

Highway 74

I let the kid ride along most times because he loved trucks so. He came in handy for opening gates, fetching things, carrying stuff and sometimes cleaning the rig, although he was too skinny and undernourished to make a job of it.

He never spoke. Just hung around at the depot gate, his jeans sagging and one bootlace trailing, wiping his nose with the back of a bony hand, looking as if he couldn't care less if I picked him up or not. His snake-skin belt had seen better days, but I doubt the kid had.

It was on the R 74, that 200 miles heat-shimmering stretch of tarred infinity that just keeps going away from you, no matter how far you put the hammer down. Whatever van der Walt says back at the depot, the need to get 74 over with always makes me punish those big hearted old diesels. That day was no different.

The kid was scrunched over against his door, just staring through the windshield like he was counting the ant-heaps and rocks whizzing by. We were halfway through old 74, with the rig pulling well and I let her have her head. That diesel smoke was laid out behind us for a couple of miles and I was watching it in the rear view when the kid suddenly yelled "STOP!!!!"

It was so unexpected, I stamped on the anchors without thinking. Under me, I could feel the big servos assisting with the massive effort of slowing thirty tons of frozen beef travelling at 70 mph.

The girl standing on the side of the road was about 16. She was barefoot, in a thin dress that made her look like she could be family of the kid. She wasn't hitching - just standing there, like she was waiting to cross the road. Even with the power steering, I was working hard to keep the rig in line so I didn't get more than a glimpse of her pale, pinched face before we'd thundered by and the cloud of dust we were dragging came down over her.

Hydraulics were still shutting down when the kid yanked his door open and legged it back. I climbed down in my own time and went to look. The kid was casting about on the ragged sand verges along the narrow tar, like a skinny bloodhound, this side and that.

He stopped and looked up, his face creased with disappointment. "Gone" he said, accusing, like it was my fault, "Gone". And it was true. There was no sign that anyone had ever been at the side of the road.

You could see a long way into the thin scrub and sun scorched tussocks of grass, and there was just nobody there. I shrugged, but I could see the kid wasn't going to let it go.

"Just gone." he said, more distinctly, as though I might be slow to understand. "Gunna look." he said, setting off in a shambling trot away from the road.

I was caught short for a moment, before I yelled after him, "Now listen kid, I'm not about to go fooling about, looking for some dumb lost girl. I got a load to deliver - you come back here, you hear me?" But he was gone, and then I realised how someone *could* disappear in that deceptively thin cover. Once, I thought I saw a flash of his greying T-shirt, although it might have been a bird - except there didn't seem to be any about. I stood there, swatting big blue flies and yelling for the kid every so often.

I looked at my watch and cursed the kid. And myself for bringing him along. Just twenty minutes ago, cold beer and a hot shower in Kwaggapoort had seemed to be in reach. Now, here I was, in the middle of nowhere, waiting for? It occurred to me I didn't even know his name. He was just "kid" and "hey, kid" and "here, kid". I'd never even wondered where he slept when he wasn't with me. Now he was God knew where in the desert - in search of someone who may not have been there in the first place. Driving a long-haul rig does things to your eyes. Maybe the kid and I had developed the same problem.

My watch said it was past time I moved on - but I couldn't leave the kid. Or could I? Who else but me knew he was out here? I really couldn't afford to hang about any longer. I walked up and down a while, thinking about what I was going to do, then I climbed back in the rig. I started up and idled the motor to warm her while I sat there, staring at the kid's empty seat.

Then I gunned the motor, dropped the brakes and rolled out onto old R 74 again, nearly an hour behind, and feeling bad about the kid. I told myself he'd get picked up, sooner or later, by someone passing and be little the worse for the experience. Teach him to listen when he was called.

Well, they didn't say much about my being over schedule and I guess the beef didn't spoil, so I had a good week in Kwaggapoort, saw some friends, had a game or two, drank some brandy and put my feet up. I was half listening to E-TV from the shower, so I didn't get the whole story on the seismic whatever on R 74, but I was in time to get the warning about the road closure. I was dripping all over the carpet as I watched the barricades going up at both ends and the provincial traffic cops turning back cars.

Then they were quizzing some engineer about the viability of fixing the damage to the road. Seems they already decided to close it permanently.

I sat on the bed a long time, considering what to do. In the end, I worked out that there was nothing I *could* do. It never happened, as far as I was concerned. And that seemed to be that, so I went out to tie one on to shake off my mood.

They moved my routes around for six months after that, so I got kept pretty busy. Had a near pile-up on the R 42 when the pills and the headaches got to me but I guess years of fighting rigs stood me in good stead and it was just a side-swipe after all, but the guy in the motor-home was pretty mad and the court wrangle lasted a couple of weeks, so they kept me off the road for nearly a month on half pay until it was sorted out. I mooched about with nothing to do except think and that's always bad for me.

I guess that's why it wasn't a good thing, meeting Fanie Dippenaar in the Koper Beker that late Saturday afternoon when the Boks had gone down to the Wallabies 25 - 18 and Koos du Plessis was doing things with everyone's emotions under the cracked plastic cover of the juke box.

"We gunna do what our pa's used ter take for granted. Get us a young, tender springbok, skin 'im, gut' im and have us a good old rooikrantz braai in the desert. KWV is invited a'course. An' Estelle here - she's gunna keep us warm!"

After the boredom of the last few weeks it sounded OK to me, and I just sort of watched it happening around me, Fanie loading things in his bakkie and the girl giggling and joking about who she got to sit next to in the cab. I squeezed myself in and Estelle hopped onto my lap like we were old friends. It was warm in the cab and after about twenty minutes, I just kind of drifted off to their arguing and cursing against the background of country music on the radio.

I woke up with my head against the window and my right leg in spasm under Estelle's weight as she dozed against my chest. Fanie looked OK, singing along, hands drumming on the wheel, when I asked, "Where we now?" He finished his verse and said, "Fifty kays out on the old R 74. Bokkies here as tame as a petting zoo they tell me. Just a month after they closed it. Reckon we'll get us a buck - no problem."

I registered where we were and straightened up in my seat. This didn't feel good. Then I considered what could be worrying me. What could go wrong, I reasoned? 6 months and more out here could do a lot of things - all good for me. I relaxed a little and moved Estelle's weight onto my other thigh. Eddy had slowed right

down and had switched on the spotlights on the bullbar. The R 74 didn't have many bends, but it was round one of these that we saw our buck.

The truck rolled to a stop and Fanie pulled up the brake quietly before stepping down. He had a beat up, single shot, point 22 rifle in his hand and I guessed he'd done this sort of thing before. The buck stopped in the middle of the road, right in the spotlights, and Fanie settled his aim from the driver's window. I was watching the springbok, waiting for Fanie to fire.

Quite suddenly, and like he was in his own backyard, a skinny, awkward figure stepped out of the scrub and stood in front of the buck. I recognised him right away. Fanie breathed out, real mad, and lowered the rifle. The kid looked a lot older than I remembered and even thinner than before. I guess months in the desert will do that to you. He just stood there, staring into the lights, but not dazzled. As though he could see past the glare and into my soul.

Fanie didn't have the same memories to bother him, and he hissed, "Hey kid, outa the way, yer ruining my night! Bliksem, will you lookit this?" The kid had raised his hand in invitation, and was joined by a girl that I recognised because she was still wearing the same dress. I noticed the kid seemed to have lost his snakeskin belt.

Fanie yelled 'Now it's a blerry family gathering!! C'mon - *get!*' The kids just stood there and behind them, the buck nibbled at the leaves on a grey-looking bush then walked slowly off the road and into the scrub. A moment later, the kids followed it.

It was Estelle who broke the silence. "Fanie, I gotta go. Real bad." She climbed off my lap and squirmed across and out of Fanie's open door. "Too many beers, I guess," she said over her shoulder and disappeared into the scrub. Fanie and I were still watching the spot where the buck had vanished when Estelle screamed. And kept screaming, wild, mad screaming that had us running through the bushes to find her.

The puff adder chewing on her upper thigh was about as big as any I've ever seen and when Fanie grabbed it by the tail to pull it off, it let go of Estelle and nailed him in the hand. I mean, really nailed him.

Swearing fit to bust, he tried one-handed to bring the point 22 to bear on the thick, thrashing shape and fired. I didn't see if he hit it or not, because the ricochet took me in the spine and dropped me right here where I been ever since. I've never known such pain in my life. I can't move.

It was a long, noisy time before Fanie and Estelle died. Almost enough noise to drown the sound of Fanie's bakkie starting up and rolling away. Damned if I knew the kid could drive.

God, I hope the sun isn't as bad as it was yesterday.

Mike Job