

The incident at Odendaalrus

Richard Cowling



Trusty rucksack alongside the R30



Me, besides the Vaal River in February 1974

It must have been the late summer of 1974. The Vaal River had breached its banks, inundating the golf course and much of the suburb (Rainbow Valley) where I lived in Orkney, a hard-nosed gold-mining town in the Western Transvaal. I needed to get back to UCT to start my second year of BSc. The vacation had been a mixed affair: a 10-day hike along the Transkei coast; a miserable attempt to sell Collier encyclopaedias, which imploded in Empangeni, when I actually sold a set to a family who could ill-afford it, and then abandoned this folly in a fit of moral outrage; and a long-awaited break up with my girlfriend, a Lebanese-Afrikaans hybrid who had little interest in my “alternative” idiosyncrasies.

So, I packed my travelling gear into my back-piercing, metal-framed rucksack and by mid-morning was alongside the R30, hitching southwards to the Cape. With the misguided optimism of long-haired interloper, I hoped to get to...where? Perhaps a railway truck would take me all the way to Cape Town, the driver an amiable ducktail with an abundant supply of *zol*. By five-thirty, with a Highveld thunderstorm looming, I had got as far as Bothaville, 50 km from home. The miners and *mielieboere* who travelled this road showed scant interest of giving this *takhaar* apparition a lift to anywhere save the furnaces of hell.

My desperation lifted when a Ford Cortina pulled off the road ahead of me. When I reached the vehicle, the driver leaned across the cab to open the passenger door. What I saw was a large man with a wealth of flesh drooping downwards, towards his knees. The blue and blotched skin beneath his eyes merged into his jawline and thence into a flurry of lipid-rich folds that overwhelmed his neck. “A lift is a lift”, I thought. Get in and let’s get going.

Off we went, in awkward silence for a few miles until the rain started pelting the windscreen and visibility plummeted, despite the heroic attempts by windshield wipers long passed their due date. So, we talked about rain, me in broken Afrikaans, he in respectable English. He told me he lived in Odendaalrus, about 60 km away and that I must spend the night with him: “This rain is gonna make

you *papnat*". "*Dankie meneer*", I replied. What else could I say? The February storm was throwing sheets of water at us and it was getting dark. The gloomy view of *mielie* fields and mine dumps did little to raise my mood. Barely 100 km in one day of hitching, and now this.

We pulled into his driveway in the waning, sombre light. The unkempt garden of overgrown lawn, cluttered with rusted garden furniture, fronted a solid 1950s house that seemed, by its decaying appearance, to be abandoned. Piet, my host, opened the unlocked door and switched on the light to reveal a house devoid of furnishings but rich in dust and emptiness. He showed me a bedroom that had two largish beds, one showing only a lumpy, stained mattress, the other revealing a grubby bottom sheet and blanket in chaotic disarray. "Put your stuff in here" said Piet, "and let's go get a *dop*".

Piet shuffled into the kitchen, me following gingerly behind, knowing that, despite my righteous teetotalling at the time, this was going to be a long night. The kitchen was depleted of content: a vintage fridge, a single, rusty hotplate on a battered dresser, a filthy sink and a small, red, formica-topped table with two matching chairs. The hotplate supported a pot filled with the assorted scraps of meat in grey matrix with solid slablets of fat, like fragments of ice in a sewer. This was the dinner proffered by Piet on the journey. It was not what I imagined it to be.

Piet reached into the upper part of dresser and withdrew a bottle of *klippies* and two cracked plastic glasses. He filled them almost to the brim and said: "Cheers, let's drink". And drink we did.

The brandy deadened my anxiety and soon we were chatting amiably. I told Piet about life in Orkney, spending my teen years in a mining town and how the aching hurt of the Anglo-Boer war lingered there. Us *rooinekke* were still fair game, especially if we attended the Catholic school in Klerksdorp. Waiting at the bus stop could be dangerous for scholars of the Pope when a Ford Fairlane full of rockspiders swerved towards us with shouts of "*fokken Romse gevaar!*".

This produced guffaws from Piet, causing the ample folds below his chin to quiver with merriment. I continued: "And if you went to a party in a *mynhuis* you had better not to look at some of the partygoers otherwise you would invite a hostile response: 'hey you *engelsman*, don't check me out skew, *ek se!*'. I will *fokken bliksem* you'. And *jussus*, don't ever look at their *stukkies*. That was inviting a serious *dondering*".

The *prut-prut* of the stew on the hotplate caught Piet's attention. "Let's eat" he said, and from the kitchen drawer produced two bowels and two spoons, one of which he used to dollop generous servings for us both. We eat silently, except for murmurs of appreciation from me, and truthfully so since the meal was tasty indeed, the mutton cooked to tenderness and the vegetables still firm and tasty.

With the meal dispatched, Piet filled up our glasses with more brandy. "I was married" he said "a *vrou* and two *pragtige meisies*, both grown up now with kids of their own".

"Where are they now?" I responded, fearful of where this question would take us.

"Ag man, the wife left me five years ago. She now lives in Bloem and has a job there, I don't know what she does. The *kinders* had already left home by then. They must have their own children. I don't know where they live or what they do. They came here with my wife soon after she left me

and took everything – *alles* – except the kitchen sink!” Another guffaw, but one which could not hide the sadness in his eyes.

He then did something that surprised me. He leant across the formica table and began stroking my long hair. “You have beautiful hair” he said softly. Another guffaw.

Piet continued his sad tale. “I also had the only Ford dealership in the Free State goldfields, right here, next door to the house. All sorts of *mense* would come and look at the new models trucked up from PE. Rancheros, fairlanes, cortina gts and bakkies for the farmers: f100s f250s. The cortina bakkie was a real hit. Mine was the place to be on a Saturday morning. They also took that away from me”.

A long silence and then: Hey, come *boet*, let’s take a look”.

So, we stumbled out into the starry night, wet with rain. Piet’s torch veered precariously towards a gate on the side of the property that led to a square building of typical 1960s utilitarian ugliness. Piet opened an unlocked door to reveal in erratic torchlight a large showroom. “They switched off the lights a long time ago. The bloody Volskas owns this place now”. Here is my office (he shone the torch into a largish booth, open to the floor space) and this is where my assistant Marietjie used to sit and answer the phone, do the books and look pretty. *Jurre* she was a beauty”.

We stood there in silence, me feeling uncomfortable, Piet’s torch hanging limply at his side, shining on the floor at his feet. “I’m sorry” I said. “Ag no. That’s life, hey. Let’s go get some sleep”.

Back in the house, Piet found from somewhere in the bowels of his house a clean sheet, a blanket and a naked pillow with blue stripes, like the ones we had in at my boarding school in Pietersburg. He dressed the unmade bed, quite expertly, while I looked on with growing concern. I suspected he would snore horrendously.

Piet left the room and I hurriedly undressed to my underpants and T shirt, and then climbed into bed, hoping for a swift, brandy-induced coma. Piet returned, wearing a giant-sized vest, stretched to the max by his huge belly, and a pair of striped pyjama shorts, precariously lodged above his gut-shielded pubis. He turned off the light and climbed on to my bed.

This produced in me an adrenalin-induced spurt of alarming physical alacrity. I sprang, without touching the ground from one bed to the next, pleading “nee, nee!” and, grabbing the blanket, settled in that part of the bed most distal to Piet. What followed was, at least for me, moments of agonising silence. Eventually, Piet said “*Ag sorrie man, ek het gedink met die lang hare...*”.

I spent the night in fitful doze, serenaded with snores of frightful magnitude.

* * * * *

Come first light, I grabbed my kit, dressed in the kitchen and quietly left the house without saying thank you or goodbye to Piet. Outside, in the rain-cleansed morning light, I negotiated my way back to the R30 and prepared myself for the journey with a sizeable joint.

As the *dagga* took effect, enhancing the lustre of the Free State morning, I couldn't help wondering if I had let Piet down. Perhaps he needed sorely some comfort, a few hugs and caresses to dissipate his desperate sense of abandonment.

Perhaps not.