

‘Space’ by Masande Ntshanga

I guess you won’t believe him, either, but this is what CK tells us, this morning. He says there’s a grey man living in the shed behind Ma Thano’s spaza shop on Miya Street, a man who isn’t a man, one sent down to Earth from a distant place.

Where we are is the local, the name our parents give to the local primary school they pack us off to each morning here in Bisho, and the way CK is saying this, it’s the last day of school and the four of us, that’s him, Thando, Thobela and me, we’re slouching at the back of our Afrikaans classroom, again, our bodies turning to slushed ice from the promise of having failed yet another take home test in die taal.

CK keeps talking.

He says how this man, behind Ma Thano’s spaza shop, he isn’t the same as any other man he’s ever seen, before. CK leans forward and tells us that this guy, whatever he is, he’s just something we have to set our own eyes on.

I nod, but all this time CK’s whispering, all this time he’s writing us notes about this grey man, what I’m doing is watching Mrs. Sindiwe, our teacher, watching how she’s sitting at the front end of our classroom with her head down, and watching how she’s scratching red lines in each exercise book that passes under her pen.

She flips open another exercise book.

CK keeps talking.

From where he’s sitting on my left side, he leans back on his chair and tells me to tell him which of us in. He turns his head to the side and to the seat behind him to repeat it to the other guys. Thobela and Thando just nod to him in response.

I go back to Mrs. Siviwe, and as I’m watching her, the minute hand on her clock slows down to a stop. Mrs. Siviwe has the clock hung above her calendar, a glossy flip-over that shouts “’92!” in the school’s powder blue colours, and when that clock freezes, her pen grows even louder on the page, and from where I’m sitting, I can hear it scraping the paper like tyres skidding across concrete.

“I’m in,” Thobela says, watching the skid marks filling up in his exercise book.

“I’m in,” Thando says, without looking up from his pencil case.

I turn around and look through the nearest window.

From where I’m sitting, the grass in our playground looks green and symmetrical, as if the field had been pressed down and ironed by a solid bar of the day’s heat.

It's a really peaceful place.

I spend a few seconds imagining myself stretching out and unloading myself out there.

When I got promoted to standard three, last year, I did well, and when my mother heard of my results she drove home with a sponge cake for us to eat for dessert—we even sat, the three of us, me, Mama, and Nana, around the long dining room table we never used for meals. This was in 1991, and it wasn't long until the spirit had taken us over and we brought out the old balloons and streamers we'd used the previous year for New Year's as well as Nelson Mandela's release from his island prison. After Ma cut us a piece of the cake each, she announced that she'd received a promotion at work and told us how, with the way things were taking their course, it was possible I could be taken out of the local and enrolled in a model c as soon as the start of my standard five year.

When I look back up, again, I find Mrs. Siviwe glaring at me.

She has my exercise book open in her hands.

When she shuts it and places it on top of the pile on her right, all the while shaking her head, I look down and write a note to my friends.

I tell them I'm in and CK says, "Good."

He says, "Tomorrow it is, then."

The three of us nod at him together.

We say, "Tomorrow it is, then."

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Thobela's been named our group leader for the rest of this year. We've decided to crown him because he holds the highest number of stolen goods bagged by a member of our gang. It isn't that close to end the year, to be fair, but CK and I tapered off quite early, this time around—we tapped out as early as May, in fact, and as far as Thando goes, ever since his father, the Bishop, drove his Mazda back into their garage and his mother's life, the guy's been extra careful about drumming up the sort of trouble you can fall into for stuffing chocolates and action hero figurines under your balls.

CK and I have always been small time, anyway.

There's really no loss to be had, here.

The first time we did it, we stole trips into the town, but grew too used to the stone lionesses overlooking the parliament square, the grown up world of loud pink bricks, hooting cars, typing machines and slippery fried sausages.

My mother had banned video games at my house, citing a collective stink that storm-clouded over a pile of our report cards, but even the homeland soldiers no longer excited anything in us, their jaws and manners just as rigid as the statues that kept vigil over the suits who worked in Parliament Hill.

I mean, they never shot their guns.

So we shoplifted at the local OK Bazaar, which stood just across the street from the Amatola Sun Hotel, where the glass turnstiles were inviting but often kept us from slinking in and walking passed the casino, our bare feet moving us from the cold white marble and onto the lush red carpet, then through to the back where—just before the swimming pool where we saw the first white woman in our lives—they had a new Street Fighter machine glowing in the corner for only five bob a game.

At OK, during our short career there, I managed to nab a Bruce Lee poster and a Spider Man figurine; CK scored himself two twin sliver revolver BB guns. Then, one cold Saturday in the middle of April, one guy who wasn't in our gang, this chubby laaitie who didn't go to school with us down at the local, got caught and carried wailing into a dark room at the back of the supermarket. I don't need to tell you which idiot's parents were there. CK and I dropped everything we'd stuffed on ourselves and walked out slowly. We'd heard about the bald security guards who waited in that back room with their batons and shell-toe boots. They'd been put on the Earth to sort out precisely guys like us.

With Thobela, of course, it's a different story. First of all, the guy's better than any of us could ever dream of becoming, and secondly, he only steals panties.

It's true.

In a good week, Thobela tallies up to five pairs, easily, and he keeps them everywhere: in his bag, in his pockets, in his pencil case, and he gets thanked a lot by the guys at the local.

So when my lift bails on me after Afrikaans, that's who I go to.

Thobela.

I walk back from my corner on Siwane Avenue and find him leaning up against the walls at the entrance to our school.

He's got this hatter's grin plastered across his folded, sweaty face and he looks like

he's just been standing there, keeping the building up on its feet or something.

Thobela's a stocky guy, too, a bit on the shorter side, and he's got a deep widow's peak with hair that grows out its longest at the back.

I tell him my problem and he says to me how that isn't a problem.

We take his contract van down from the local's gates and swerve down into Circular Drive. I usually hitch my rides with my driver, Petros, a guy who covers my neighbourhood all the way up to just one block before CK's, and never with Thobela, since out of our entire gang, he's the one who lives farthest from of us up in the north.

We settle into the back of the van as Thabo, Thobela's driver, turns his leather-sheathed wheel and tunes in a jam by Sipho Hotstix. We swerve to the right and roll down Independence Avenue, which has no speed humps and allows us Thabo to shift the stick up.

Thobela grins and says to me he has something to show me.

I look and it's his latest pair: a sky blue number with a small bow knitted at the front of it. It's got a faded yellow stain down the centre where the girl must've crossed her legs and wrinkled the cotton.

I guess that's a period stain.

My first one.

At the back of the van, Thobela's thumb rubs around the patch of off-white with a careful, admiring stroke. He pulls his back pack up and we give the cloth our devotion. The fabric has been scrubbed as thin as the pages of a Gideon Bible.

"She can have babies, now," Thobela explains to me.

I watch him fold the pair back into his satchel.

The contract drops me off at the bottom of Rharhabe Road, a good five minute walk up from my house, and Thabo, who's driven us this whole way, tells me I don't need to collect a two rand for him on Monday for the ride—I should count it as a favour to my mother: "All three for us are oomkhaya, remember, we share a clan name," he says.

Thobela has another ten minutes or so at the back of the van and so I wave him off. Then I start the walk up to my place.

When I get home, I notice I've broken out in a light sweat, the moisture griming up my collar even more, and our stop-nonsense, more than a few months in need of a shape up, now, has toppled over and spread my family's instability into our new neighbour's yard.

Though I guess Mr. Sithengi isn't that new, anymore.

He's offered to put up a face brick fence with a red finish that complements our

garage for upwards of a year, now, but Ma has declined his generosity each time.

“I don’t need a handout”, I once hear her say in Nana’s room.

Right now, I can see into their green lawn from our porch. A tractor tyre has been carved into a garden swing and it sways languidly under an oak. It looks like a magazine picture. The yard of a happy family.

I unlock the padlock on the burglar, let myself in, and lock again.

In the bathroom, I masturbate twice to whichever girl comes to my mind before I wash my hands and prepare tea for Nana.

“How was school?” she asks me, when I bring her tray rattling into the room.

Nana likes to talk in the moment it takes for her tea to cool down. Afterwards, I mix in her sugar and she lets me have the first sip.

“It was okay,” I say to her.

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The next day I wake up early from a wet dream and a nightmare I’ve had about the grey man. The way it happens is that it’s a Saturday and even inside my room, with the curtains drawn, I can feel the day’s heat, its long fingers, circling around my neck and taking my sleep.

Since Ma gives me all my chores the previous night, I know what to do when the morning arrives. She likes to take her rest on Saturdays and Nana always makes sure that I give her enough of it.

The first thing I do when I get out of bed is reach into my bag. I take out my Afrikaans exercise book and push it under my mattress. Sometimes Ma likes to check to see if I’ve been eating my packed lunches. She has awful days, sometimes, migraine days, when I just let the stuff pile up in my knapsack.

I peel off my briefs for another pair in the drawer, and after I hide my test, I step into the hallway, as quiet as sleep, and make my way into the humming kitchen.

Once there, I take our big pot, first.

I empty out the water I poured on it to soak the crust from the pap we ate last night. Then I do the rest of the dishes and sweep. I fill up a plastic bucket with water and Sunlight and mop up the kitchen floor.

Then I take down a box of oats and three bowls for myself, my mother and Nana, and as the water heats up, I step out of the kitchen door and into the morning. The dew on the grass wets me between my toes and I itch. I take a big breath and watch the sky as it turns from pink to white. Then, after a while, I wipe my feet and walk back inside.

I cook and serve myself a bowl of oats.

Then I boil another pot of water and pour it into a vaskom which I take with to wash inside my room. When I'm done, I lather myself in Vaseline and get dressed in a black shirt and red shorts before I take another look at that stinking test.

I barely scraped over, this time.

I stick it back under the mattress and write a note to my mother about how I've gone playing with Thobela; the rest of the guys. Then I walk out and sit on my front stoep to wait for our leader.

The concrete feels cool beneath my thighs.

I lie on my back and watch the sky change from white to blue.

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Thobela lumbers up to my stoep a few minutes later. He's had to walk it all the way down from eBhalasi, a township just north of our suburbs, bordered by a squatter camp our adults often tell us mocking and warning stories about.

Thobela's dad owns a two-room up there, and where they live is just three blocks down from the landfill that starts off the squatter camp, a place where we kick around plastic bags and scour the pit for toys long lost from the white children who come to sleep at the Amatola Sun during Christmastime.

Thobela plonks himself down next to me and takes out a plastic Rambo knife; his latest find.

"Hey, check it, out," he says.

I do.

It's a decent piece. I stand and crouch, gouging the air a few times with it like a commando.

Then I hand it back and sit down.

We're quiet for a while.

Two cars pass us by, both of them Toyotas, before I ask Thobela if he passed. He says he didn't and I turn to look at him.

"It's fine," he says, sharpening the knife's plastic blade on the edge of my stoep.

"I'm not repeating the standard. I'm not going to white school, next year. I'll start high school eBhalasi."

I don't say anything.

"What about you?"

"I passed by one mark."

I look over the fence, to where Thando's family stays. You can see his place from mine. I guess he's sort of my neighbour, this way.

"Your marks were good last, year," Thobela says.

He's right about that, but I give him a look that tells him to stop.

Thobela laughs.

"I wouldn't want to go to white school either," he says.

"Do you think it's real?" I ask him.

"CK?"

"I had a dream about it."

"He's lying," Thobela says.

He goes back to sharpening the knife.

"I only came out here because I hate Bhalasi."

I think about my grades and the grey man as we walk over to Thando's house.

*

The sun almost overpowers us. Its light makes our shadows criss-cross the way the world doubles up whenever we squint through Nomalanga's keyhole.

Nomalanga is my friend Thando's sister.

From where I'm standing, I can see her hanging panties and bleached dishcloths on a sagging clothesline. She stands in the shade under the line, a lime wall cordoning their backyard from the eyes of strangers like us. Like always, she ignores the both of us.

When I turn around, I find Thobela leaning over Thando.

Where we are is Thando's driveway, which means we're on cement, very hot cement, and at places we've had to skip over molten tar just to get here. The way it's getting hot is that when you go without shoes, you can't. You have to stand on the sides of your soles and everywhere on your face there's sweat trying to tickle you, sticky rivulets that try to sting our eyes shut.

In front of Thobela, in his check shirt and brown shorts, Thando's sitting on the driveway with both his knees held up to his face. He isn't looking at either one of us, but between his knees and below his face, Thando's hands are busy squashing ants.

They're both grazed and bleeding.

He dips his thumbs in the blood and squashes ants between his feet and everywhere around him, there's blood thumb prints with these little black dots of dead ants in the centre.

He says we can't go inside his house, today.

Thando says we can't do it tomorrow, either.

One time, about two weeks after the Bishop's return, it was me, Thando and Thobela, and we were out on the driveway playing cars with the garden bricks. I don't remember what happened, but Thando opened his thumb against something and screamed. He said it was Thobela's fault, but he wasn't sure. Then he said it was my fault. Then Thando bled and said the both of us, Thobela and I, we'd collected sins. He wouldn't stop saying that, again and again, and then he walked through his front door and disappeared.

We'd collected sins.

"Not ever," he says, now, about his house.

I ask him, why?

He doesn't look up.

First, and maybe for eight seconds, he stays quiet. Then, looking up with this clot of dead ants stuck to the blood on his thumbs, he squints up at me and says:

"My mother's been possessed by demons."

He laughs and says they came through the kitchen sink.

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We leave Thando in his driveway and walk up to CK's. CK lives on the edge of the neighbourhood, a few blocks up from Rharhabe, and shares a Wendy flat with his aunt in the shebeen district. Often, he lets us go behind their backroom where we break his aunt's beer bottles into weapons, gemstones, and dagga pipes, before she wakes up and lets us in for a plate of eggs in the early evening.

When this happens, the three of us chew in silence and I always find myself looking sideways, watching the evening colour the windows the same shade as the perfume bottles trembling on the dresser.

Today, CK meets us halfway down the street. He tells us he's on his way to buy his aunt a beer and that we came right on time.

Thobela reminds him that we came to him.

"What if we missed you?" I ask.

CK laughs, blowing us off.

"You can always find me," he says.

It's always been difficult to stay angry with him.

CK has a funny face, these big teeth and a voice that sounds like a money man on the radio. He's always twisting his lanky body into a new dance move he's picked up from the shebeens, and even at the local, he never runs out of a story to tell.

So we shrug and walk with him down Mfelane.

A stray cloud wipes the sun, laying a cover of shade on our path.

"I dreamed about the grey man," I tell CK.

Thobela plays with his knife and CK laughs into space.

"That's a good sign," he tells me. "It's a lucky sign."

We walk on, before finally turning into Miya.

"It isn't much longer now," CK confirms.

We can see Ma Thano's spaza from where we are.

CK's face takes the form of a stone as he points us out.

He says, "There."

He says, "That's wall, there."

*

Thobela and I squeeze ourselves between the walls at the side of Ma Thano's spaza, walking over broken glass and ponds of urine, making steady way to the fence leading to her backyard.

The way Ma Thano's spaza shop works is that when she opens her garage door it doubles up as tavern.

As we slink passed, someone knocks over a quart of beer and froth spews from under the garage door like surf.

Thobela gets himself up on the fence and looks for a dog. The he flips himself over into the yard.

I follow.

Inside, we look around at the same time. We find a zinc shed built against the cinderblock wall on the far end.

Its door hangs open.

We're still standing when CK sways through the kitchen door lugging a sweating quart of beer.

"Are you ready?" he asks us in a voice I've never heard from him, before. We watch him as he raises the bottle to his mouth, twisting the bottlecap off between his teeth.

"You need a little strength for this," CK says.

We pass the bottle around until we start to feel our heads lifting off our shoulders. I restrain myself from vomiting each time I taste the beer's bitterness. Thobela sucks on the on the bottleneck like a pro, taking the brew down in massive gulps. I look at CK, who's grinning and staring at space like an idiot.

"What will your aunt say?" I ask him.

"Nolthando is not my mother," he says.

I don't say anything else.

I realize we've never asked him about his parents.

A moment passes before CK belches and says, "Come see."

So that's what we do.

Thobela passes the quart back to him and we go see.

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The man inside the shed isn't an alien, but he has CK's teeth and the body of an eleven year old girl. His head sits massive on his small neck, the skin on his face drawn so tight against the bone it looks like it was sprayed on his skull.

Thobela covers his nose the same time as I do.

It smells like the inside of a latrine.

"This is my father," CK says.

He kneels down next to the man.

"He's like an alien, isn't he?"

Thobela and I say nothing.

CK waves for us to go closer and we inch forward.

"What's wrong with him?" Thobela asks.

"Ma Thano says he got it working in Joburg. No one really knows what it is."

CK dribbles a small amount of beer into his palm and pours into the man's mouth. As he gets up, we hear the kitchen door slamming open. Thobela and I throw glances at each other in panic, but CK just stands there. When I reach for him he doesn't move, so Thobela and I run out of the shed without him. We scale the wall just as Ma Thano bursts screaming out of the kitchen.

On the tar, my feet no longer feel the heat, and as we run down Miya Street, Thobela and I, the cloud moves away from the sun and the world seems to change, growing bright and intense like a beam from an alien ship.