

Las Vegas:

The Last African City

CHRIS ABANI

Sunil took in the copper ingot of the Mandalay Bay rising into the dying sun. Next to it was the pyramid of the Luxor and reclining in front, the light catching the gold paint of its headdress, was the Sphinx. Further to his left, were the Bellagio and the tip of the Eiffel Tower rising above Paris Las Vegas. The Venetian, his favourite, was obscured.

He loved this precipitous moment just before the abruptness of night that seemed exclusive to deserts and plains. Here in Las Vegas it reminded him of the light on the Southern African veld. One moment bright and full, the next, gone. The veld was just like its name, a stubby felt of grass and trees and small hills that seemed to only break when the green rim of it touched the sky.

For one magical summer as a seven year old, he'd left Soweto behind on a summer trip to see his grandmother Marie who lived in KwaZulu. KwaZulu was a homeland, one of those odd geographies created arbitrarily by the apartheid state as all-black enclaves within South Africa. Not unlike Native American reservations, homelands were corrals, ways to contain and further impoverish native populations: entire settlements made up of shanties leaning unevenly into the wind, not unlike the townships in the republic, except perhaps worse.

Grandma Marie lived in the foothills, and as Dorothy and Sunil traveled higher into the old Zulu territory, the shanties disappeared. Up there, everything felt different – the pace moved only as fast as the swaying fields of corn, or the lumbering herds of Zebu that roamed everywhere, horns curved like arms raised in prayer. Each cow was marked so distinctively, in so many variations of red, white, black, brown, rust and dun, that from a distance they looked like flocks of birds littering the grass on the hillsides.

The frenetic mood of Soweto seemed like a bad taste spat from the mouth, and the air smelled fresh and sometimes heavy with rain. There was hardly a white person to be seen, and the blacks were less suspicious of each other. The only anger was the gossip – how Shemble Masunkungo had slept with Blessing Mphalele's husband a week after she died. How Catechist Brown was never the same after Father John died, and though no one would admit it, they all knew they'd been lovers. How Doreen Bwongenga always miscarried because she'd had an abortion as a young woman in Cape Town, and how though she'd renounced the world and followed the Lord, she couldn't find any respite until she confessed to the murder of her unborn child. But as his mother Dorothy told Grandma Marie, there are no words for some things. Everything else was the smell of the toffees his grandmother pressed into his palms that melted in the heat of his clutched fingers; the drying grass and herd animals that filled the air with dust and delight, and butterflies – everywhere, butterflies. And at dusk, the soft purple pastel of sky blurring into the darkening grass and then before he could count to a hundred, night.

Sunil knew that his memory was faulty, that it was so tempered by nostalgia it could offer nothing concrete, but that knowledge did nothing to diminish his joy in the recollection. The sun

in his eye brought him back to the moment, to his body standing at the windows of his sixth-floor office in the nondescript building in the nondescript business park east off the strip that was home to the Desert Palms Institute.

Sunil was a history buff and he knew that the extravagant hotels he could see weren't new. They were in keeping with the tradition of this city. The Jewish-Irish-Sicilian mob syndicate opened grandiose hotels early. In 1952, the Sahara was designed to mimic the movie romanticism of North Africa. In 1955, the Dunes, which had waitresses dressed like DeMille extras in an *Arabian Nights* production, complete with a 30 feet tall turbaned black Sultan with crossed arms guarding the doors, appeared almost overnight. And in 1956, in the new Fremont, twelve-year-old Wayne Newton rose to fame singing *Danke Schoen*.

Vegas is really an African city, Sunil thought. What other imagination would build such a grandiose tomb to itself? And just like in every major city across Africa, from Cairo to his hometown of Johannesburg, the palatial exteriors of the city architecture barely screened the seething poverty, the homelessness, and the despair that spread in townships and shantytowns as far as the eye could see. But just as there, here in Vegas, the glamour beguiled and blinded all but those truly intent on seeing and in this way, the tinsel of it mocked the obsessive hope of those who flocked there.

In Johannesburg there had been the allure of gold and the untold monies to be made in the mines. Gold so plentiful there were hills of it. No one bothered to explain to the obsessed that the glittering hills were just a trick of the light – mounds of yellow sand dug up for the gold, the silicate glowing in the sun with false promise. No wonder I feel at home here, he thought, I am used to this companion to every city's luminescence – darkness.

He hadn't lived in Johannesburg since White Alice left, shortly after his mother was taken to Durban, and he had returned only once in the years since, just after apartheid officially came to an end. He'd been shocked to see that the once vibrant city center had turned into a ghost town. Indians and Whites had emptied out, fleeing either abroad, or to the suburbs. What had surprised Sunil though was that in the wake of that flight, the city hadn't been filled by South African blacks leaving the townships for more salubrious digs, but by Nigerian and Senegalese businessmen selling everything from the popular Nollywood movies to phone cards. The feeling of racial camaraderie hadn't been extended to these invading blacks that the more gentle South Africans thought were worse than Zulus, which was saying something.

Now he thought of Las Vegas as home. That's the thing about having always been a displaced person; home was not a physical space, but rather an internal landscape, a feeling that he could anchor to different places. Some took easier than others and although it was always hard work he was good at that.

He came to Vegas seven years ago to co-direct a new research project at The Desert Palms Institute, fresh from Cape Town where he had worked for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Desert Palms Institute, among its many government contracts and shady research projects with no oversight, was studying psychopathic behavior. This was the project Sunil had come here to work on. He had expected to enjoy the study, but what he had not expected was that he would fall in love with the city.

His attention returned to the coming night, and the darkness that held nothing but what was projected, like a wallet for his demons. Was night the same everywhere? In the Soweto of his childhood the darkness was broken between pockets of lights and cacophony and an absolute stillness that held only police cars cockroaching through. Here in Las Vegas, near the strip where it never really got dark, could anything be revealed in the bright neon? He often tried to read

the faces teeming there but quickly realised that everything was obscured even in revelation; the brightness its own kind of night.

Noticing that the coffee had run in a tiny rivulet down the side of the cup, Sunil frowned and reached for his handkerchief. Adorned with his initials, it was a throwback to his childhood, to the older men in Soweto who always seemed to have a clean handkerchief on them, no matter how threadbare and patched. He wiped the rivulet away, brows furrowed in concentration.

There was an exactness to Sunil that spilled out into the world and was reflected in his sense of order: the neat row of very sharp pencils in the carved ebony holder on his desk, upright and ranked by use like soldiers on a parade ground; the sharp diagonal line connecting the brushed aluminum box of multi-colored paperclips and the art-deco stapler; the small photo, not much bigger than a baseball card, held in a solid block of Perspex, angled so that it was visible to him and anyone sitting across from him.

The photo was of a man with a red turban and thick black beard and moustache. It was eroded on one side, the man's face disappearing under a mottled furry stain. Sunil still sometimes wondered if it were really a photo of his father or a generic photo of a guru that his mother bought in the market. He'd been too scared to ask and he regretted that. Sunil wished he'd met him, and on the back of the photo in childish script, he had scrawled his father's name: Sunil Singh Snr.

Wooden and glass frames lined the red walls, arranged in ascending order of size. His diplomas were on the wall behind the desk. Against another wall, colour photographs of Zebu were arranged like the speckled squares of a Rubik's cube. Flush with the far wall was the teak sideboard adorned with carved Ghanaian Adinkra symbols, on top of which sat the silver coffee machine and boxes for the Equal and wooden stirrers.

This obsession with order carried on to his home and often into his mannerisms, most notably the way he brushed imaginary lint from his clothes reflexively, or the way he crossed his legs when he sat, snapping the fabric of his trousers then smoothing the crease between two fingers.

The wall of cows, not so much their frames but the riotous colour and patterns of their hides, contradicted all his control. 'Like a tarot deck,' Asia said the first and only time she'd come to his office. They'd had sex on the sofa and walking around nude, she'd stopped by the wall, mentally shuffling the framed cows, trying to read the spread. He'd felt more naked than her in that moment, more revealed than when they had sex and though she came to his home often after that, he never asked her back here again.

He sighed and crossed to the sideboard to pour himself some more coffee, wondering if he should call her and see if she was free tonight. It was Halloween though and she was no doubt busier tonight than other nights. Everyone else was.