

SEAN, EDDIE and ME

Paul Leger

RED
PRESS

ONE

Kia? You want my honest opinion? Typical Jap crap. Second and fourth set way too close together. The same goes for the clutch and brake. And less power than a Singer sewing-machine. No wonder I can't get the hang of it. I'm a chip off the old man. Always going for the cheaper option and then regretting it.

Anyway, I better concentrate before I end up in some township, because that's the last thing I need right now. I'm trying to remember what the Avis guy said. Take a left when you get to the fork outside the airport, then carry on towards the city until you see the N1 south. Or was it a right at the fork? Great start. Not even out of the carpark and already I'm lost.

Only once I'm on the N1 do I start to unwind a bit. I don't know why I was so nervy in the first place. But that's just me. Being a Sunday afternoon, the road is quieter than a morgue. A few long-haul trucks, a couple of cars, a taxi or two, nothing much. The rest of the country must be farting under the covers after their Sunday lunch.

At least I have the road to myself for a change. It gives me a chance to think about things. Nowadays I never get a chance to think about anything, what with Jen and the kids, and the company helping itself to its pound of flesh. I don't even have time to piss anymore, never mind think.

There's not a cloud in the sky, only this hazy pale blue. Brown veld stretches in every direction, broken here and there by scraggly thorn trees and overhead pylons and telephone lines. Everything looks worse in winter. Like an old photo with the

colour washed from it. I don't understand how anyone can live here. I don't know how I could have lived here.

Off the N1 the road becomes narrow and potholed. I'm soon trailing this massive flatbed that's drifting over the white line and going eighty. I bet the guy bought his licence. That's how it is nowadays. I gear the Jap toaster down to third, press my foot to the floor and crawl past without landing in the veld.

The N18 turn-off pops up ahead. I keep straight. At this rate I'm going to get there way too early. And that's taking it slow. I feel naar just thinking about it. There's nothing worse than arriving somewhere on a Sunday, unless it's in the dark. Especially a place you don't want to be.

Two hours later the town looms up ahead; it's too late to yank the handbrake and do a U-turn. First up is the prison. Not as I remember it. It's twice the size and wrapped in razor wire. No wonder the woman on the phone said the town doesn't get many tourists. A few guys in orange are hanging around the open quad area, looking bored out of their minds.

A hundred meters further down the road *Huis Sonskyn vir Swart-Bejaardes* is still open for business. If it wasn't for the sign you would reckon it's part of the prison next door.

The Monopoly mine houses on the opposite side are still there and uglier than ever, now that the jacarandas once shading them have been mowed down. So called 'aliens'.

As I lean the Kia into Sand River circle it seems as if I've never been away. Like past and present have collapsed into one, and everything in between suddenly doesn't count for much.

I hardly recognise the Vegas. It's still standing, but only just. The red and white neon sign that flashed twenty-four seven is gone and that green grass that saw how many packets of slap

chips drowned in Aromat is a parking lot selling dodgy second-hand cars. I keep driving.

Like the woman on the phone told me, I take a right into Voortrekker, then a left into De La Rey, then another left into Retief, where I find the hotel. All this time I've been imagining this posh new spot called the Jacaranda, meantime it's the old Doringboom dressed up in a fancy new name.

I pull into the half-empty parking ground and find a place near the entrance. I squeeze out of the car. My back hasn't felt this stiff in ages. By the looks of it they've given the hotel a facelift. It could be worse. It's got two stars, whatever that means, apart from an excuse to charge you more. There was nothing else listed on the internet. Besides, I only booked for one night.

I take my overnight bag from the boot and make sure all the doors are locked. You can't trust anyone these days. Not even in small towns.

The woman behind the reception isn't bad looking, in that Afrikaner sort of way. Nice skin, big bones, shiny brown hair going down to her shoulders. She's also friendly, which makes a nice change. I appreciate that. A good-looking woman that's also friendly, that is. A black guy in a red jacket and black pants from the Ark appears from nowhere and takes my bag from me. I follow him up the stairs to Room 104. That's the same number as our house in Durbanville. If I was Jen I would believe it meant something. An omen or something like that. But I'm not Jen.

The old guy is also friendly and polite. Too polite. He's been working here eighteen years, lugging suitcases up and down the stairs. While he fiddles with the key in the door, I'm calculating how many suitcases. Let's say ten a day. Times three-hundred-

and-sixty-five. You get the picture.

I give him a tip, five rand in coins. It's all the loose change I have. But it must be more than he earns in a week because he genuinely seems to appreciate it; you would swear I've given him a Christmas bonus. I tell him I'm not his *baas*, but it goes in one ear and out the other. Like I always maintain, this so-called new South Africa is a bullshit story. Except in the cities, nothing has changed. The same old thing in a different wrapper. That's why I'll never bring Jen and the kids to a place like this.

I lock the door and check out the room. I've long since lost count of all the hotels I've stayed at. That's the price you pay for being in sales. I go around the room opening the cupboards, turning on the hot- and cold-water taps, checking under the bed for dust, testing the mattress, sniffing the bedspread and spare blanket in the cupboard – that type of thing. It's called a ritual. I can't relax until I know what I'm dealing with.

I'm feeling it a bit now. It feels like I've been on the road all day. I don't know what the rush was about. I lie down on the bed and kick off my Crocs. Don't care what anyone says, they're still the best shoes in the world.

They probably haven't replaced the mattress since the Doringboom days; it's way too soft and sags in the middle. There's a long crack on the ceiling, running from one side of the room to the other – I bet caused by an earth tremor from the mines. People don't believe it when you tell them you grew up on an anthill, with these million and one black ants in mining helmets drilling holes miles under you.

Someone has tried to fix the crack, but they've done a hash job of it. You can't just slap on Polyfilla. With these things you have to get to the root of the problem. You can't just cover over the surface and think it will go away. Nine times out of ten

you'll have to start from scratch again.

The room has a TV, one of those massive dinosaurs from way back when. Talk about a blast from the past – Barlow-Vision. Because it doesn't have a remote – remotes weren't even invented in the Seventies – I have to sit up and lean forward on the edge of the bed to flick channels. I don't know why I bother; there's nothing to watch on a Sunday, besides Bible bashers getting their rocks off. Nobody must tell me who and what to believe. I turn the sound right down and sit there thinking what to do until dinner.

I should try get in touch with Eddie. He's been living with his mom all these years – that's according to Simon. I wonder if he still looks the same. He probably wouldn't even know who I am; that's how long it's been. Maybe I'll stick to my gameplan and leave it for another time.

This crack on the roof is bugging me. If it were up to me I wouldn't just cover it up with Polyfilla. First, you've got to chip away the plaster around the crack until there's a clean groove. Then you cover the groove with forty-millimetre joinery tape. And only then do you smooth it over with Polyfilla and give it a good sanding with a hundred-and-eighty-grit. Once I'm finished with it you won't know there was a crack there in the first place.

I should give Jen a quick call, let her know I got here safe, make sure everything is okay and tell her to lock the Trellidoor. She's a complete hippie when it comes to S&S – Safety and Security. If I didn't insist she carry a cellphone with our emergency numbers punched in she wouldn't bother. I once asked her what she would do if she broke down on the N2 at night. She just shrugged her shoulders and said some airy-fairy nonsense about karma. That's Jen for you. I would cut my own throat for her, but she's still living in the '70s.

I dig out my cellphone from my jacket and check if there are any messages from her. Nothing. Probably still being faxed through. I hit 'Theron Home', and then hit 'Cancel' before it even starts ringing on the other side. I'll call her later, after suicide hour and the kids have gone to bed. I check my watch again -15:10. Still three hours to kill before dinner. I get up and fill a glass of water from the bathroom, then dig out the Rennies from my toiletry bag. I down three of them and lie on the bed again. Before I know it I'm staring at the crack, fighting off this heavy lump of dread I've had from the moment I stepped off the plane.

TWO

"You're a psycho, you know that?"

"Check who's talking? I'm just keen, that's all."

"Just keen', he says. Only psychos go fishing at sparrow's fart. To think I could still be dossing at Club Duvet."

"Ag, it's not that early."

"What? The sun hasn't even poked its head over the mine dump yet? Yikes!"

"What?"

"Almost saw my arse. This path is slimy as all hell."

"Chips with that rod, won't you. You almost saw my eye. At this rate I'm going to walk out here a blind man."

"And me in a wheelchair."

So, with this fine mist hanging over the river and about fifty degrees colder down here than up on the bridge and us talking non-stop crap, we work our way to the water's edge. I swear, I wouldn't want to be here alone, even during the day. With the willow trees on the other side appearing and disappearing like dangly skeletons in the mist it could be something out of a horror movie. I stick to Sean's back as we trek along the path running next to the river.

"Seriously, Nick, you're going to take my eye out," says Sean after I've jabbed him in the back for the fifteenth time.

"Sorry."

"Don't mention it."

It's a bit of a schlep to get to our spot, a soft patch of green grass spread under a huge ancient willow that's jam-packed with weaver-bird nests. It takes forever and a day to get there, at least fifteen minutes from the bridge, but it's always worth it in the end because nobody else comes here. It's just Sean, me, the weaver-birds and the brown moody river.

We chuck our haversacks onto the dewy grass and begin to organise ourselves for some serious fishing. More like Sean organises himself for some serious fishing, while I lay out the flask and sandwiches and . . . I start patting my pockets. Sean must spot the seriously worried look on my face.

"What's wrong?"

"I forgot my lighter."

"You're bullshitting?"

“I’m serious.”

“So now what we going to do?”

“I dunno. I’m such a loskop.”

“That’s no lie.”

“Up yours too.”

“Maybe later.”

“Think I should go back?”

“Are you nuts?”

“Shit, I can’t believe it!”

Sean casually carries on sorting out his stuff, like it’s no big deal.

“By the way . . .” he says, his back to me, threading his line.

“What?”

“Maybe if you ask nicely, you can use the matches in my tackle box.”

You would swear Sean has just saved my life, I’m so grateful. We spread the groundsheet on the grass and I find the matches and arrange them next to our unopened box of Dunhills, with our flask and lunchtin alongside them. Things have to be just so before I can get going. It’s not like there’s any rush and it’s not that I’m really that big into fishing. Not like some guys. They go into panic mode soon as they smell the water. Sean falls into that category. He’s big time into fishing. Always has been.

“I wonder if I should use a number two or four hook? What you reckon, Seanie?”

“Maybe try the four. With this mist the bass might be biting.”

I screw on the coffee grinder tight and proper. Not like the last time we were here when I almost tossed my reel into the water, together with the rest of the rod.

“I reckon today’s the day, Seanie. You watch, I’m going to catch the biggest mother you’ve ever seen.”

And I pick up my rod and start going through the motions of hooking a fish the size of a marlin. Slipping and sliding across the grass, the marlin drags me towards the water. I dig my feet hard into the ground and fight it and slowly reel it to shore. As it reaches the riverbank I pull out the Okapi and stab it in the throat, then collapse on the grass and have a heart attack. By this time Sean’s killing himself.

“You’re such a doos,” he says, shaking his head, but wiping his eyes at the same time.

“That’s why you like me. Birds of a feather and all that.”

“Ja, true. But sometimes I wonder.”

I look at my watch. It’s almost eight and the sun is at long last breaking through the mist.

“How about a good luck smoke before we start?”

Now Sean looks at his watch. “If you’re keen, I’m keen. You can do the honours.”

So I squat down on the groundsheet and unwrap the Dunhills and flick open the box and carefully lift off the gold paper. The last thing we need now is our pack of twenties to land up in the water. I lift the box up to Sean’s nose.

“Like flippin’ mother’s milk,” he says.

It’s my turn next to take a sniff.

“Nothing like it, hey? I still maintain Dunhill is the best brand in the world.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Of course I’m right. You first,” I say, offering him the box.

“No, you first. You paid for them.”

“Okay, if you insist,” I say in this stuffy English-gentleman accent and help myself.

When we have both settled down and are ready, I light Sean’s for him and then mine. It’s the ritual. I close my eyes, suck

the smoke deep into my lungs, hold it there for a bit and then slowly let it out through my nose. There's nothing better than that first drag. Especially when the guy I'm sharing it with is Sean and we are standing on the misty banks of the Sand. Sean blows a smoke ring into the air and we watch it float away slowly and dissolve into the grey.

"Mother's milk," he says, and soaks up the earth's oxygen with the next drag. We stand next to each other, looking at the river, neither of us saying much. You don't need to say much in moments like this. Sean finishes his first and flicks the butt into the water.

"You want the last drag?" I offer.

"No, you enjoy it."

After I've sucked mine to the bone I also flick it into the river and watch it bob up and down, hoping a fish will go for it. Sean yawns and scratches his balls like he's got crabs or something.

"This is the life, hey. What more can a man want?"

I don't answer, because right now I can't think of anything.

As I said, when Sean and me go fishing I do more messing around than actual fishing. But eventually I get my act together and my line into the water. Sean's already tackled up and trying his luck higher up, which means I get the spot under the willow.

I don't know how long Sean and me have been coming to the river. It must be since we were still in nappies. Okay, I'm exaggerating but that's how long it feels. Compared to Sean I hardly ever catch anything. Not even a barbel. But it's not only about catching fish. It's hard to explain, but there's more to it than that. Only Sean and me understand that.

Once my line's at the right tension and my rod at the right angle, I settle into the gnarly trunk of Old Faithful – that's what

we call her, the old willow tree – and stare out over the water, taking in the early morning: the sun burning up the last of the mist, the weaver birds having it out above my head, the gentle slap-slap of water against the muddy bank, the smell of morning grass, the bubbles popping on the surface.

Stupid thoughts start popping in my own head. Like, I start wondering what's been the biggest and oldest fish ever in the Sand River. And are the bubbles on the water just crabs or some other underwater creature we don't know about? Or maybe it's just the mud farting. And were the black things in that Bata shoebox really Swapo ears, or just biltong? And is it true that Luke Scheepers cut them all off or is it just another of Eddie's stories? And about all the stuff we're planning for the holidays, the veld camp and the fête and my birthday that's coming up soon. And whether my uncle's going to make it. Dumb thoughts, floating in and out of my head, as I lie there waiting for a nibble.

The time passes. The sun climbs higher and higher and I slide lower and lower, until I'm on my back staring up at the sky, watching this small cloud changing shape, from a dog into a bird, then into a tadpole, then into a fat dog turd.

"Had any luck?" asks Sean from somewhere way above. It feels like he hasn't been gone for five minutes.

"I just lost a huge motherfucker," I say, blinking my eyes in the bright light and yawning.

"Like flippin' hell you did. We wouldn't hear the end of it, even if a guppy nibbled your bait."

"What about you?"

"Nothing much either. Just a few small ones."

"Where they?"

"Threw them back."

“Are you kidding me?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

And so we go on, back and forth, until the sun burns a hole in the top of our heads and Sean decides to try for barbel lower down where the water's more muddy, and I decide to stay put. While Sean crawls around in the mud and I park off with my hat over my face, I'm thinking it's lucky no-one's around when Sean and me go fishing; they would think we're nuts.

By the time we've packed up and hiked for miles back to our bikes chained together up at the bridge my shirt is sticking to my back and my face feels as if someone's smeared Deep Heat over it. It's one of those typical Free State days, when it's so hot everything stops moving. Even the insects and leaves on the trees. Everything. It's so hot that breathing is a mission. It's one of those days where you just want to sit on the stoep and stare.

“Looks like someone's moving in,” says Sean, after we've crawled to the top of Voortrekker and taken the turn into Van der Stel. A truck with a double trailer is parked outside the old mine manager's house. Van's Household Movers is splashed in yellow down the side.

“About time someone moved in,” I say. “The place has been standing empty for yonks.”

It's true. Ever since the mine built a new mansion for the mine manager, with a tennis court and a sauna and all, hardly anybody's been living here.

Sean pulls up ahead under the Syringa tree. I pull over next to him and we stand there catching air over our handlebars. It's a real mission getting back from the river, especially when you have to carry a rod and heavy haversack at the same time. I feel

like I've got a Checkers bag over my head. Five black guys in blue overalls are hauling a piano up the driveway. It must weigh a ton-and-a-half.

“Definitely not Morkel's,” says Sean, pointing with his rod to the furniture on the grass.

“Or Russel's. I wonder who's moving in.”

“Larnies. Check that Beemer in the driveway. You know what that thing must have cost?”

“How much?”

“Big bucks. Minimum sixty grand. Can't see from here but if it's the 735i, even more than that. I wouldn't mind getting behind the wheel of that thing.”

“You can buy a bladdy house with sixty grand.”

“You're telling me. You can buy your own tropical island with sixty grand. These okes earn a wack. And for doing nothing.”

“You reckon?”

Definitely. All they do is sit behind a desk all day telling their skivvies what to do. My old man says they don't even bother going underground.”

“Is it? If that's the case I'm going to study to be a mine manager.”

“Ja, me too. That's if I ever get my matric.

“Of course you will. It's Eddie who won't.”

“That's true. Hell, but it's hot,” Sean says for the hundredth time today. “How about we hit the pool this arvie?”

“What a ques.”

As we pull away from under the half-shade of the Syringa, the five black guys in overalls start hauling the piano up the stairs to the front door.