

Lessons On The Trans Karoo

*“On a warm summer’s evening
On a train bound for nowhere”*

Kenny Rogers on the earphones, gravelly here and there, but mellow as ever. Some pretty guitar-work in the background, nobody pushy or looking for recognition, just content to be part of the whole, working for Kenny - with Kenny.

Outside , moonlight shone through the gaps between the coaches in the train’s long shadow rushing along the ground near to the track - unless a rock or a bush blocked it out for an instant. Karoo flatness stretched away into infinity, to far-off places and things. Once or twice, the glimmer of orange lamplight in the distance, brief reminders that this vast, barren landscape wasn’t completely devoid of life. Brave souls, content to live out here, preferring the solitude and the silence to the way I lived.

The Cape Town gigs had been good. Well... good enough, me trying to fit in with the musos that knew Eddy Lasky nearly as well as I knew him before we parted ways. Who would have guessed his lead guitarist was that far into the powder – might explain some of the bad press they’d got when the guy got overly creative and the fans objected.

When the call came through, I had two guitar lessons done and another prodigy on his pimply, cosseted way to my Hillbrow crib, Mommy’s Porsche Cayenne tackling the 5.30 traffic like any wage-slave’s Beetle, Corolla or Corsa. That much, at least, gave me pleasure. OK, that, and the monthly transfer of funds that paid my rent. Watching him pick his clumsy way through the simplest of chords was the down-side, because Chet Atkins or Mark Knoffler he wasn’t. There were times I wondered how he got the catches open on his chamois –covered guitar case, when I wasn’t salivating over the limited edition Ibanez it contained.

It was like watching someone using the Mona Lisa as a backstop for a dartboard, to see him man-handling that hand-crafted treasure .

Anyways, back to the call, Eddy at his most persuasive. Not begging, but calling in old markers and making an offer that didn't require much thought. If he was offering those figures, he was obviously doing a lot better than I was. I'm a slut at times, particularly when I'm starving, so I accepted the Trans Karoo ticket as a substitute for the SAA return flight I'd have preferred, figuring I had time on my hands.

I was glad to be alone in my compartment. I was surprised to see that my bottle of Jack was getting to the bottom of the label when there was a ratatat-tat on the compartment door. Company wasn't what I wanted at this time of night, but when the door slid open, I had to admit it was what I did want. She looked twenty but could have been any age that favoured Levi's with shredded knees and an off-the shoulder white T-shirt with a snow-white bra-strap showing. Barefoot, but I didn't have sheets that would object to some good old SAR corridor dirt.

What also caught my eye was the heavy-duty Hohner in her hand. "Heard you playing earlier," she said, "some nice riffs. Want company?" The way she motioned with the harmonica made it clear she meant in the musical sense.

"Sure," I said, reaching up for the Fender, back in its case on the luggage rack. "Pull up a bunk and let's do it." She ignored my leer, settled back against the green leather and put one foot up on the hand-basin, waiting.

I strummed a few chords and settled into picking 'Me and Bobby McGee'. The Hohner came in faultlessly and stayed there with me the whole while – her eyes on my fingering. Maybe the story-line would get to her. It often did. But it didn't, this time. Neither did "Help me make it through the Night." Kristoffersen wasn't living up to expectations, but I was really enjoying the music by now and when she led me unexpectedly into "Long Haired Country Boy" I was delighted to get round to Charlie Daniels and from there into Axton's "Della and the Dealer".

I tried to impress her with some improvised Ry Cooder slide guitar, but it's not easy without a slide guitar and the bourbon was making me clumsy.

I proffered the bottle, and she said, "I take it with water. I'll get a glass. I need to freshen up anyway." I said, "Y'all don' be long now, y'hear?" but when I went to push the compartment door open for her, I realised I had quite a load on board and sat down again to get a grip on things. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, listening to the soothing metronome rhythm of wheels on rails. It was taking her a while to fetch a glass and do whatever women do to freshen up. I guess I fell asleep waiting for her, but I did dream that she came.

The pre-dawn Karoo chill woke me, shivering, stiff from the unforgiving leather surface and a bad taste in my mouth. I pretended not to care that the Hohner player hadn't come back and got another hour in, lying flat this time, although I couldn't find one of those green bolster things to use as a pillow.

Kimberley came, and a very long time afterwards, Jo'burg arrived in a racket of brake squealing and locomotive noise, along with all the platform sounds and shouts, rattling the tin roof overhead and setting the pigeons to flight. I rinsed my toothbrush and put it away and pulled my two bags off the rack. The guitar-case was a third burden, but I shrugged into the shoulder strap and managed to get out onto the platform, disconcertingly solid and immobile underfoot after the movement of the train.

Japie was late as usual, and arrived panting and sweaty to help me carry the stuff to his car, parked miles away. "How was Cape Town? And the chicks?" Japie still called them chicks.

"Well, Cape Town was good. Nice gigs. Chicks? Well, there was one on the train..." Japie's eyes got big and, not to disappoint him, I described a night of smouldering passion on snowy South African Railways linen, borrowing shamelessly from 007's Trans Siberia Express liaison. I had to grab the wheel twice en route to Hillbrow. Japie doesn't get out much.

Power and geyser back on, I pressed fifty rand on him thanked him for the lift and said cheers about twelve times. I unpacked, stood the Fender case in the corner and showered in lukewarm water, thinking about the next evening's gig. Long ago, I'd started checking for spare strings in the side pocket and although I needed a burger and a beer, I paused long enough to do that. There was something vaguely strange about the balance of the case as I swung it up onto the table.

I unzipped it, and stared down at the embossed springbok head and SAR/SAS logo on the two green leather bolsters nestling there in the padded velvet interior.

Mike Job