



APRIL 1988

Steve Botha spends most of his time in dosshouses and the rest of it divided between gutters and prisons. He also writes and he paints. In his heyday he used to land upwards of 20 jobs a year. His job-landing technique is straightforward: He finds a factory in need of skilled work, and he applies. He tells the foreman he left his papers at his ex-wife's cousin's place in Putsonderwater after Auntie Doris's funeral, but try me, he says, I can do the job. And the foreman tries him and can't believe it. Steve does ten men's work with a computer's accuracy. For three days or a week. Then either Steve goes on a bender, or he takes offence. Steve takes offence when strong people are rude to humble people. He can be doing his work when a foreman screams at a labourer, and he mumbles and mutters and gets up and walks out, very possibly leaving his jacket behind, containing a half-written story and a half-used wage-packet. Steve's writing comes, usually, on scrap paper in longhand. It needs a typist but is uniquely exempt of need for a sub-editor. As for his art... another day

The Hunt

When you think about it, practically everything you read about the seamy side of life comes from an outsider looking in. Steven Ashley Botha is an insider staying in. That may be part of the reason why his stuff bangs your brain.... even on an unexpected re-encounter 20 years after the first.

The Station Hotel stands next to the railway line to the East Rand. The station, more suited for trains than people, is two long uncovered platforms, serving mainly blacks from the industrial areas on the far side of the tracks. Dingy shops, dim and packed with cheap goods, line the street opposite. Most are run by Indians with hawk faces and silent sari-clad women. A couple of Portuguese fast-food shops steam aromatically on cold mornings.

The hotel is a white rock in a black tide, wholly frequented by people who talk of kaffirs.

There are two subways under the tracks, some 300m apart. The one nearest the hotel is marked '*non-white/nie blankes*', and the other '*whites/blanke*s'. Nowadays, anybody uses whatever is more convenient. They are nearly all black anyway.

THE HUNT

Cracked pavements wander next to rusted wire fencing. After dark only the hotel evinces any signs of life. The shops are shut behind heavy grilles. Security guards sit with mangy dogs in front of the factories. During winter every corner is occupied by a *konka* glowing with a bellyful of coal and wood scraps.

One morning I wandered down to the hotel for a beer and a game of pool. At the hotel, sitting outside on a yellow plastic chair, was an elderly bespectacled man called Norman. A bloodstained green blanket was draped over him, and he was holding a bloodily smeared glass of brandy in one red hand. The hotel manager and a handful of regulars stood around, drinks in hand. Tony, looking like a hobo with unkempt hair and unshaved face, teeth protruding like an old picket fence, filled me in: "Norman's been stabbed by some kaffirs in the subway." An ambulance was on its way.

Norman had been stabbed in the arm, chest, side and back. His safari jacket, ripped and stained, lay on the ground. His face was pale.

"He shouldn't be drinking alcohol," I said.

"What do you know about it?" demanded the manager. He was in charge and no-one was going to steal his thunder. He kept checking that his long thin hair was staying in place, artistically covering his freckled pink pate. I later learned that when Norman returned from the hospital he was presented with a bill for his drink and for the cost of cutting new keys to his room.

Norman had apparently been carrying R500. The previous day he'd caught the place accumulator. A black man had followed him into the deserted subway and got him there.

The mugging was naturally the buzz of the bar.

"Why don't they rob their own bladdy people?" said Don. "I wish they'd try it on me," he added reflectively, clamping his false teeth together and hoping they wouldn't actually. His scarred brown hands were ropey with veins although his lean body still looked hard.

I have been mugged. I suppose that, rape besides, it is about the most humiliating experience that one can imagine. It leaves a bitter and helpless feeling that cannot be assuaged by post-traumatic anger.

THE BEST OF FRONTLINE

Ironically, had Norman used the ‘non-whites’ subway he would probably have been safe. It is far busier than the further, inconvenient, ‘white’ subway. I suppose he went specially to the ‘white’ one in honour of all that money in his pocket.

“They should have guards with dogs at the entrances,” said the manager, chalking his cue at the pool table.

“They haven’t got the manpower,” said Don.

“What? Every time you go to the copshop it’s swarming with *boere* who should be out in the streets catching robbers,” said Tony.

“Has this been reported to the police?” I asked.

“What’s the use,” said Tony. “There’s nothing they can do about it, even if they wanted to, which they don’t.”

Richard, the black barman, served silently. He was usually chirpy, and would often come around the counter for a game of pool. He was a sought-after partner, one of the best players. This morning no-one asked him to play. He stayed behind the bar.

“I *tjaaf* you, the peckies are getting white these days,” said Don, “You can’t trust them, any of them.”

Tony wiped the beer from his moustache: “It’s your own fault if you do,” he said.

I tried to catch Richard’s normally twinkling eyes, but he wasn’t looking anybody in the eye, and he was keeping his mouth shut.

“We should do something about it,” said the manager, bending over to make his shot.

Everyone agreed. No-one came up with a plan of action to satisfy the blooming *kommando* spirit.

A while later I left. The men in the bar were exchanging stories of horrendous disasters that had befallen them, each story incidentally illustrating the narrator’s courage and strength. I thought the idea of “doing something” was over and done with.

THE HUNT

That afternoon I came back to meet a friend who owed me money. As I walked into the foyer Don came lurching out of the Ladies Bar, his trademark white hat squiff and his blue eyes swollen with liquor.

“Did you hear?” he said. “Lorraine was also mugged at lunchtime in the subway.”

“Oh no,” I said. Lorraine was the person who owed me money. “What did they take?”

They cut her bag straps. There was three of the bastards. She’s down at the copshop now.”

“Was she hurt?” I asked.

Don smiled. “She said she kicked one in the balls, but she wasn’t hurt except for a few bruises.”

Everyone was now in the Ladies Bar, and newcomers were being informed of the day’s events. The barmaid, Nikki was revelling. All the talking made men’s throats dry, and the more they drank the more they talked. The normally drowsy place was filled with an electric hum of bravado and camaraderie. People who hardly knew each other were buying drinks for one another. Several loudly announced that they were going to their cars, or home, to collect their batons or pistols or knives.

I went to the steps of the hotel. A flood of black people, many covered in makeshift raincoats of plastic bags, headed towards the station.

Suddenly Nikki the barmaid was at my side holding my arm. She’d had a couple of drinks.

“Are you going with?” she asked.

“Where to?”

“To the subways to give the muggers a lesson,” she told me.

“Who’s going?” I asked.

“Oh, everybody. Jan and Don and Tony and George and Johnny, oh, everybody.”

Just then George and a friend came out. George was a big, beefy man with

THE BEST OF FRONTLINE

a handsome face and a mop of curly brown hair. His conversation was mono-syllabic. He was impenetrably dense. He was stuffing a .38 revolver into his waistband. His friend was carrying a baton – a ‘*moering tool*’ he called it. He smacked it onto the palm of his hand and squinted across the rainswept street towards the subway entrance, choked with homeward-bound commuters.

“You coming with, *boet*?” George’s friend asked me.

“I don’t think it’s a very good idea,” I said cautiously.

“Well, we think it’s a bloody good idea,” said George’s friend.

“If you think that the okes that mugged Norman and Lorraine are still hanging around, then you’re mistaken,” I said. “They’re miles away by now.”

George’s friend said: “That doesn’t matter. Anyone will do, so long’s they know not to eff around with whites.” He licked his lips again and again.

The manager and several others joined us. I was being forced off the steps into the rain. The manager was also packing a handgun in his waistband. It made me nervous. None of them was sober. I was reminded of the book “To Kill a Mockingbird”, where a crowd of likkered-up whites are just barely prevented from lynching a negro who is later found innocent of the rape of a white woman.

The rain was easing off. The boys all congregated in the foyer. A rough plan of action was outlined: both entrances of the ‘whites’ subway were to be blocked off and someone, acting as bait, should stagger through and, hopefully, get himself attacked and mugged. Somehow nobody was especially keen to be the bait.

The boys walked down the street, spread right across the roadway like in those westerns where the good guys hit town in a bunch to tame some evil robber-baron. I tagged along.

By the time we reached the subway I’d decided to be the bait as it was unlikely that any mugger would strike after seeing this ragged bunch of armed white men ostentatiously staking out the entrances and generally acting like a cowboy undercover unit.

I walked down the steps into the subway. I noticed the trail of blood Norman

THE HUNT

had left on the filthy concrete floor. About halfway through the subway I found the spot where the attack had occurred – there were smears against the graffitied wall and dried splashes of blood on the ground. The subway was deserted. It stank of urine and damp.

Someone was coming down the steps. For an instant I froze, regretting my impulse to volunteer and feeling very foolish indeed. It was a black guy intent on hurrying for his train. He glanced at me sharply and darted up the steps to the platform. Maybe he thought I was a mugger. I couldn't suppress a chuckle. This was a ludicrous situation.

I decided I'd had enough and retraced my steps. The ill-lit tunnel was dripping with water and reverberating to the passage of a train overhead.

"Why don't you stay down there?" said George's friend.

"Stuff it. Nothing's going to happen now, and you know it," I told him.

It was starting to rain again. The okes were getting wet. There was a quick tour of the subway in hopes of finding a suspicious character, and then back for the hotel. Only dignity restraining a run.

"We should've just gripped a couple of them and given them a hiding," said George's friend, his blonde hair plastered to his forehead. I think he was genuinely sorry nothing had happened, while the rest of us were relieved to be in or out of the wet.

The bar was warm and the beer was cold. A tight knot of people gathered around George and his friend in one corner, congratulating themselves on their heroism with double brandies all round. They were planning another expedition for the following Friday, this time meaning to use a woman as the bait. Someone volunteered his wife. I wondered how his wife would take the news when she learned of it.

"You can't blame them," said the barmaid, seeing my expression.

"Ja, at least they get some exercise," I said.

Norman returned from the hospital to a hero's welcome. Within minutes, brandy glass firmly clenched in one hand, he was lifting his shirt to show the impressive acreage of dressings.