

An extract from 'This is not about sadness' by: Olumide Popoola

Experiences come in all manners. They spread and engage, tug and pull, question and challenge. Much longer than you desire. My name is Tebo. Tebogo. I arrived yesterday. It is spring, they say, but I wasn't prepared for this. What a strange city. It looks nice outside with the sun shining, the clouds sitting fat and well-fed underneath the blue of the sky, but when we stepped out of the cab it was not as I had expected it. Eish, the wind is too cold! It hits from the west, drops sharply south, then spreads into all directions. Everything shivers. It is cold but I'm glad I'm here. If not for Lucky and his broad smile I would be crying right now. But I'm glad I'm here. Really. I'm here to forget what happened on the corner of Koma and Potch. That stretch of red earth before the tar begins. Where the fine dust is whisked up by speeding cars. Where the soil is hard but layered with the finest, the finest of dust. Three months and 15 days ago I stood on that corner. Zanele and Pedita were having one of their usual arguments so I had left the party. Not to disappear, not to smoke - I don't, not even dagga - I just wanted to catch some air, think about what to do and if this was going to be one of those nights and I had to make the long way to Number 36 by myself. Although it was going to be Sunday I had work to do, finishing the set at the Windybrow where I was doing my internship in stage design. It was my final month and it had gone well, very well, mainly because I know how to stay out of trouble At least I used to. I was standing on the corner thinking about how I would make that long journey from Soweto while Zanele and Pedita were still

at each other's throats, filled to the rim with cheap booze like a vat of freshly brewed beer, with no one else around that cared. We hardly knew anyone at that party, but had thought better go than wonder about what we had missed. Now I was stranded there. Those two always found a reason to fight and then make up; it was their pattern. One time they had driven off without me, still shouting, and only in the morning did they remember that they had left their best friend to beg for a bit of space in other people's overcrowded cars.

I stood on that dusty corner, only for a few minutes. When your life changes you cannot foresee the impact, but when it does, the things that happen are unstoppable. Like the dust, they get carried away with the current; like the wind, it buries itself deep in your bones, and slowly from the inside out you start peeling away. Your old self stripping off, all that was truth, one layer at a time. Never to be innocent again.

My name is Tebo. Tebogo. I arrived yesterday.

Well, she came one day. Small and fragile. Pretty little thing but yuh tink she a tink she can carry bricks so. I neva waan talk to her. Me ah just sit inna me front room looking outta de window. Me no need no young little ting ah tell me how de world must run. Nuh! She always got sumting fi sey. Asking, always asking. Den her eyes look pon me like sey she neva gon' see me again. Her big eyes. Like she waan find sumting pon de bottom of de well. Me well, very well but no well, nuh

so? *Chups*. She work hard, man she coulda work hard. Drag all dem old things outta de house, clear de garden, all by herself. It was an accident. Everyone sey so.

Everyone comes with a past. That's where the story lies, naturally. She came in a cab. Motor running, cabbie leaning against the black roof, smoking. Lucky running inside to get more money for the fare. His step, heavy from the weight of his belly, absorbed by the asphalt. Inside the vehicle, the girl. If frailness was a measurement, she would have scored a six out of ten. Evenness is what best describes how she *seemed*. Small, slender and very polite looking but somehow you thought she'd call you out if need be, very matter-of-fact, straight away. Then the dragging of a suitcase. Lucky smiling, cab driving off. The girl freezing, looking for the first time at her new environment.

The grey house - not Lucky's - but inside it his dark ground floor flat, wedged between others, snug and tight. A mid-terrace Victorian house. This is how she arrived on Corbyn Street. The next morning routine starts. Lucky off to work, as usual early shift, London barely lit by a hopeful sky. The girl already awake, she'd been all night, wandered to the back window inside the kitchen, looking at the contours of the garden. In the morning after Lucky leaves, the fabric of the front window curtain moves. Her oval face appears. Tired, her eyes, under the high and thin brows. A

faint red embedded in the lower corner of the sclera. Straining, she watches the garden slowly emerge from its dusky envelope.

Lucky returns in the late afternoon. He smiles, always does and a few minutes later they both stroll to Tesco's. She's chatty now, alive. Her face remains un-creased and well arranged but her eyes awake now, travel and extend to the distances between houses and corners, street signs and shops, local pub and butcher. Attentive, she asks questions, holds Lucky's hand like a friend does. On their way back she points to the house, laughs again.

"They all look the same."

"Yeah," Lucky replies.

The woman tending to her front garden next door is a familiar fixture on the street. Bent over, she is big boned and hunched permanently. They speak. Lucky introduces the girl but the woman's lips hardly move. In her hand a small scoop, she keeps her eyes on the bit of soil between the pavement and the flagstones in front of the entrance to her house. The tool grips the earth she watered, like it's making an incision. Metal drives itself into soil, she doesn't look up long enough for the sun to make her eyes blink. The girl looks at Lucky, startled. He shrugs. These are the peculiarities. There are many. Like everywhere. Lucky unlocks the front door but the girl's gaze remains. Her hands grab the woolen cardigan she wears and wraps it tight. The close knit fabric still allows the coolness to penetrate. There is no force in the air, no wind, still there is a chill. She floats almost within its stillness, suspended

for a moment. Time and space foreign, keeping her at a distance, the new environment lodging on her skin. Later this will become a normality; an observation no longer being made but a casual encounter with the street, the house, the front yard of her new home. She watches the woman with her tools. The gardener has moved on already. Her thoughts carried away from the dirt and much further than the girl a few meters away. Leathery her face, a thin type, and smooth like fine suede, of course without the fuzz. The girl can't pull herself away. In the bubble created by the confusion of her internal body clock and the new impressions, she's stuck. Glued to the very spot she's standing on. The woman's hands are moving, scraping, tugging. Weeds are piled neatly, the flagstones framed on all corners by brown alone, almost a third of them cleared of vegetation. Lucky calls from inside. The girl follows him then turns around again.

"A beautiful flower bed you have here".

Immersed in her work there is a faint "uh huh".

"So well cared for. I can see."

The woman is returning to her work, her back square and solid, warding off.

"... you must be..."

But there won't be an answer. The girl's eyes linger for another second then she follows Lucky into the house. Their door shuts and there is laughter again. Pots rattle.

Later there'll be food and friends, the table set in the kitchen, guests arriving. The girl meets many, Lucky a smiling host. Music from an ipod hooked onto an old-

fashioned stereo that came with the flat, and more laughter, which sticks to the walls like condensation.

Next door the woman, the gardener, the one with no speech for the girl. She's on the bed, her feet dangling slightly in the air. Her day has been divided between the front yard and the inside of her flat. The washing neatly folded on the chair in the bedroom. She will put it away another day. Tomorrow perhaps, when there are more hours of the same week broken by the visit to the church, she herself won't make. Her night is restless on the single bed, her ears distracted by the young voices next door, crawling through the air like a racoon's touch through a tent wall. Soft, almost dismiss-able but with a faint imprint of certainty. People.

She tosses, right and left, her gown tangling with each move. Her eyes squint now in a way they didn't in the afternoon, when the neighbours passed. Now they stare into the dark room, asking for the lid to temporarily close on her consciousness. She sleeps lightly, scurried dreams keeping her always just above the surface. In the morning when she rises there is a sore spot on her lower back. There the mattress left an impression. The unrest.

I neva know how she come sit inna me garden. She always talk. Always! Me neva have nutin to sey. Whey me ah sey? Little thing she is, why she gon' have to talk to me? Me just mind me own business, harm nobody. I know all a dem think me crazy or sumting. Mek dem talk. Me no do nutin to nobody.

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