

# ROAD KILL

PAUL LEGER

## *Day 1*

### *1*

Hidden by the shade of the gnarled pepper tree, the driver of the black Nissan Navarra tracked the prey's movements through his binoculars: the ritual tapping of the road sign, the stopping midstride to take a piss in the veld, the tucking in of the vest, the tying, the retying of laces.

Taking his cue at eight hundred metres – the yellow (and still wet) daub of paint on a telephone pole – the driver placed the binocs on the passenger seat and turned the ignition key. The Navarra crawled out from its den and rolled slowly onto the tar. His focus locked on the prey – still a distant smudge – the driver eased his foot onto the accelerator.

The runner's outline came into view – hogging the centre line, sidestepping the potholes as he ran. The driver's jaw

muscles tightened as he pressed his foot deeper into the floor – unleashing a menacing growl from under the hood. At two hundred metres, the runner's features were now clearly visible. Long sinew and bone, wearing a vest and peak cap and blue Polycotton shorts. His biltongy arms swinging loosely at his side, head lolling on his shoulders, his gait relaxed. The cap was pulled down, fending off the morning sun that still sat low on the horizon.

The runner was now moving away from the solid centre line, aware of the Navarra's approach, but his stride still loose and free. Glancing at the speedometer, the driver stuck to his lane. He wasn't about to blow this one; it had been too long in the coming. Under the cap, the runner's expression was changing – puzzlement had replaced endorphin-fuelled confidence.

Twenty metres. With a precision born out of repeat experience, the driver ground his foot into the pedal and pulled hard right on the steering wheel. Caught in no-man's land between the centre line of the R434 between Brits and Edendal, and the yawing veld of the North West, the runner's face registered a flash of primal terror, before flesh and bone merged with hardened bulbar steel travelling at precisely one hundred and forty-six kilos an hour.

Leaning over his *AA Map of Southern Africa*, Steve Aldridge traced a finger northbound along the N14. From time to time the finger paused on a point of cartographical interest. He rolled the names around his mouth. It was like sucking on a pack of boiled sweets – each came with a unique flavour: Soetkraal, Brakfontein, Lemoenhoek, Rosedene, Soutpan. A thought struck him. It was so true what they said – life was about the journey, not the destination.

Venturing into the unknown, guided by a mass of black dots linked by a spider web on a piece of paper – this was the stuff of goosebumps. And that's where he and Tarryn were wired so differently, because she just didn't get it. He related fully with guys like Columbus, Vasco da Gama, David Livingstone, the Voortrekkers. Like Bruce Springsteen sang, he was also born to be free.

Aldridge stretched over the bonnet and flicked a scab of bird turd from the white paintwork – it was a good thing he hadn't gone for the metallic.

Like explorers recent, past, and present, he was dressed for the job: Cape Union shirt tucked into Cape Union multi-pocket khaki shorts, anti-glare Polaroids, and Hi-Tec ATs (All-Terrains) – after Crocs, the best shoes in the world, in his humble opinion. He didn't care what anybody said.

Aldridge folded the map and returned it to its plastic sleeve. He checked his watch. It was still early. He took a slow sip from his Crème Soda and leant back against the Fortuner. Man, did it feel good or what to be on the road

again. He closed his eyes, savouring the fresh early morning forecourt air, the warm North West sun on his face. This was why modern-day humans worked – for moments like this. The past year at work had been a killer, what with the Supa-Lube Bearings launch hitting them smack in the middle of the recession and all.

He held up the can and studied the small print. It didn't matter half the ingredients were Greek to him, because there was nothing like a well-timed Crème Soda. Best of all, there were another eleven where this one came from – Kruger treat. Again, he checked his watch: seven fifty-five. Good thing they'd hit the road early. As long as he lived, he would never get why women took so long to sort themselves out, when he could tick off the three Ss in ten minutes flat. Not that he was complaining, or anything. On a day like this, he was more than happy to chill while Tarryn did her thing in the Ladies.

“Mornings!”

Aldridge squinted into the sun. A fellow traveller. One of those sunburnt guys in Mad Dog shorts and slops and mozzie-bitten ankles clawed into scabs – a veteran camper.

“Mornings.”

“Nice day for travelling, or what?”

“Most definitely. Couldn't ask for better.”

“Where you chappies headed?”

“Kruger.”

“Nice. Very nice. Which camp?”

“Satara,” said Aldridge.

“Not messing around. I like. Which gate you attacking from?”

“Orpen.”

“Orpen? If I was you, I would hit it south from Skukuza side. Especially pulling that baby behind you.”

“Isn't Orpen quicker?”

“In the old days, maybe, but this is the New South Africa, my friend. The roads have gone to kak and gone. 'Specially the one to Orpen.”

“Thanks for the tip. I must look at my map again. Where you guys on your way to?”

“Toti. Visiting the old lady's people. Got themselves a mansion right on the sea like you won't believe. Any closer and you need a lifejacket and whistle. Did you also kip last night at the Municipal?”

“No, we drove straight from Sasolburg this morning. What was it like?”

“Nice lake for the kids, but hardcore. Got chowed to death by mozzies as big as bats.” As if reminded, he lifted a leg and gave his ankle a hefty scratch. “But for a hundred bucks a night, you see me complaining?” He took a lick at his soft-serve, aimed it at the Fortuner. “How's she run?”

“I've only had her for two months, but so far, brilliantly,” said Aldridge, experiencing a fuzzy feeling in the chest. “The new technology that's come out with this model is—”

“Four by four?”

“Umm, no. Just diff lock. But for the type of travelling we do, we don't really need—”

“And thirsty as all hell I bet. That's ours there, the red Hyundai under the shade cloth. Bought it off my brother-in-law for an effing bargain – excuse the French. Goes like a Boeing. ABS, aircon, CD shuttle, fifteen kays per litre – you name it.”

“Is it still on motorplan?”

“No ways. Who needs a rip-off motorplan when you’ve got reliability?”

“It’s actually not that much when you stop and—”

“Shit, here I’m jabbering like a woman and I haven’t even introduced myself. John Phillips.” Phillips extended a freckly hand.

“Steve Aldridge. Nice to meet you, John.”

Phillips lifted his arm to the sky and suctioned the dripping ice cream from under the cone. “You must try one of these. Only sixteen bucks ... with Flakey.” He aimed the cone at the service court. “I see the missus is howling for my blood. Can’t live with them, can’t live without the bladdy things. Anyways, say howzit to the elis for me.”

“For sure, I’ll do that. You guys must have a safe trip.”

Aldridge took a sip of Crème Soda and watched John Phillips cross the forecourt and stop in front of the Mens to give his ankle another claw, before disappearing inside.

That was another thing Steve Aldridge loved about travelling – you always met such interesting people.

### 3

“Fok!”

This had to be the tenth time the sign had blown over. Truter’s day hadn’t even started, but his gut was telling him it was going to be a seriously kak one. And nobody to take it out on; that useless pen-pusher Delpport was never around

when he needed him.

The morning breeze whipped the dust around Truter’s state-issue riot boots. He glared into the cloudless sky. One of those hot-as-hell days he despised. Minimum thirty-five in the shade, according to his hangover-skewed estimate. Not that there was any shade to speak of, because all that stood between the sun and his balding head was a scrawny acacia. He would take Durban humidity any day.

A jackhammer pounded behind Truter’s eyes. He must be getting old. That, or the Three Ships wasn’t what it used be. Cock on block, the cheapskates were cutting the whisky with methanol. He wouldn’t put it past them, because these corporations were all the same. They didn’t care a rat’s arse for their customers, as long as they made a fat profit. Who was it who had told him about a Chinese company replacing milk powder with baby powder? Must have been Delpport and his Google.

With this new-found knowledge at hand, Truter’s hangover now made perfect sense: the Chinese had bought out Three Ships and were cutting it to increase profits. Unbelievable. He didn’t trust the chinks further than he could spit.

Truter farted into the morning sky. He pushed back on his hips, stretching his aching groin – he should have sued SAPS Rugby Union for making him play prop. How many times had he told the coach he was born to play lock? More than he could count, that’s how many.

A new thought had hatched in his brain and was crawling its way towards the light – his ex-brother-in-law, Ross. He was the one diluting the Three Ships with rotgut to save himself a few bucks. Once a cheapskate, always a cheapskate.

Now that he stopped to think about it, he'd never trusted the guy, even when he was still married to his witch of a sister. The mere thought of Sharon triggered the vein on the side of his head into violent spasm. There was something all high and mighty about Ross. Him and his fake concern during and after the divorce, acting like some marriage counsellor, but in the meantime getting his rocks off somebody else's problems. Who did he think he was coming over to his flat with a bottle of whisky? Invasion of privacy, that's what it was, asking all those personal questions, snooping about the place like he owned it, going for a piss one time too many – what was that all about, anyway?

What the stuff, thought Truter, he had more important things to worry about right now than Ross the Toss. Like getting the roadblock up and ready before the holiday traffic hit. He looked around him. What was called for was a heavy rock to stabilise his sign against the wind.

It now occurred to him that Delpport should be doing this, not him, a high-ranking policeman. Problem was, you couldn't rely on Delpport to organise a lap dance at a Teazers. When it came to practical matters, the guy was worse than useless; if he couldn't change a tyre on a patrol vehicle, or something as simple as squeezing the truth from a suspect, how was he going to man a roadblock? All Delpport and the new-breed cops were good for was office work, when what Truter needed was someone to cover his back under fire. His radio crackled into life.

“Come in, Sergeant Truter. Over.”

Truter reached into the vehicle. “Sergeant Truter!” he barked into the handset. “Is that you, Delpport?” He rolled his eyes skywards.

“Yes, sir. Over.”

“Over what? Forget it! Flippin' hell, Delpport, can't you see I'm busy? This is the real world out here, not some office tea party.”

“Sorry, sir, I just called in to alert you to a possible missing person's in your environs ...”

“Wat se environs? Speak English, Delpport. A missing person's, who?”

“A Miss Bianca Reynolds ...”

Truter felt his pants stiffen. “You telling me a white chick has gone missing?”

“No, sir. Bianca Reynolds is the partner of the missing person's. According to her statement, her boyfriend went for a jog at six hundred hours on the R434 and hasn't been seen since. She says he's normally back by seven hundred hours. Over.”

Truter had heard it all before. “Let me tell you what's going on here, Delpport. Your so-called missing person is dipping it in on the side. And this Bianca chick, I bet she has a face like a dog's ringster. Am I right, or am I right?” Truter shifted uncomfortably on his feet. Something was starting to stir below.

“She's actually quite pretty, sir. Long dark hair, nice skin ... She's convinced something bad has happened. Over.”

“And I'm convinced she's wasting our time, Delpport. Over and out!”

The stirring below could no longer be ignored. He cursed himself for not sorting it out before coming on duty, but this was proof of what happened when you had to do everything yourself: you ended up rushing. You ended up forgetting

to take care of the little things. Like taking a crap before clocking in for work.

Truter shielded his eyes against the North West glare and studied the horizon. The R434 was still clear – not a vehicle or human in sight. He had to act quickly, because one couldn't mess around with these things.

He scanned the immediate terrain for a suitable site; right where he stood appeared as good as any. He loosened his belt, his holster and radio dangling heavily from side to side. A horse on the home run, his bowels anticipated impending relief. With not a moment to spare, he dropped his pants and squatted down and gave himself over to the hissing deluge, gasping with pleasure as the nagging burden dropped from his body. He shifted his weight onto his good knee and marvelled at the steaming result. Nature was incredible. The body's ability to produce such volume at such regularity was a miracle. There was nothing more underrated in life than the deep spiritual satisfaction of a good boskak. It ranked right up there among life's true pleasures.

Truter craned forwards for a better view of the road. His back felt like an ironing board. He should have given up rugby when that quack had told him to. His uniform creaked under the weight of his belly. Wiry black tufts sprouted from the gaps between the buttons. He sighed contentedly, savouring the moment. Special occasions like these were not to be rushed.

Truter's ruminations were called up short and sudden with the realisation that his allocated roll of patrol toilet paper was sitting above the office filing cabinet. Pushing down a surge of panic, he weighed up the options. There weren't many. He

tugged at the spiky veld grass bordering the tar – a last resort. He calculated the distance between himself and the patrol van – at least twenty metres by his reckoning, and a messy affair getting there, with uncertain outcome, since the vehicle contained nothing of use besides KFC takeaway polystyrene and Sparletta cans. He patted his shirt pockets – a chewed Bic pen, his pack of Pall Mall 20s, two sachets of Grandpa headache powder. A second surge of panic, stronger this time, rippled through his body. He peered down the R434 – still clear. He lifted himself into a half-squat, careful not to mess, gingerly probing his trousers for good news. Nothing in the front pockets. He was fast running out of options. Wincing, he reached round to his back pocket and patted the square outline of a charge book. He had forgotten about that. Things were looking up. A wave of Zen-like calm settled over him and the world felt like a kinder place.

Taking his time now to complete unfinished business, he paged through the dog-eared charge book, noting the contents with grim satisfaction. Pretoria couldn't accuse him of laziness. Not that those bastards ever showed any appreciation for his contribution towards law and order. They couldn't even spell A-P-R-E-S-I-A-T-I-O-N. It was a pity to see all his work about to go to waste. To think he had risked his life bringing some of these criminals to book. On the other hand, a charge book was nothing more than admin PT to make the bosses rich; his present situation was a lot more urgent than any donation to their gravy train.

His view crystal-clear on the matter, Truter took hold of carbon copies B500 to B535, ripped them from the charge book, and proceeded to wipe himself blue in the arse.

## 4

The midnight-blue Toyota Camry turned right into Rubicon, then swung a sharp left into Nerina Close. The driver cut the engine and coasted the car to a halt. Thirteen was the last house on the street.

Freddie Ferreira remained behind the wheel, surveying the lie of the land. Standard government-sponsored face-brick house built in the '70s, fronted by stoep and cement strip driveway. Neat flowerbed with white and yellow flowers of some sort, and an Italian statue – lady's touch. White Ford Sapphire parked under the shade cloth. Mint condition. Two thousand and four to 2006 model – Sunday driver.

Ferreira shifted his focus to the roof and gutters – as his mentor Mr Zeta would have said, the window into a man's soul. No peeling fascias, gutters and IBR in prime nick, no rust spots from what he could tell.

Processing the data, Ferreira had his profile: not your average New South Africa citizens. These people lived to a financial plan. They lived for the future, not the present. He could just about smell the fear coming off the roof.

Ferreira flipped down the visor and checked his hair. Licked his finger and straightened his eyebrows. Gave his nostrils the all clear. He clicked open the gold-buckled vinyl briefcase on the seat next to him, checked the forms were in the correct order, and snapped the lid shut. The butterflies

were kicking in. Same ones as in Angola, before a contact. Just different time and place.

“Nice and slow does it, boytjie. Nice and slow.”

Ferreira stepped from the car and strode up to the gate, pushed it open and marched up to the front door and knocked.

He counted to ten. Footsteps were now coming his way. A shadow appeared behind the brown glass, followed by a chain unbolting. A crack of light escaped through the door, revealing a balding grey-haired man fronting a heavy gut.

“Yes?”

“Good mornings, Mr Scimper!” Ferreira announced. “Fred Ferreira, Titanium Financial Services. Hope I'm not too early?” The crack widened. Ferreira slipped his hand through, which Scimper ignored. Ferreira laughed. “Hell, hope I've got the right day? We did say Wednesday, nine o'clock?” The ball was back in the enemy's court. The man on the other side hesitated.

“I suppose you want to come in?”

“Thanks so much, sir. Beautiful day, don't you think?” Ferreira squeezed through the doorway.

“We'll do this in the lounge.”

Scimper led the way down the passage. A bloodhound testing the air, Ferreira noted the trapped odours – burnt chip oil, bacon, Glade air deodoriser (lavender), old dog, ladies perfume. He followed Scimper into the sitting room. A woman was on the couch, knitting something brown.

“My wife, Joan. What did you say your name was again?”

“Ferreira, sir, Fred Ferreira. Pleasure to meet you, Mrs Scimper.” Flashing a gold-toothed smile, he walked over to

the couch and politely shook the woman's hand. "Lovely place you people have here. So ... how can I say? ... Tasteful." He noted the red flush to the cheeks, the lift of the heavy tits. He pointed at the brown something. "I see you're very creative. Something for your grandchild?"

"Take a seat," cut in Scimper. "I don't have much time."

*Don't have much time se voet* – only a bored white man on government pension would wash his car during the week.

"Yes, of course, sir, I understand fully."

Ferreira sat down and fiddled nervously with his tie. Scimper remained standing. *Oldest trick in the book – top dog, bottom dog.*

"Where did you say you were from again?"

"TFS. Titanium Financial Services, sir. I'm just here—"

"Ja, ja, you're just here to try sell us something, right?"

"Not at all. It's what we in the business call a courtesy visit."

"Give me a break."

Joan Scimper lifted herself from the couch. "Who would like a nice cup of coffee? You must be thirsty after driving all the way from ..."

"Witbank. And a coffee would be fantastic."

"How much sugar?"

"Just three, thanks."

Brian Scimper waited until his wife had left the room. He pulled up the chair opposite Ferreira, and leant forwards. *Classic combat mode.* "Okay, pal, don't give me this nonsense about courtesy visit, blah blah. Before you start with your spiel, let's get a few things straight, man to man."

"Sure, Mr Scimper."

"First of all, you mustn't think I was born yesterday. I know what you insurance people are all about. You're like vultures. No, no, let me finish. I'm not saying you're one of them, but while you're under my roof, in my house, don't try pull a fast one over me." The shock on Ferreira's face didn't pass unnoticed. Scimper softened his assault. "I've seen every trick in the book, Ferreira. Been there, done that, got the T-shirt." Scimper blew into his hanky, and examined the result. "Okay, I've had my say. The stage is all yours, pal."

"Sir, I appreciate you being honest and all, but can I just say something? I ... we at Titanium would never sell you something you don't need. You have my word on that."

Scimper settled back into a more comfortable position – *aggro township brak exposing its soft underbelly*, as the boys liked to describe it. "Okay, that's good to hear. I'm glad we have an understanding. Now—"

"The other thing I want to say is I personally understand how hard retired people like you and the wife have worked for your money. I've been there, Mr Scimper, with my own mom and dad." Ferreira paused. "I don't want to get all personal, but my dad lost everything after this new government came into power. Forty years of pension savings down the drain because of the same vultures you mention. You won't believe it, but this was the reason I first got into the life insurance business."

Brian Scimper's face now carried the guilty look of a man who knew he had crossed the line. "Look, I didn't say you're one of them ..." he mumbled. "Anyways, here comes the coffee."

Ferreira held up his hands. "No need to explain. I understand hundred per cent where you are coming from. Mrs Scimper,