

Avalon

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Thapelo wakes up strangely, underwater. It takes a while to realise it's not him in the water but Irene. She is wallowing noisily in the bath, throwing water onto the floor. As if she could splash herself awake. He is on the couch. It is a weekday, obviously. The sounds of his house and from the suburb outside are ferocious and hurried. The TV is on. The Learning Channel.

He rolls over, pulling the smoky blanket around him, and tries to go back to sleep. It is neither comfortable nor warm under the blanket on the couch. He is hurting in patches where his clothes have slept inside folds of flesh. There is the imprint of an embroidered cushion on his face. To make matters worse he is slobbering. Next to his head he senses three empty wine bottles and the stink of a wet ashtray.

Thapelo finds a lone cigarette in the crumpled packet on the floor. His hand searching the cold floor for a lighter finds a box of matches. He lights the cigarette and then lies back to stare at the television teacher talk her way through a complex formula, a lurid geographic backdrop behind her. He is amazed at how ugly she is but he can't help feeling some grudging respect for the way her eyes burn with love of higher-grade mathematics.

He's never watched much television, until these last few weeks. Now the television is an intimate: a place of friends who make him cry and put him to sleep. Something to wake up to.

Irene stalks through the living room with a shake of wet curls and a pointed look in his direction. He hears the sound of her hands slapping body lotion onto her legs. He thinks about the small red pocks and graceless stubble that her shaving produces in places he likes best; her underarms and calves. Now there is the whine of her hairdryer.

Thapelo jumps up, snaps the TV off and slips into the bathroom locking the door. For a moment he just stands there, staring at the puddles on the floor. He can smell Irene's 'organic' shampoo and her discarded underwear is curled up like a dead spider under the basin.

He washes himself in a few inches of lukewarm water. Irene has used all the hot water again and as usual she has not washed the bath. Tiny close-shaved hairs cling to her oily waterline. He can feel them sticking to his skin. He finds it difficult to like anything about her right now.

He can hear her heels pacing in the kitchen, the opening and closing of the fridge, the rattle of a teaspoon in a cup of coffee. Soon she will be gone. He moves fast. Dressing in a series of jerks, hopping on one foot to pull a sock on, he says: 'Can you drop me in Sandton on your way to work?'

'Why?' says Irene.

'I have to pick up the suit. I need it for the funeral.' There's silence from the kitchen and then she says in a small voice, 'OK.'

‘Thank you,’ Thapelo says with deliberate politeness. She is next to him now, tapping his wrist with a pale finger. Talking to him like he’s a little kid.

‘Sorry, I forgot... about tomorrow. Would you like me to iron a shirt?’

Thapelo turns his back to her. She has never offered to iron a shirt before. ‘I didn’t think you knew how to iron, didn’t you have servants to do that for you?’

She’s waiting in her car when he comes out and she stares out of her window, intently, when he gets in. ‘Does this car have a dress code?’ he asks without smiling. He is wearing a nylon tracksuit and sneakers. She ignores him and drives aggressively through the obstacle course of speed bumps and checkpoints of their suburb.

‘Did you set the alarm?’ she eventually asks.

‘Yes,’ he says, although he didn’t.

‘How will you get home?’

‘I’ll take the taxi, like other black people.’

Irene swallows hard. ‘Fuck this,’ she says eventually. The traffic is slow, more than usual. Near the Atholl off-ramp there is a pile up, with traffic backed up for miles. Only a few cavalier taxis are brave enough to run the apron. ‘Fucking maniacs,’ Irene says.

‘It feels different when you are in them,’ he says conversationally but the remark makes her seethe. ‘You always do that,’ she says sadly.

They both stare at other people in the cars edging around them. A minibus looms alongside; the people in it do not move or speak. They are swaddled in winter jackets and squashed together like orange segments. Silently and without expression all the people in the minibus look down into their car. This communal attention stops the bickering.

There is uneasy silence until they finally draw level with the accident. Metro cops in reflective jackets keep their backs to the carnage, their shiny faces to the traffic. Thapelo turns his head away when he sees the minibus lying on its back, its seats ripped apart. He knows there will be body parts on the road. Irene takes it all in, craning her neck to get a better view she almost bumps into the car in front of them.

‘For God’s sake Irene.’

‘Fucking taxis!’

Thapelo fiddles with the car radio, looking for anything but Classic FM. Above the static Irene announces: ‘I am so glad that you are alive.’ She mentions his accident innocuously enough, but he feels her accusation. ‘Yeah,’ is all Thapelo manages as he gives up on the radio and sits back.

It hurts to think about the night he trashed the Beemer, almost killing himself and Dumisani. They were drunk and high when they collided with a robot in Orange Grove. Club smoked people had poured out of 206 to witness the spectacular wreck. Dumisani had used the opportunity to get phone numbers from the pretty girls who all tried to nurse him. Thapelo remembers the crunch of metal and the frailty of being made of flesh, blood pouring over Dumisani’s laughing eyes. Now Dumisani is dead, anyway.

He knows that Irene is anxious, that she wants to make things better so he’ll go back to work and stop drinking himself to sleep every night. He wishes she would stop being so Settler about it and just scream at him. She doesn’t.

‘I might go see my mother,’ he announces.

Irene stares ahead, trying not to panic. Every time he has been missing for days and come back smelling like booze, sweat and cunt, he has simply said the talismanic words: ‘I went to Soweto to see my mother.’ She sees huge waves of pain coming like evenings alone in a dark house when his cellphone is off and he is missing.

‘Are you coming back?’ she asks.

Thapelo ignores the question. ‘You can drop me at the Square,’ he says, ‘or if it’s easier, behind the library.’ Irene chooses the Square. Thapelo tries to kiss her cheek but comes away with only the smell of her face. ‘Thanks. See you later,’ he says, keeping it casual. As he walks away, into the gloom of the parking garage, he thinks he hears the wheels of her Clio spin but he doesn’t look back.

Burrowing into the mall he keeps his head down. First the bank and the hungry churning sound of money being spat out. The notes are unnaturally clean and crisp. Without checking his balance he stuffs his wallet and enjoys the feel of it nestled fat against his thigh.

He moves hungrily past displays of candy-coloured winter boots, miracle cures and frosted Martini glasses to stalk the counters of the food court considering his options. Young kids who should probably be in school are running riot in platform shoes. When he was a kid the place to be was Town. Now Sandton City occupies the mythical place once held by Carlton City: a place of dreams and gleaming underground passages where it is always summer and shops announce in giant red lettering as if it were an unusual thing for a retail outlet to do – SALE!

He eats methodically, leaving half of his coffee behind as the yearning inside him identifies itself as nicotine craving. He buys a pack of *gwais* and trudges back toward the open air of Nelson Mandela Square, recently marked by a super-sized and strangely undignified statue of the statesman, arms open wide to welcome worshippers at the style shrines.

He leans against Madiba’s huge bronze thigh and tries to feel the sun but the cold, he decides, is inside him. He smokes three cigarettes, watching a passing parade of suits and shiny shoes, before he heads back in, patting the old man’s knee in a gesture of affection.

He takes the elevator two steps at a time, racing past dumbstruck shoppers watching their own reflections in windows full of options. Levinson’s Gentleman’s Outfitters, is a small patch

of familiarity for him. He lurks at the shopfront remembering his uncles and their reverence for those who wore 'Jewish' from the smart shops in Town, where heads were measured and Florsheim shoes were shiny enough to start veld fires.

Somewhere in the back a gunmetal grey wool suit, mostly paid for, its trousers let out just a little, is waiting. Waiting for him and the funeral.

An old man whom he calls Mr Levinson (although his name is probably Cohen or maybe even Smith) is behind the counter, arranging ledger books. Thapelo pays the balance for the suit that is brought out to lie across the counter. Prodding it, Thapelo can feel it slither around in its plastic skin. Mr. Levinson smiles his funeral smile and asks, seeking detail: 'Your friend, was he the guy they wrote about in the paper? What a shame, how terrible, how very tragic.'

'He was a prince,' Thapelo says, struck to the stomach with pain and irritated because he suspects the conversation will turn to the usual platitudes about the magnitude and horror of crime in South Africa.

To close that option down Thapelo says, 'If we're the crime capital of the world how come we can't hijack or burgle properly? We don't have burglars, we have bunglers.' Mr Levinson blinks, then he sighs and puts his pencil back behind his ear. Thapelo drapes the funeral suit over his arm and, thanking the old man sincerely, he leaves.

Once again Thapelo is deep underground. He moves around the mall, looking, touching and moving away when shop assistants hover. He wants everything and he wants nothing. He wants to be alone more than anything. He covers the same ground over and over, the suit singing a synthetic song of chaffing against his tracksuit. He hates the cheap shit in the windows of Mr Price. He hates himself. He does not really know what he is doing. All he knows is that he has fallen apart.

It feels like hours before the corridors feed him towards an exit. The sun is thin and emasculated on the concrete arteries that feed Sandton City; there is the stink of petrol and a hovering smell of coal fire. Thapelo has not been on a minibus taxi for at least eight years.

Squinting in the smoky glare, he looks for a place to put his finger in the air. Nothing is where it used to be. When he sees the back end of a few sorry looking taxis further down the road he follows his township nose into a palisade-fenced rank. In the almost heat of a Johannesburg winter lunchtime the place is desultory, there is the smell of *wors* and shoe polish. Shadows are cold. Thapelo leans on the flank of an empty minibus, waiting, in a small patch of sun.

People drift into the rank and climb aboard the taxi like timid animals at a watering hole. Thapelo lounges apart, outside, his funeral suit hanging off one cocky finger over his shoulder. The yellow cursive letters on the taxi's rump say *Home is Home*. To get home he will have to take a taxi to town and then change to ride back in the same direction. It will take more than an hour, depending on traffic, and his suit will get creased. If he drove home from here, it would take fifteen minutes.

A driver appears from nowhere and the taxi lurches into the traffic. Money is collected with an easy prattle and gentle tapping of shoulders. Then there is a silence filled with noise as the taxi pushes down the N1 and slips into town.

Alongside of the concrete bunkers of the Noord Street rank the minibus stops for just long enough for the passengers to clamber out. Then it is gone. Thapelo is left standing in the street, slightly lost. So much has changed.

Behind the rank there is a new hawker market, selling cheap little necessities: nylon socks, beanies, loose sweets, miniature tins of Zambuck and lumps of beige clay for pregnant women to chew. He has to make his way to Bree Street, to catch the taxi that prowls the streets of his suburb, dropping domestic workers and picking up gardeners.

De Villiers street is awash in gospel music.

He walks when he can and skips and weaves when he has to, negotiating the sliver of space between shop displays and hawker stands: the single person width given to pedestrians. Worshippers are spilling down the stairs of the United Church of the Kingdom of God. Burglar bars stand between him and rapidly blinking displays from the outfitters shops, remnants of the old Town.

It takes a block of bobbing and weaving, moving like a new initiate through the sidewalk malls remembering the smell of kitchen floor polish, the hint of beer and musty sex smells behind dark broken doors, before Thapelo really knows where he is going. Nostalgia and airbrushed memories engulf him. His father in the form of perfectly ironed khaki trousers, the groin worn half way down the thigh, the legs too short, mixed with the sound of his mother drunk and crying. He will go to see his mother, after all.

A dank smell of old earth and buried things draws him into one in a long row of muti shops. Behind the counter there is an Indian man with an impenetrable face, almost as blue as his shirt, like a storm riding over the city. Horsehair whips are rubbing against Thapelo's face and lizards are playing trapeze in the ceiling and there's no time to window shop.

There is a strange exchange of money and Mphephu. The herbs are wrapped in newspaper, stuffed in a flimsy grey plastic packet and pushed across the counter. The money – 10 rand – is refused. The man won't take the cash directly from Thapelo, nor will he even meet his eyes. So Thapelo flattens the note on the counter and then pushes back to the street.

Across Diagonal Street he finds a general dealer where the only action is at the lotto machine. No one is buying the stuff piled to the ceiling in the twilight of the shop's belly. Thapelo circles the shelves until he finds a pack of small, childish birthday candles in multicoloured candy stripes with little florets to hold them upright. At the counter he picks a tin of snuff from a dusty pyramid and asks for matches. This Indian smiles and takes the money from his hand.

In the taxi metromall across Bree Street he buys a cheap beanie to shield his ears from the unfriendly cold and then he boards a taxi to Chiawelo. The old lady sitting next to him tells him where to get off for Avalon, and he settles against her, longing to put his head on her bosom and sleep. The afternoon sun is seeping into the taxi turning it into a hot box. Thapelo enjoys the heat as the taxi squeaks and screams past vanishing mine dumps toward Soweto.

He is startled awake when the taxi stops at Baragwanath Hospital. He thinks about his mother and starts to practice what he will say to her. All the way down Old Potch Road he is revising his promises, prayers and pleas.

The rows and rows of brown and grey houses look sad but in him they evoke the romanticised memories: his granny playing the wireless, eating porridge in the back yard, playing barefoot soccer in streets where he learned intelligence, dance moves and sex.

Halfway through Chiawelo the taxi pulls up – by prior arrangement – next to an awkward metal tree fashioned from exhaust pipes. The driver shouts, without turning his head, 'Avalon'. It is awkward to get out from the back seat, but he manages to salvage some dignity and swing the door closed without looking back. Then he is trudging down a dusty tar road. Past signs for safe abortions and small derelict stalls selling offal and *madumbis*.

Wind is blowing dust across the thin tar of the road and Thapelo feels conspicuous. He knows he may look strange, dressed for gym and carrying a suit over his shoulder, walking the long way to Avalon past Somoho, the Soweto Mountain of Hope.

There are two-roomed brick houses to his left, to his right a row of plain shops selling beer, coal and building supplies. His feet are getting dirty, the red dust of Soweto that makes him ache with untilled memories. The street is quiet and Thapelo is lost in thought, but suddenly a hearse blocks his way. *Chiawelo Funeral Undertaker and Mortuary* says the lopsided signage over a thick coat of white paint.

The long car, which looks like it started life as a sedan taxi before being converted to carry the dead, is parking in front of a shop full of coffins and plastic wreaths. Thapelo enters and stands in front of the display of red, orange, pink and blue plastic flowers arranged in cake-size whorls. The flowers are ugly and when he prods them through the cellophane they yield clumsily, but he doesn't think his mother would mind. He wonders if she would expect flowers at all.

A woman emerges from the back to take 50 rand for a yellow wreath. His mother likes yellow. The flowers are stuffed into the packet with the snuff, candles and Mphephu, Thapelo walks on. Men with friendly faces are tending Somoho vegetable patches next to an empty and cold looking rondawel constructed for tourists. Perhaps, Thapelo thinks, so they can contrast the matchbox houses with an idea of the innocent African before colonisation. There are no tourists climbing the Mountain of Hope. They are probably all drinking cappuccino, ogling Winnie's house and buying souvenirs in Orlando West.

The small brick houses give way to shacks. His sports shoes are crackling on tufts of burned brittle grass. The smell of smoke, the quiet of the township in the afternoon before children come home, the patches of burned earth and the sharp thin light do not depress him. It feels good to be home.

Thapelo walks over the railway bridge toward the slatted vibracrete walls of Avalon. The occasional car passes, sending up dust, but Thapelo is alone on the wintry road, with only the roar of trucks on the road to Eldorado Park in his ears, muffled by a dense and angry wind.

Avalon, Eldorado Park, Meadowlands... what kind of tyrannical bureaucrat could come up with such tauntingly lovely names for places of exclusion and violence? Nearing the gates he lights a cigarette, battling to get the coal burning in the wind, but after two drags that make him giddy he is grinding it into the dust. He doesn't want his mother to smell smoke on his breath.

At the gates of Avalon he starts to feel the cold. The wind is numbing his ears and his eyes are smarting. He pulls his new beanie over his ears and it helps a little. Dust is travelling in sheets across the ground.

The winter grass is hard, brown and occasionally yellow but mostly charred and black. The last time he was here, some years back, it was summer and they drove in sad convoy to his mother's grave. That was 1995, just after Joe Slovo died. His mother is not far from Joe Slovo, in Block A. He knows he will recognise her when he sees her.

He follows the signs on the palm-lined concrete avenue that point to Slovo's grave. Not long ago a prominent businessman was hijacked in Avalon, but the cemetery is quiet, a few vehicles crawling between the rows of graves – all facing the same way, all facing away from the sun now dipping towards the horizon, shining starkly in his eyes.

There is a shortcut through a vast and brittle swathe of tiny graves, unmarked but for rusted numbered pegs. Thapelo skirts the area. He knows his brother and sister are buried there, but

he doesn't know where and he wouldn't know what to say to them. They were ghosts that haunted the small house in Meadowlands; ghosts that made his mother drink and swear in the later years.

There are few headstones in among the hostile shining pegs, each numbered and driven close together into the hard ground, to mark baby and child-sized graves. There are no footprints in the burned grass, no soft loving steps from mothers, fathers, sisters or brothers. No flowers either. He wonders if his father is also buried in Avalon, along with Hector Pieteron, Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and countless, less famous, but dearly beloved mothers, sisters, brothers and fathers. His mother never spoke about what had happened to the man she said was a snappy dresser and a heart breaker. 'You are just like your father,' she said a few times, when she was drunk and angry at the world.

Her grave is a modest mound of dirt, surrounded by a small feminine wrought-iron cage. There is no headstone, not until he pays the last installment on a hulk of marble to be erected and kept wrapped in plastic until the unveiling ceremony. In silence he clears away the dead weeds and sweet wrappers around the pile of stones. He hangs his funeral suit over his mother's grave and for a few minutes stands there staring, feeling childish and humbled. In among the pebbles and weeds are perished petals from forgotten funeral wreathes. After almost 10 years they resemble something organic. When he picks up a blue petal it crumbles between his fingers.

When the grave is roughly clear he moves quickly. He pins the birthday candles in the earth near the head of the grave, hoping the wind will let him light them. The new yellow wreath replaces the old rotting one above the candles. Then he rifles through surrounding graves until he finds a discarded plastic bowl. He pushes a chunk of *Mphephu* down into the bowl and stands back, the tiny green round of snuff in his hand. He is ready to talk to his mama.

Wait, he must move the suit.

Looking around for a suitable place, Thapelo changes his mind. He scans the cemetery, there are a few trucks plying the paths, but no one near him. The wind bites and scratches his skin as he undresses. For a moment he laughs at himself, crouched in his underwear behind a pink marble headstone. Then he puts his new funeral suit on, the lining soft against his skin. He hopes his mother won't mind his sneakers.

It is difficult to light the candles in the wind. He only has one box of matches so he does it deliberately, shielding the grave with his funeral-suited body. It takes half a box before the candles splutter, then he lights the *Mphephu*. After a few minutes smoke comes pluming out to fill the air with a familiar fragrant smell. He can hear the flowers popping as they burn.

Solemnly he stands at the foot of the grave, sprinkling black snuff over it.

'Hello mother, it's Thapelo.'

He can smell the urea in the snuff, he sprinkles more, aiming next to the grave so the wind will carry it to its mark.

'I am here to ask for your forgiveness. I have not been here for a long long time. I have not been a good son.'

The wind whistles through the headstones and a cargo truck hoots a long slow melancholic note across the charred landscape. Thapelo searches for himself, for words, then they come, rushing out breathlessly. He apologises for not having paid for the headstone and for not coming earlier,

for not observing the rituals a good son should. He tells her about the white woman he lives with. 'I think you'd like her, she's very headstrong just like you. Her name is Irene. I haven't even told her that you are dead. But I will now. I will. I promise.'

Thapelo makes a great many promises to his mother. The yellow wreath is on fire, lighting up the whole cemetery as the last of the afternoon sun catches its petals. The earth seems to breathe in. The grave looks lovely, almost peaceful, like a child's rumpled bed. Thapelo retrieves his tracksuit and walks away. He is not supposed to look back, but he does, just once to see the yellow that marks his mother's grave and how it sets the whole cemetery alight.

Trudging back through the graves, all facing him now, the wind and the sun on his back help him to move quickly through the gates of Avalon and past mottled brown dots of houses in the dark that is settling like fog over Soweto. Crossing Old Potch Road he climbs into the first taxi that stops, and only when they have left the township and are hurtling over the highway toward a city turned gold by the last light of sunset does he realise what he has done. He urges the taxi to go faster. He wants to go home.