

Ashes to ashes

Martin Gustafsson

The bleached winter sun, the chattering of leaves in the bluegum canopies and a horizon etched perfectly against a blue sky still dotted with specks of night confirm for Michael that Highveld winter mornings are tailor-made for funerals.

The chill has permitted a full display of Joburg apparel. Coats, scarves, gloves and even a couple of black cowboy hats and one tailcoat jostle for space round the graveside. So immaculate are the coats that they must have been laid out carefully on car backseats for the ride starting at four or five this morning. Michael, in his charcoal windbreaker keeps a distance, knowing, not without some pride, that he doesn't fit in.

The deceased, though from a distant country, is being buried in the hometown of his lover's parents, who had come to accept the deceased as a son. The fact that they were two men had at first raised eyebrows in Makhadostad. But they more than made up for that by visiting frequently, and building a house like a Joburg house, complete with generator and under-floor heating, in the midst of poor Makhadostad.

The community elders sit, with ritual solemnity, on chairs dressed up in white covers and ribbons for the occasion.

This is not an Auntie Aida funeral. The deceased did not get to expire gradually on a deathbed. Instead, he was drained of his blood quickly, after a young man he couldn't resist taking home, whilst his lover was on a business trip, stabbed him four times. This detail is known only to the Joburgers. The locals would never understand.

It is not for the deceased that Michael is here. It is for Sammy, the deceased's lover.

Sammy is the fling that Michael could never forget. Michael is educated, and understands many things, but he does not understand why Sammy stuck like a stone glued to his heart.

They were oil and water. Sammy loved social events, from champagne breakfasts to funerals. He liked nice houses. Michael was a recluse living in a flat in the wrong part of town who liked books and his computer.

Now Michael is older, and he has a nice house. And against his better judgement, he finds himself, uninvited, at a funeral under whispering bluegum leaves.

In about thirty minutes Michael and Sammy will meet, face to face. For Michael, Sammy will have the appearance of someone who has washed in the sea. His eyes are red, and there are traces of salt on his face. But the smell that will meet Michael is a mix of eau de cologne and some strong drink, maybe gin. Sammy will see Michael's oddness, his tastelessness when it comes to clothes, his very presence, as something refreshing, and will blurt out, 'I'm so glad you could make it!'

They will exchange cell numbers.

Michael will leave the funeral shortly thereafter, his mind staggering like a drunkard with new doubts previously unimagined. The brief exchange with Sammy will have shifted something inside him, like a large piece of furniture he had thought was immovable. He will wonder whether the Sammy he remembers and the Sammy he met are really the same person. He will feel the Sammy he remembers dissolve and fly like ash out of the open car window.

Two weeks later, Sammy will call Michael and suggest they meet. For six months they will be lovers, will try to turn the clock back. This time it is Michael who will find their differences unbearable, and will break up.

From time to time, they will meet as old friends, mostly at funerals.

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