

SKIVVY

Insults are like being punched in the face with words

Unknown

It was the wettest year in the Eastern Karroo for a very long time. 1948.

Frankie Kleinboi had been awake all night anxiously hoping the rain would stop because he would soon have to walk two miles to work. He was employed as skivvy to engine driver Koos Kleinhans and was expected to be at his beck and call day and night. Certain folk in Naauwpoort had a far nastier word for what Frankie did for a living.

Frankie came from poor stock –other side of the railway line. He lived there with his widowed mother Saartjie. The houses were all small one-roomed brick units with tin roofs erected like peas in a pod. Each unit had a brightly painted wooden door and two small front facing windows. A common ablution facility close by serviced the units.

Like most poor folk living on the other side of the railway line, he and his mother dreamed of a time when the struggle to survive would end.

Frankie could wait no longer and had to leave home in the pouring rain to ensure he was at Koos's house on time. He hadn't gone far when he was shivering involuntarily. The rain was falling so hard he thought it was the second flooding.

His mother had read him a story once when he was a child. It was about a man called Noah, when the whole world flooded.

There were no streetlights in Naauwpoort like there were in the big cities. Apart from the lights around the busy junction and the station platform as well as the ever-blinking signal lights it was darker than the devil's armpit. Rain streamed down his face like being in a shower with the cold tap turned on high.

His not-so-waterproof veldskoens were caked in thick black mud and so were his threadbare dungaree pants.

Koos had given Frankie strict instructions before going to bed to wake him up at three o'clock in the morning. Koos had to be ready at three forty-five to relieve the driver of the incoming passenger train from Port Elizabeth. It was his job to take over as driver from the busy Naauwpoort junction through to Bloemfontein and then return on a Port Elizabeth bound train.

More than eighty-five locomotives steamed through Naauwpoort each day turning it into the busiest and noisiest rail junction in South Africa.

The acrid odour of coal smoke from the mighty steam locomotives permeated everywhere whether it rained or not. In summer soot fell like fine rain from the thick clouds of black smoke belched out of the metal behemoths.

Washing day in Naauwpoort was a housewife's nightmare. Worse still when the summer winds gusted over the coal yards.

Screeching wheel brakes and the deafening cacophony of coaches being shunted into each other from different directions like demented dominoes, invaded even the most sacred spaces. The incessant chugging and whistling and blasts of steam were something every resident lived with. There was no escaping the clamour day or night. It was the shuddering lullaby of Naauwpoort. And the lingua franca was *Spoornweg*.

If Koos or any of the other drivers, of which there were many, were ever delayed or worse still, did not arrive for their shift, chaos would ensue. A train held up at the hectic Naauwpoort station was a very serious matter because it threw all the carefully planned schedules out of kilter. It ricocheted all the way up to Johannesburg and down to Port Elizabeth.

Frankie arrived at Koos's house in time and rapped firmly four times in quick succession on the bedroom windowpanes.

"Wake up, please mister Koos, it's nearly three o'clock." Frankie had to raise his voice until he was shouting above the noise of the rain pounding on the veranda's tin roof and the din from the rail junction.

He wiped the rain from his eyes with the back of his hand and rapped firmly once more.

“Mister Koos, please wake up.” The rain penetrated his tattered old rubberised railway issue raincoat and oversized hood as if they were made of fish net.

Frankie had parked his rusted old bicycle against the wooden gatepost before squelching his way up the short muddy path to Koos’s house. He had asked himself repeatedly why he was stupid enough to attempt to pedal his bicycle all the way to Koos’s house in the first place. It would have been much easier had he walked the two miles without also having to push his bicycle.

The soot infused mud had threatened to suck his veldskoens off his feet. He may as well have been bare footed. It really made no difference.

Koos’s ugly brown dog *Wagter*, with the bent tail was asleep in its kennel around the back of the small house. How the dog’s tail got broken was probably the result of Koos’s foul disposition. Frankie had first-hand knowledge of that. There was little doubt in Frankie’s mind that the poor mutt was as wet and cold as he was. The mood Frankie was in right then he knew it would be better if the dog stayed in its kennel if it knew what was good for it.

When he first started working as Koos’s skivvy he had knocked on his front door because he thought it was the proper thing to do. That was how he was raised. The result was Koos did not hear him knock and did not wake up and the train was delayed. There were some really ugly curses

flung at Frankie, not only by Koos but also by the other engine drivers.

Knocking on his bedroom window proved to be much more successful.

Jobs on South African Railways were strictly reserved for a privileged few by a regime that paid scant attention to qualification. Frankie Kleinboi had standard six as did a great many railway employees. But he stood no chance whatsoever of official employment.

Twenty-year old Frankie had been an attentive learner and a keen athlete. But had to leave school at the age of fifteen to earn money for his mother. He had had little alternative.

Saartjie Kleinboi knew her son was being victimised and it hurt her deeply because she was powerless to put a stop to it. She knew that Frankie often snuck across the school's sport fields at night where he pretended to be a pupil. Under the light of the moon he would pretend to be Dennis Compton batting against England and the imaginary crowds would be cheering his team on: *Frankie, Frankie*. He would do the dance of victory with his arms in the air.

It broke her heart to think that her son would never know what it felt like to wear a school uniform or be part of a cricket team. She knew Frankie's heart would have burst with pride singing the school's anthem.

What she did not know and what Frankie did not know either, because he did not own a stopwatch, he could run the hundred yards in 10.1 seconds –bare-foot on grass in the dark. But no one was watching, just the man in the moon. The world record was 9.4 set by American Melvin Patton that year. Frankie had the frame of an athlete. He was five foot ten inches tall and weighed in at one hundred and thirty-five pounds. He had a dark complexion and short curly dark hair.

“Mark my words, my son,” prophesised Mrs Kleinboi. “One day Naauwpoort will be a big city like Bloemfontein with street lights and lots of fancy shops. And there will be Studebaker and Hudson motorcars everywhere.”

Being a skivvy to a man like fat Koos Kleinhans had earned him a great deal of derision. But it was nothing worse than what mister Koos had called him, especially when he had to wake him up in the morning in the middle of winter to start his shift.

There had been a time when Koos had bought an alarm clock but it didn't go so well for the hapless timepiece. The first time it sounded off at midnight Koos threw it across his bedroom and it smashed to pieces against a wall. That was what led to Frankie becoming his skivvy.

Frankie's mother had been employed as a cleaner in Koos's house, she knew from experience what type of person he was. When after ten years she had gotten too old to do housework, Koos told her to go. She pleaded with him to let

her fifteen year old son take over as cleaner and cook and he reluctantly agreed. They desperately needed the money.

Frankie was nowhere near as efficient as his mother or as good a cook and often got his backside kicked and food thrown back at him. But when Koos was promoted he employed Saartjie's youngest sister to cook for him. He kept Frankie on as cleaner and also made him his alarm clock skivvy.

Koos Kleinhans was a short fat bald fifty-one year old divorced man. He lived alone in a small brick two bedroomed railway house with a faded red tin roof and a front veranda that was as wide as the house. It was adjacent to the busy station where all the incoming and departing trains stopped and where he took over as driver.

It amazed Frankie that Koos was still able to hoist his bulbous frame up onto the footplate. If he happened to kick his shin or some other painful part of his huge anatomy his swearing could be heard above the blast from the train whistle.

A bright light suddenly flared in the dark of the bedroom as Koos lit a candle.

"Frankie! Dammit boy," yelled an irate Koos. "I heard you the first time. Stop your bloody shouting." Koos must have shouted with the candle in front of his big mouth because the flame suddenly died. He had to bend over in the dark to pick up his matches and re light it.

Frankie knew what was coming next but thankfully the noise of the rain on the tin veranda roof masked the canon blast of Koos farting. That huge belly of Koos's could hold a hell of a lot of wind. Sometimes he was still farting as he laboured up onto the footplate of the class 19D number 2644. According to Piet Nel, Koos's stoker, if ever the train ran out of steam they could just plug Koos's fat backside to the boiler. It would break the speed limit going through the Karoo. Notwithstanding, Koos Kleinhans' colleagues regarded him as one of the best drivers in the Karoo.

Frankie's grandfather had warned many times to never trust a fart. It was his favourite wisecrack. He smiled at the thought of it and how appropriate it was for mister Koos.

Frankie didn't trust Koos. Once before the old man had gone back to sleep and the train got delayed. Frankie was blamed of course, that was nothing new. So Frankie waited outside in the rain until fat Koos appeared on the veranda satchel with sandwiches and coffee flask in hand.

"How in the name of hell am I supposed to get through all that bloody mud? Bring me that damn bicycle of yours so that I can ride instead of getting my dam pants gat full of dirt."

Frankie shook his head in disbelief. He knew very well that fat Koos had never ridden a bike in the last fifty years. He would wreck the old bike and would fall face first into the mud. Then he would have to go and change clothing.

“Mister Koos I am so sorry mister Koos the bloody bike has got a flat tyre man. I am sorry mister Koos but I think you is going to have to walk around to the siding. ”

“Well where the hell is your umbrella?” Koos barked at Frankie.

“Mr Koos the thing got broken in the storm last week. Remember mister Koos you threw the thing into the veld?”

“Well then give me your rain jacket so I can put it over my bliksem se head,” ordered Koos impatiently.

“Y-yes mister Koos.” Frankie hated the way Koos spoke to him but he knew it was fruitless trying to argue. He grudgingly took off his rain jacket and held it over his boss’s head.

“This bloody jacket stinks don’t you ever wash the bloody thing? C’mon then walk and walk slowly so I don’t get wet.”

“Yes mister Koos.”

Frankie was about to start walking while holding his rain jacket over Koos’s head when he noticed something that suddenly brought a broad grin to his face.

“What the hell are you grinning about?” demanded Koos

“Mister Koos’s water works are sticking out,” said Frankie choking on the words.

“W-whaat? Talk louder you damn idiot,” shouted Koos above the clamour.

Frankie had second thoughts and shook his head. “Nothing mister Koos, nothing.” Frankie decided not to tell Koos that he had forgotten to button up his fly. It was apparent that Koos did not believe in wearing underpants. He would soon find out when he stands in front of the boiler.

Frankie didn’t so much mind the rain or getting soaking wet. He didn’t even mind having to sit up all night until it was time to go and wake Koos. He dared not fall asleep or else Koos would fire him on the spot. What Frankie disliked most, was having to place his hands squarely under Koos’s fat backside to get him up onto the footplate.

The exertion once again proved to be too much for Koos and he farted loudly in Frankie’s face. Frankie couldn’t believe his eyes when he looked up at Koos’s big backside.

What he saw made him chuckle all the way back to his house. His grandfather was right, mister Koos should never have trusted that last fart. Not only was Koos going to scorch his waterworks, he was definitely going to have a kak day and Piet Nel would have something really funny to talk about with the other drivers.

He headed for home to dry off and get some sleep. But he would have to be back at Koos’s house at eight o’clock to clean the house and wash all the dirty dishes. Koos was never away longer than a day and a half.

His mother had heard from their church leader that Doctor Malan’s National Party would soon be taking over

from the Smuts government. She told her son that things could only be a lot better from 1948 onwards for all South Africans.

“Agh mamma, if that ever happens,” said Frankie kissing his mother on her cheek. “I take my weekly wage of two shillings and six pence and I will buy you a new dress.”

Frankie smiled. The thought of not being a skivvy to Koos Kleinhans any longer was all he ever hoped for.

Roland Willis