

THE ENCOUNTER:

I have been sitting here too long now. Norah went away, I do not remember when that was. Maybe that is because I don't want to remember, that is, I don't want to think about Norah. The last time I saw Joe, we hardly had anything to say to each other. He said a whole lot of things, but while I listened, and was determined never to respond to what he was saying, the fire was leaping inside me; he was saying some things which I thought to be outrageous. They have gone now, or so it seems, and I am here.

The thing about this corner is that there are many people who pass by. To be able to note a thing like that, that many people go by, you have to be alone, left alone, lonely. I don't know if I am lonely. I know that Norah and Joe must go to hell! That is all. But as soon as I say it I get scared; it feels as if I have been walking in the dark, in a place I know has a cliff, and I suspect I am near the cliff without being aware of it. I may start to tumble down anytime.

The first time I met Joe was when I went to Nana's shebeen at Twelfth Avenue. He was sitting on the edge of the sofa, as if he was squatting. I came in, after going up the long stairs which seem to go to heaven, which frightened me all the time, because, going there, I always intended to drink, and always wondered what was going to happen if I left the place drunk. On that day, when I met Joe, I got in, and our eyes met. He smiled. We had seen each other before.

"Haai," I said, responding to the smile.

"Lefty, how are you?" he said, still wearing his smile. He shifted to the side of the sofa, to let me sit next to him. I had no choice.

"So you are here," he said.

"Yes, I did not know that you come here," I said.

"I do."

"I never see you here".

"Maybe it is just that our paths don't cross, he said. I was wondering, then, though I was not about to ask, how he came to know my name.

I did not know his.

"Our paths have crossed today," I said, "Nana, can you please give



us six beers."

"How are you Lefty?" Nana asked.

"Fine, six beers please."

"You are in a hurry, heh?"

"You are not a nice lady Nana, so don't pretend, just give me six beers," I said.

"Why do you say that?"

"You and I know," I said.

"Oh, because I would not give you credit?"

"That and because you have the habit of treating your customers like dogs, if you remember."

"Things can't just go on and on, especially if you are dealing with people who have been drinking; you have to know how to stop: when it's closing time it is closing time. If you think someone won't pay you, you don't give them credit, be firm, and final; you will make friends: I have come to know that after a long struggle and trouble. I am not shifting from it," Nana was saying, moving from the kitchen to the dining-lounge-drinking-room. She put the beers on the table. They were cold.

I don't know how many beers Joe and I drank that day. I did come to know that Joe knew my name because he was friends with Norah. We talked about a whole lot of things. We even agreed that Norah is an unusual woman. We talked at great length about her. And naturally, when we had had enough, or rather, there was nothing else to do, which could be done in the place we were in, we dragged ourselves to Norah's place. It was late night. It was a Saturday night.

Our state, coupled with the time of day, or night to be truthful, angered Norah. How dare we walk the streets, on a Saturday night, in the state we were in? I do not know what we said to her, I suspect nothing important, it could not have been anything sensible, given our state. We did though, say many things. I can remember that.

We woke up the following day, Sunday, our heads pounding, mine was. Norah had been to buy the newspapers, had cleaned the house, had cooked, and was listening to the news. When I emerged from the bedroom, I met her clean face, and forever-surprised eyes, and her thin tall frame, at the table, near the radio, pen in hand scribbling something.



"Next time, I will leave you both to sleep in your shoes, or else strip you to the skin, and see how you will look at me in the morning," Norah said.

"Was it that bad then?" I asked.

For five years, maybe more, since that day, Norah, Joe and I were always together. Those years took Joe and me out of the shebeen; they took Norah out of the church. They threw us into the streets, taking us out of jobs. Now, the streets of Alexandra are very unkind. They ask very cruel questions.

Everybody knows the streets of Alexandra to be so. That is not to say that Alexandra is peculiar in this way. That is only because South Africa is a strange country. Alexandra Township is one of the oldest Townships in the country. Maybe that is why it is so widely known; and, also, it excels in almost everything that Townships produce. All we know, is that Alexandra was supposed at one time to have been intended to be a farm - the farm would, as the plot did, belong to some white lady; also all we know, is that it never became a farm; it is now a Township.

What does one do when one day, one discovers that, either because of one's make up, and that has to do with the nation, one finds that shebeens, the streets, the church, in a place like Alexandra, have become unacceptable? At the same time, you realise that many of your friends, relatives, and some people you could easily love, are, day after day, claimed by these - that some, every Sunday, seem to have their lives controlled by ritualised standing up, kneeling, sitting down, singing, closing their eyes and talking; or, some never ever are sober, that in fact, everything about them, has been structured to revolve around ending up drunk; or, that some, while drunk forever, and some being Christians, like ants, build their soil-hill or dig holes, or carry prey or a piece of grass, keeping the rhythm of the monotonous, ever-in-motion queue, until they drop dead? You see the children, and places like Alexandra seem to know how to make them in large numbers, come, and because there is nothing else to do, you cross your fingers. How come life can be that way? You see thousands of churches, in a very small place; you see many small shops, with, really nothing to sell;



you see people you knew, as a boy, either repairing shoes, their backs bending, till they die; or one of your friends, does something mad, mad because he ends up in jail, and when he comes back, he has gone mad. You realise that, it would seem, it would seem that life is about finding the most cruel ways of dying. How come?

I do not know what to say about the day I found out that I was arrested. I was detained, and kept in solitary confinement for a very long long time. Norah and Joe were detained too. The police, both black and white, tortured me. Once, a black policeman, I think his name is Masebe, extracted my tooth, using a pair of wire-repairing pliers. A white policeman, once pulled my penis out to pain-reaching stretch and hit it with a hammer-gently, slowly, taking his time, until it was erect.

Naturally, I screamed. I do not know why I feel ashamed to say this. But now, I must say it. I cried, and screamed, it was painful. There is another type of pain. It is not easy, to be in a cell all by yourself, day after day, night after night, and you know that all you are waiting for, is to be called back, to have your tooth extracted or your penis knocked with a hammer, against a wooden block, until it is erect.

Many times, while I was in solitary confinement, I found myself wondering, what, if the police did that to my penis, were they doing to Norah, to a woman. The police did all these things to me, because they wanted to know if I was a member of the African National Congress. I knew then, that they were very scared of the African National Congress. I knew of it, from the time when I was a boy. There is no way you can grow up in Alexandra, or in South Africa for that matter, and not know of the African National Congress. I told them so. I don't think they believed me. But I was telling the truth.

When we came back from prison, Joe, Norah and I, I think, were afraid to meet each other. Norah broke the ice. One day she dropped in at my place. I did not know what to do with her. In the end, an hour after she had come, I wept. Norah hugged me, and told me that I must know that we are brothers and sisters, and there is nothing that can come between that. She told me that the police



had read my statement to her, that gave her strength, that it made her be able to fight against terrible odds, and that she had learnt a lot from that statement, about what we were trying to do, before we went to prison. She realised, she said, that as the police were torturing her, that as policemen, of a mad country, they were doing a job. A bad job. A very dangerous job, which signalled that the nation must give them another choice.

The nation needed people who will fight to stop the madness. Norah said all these things, her arm around my shoulder, and her other, free, hand kept wiping my eyes.

"I think you must go now," I came round to saying to her. She dropped her eyes, her ever-surprised eyes, stared at me, not blinking, her face was expressionless, there was something aloof about her; I think it is the way her shoulders pulled back and the angle of her head, her neck slightly twisted to an angle, her hands, clutching, hanging in front of her like sticks. She looked at me for a long time. Then, touching me lightly on the cheek, she turned and walked out. I stopped crying. Then, I must say, everything, just everything became a blank. I was twenty-seven then.

I did go to see Norah, after she had come to my place. I found Joe with her. I met Joe for the first time since we came back from prison then. I thanked Norah for having come to see me when she did. Joe told me that when he heard that I had asked Norah to leave, he did not know what to do, he had wished to come and see me, but something had told him to wait. There was a long silence after that. I discovered in that silence, that there was a terrible distance between them and I. They seemed to hold hands, in a way I have never seen lovers hold hands. I saw that they were together, I was out, and that, it seemed, there was nothing anyone of us could do about it.

I read sometime back in some newspaper that Joe made a speech while in East Berlin, that the African National Congress, was determined to destroy the Botha regime, the system of exploitation, oppression and racism; that it was going to intensify the armed struggle, and that it was enjoying the support of the oppressed people of South Africa.



I have been sitting here too long now. Second Avenue and Selborne Street, is a very busy corner. People who come from the factories in Kew Township, a stone's throw from Alexandra, a white area, pour from there into Alexandra, their home. Young and old, men and women, individuals, only in the sense of what they wear, and perhaps when you go closer to them, the way they laugh or cry, make a crowd coming out like that, from Kew Township, at five p.m. Buses and taxis roar in from Johannesburg. People pour out of them. There is a sound, a noise, characteristic of five p.m. at this corner. This noise, this sound, belongs to the colour of the sky as the sun falls. The sky is red, blue, yellow, the sun is a huge red coin, floating there, almost touching the top of the building at the bus depot. I have seen this, five p.m., here, for many many days. My house, which was once a tailor shop, has its door facing the street, has a verandah, which now and then gives shade to many people I have never seen before. Very often, to see the peculiar face of five o'clock p.m., I sit on the verandah.

"Hullo," he said, sitting next to me.

"Haai," I said. And, because he was still looking at me, I had to look at him again. I have never seen him before. Our eyes met for a long time.

"I am Norah's friend, she gave me your address and name, and said I should look you up," the man, or boy, I should say, said.

"Norah?"

"Yes."

"Who is Norah?"

"Your friend?"

"Norah?"

"Yes."

"Who are you?"

"Peter Tlabula."

"Norah?"

"Yes"

"Where is Norah?"

"She said that if I told you that I am a freedom-fighter, you would help me.

"A what?"

"Freedom-Fighter."

"Let's go into the house," I said. My heart was jumping and



jumping and jumping.

I shut the door behind us. Peter looked around the room, for a place to sit down. I don't know what freedom-fighters look like. But suddenly Peter made my house to appear as if it had no windows, as if everyone was looking at us. It seemed as if, anything we said, was very loud. I was trying to make tea, but my hands were shaking and shaking. Peter did not say much, I felt him watching me, I felt his eyes.

"Look at my hands," I said at last, holding out a cup.

"They are shaking," Peter said.

"Yes," I said.

Peter was smiling.

Mongane Wally Serote.