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Opening Extract from...

The Serpentine Road

Written by Paul Mendelson

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PROLOGUE

January 1994

He stares, aghast, at the smoking void where the façade of the Victoria Drinking Hall had stood for the previous sixty years. Above and beyond the ruin, Devil's Peak is shrouded in fast moving dark cloud and rain falls sporadically but hard, diagonally across the taped-off streets onto ambulance men and police officers surrounding the scene.

South African Police Captain Vaughn de Vries can make out eight blanket-covered mounds in human form, laid out side by side in rows four deep, and feels his fists clench, jaw tighten. The smell of cooking meat is not the sweet *braai* smoke of the summer just ending, but acrid, choking. Twenty-three days before, he attended the Heidelberg Tavern bombing, not one kilometre away. To the whites of Cape Town, this is a senseless atrocity. He and his fellow officers had watched silently at the station, bile rising, Nelson Mandela walking from Victor Verster Prison amidst the cheering throng, the now inevitable path for South Africa indelibly signposted: elections, black majority rule, President Mandela; the end, many believe, of their cherished country. Yet, three years on, dates for elections set, world watching, still the APLA, armed wing of the Pan African Congress, targets innocent civilians at churches and bars. This is the second within the suburb

of Observatory: four dead at the Heidelberg, at least eight here; students, adults and the elderly; white and black and coloured.

He hears his name barked:

'Captain de Vries. Take that vehicle, follow me. We have information on the suspects' escape route. Move.'

De Vries salutes, sprints to the van, sees another officer jump into the passenger seat, guns the engine, follows in the wake of the huge police van and his commanding officer, Major Kobus Nel, who breaks through the cordon, heads up towards Main Road and takes a sharp left towards Rondebosch. De Vries's vehicle howls as he accelerates up the hill, moans as he turns. He catches glimpses of rubberneckers, covered against the rain and wind, but ashen faced, their white complexions sickly green in the faltering dusk and flickering street lamps.

He turns to his passenger.

'Who are you?'

'Constable Mitchell Smith, sir, Rondebosch.'

'De Vries, Captain, Observatory. You know my CO, Major Nel?'

Smith shouts above the engine noise: 'No, sir.'

'Taskmaster. Do as he says; don't think for yourself. You get it?'

The vehicle ahead pushes through red robots at the hospital junction, bears left and drops down onto Settlers Way, crosses four lanes, accelerates onto the N2 freeway. On the vehicle radio, they can hear shouted directions in a mixture of English and Afrikaans, hysterical and contradictory, barely comprehensible beneath a blanket of interference and static. De Vries discerns Nel's bark above the cacophony:

'Khayelitsha, Pama Road . . . Grey building.'

The rain is falling harder now, without respite, driven across the freeway by the gusting wind: a sharp summer cold front hitting town. The sky is now completely dark but for a pale halo of light around the mountains on the horizon; the freeway lights are out.

As they pass the cooling towers and head towards DF Malan airport, the front tyres lose traction momentarily and De Vries struggles to regain control.

'Shit. Keep a lookout for them ahead. I can't keep up in this *kak* fucker.'

De Vries struggles with the gearbox, wills the vehicle on, steers hard into the buffeting wind. There are few other vehicles on the road, a dangerous enough stretch without the hazardous conditions. As they pass under one of the new pedestrian bridges, built to prevent the squatter camp dwellers from trying to cross six lanes of fast-moving traffic, De Vries looks up: the squatters have been dropping lumps of concrete onto cars beneath them; half a dozen individual fatal incidents; a huge pile-up had cost seven lives just five weeks back.

The road rises as they pass the end of the runway, the airport itself quiet and dark. Already, De Vries knows, more people arrive in South Africa as sanctions are lifted and the pariah state is re-welcomed back into the world. What kind of country will it be that raises its head amongst its peers?

Suddenly, Smith shouts: 'Left turn ahead. Left, left, left.'

De Vries swerves onto the slip road, the back of the van slides outwards and he struggles to steer into the spin and bring the vehicle under control, hears Smith gasp at his side. Ahead, in what seems like thick, fast-moving mist, De Vries can see the larger police vehicle pulling away from him again, thinks he will lose it, squints through the windscreen barely cleared by the stuttering wipers. Everything is *opgefok* in this outfit, nothing works, nothing functions. What a country we're going to give them; economy fucked, infrastructure crumbling, people starving. Beneath the roar of the rain on the roof and the engine straining, he mouths the words: 'But, for fuck's sake, we're giving it to you, so don't go fucking killing our people or we'll fucking kill you back.'

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He sees the vehicle pull off the tarmac surface, catches up with it, watches jiggling rear lights as both vehicles thunder along the rough unsurfaced road, tyres in potholes throwing up orange-brown ejaculations of mud. Ahead of them, at a deserted crossroads, a damp grey dwelling constructed of breeze blocks and corrugated iron sits dripping in the white light of a single lamp post, and a metallic green Ford Escort stands nose first in a partially fenced front yard.

De Vries can see Nel and three other white officers, armed and squatting behind their vehicle. Smith winds down the passenger side window, struggles against the oozing stiffness of the old mechanism.

'Across the way there,' Nel orders in his deep, strident voice, eyes blazing, sweat on his upper lip. 'De Vries, stay by your vehicle, take the sightlines across the crossroads, keep anyone else out of the scene. You,' he points the muzzle of his handgun at Smith. 'I want you at the perimeter of the yard to this shit-hole. Check the green car, guard our backs. You got it?'

They acknowledge the orders, watch Nel back off, keeping low, order his men to follow him. De Vries knows them all: Mike de Groot, Sheldon Rich, Johan Esau. There is another in the driver's seat, could be Joey Swanepoel, left to guard the vehicle, keep the engine running.

De Vries climbs out of the van, draws his weapon, holds it in both hands, balances it on the roof of the van; he scans 270 degrees, sees no one. This is not a night to be out on the street, not a time to be taunting the armed white policemen, high on a righteous mission. Smith has taken his place at the corner of the tiny plot. De Vries sees him feel the bonnet of the green Ford, check the doors, open the boot, shake his head.

Shouts from inside the dwelling; a shot, screams, then a dozen rounds like frenzied drum beats, a woman's wails. De Vries swings around, his weapon pointed at the doorway. He can see Smith squatting behind the green car, weapon primed, hears more shouts, a woman begging, imploring; then swearing, Nel's shout, two final shots – an epilogue. A minute flash of silver catches his eye at the side of the shack; a semblance of movement. He thinks he makes out a figure. He raises his gun, aware his hands are wet from rain and sweat, the muzzle shaking. Another movement, perhaps a scraping sound, a high-pitched, almost whispered command. He tightens his grip, feels the trigger bite into the joint of his index finger. Something tells him not to fire: it is a child, children. He tilts his head. The rain makes him blink, re-focus; he sees eyes stare back at him; too small, too low to be an adult. With his left hand, he pushes down the muzzle of his gun, squints, discerns nothing but the sound of heavy raindrops beginning to fall again on the tin-roofed shacks around him. If he has seen children – seen any living animal – it, or they, have run away down the narrow alley between the two rows of shacks and tiny houses, beneath the sagging lines which steal electricity from the looming pylons at the end of the encampment, into the maze of the dark and filthy township.

He looks across to see Nel and the three officers exit the building, senses more than sees shock and fear on the faces of the young subordinates, their legs weak.

'Next junction, grey house. Go.'

De Vries does not know whether this is an order to him or to Nel's men. He watches them stumble into the vehicle, the sound of the engine revving, back-firing, jolting into gear. It passes De Vries, turns again onto the main thoroughfare and heads away, thick fumes in its wake.

De Vries looks over to Smith, still crouching. He turns full circle, scanning the shacks and passages, sees no movement, scurries across to the van, crouches next to him.

De Vries is dry-mouthed:

'What happened?'

'I dunno.'

'What did you see?'

'Nothing. Nothing.'

'You see anyone come out the back, the side of the shack there?'

'No.' Smith turns around, looks down the alleyway, shakes his head. He stares at De Vries, mouth agape, panting.

'Wait here. Cover me.'

Keeping low, De Vries jumps the broken chain fence around the yard, runs to the front door, jams his back against the wall, primes his weapon, glances inside the building. He takes a deep breath, ducks inside.

The rain on the tin roof is like a thousand gunshots, the bitter stench of fresh blood clashes with the warm smoky air, thick with sweat and urine. The interior is lit only by a fading hurricane lamp atop a pile of firewood, a faint orange glimmer from a fire against the back wall. To his right, deep, dark blood oozes from the bodies of an old man and woman sprawled on a thin, stained mattress; ahead of him, in front of the fire, a young girl lies face up, her head encased in a solid helmet of hair matted in blood; to his left, two adults, he thinks maybe in their late thirties or early forties, lean against one other, heads touching, one with half his face blown away, the other riddled with bullets. In their agony, they seem to have embraced, arms around each other, ankles crossed.

De Vries fights back vomit in his chest, takes short staccato breaths, squeezes his eyes shut yet forces himself to picture each body, each face. He searches for weapons, sees none. He makes

himself step forward, pushes aside debris with his foot and with the muzzle of his gun. Still he finds nothing.

He backs out, reaches the cooler, heavy air and breathes it into his lungs; he remembers where he is and what he has seen, swings around and sees only Constable Smith, alert yet somehow mesmerized, pointing his gun at him. He meets his stare, drops to one knee and checks around him. Still there is no sign of life on the streets. He pulls himself up, scurries towards Smith and the green vehicle.

'What is it?'

'Something set them off. Firefight. Five down in there.'

Smith swallows.

'Blacks?'

'*Ja*.'

'We follow Major Nel?'

De Vries hesitates.

'No.'

'Sir?'

'We go back to Obs. Back to the station.'

He rises, pulls Smith's sleeve, scampers back to their own van, fights to get the engine started, pulls away, swings around, heads back in the direction from which they have come.

Above the sound of the straining engine, Smith shouts:

'What happened?'

De Vries grits his teeth, fights the stench in his nostrils, keeps watch either side of the road, alert for ambush; he says nothing.

What happened?

Wrong house, wrong car, wrong information – if there ever was any. Trigger happy, angry, vengeful policemen, sick of the struggle, sick of seeing their own cut down, sick of the weather. Out of control commanding officer venting his hatred, his frustration that at the end of years of toil, decades of faith in the system, those

above have capitulated; lashing out at anyone without answers, anyone black . . .

What happened?

'Don't know,' De Vries says.

Kobus Nel is scarcely older than him, but he is broad and balding, and very fit, his muscular arms filling out his rain-and-sweat soaked uniform. De Vries is taller, but he is thin and lean, his hair still buzz-cropped, army-style. He is back on home territory in Observatory, but he has been away for two years and is newly posted to the station.

The changing rooms are located in an old stone building covered by corrugated asbestos roofing. The rain thuds against it. It is cold and damp and, mid-shift, empty. De Vries has showered under the sputtering tepid streams, torn between remaining to face his CO or getting out and going home, and facing him the following day. He is absentmindedly toweling himself down when he hears the door slam and Nel's voice boom. Nel runs down the narrow corridor of lockers, pushes him hard in the chest. He stumbles back, falls over a low wooden bench, hurtles against the far wall of lockers, causing a crash of metallic thunder. He scrambles to his feet, naked, heart pumping.

'Come here, De Vries.' Nel points at the ground in front of him. Vaughn stands straight, winded and shocked. They are alone and De Vries can smell the liquor on the man's breath, senses the unstoppable determination in his posture; that his will cannot be challenged. De Vries looks up at the grey lights.

'De Vries. Where the fuck were you?'

'Sir?'

Nel shoves him again, forcing him back.

'We moved from the house in Pama Road to further locations. You were our back-up.' He stamps forward, shoves De Vries hard;

another thunder-clap of bone on metal locker-front. 'Where were you?' He shoves again, until De Vries' back hits the lockers; a cymbal cacophony echoes. 'And Constable Smith?'

De Vries unconsciously switches to military mode, barks his answers, loud and staccato.

'Understood we were to remain in situ, guard the scene, sir.'

Nel has him trapped at the end of the row. He slams his fist into the locker door next to De Vries's ear.

'No, Captain, you cowardly fucker. You fucking left that scene, abandoned your unit and slunk back here. What if we had encountered resistance?'

'I misunderstood your orders, sir.'

Nel is shaking now; his gloved hand shoots for De Vries's neck. Vaughn feels the cold, clammy leather on his windpipe, knows he has only seconds to decide whether to fight back. Nel smashes the locker door with his other fist, releases his grip on De Vries's neck, stands back. De Vries realizes that the physical threat is bluster, that Nel's anger is diminishing, mutating into a different mood.

'Your report on my desk before you leave the station. Make sure it's right. You understand?' He takes a small step away from De Vries. 'Check what Constable Smith writes, counter-sign it and leave it with yours. You have a duty, Captain. Fulfill it and this is over.'

De Vries prevents his head from nodding automatically; he stands still, ignores his heart pounding in his chest, feels control returning to his limbs. Imperceptibly, he draws himself taller.

'What do you want in my report, sir?'

Nel stares at him, his pale eyes focused.

'Nothing that brings disrepute to this station, to my command. I make myself clear?'

De Vries stands taller. His shaking has abated, his nakedness forgotten.

'What role did those people play, sir, the people who are now dead, in the incident at the Victoria?'

'That is not your business. You report what you saw. Only what you saw, not what you think you saw.'

'I saw,' De Vries says.

There is a beat of silence before Nel comprehends, recoils. De Vries sees him re-evaluate the threat he poses. Nel lowers his voice, comes back towards him.

'I am the commanding officer, De Vries. What you believe you saw makes no difference. There are four witnesses who will recount what occurred. We were threatened at gunpoint by men and women who harboured terrorists. We defended ourselves, confiscated weapons. No one will recall differently.' He backs away and then struts towards De Vries anew.

'One word from me and you're gone. When the new regime comes to power they will exploit any weakness to gain control. So, you decide, De Vries. Stay with us, or be our enemy. See how many friends you have then. You won't live to see the new fucking *kaffir* South Africa.'

'I'll see it rather than start a bloodbath.'

'*Ja*, that is what you would do. You and fucking De Klerk and the Nats who've sold every one of us down the fucking river. And that fucking *kaffir* terrorist, fucking saboteur, Mandela. You think he will bring peace to this country? He's a fucking bomb-maker. You think men like me will let him become the fucking messiah?'

Kobus Nel struts in a circle, still blocking De Vries's exit. He is shrieking.

'You know what will happen? The police force is over; they'll disband it because there'll be no fucking rule of law. They're going to take our jobs, our houses, our land, destroy everything we have done to build this country into the great nation that we are. They're going to fuck us all up, and with the whole world watching, cowards like you are going to let them.'

De Vries baulks, knows that over brandy and cokes with his friends he has drunkenly debated the future, acquiesced to the ugly fears of his colleagues, the hateful proselytization, but he has never fully accepted it. His new wife, Suzanne, younger and more enlightened, more informed, has tempered his insistent gnawing fears and argued to accept the inevitable, to gauge a reaction, not to allow knee-jerk ignorance to rule his heart, and to believe in hope for their daughter's future in the new Republic of South Africa.

De Vries says quietly:

'You know what's frightening about people like you? I am angry, I feel betrayed, fear for my country, but you know what? You make me sound so fucking reasonable.'

Nel laughs bitterly, shakes his head.

'We're all fucked, whatever you pathetic liberals, you fucking apologists think, but I'm warning you, you threaten my future and I will bring you down. So, right now, you better do your duty, Captain. Don't do it for yourself. Do it for your wife and child.'

He turns, and in the split second Nel's back is to him, the thought comes to De Vries to jump the man, to bring him down, to beat the life out of him.

When the door to the locker room finally closes, leaving him alone, he bows his head, his weight still on the steel doors against which he had been trapped. He pretends that he hasn't yet decided what he will do but, deep inside, he already knows. He wonders whether the shame will allow him even to stand upright to leave this place, to dress, to type up his lies and cajole the frightened Constable Mitchell Smith, to walk through the station to the exit, to travel home to his wife and baby.