, concentrate, concentrate—I look through Heinz's window at the road ahead. I don't want to be fixated with near vision on his trunk. He is now driving for both of us and I have to anticipate his moves as though I am driving his car. If I wait until I see his car react it will be too late. We were covering a football field length every second. Even a young man with superb reaction time will require 50 yards to make any steering or braking response. I am far from being a young man so I will have to rely on skill and experience. Of course I don't have much of that either. I guess that's why John gave me those parting words. No doubt about it, the outcome of the race and my very life depends on luck. I am at ten-tenths with no margin left. Death is riding on one shoulder and victory on the other; Lady Luck will have to make a choice.

I will either win or lose, live or die in the next half hour.

At about five minutes into the race I am able to settle down as I am fully "velocityized." At this constant velocity, kinematic adaptation of my senses has occurred and what initially was fearful becomes strangely comfortable at least to the extent that my adrenaline output subsides and my body begins to function in a more normal manner. I become aware of my peripheral vision with the result that the scenery which was initially a blur now consists of distinguishable objects such as trees and shrubs.

I have heard stories that race track drivers, during the course of a long, high speed race, can pick a single face out of a huge crowd and focus on it lap after lap. I guess that is the type of perception I am starting to experience. Surprisingly enough, I am not worried about the car. It is dancing a little on the road but feels solid and controllable. The engine is almost turbine-like in its sound. It is now operating in the optimum design envelope with perfect dynamic balance and proper fuel air mixture. Oil and water temperature are stabilized to their steady state values and are within the proper range. My mind is entering a state that gets a lot of drivers killed. I am becoming fat, dumb and happy. I must force concentration so that I will not slide into a condition of mental stupor.

The race is going very well for me. Heinz must be a little surprised to see me so close on his back bumper. For the moment he is not doing anything stupid like flashing the brake lights to trick me into slowing down. He must know that if I rear end him we both lose and I do not think Heinz is suicidal. The first hint of trouble is wisps of moisture coming off the pavement as it warms in the early morning sun. FOG! Oh shit, not fog! We are racing down towards the river when in an instant we are enveloped in heavy fog. The cops weren't playing games with us when they stopped the traffic.

The autobahn is goddamn dangerous for normal traffic and we are going at warp speed. I hate fog. I can drive in rain, or on ice and snow, but fog is sheer terror. If I slow down I could die, if I speed up I could die and if I don't do anything

I could die. If there is any consolation, it is that Heinz must be on full pucker about now. At least I can concentrate on the three pointed star on his trunk. All he can see is a white sheet in front of his eyes. If he does anything to change speed or direction it will take a metallurgist to separate the Stuttgart steel from the Rouge River steel. Just as suddenly as we went into the fog, we burst out of it into bright sunshine. We have drifted to the right lane but Heinz makes a slight correction and we are back on track in the left lane. I let out my breath and can feel my heart pounding in my chest. A few more seconds and we would have done serious damage to the guard rails and the surrounding countryside.

Heinz is setting the pace and for the moment he seems content to hold at about 150 mph. We are two-thirds of the way towards the finish when Heinz starts slowing down. What is he up to? I notice him looking to the right. Does he think he is going to sucker me into a right side pass and then slingshot me at the finish? That is my game plan and I am not going to pass him even if he stops and eats lunch! Again he glances to the right. What does he expect to see? After about thirty seconds of this nonsense, he picks the speed back up to 150 and I can see him concentrate intently on the road ahead. That little gimmick didn't work so well, did it Heinz old buddy?

The Mercedes with its carefully designed aerodynamic body is breaking the trail having to overcome the frontal impact drag of a fast moving object slamming into a compressible fluid. This greatly benefits me since it reduces the horsepower I need to stay up with him. On the other hand, I have to contend with the vacuum generated when the high velocity air slips over the body of the Ford and joins the still air in the rear, this benefits the lead car. A turbulent condition is created that requires control by the rear spoiler that we fabricated.

Without the spoiler to smooth out the transition and generate down force, turbulence will lift the rear end off the pavement and cause the car to be uncontrollable. The net effect is that the two of us traveling nose to tail can go faster than either of us alone. However to win the

race, I will have to go it alone when I pull out to pass Heinz. This is going to be unknown territory. Will I have enough power to overcome the aerodynamic forces and will the car be controllable? In five more minutes we will be at the curve and I will have to make my move.

I take a quick check of the instrument panel and see that every gage is in limits and there is plenty of gas left. Now I must concentrate on recognizing the sign that marks the beginning of the curve. Missing it will be a disaster since it is just one mile from the curve to the finish line. It will be my only opportunity to make a pass. On the final straight-away, Heinz can easily block me from passing him if I am not in the lead.

There it is: "Ausfhart Freising 500 Meters"—one-quarter mile to the curve. Just like Bobby instructed me, I pull out one-half car width to the right. I instantly feel the impact of the slipstream coming off the Mercedes but I retain control with a slight steering correction. Heinz glances up and observes my move. He pulls to the right to cut me off just like I want him to do. We are now entering the curve and Heinz is committed by Sir Isaac Newton to complete his drift to the far right lane. It is too late for him to make a correction, the slip angle on his tires will be too great and he will skid off the road if he tries. Heinz is too experienced a driver to make that blunder.

Now for my move. By setting up to the right before the entrance I am able to dive for the apex of the curve on the left lane. The impact of the air is brutal, I instantly need more power. I shift down to fifth and hit the stage-one nitrous switch. The Ford starts accelerating immediately as the rpms climb to 6000. I am now beside Heinz who is also pedal to the metal. His AMG modified motor is screaming so loud through the unmuffled tail pipes that I can hear it above the staccato beat of the Ardun. I hit the switch for stage two nitrous and again the Ford accelerates and I am past Heinz and pulling seven grand out of that fabulous motor. Thank you, Bobby! The race is mine—one half mile to go to the finish and Heinz is sucking hind tit. The good guys were going to win. Halle-damn-lujah!

Oh no! Oh no! I'm losing power ... oil and water temperatures are pegged! What the hell is going on? I can see Heinz coming up fast on my rear end. Oh dear God, he's going to rear end me just like he did the BMW. I can see the finish line 500 yards ahead. I am going to die a violent death. There is nothing I can do.

Deep in the bowels of the motor the main bearings are failing. They are stressed way beyond even the maximum design limit. The crankshaft spins for a few hundred more revs in this molten devil's juice and then it seizes. With terrific angular momentum it rips out the main bearings and shoots the pieces down through the oil pan. The connecting rods, pistons, flywheel and clutch plate come out with them. Raw gas is now firing down empty bores. A piston pin from a shattered piston ricochets off the pavement and goes through the floorboard and out my roof like a 30 mm cannon shell. The Centerforce clutch becomes an insane Frisbee spinning at 6000 rpm. It pancakes off the road and flies over the hood of the Mercedes hitting the driver's side of the windshield and then exits out the rear window, its surfaces coated with Heinz's brains.

A piece of the crankshaft with the flywheel still attached, shreds the right front tire of the Mercedes and shatters the aluminum wheel. At 160 mph the Mercedes right front end digs into the pavement causing it to pole vault 20 feet in the air right over the top of the hapless Citroen 2CV that is puttering along in the right lane. Marianne is still complaining about the German wines and Michel is lost in concentration about his business. They never even see the Mercedes

rocket over their heads and out into the field beyond. Ten quarts of hot oil ignited by a blow torch of high octane fuel is leaving a trail of flame 50 yards long behind the Ford. Some of it comes through the firewall and licks at my Nomex suit. It is the only thing that keeps me from becoming instant barbecue.

Unrestrained by seat belts, Heinz's body is churning around inside the disintegrating Mercedes like stew beef in a mix master. It is the Fourth of July and I am the fireworks display and Heinz is the hamburger. By reflex action I jam my foot on the brake pedal. The friction pads of the big Brembos grab the disks and the kinetic energy of the fast moving car instantly starts converting into heat. In only a few seconds the disks are glowing cherry red from the terrific load they are required to handle. The Ford starts a wild spinning skid down the autobahn. I cross the finish line going backwards with the tires locked up and smoking.

I don't remember too much about what happened next.

I wasn't unconscious, it was just that the sensory overload blocked my mind. Marcus was the first to reach me. He said I just looked into his eyes with a blank stare. He had to pry my fingers off the steering wheel. I do remember standing at the side of the road with my legs trembling uncontrollably. I had cheated death and won the race. When I looked up I could see a pall of smoke 500 yards north of the autobahn. Marcus said it was what was left of Heinz and the Mercedes. Too bad such a fine car met such a violent end.