

# The Boys Whose Hearts Were Sepulchres

MOSO SEMATLANE

ON SUNDAYS, SELLO NALANE would stare at the white boy. The boy would look away and smile. A remnant smile. Flickering upon his rosy lips. It was because of that smile that Sello kept staring. Before long, Sello had come to think of it as a cat-and-mouse game, one they played every Sunday, and one (it was pointless to deny it now) that Sello came to church with the sole intention of playing. As the congregation sat on the pews, drowning in Eucharistic hymns, Sello's eyes would meet the boy's, briefly, before the boy pulled his green-eyed gaze away, shifting slightly in his seat to show what – discomfort, pleasure, boredom?

Sello was embarrassed at first. The embarrassment of two boys whose eyes accidentally graze against each other. A moment suspended in time. Questions asked of each other. It was a strange signal. And with this signal, picked up in restaurants and malls and nightclubs, boys could tell what the other *was*. What the other *wasn't*. Sometimes the moment would lead to a conversation. To exchanging numbers. To

sex. Other times the boys would disconnect their gazes, walking away from each other like nothing had happened.

Sello couldn't tell which scenario the boy's eyes could lead to. The smile was evasive. Opaque. He needed a surer sign. Whenever someone shifted on the pews, Sello would study the boy through the opening left by the person's body. The way he shaped his lips in an 'O' when he sang along to the hymns. The way he crossed and uncrossed his legs for most of the service. Still, Sello could not tell. But the ambiguity also kept him interested. Things in motion and things in stillness. The sturdy body underneath the boy's clothes. His dark hair the colour of licorice.

In the mornings, Sello's mother, 'MaSello would turn the trips to church into impromptu driving lessons. Sello was about to finish his Matric. She would tell him how a driver's license had to be his first 'adult document', to come even before his Matric results. But Sello didn't want to be an adult. He didn't even like driving. Ideally, he would have liked to remain eighteen forever. Endless days with friends. Homework was tolerable, if it meant he would never have to face the future. And so his hands would tremble against the car's steering wheel. 'MaSello was impatient, and would bang her hand against the dashboard when he made a mistake. To make himself feel better, Sello would think about the boy.

The opportunity to start a conversation with him never presented itself. The church's architecture itself was designed to separate them. Although they both sat in the third row, a wide, polished aisle stood between them. It was impossible for Sello to look too long at him without being conspicuous; leaning forward would risk a brush with the nape of the person in front.

There was also Bishop Marais. He had a gift of sucking every strand of inattention from his congregation, until for a few minutes, one forgot about God and Jesus, and he became everything, and everything became him. With his white robes sweeping the floor as he walked and talked, he looked like a flower that had bloomed from the centre of the earth. Watching him was a sensation so pronounced that Sello felt he

was sinning just by looking at the boy. Sello would make an effort to cast every thought of the boy to the back of his mind, away from the stained-glass eyes of the church. Away from Bishop Marais.

Even if Sello wanted to approach the boy, most times 'MaSello would whisper to Sello just before the service ended:

*Ha re tsamae.*

Lately, she had been attending church as little as possible, a stark contrast to her enthusiasm when they first moved to Ladybrand. 'MaSello was a bishop's daughter herself back at the parish in Lesotho, and for her, church was a fact of life that grounded her in whatever locale she flung herself to.

In Ladybrand she was rootless. This was a frontier town built to consolidate the land the Boers had taken from the Basotho in the 1800s. It was built for white people. So was the church. 'MaSello would make conversation in the hope of reestablishing herself in the new parish, only to be reprimanded by small talk that quickly went cold, smiles that never reached the eyes, and even rebuffs:

*Ek praat nie mooi Engels nie.*

After service, Sello and his mother would be the first to leave. Opening the wooden doors, the sunlight had a flat, blinding quality. Its glare made Sello's head hurt. Or maybe it hurt because, once again, he left the church without so much as a word with the boy.

One Sunday, 'MaSello and Sello left the church through their normal, shiftless routine. Approaching the car, Sello already dreaded the possibility that she would make him drive. The car would turn off when he changed gears. The lessons would just add to his failures.

Sello excused himself. He needed to escape.

*What if I told him right now that I want to fuck him? Right here on God's lawn?*

He drifted to the edge of the lawn, intending to calm his nerves with a drink of water. He bent down to the stone drinking fountain. He had barely drunk when a hand came into his view. The flow of water stopped. A white hand gripped the tap so tightly that tendons moved beneath the skin.

Sello raised his head.

Frozen, with water crystals trembling around his mouth, Sello found the boy standing in front of him, as real as the touch of water on his lips. And then the familiar smile. Unsure of itself. So, so delicate. It warmed Sello's chest, like having a baby wrap its palm around his finger.

Sello opened his mouth to speak. The smile disappeared. Sello stayed silent instead, watching the boy's mouth pull furrows across his forehead. His eyes changed, the mirth leaving them. This was how human beings unraveled.

The boy took a step closer. His breath poured against the side of Sello's face.

*If you keep looking at me, I'll fucking kill you. I'm not a moffie. Okay?*

Sello nodded. Why did he nod?

Up close, he appeared so big that Sello felt he was being pulverised into the earth. Sello didn't even know his name and yet—

*Breyten!*

A woman called from across the lawn. The boy unlatched himself from Sello.

*Breyten!*

Sello knew that woman. Her name was Annelise, Bishop Marais's wife. She wore the same green suit every Sunday, a shade lighter than the green of the lawn. Even from afar, Sello could see hints of Breyten's face in hers, his soft features reconfigured into a cruder, more angular design.

*Breyten.*

A strange name without epoch or place. It could have belonged in the American cities or here in the farmlands of Ladybrand.

Breyten, like 'MaSello, had a parent who was a bishop. Connections severed before they could form. Breyten hopped towards his mother with an athletic gait. He didn't look back at Sello.

Mrs Marais threw an arm around his shoulders, kissed him on the lips. Breyten absorbed this with a shudder and walked away.

Mrs Marais remained. The lines on her face hardened at Sello. She had seen Breyten speak to him, their faces close.

Sello saw his chance for revenge. There was fear in Mrs Marais's eyes, and as punishment for how Breyten had made him feel, Sello would make it real. When they got home, Breyten would have to explain to her why their faces had been just centimetres apart.

He met Mrs Marais's glare with the force of his own. He hoped that she could see the *lust* he felt for Breyten, for boys whose biceps peeked out their shirts with hormonal beauty.

Boys who could love only in the darkness.

After that Sunday, the days moved as only Ladybrand days could. Small-town days when the smell of boredom was everywhere and made things slow and elemental. One hot day, Sello went to Lielehoek with his friends Refiloe, Seeiso and Jhunaid. Sello had known Refiloe from his primary school days in Lesotho, but he had met Jhunaid and Seeiso after moving to Ladybrand. The four found an empty campsite and started a braai. The boys took their tops off. Refiloe peeled off her frock to reveal a neon-green bikini top. They moved around the park, feeling white people's eyes against their bare brown backs.

When the meat was done braaiing, it came out tough and blackened. They ate it regardless. Later in the day, the heat lessened. Sello and Refiloe broke away from The Boys to take a walk amongst the pines. Earlier that week, Sello had said something unforgivable to her. Though he felt remorseful, he hadn't apologised. Sello and Refiloe argued under the shade of a pine, and then all was forgiven.

Another day, the friends crammed into Jhunaid's car, played the summer's biggest songs, and joined the N8 to Bloemfontein. Their petrol was running low. Watching farm after farm pass by the window, Sello was electrified by the wildness of the land.

The petrol finished near Botshabelo.

*How much money did you guys bring?*

The Boys left to buy petrol, leaving Sello and Refiloe in the car. They had only been gone for five minutes when Refiloe bolted from

the car and ran into the farmlands. She lifted a barbed wire fence and crawled through; a sign attached to it:

### OUTLET FOR SUBSOIL DRAIN

Sello followed. He lifted the fence, too, making sure his clothes didn't catch in the spikes. He chased and chased after her, running for no other reason except to run. Years from now they wouldn't be eighteen, seventeen, eighteen and eighteen anymore. Matric would be over. They would have lived through a hundred recessions and twice as many economic booms. Some of them would be married. Some would be failing a university course for the third time.

Running is a kind of baptism, a thin layer of sweat clinging to your skin. Sometimes when you do it hard enough, the holy water of your body soaks your clothes. It carries the scent of the first kiss, the first wail that ripped through your lips when you fell and scraped your knee. The first time you opened your eyes and your mother was there to meet you. Where she held you close and whispered that she had waited all her life to meet you.

When Sello came in that night, 'MaSello was cooking curry on the stove, delighting in her solitude, and how the smell of the curry filled the house and steamed the windows. Sello told her he didn't want to go to church the next day. The disagreements about church weren't new. She was prepared for each one, she had to be – the guilt of uprooting Sello from his more colourful life in Lesotho had never left her; she felt the need to constantly defend the church, and defend Ladybrand itself. What she wasn't prepared for was the look in his eyes, as if he were pleading to be released from some inescapable fate. She asked him if something was the matter.

*No. But what I'm trying to understand is why you always make me go to church with you, when you know what the church thinks of people like me.*

Sometimes, and she wasn't proud to admit this, she would have

doubts about Sello's claims about his sexuality. Perhaps he was just confused. Weren't we all at some point in our lives?

She knew Sello had had a boyfriend, a nameless, faceless shadow floating around the edges of his grade eleven years. She had mentioned him only once – an invitation to Sello to bring him to dinner. But the words grated her as soon as she said them. Both she and Sello felt uncomfortable. She never mentioned the shadow again.

But she also knew the feeling of being in her own body, the heat in her navel awakened by a man's touch. There had been many men in her life, Selinyane, Tellang, Sello's own father, Mphethe, and it confused her how her son could feel this same heat for a man.

*What does the church think of you?*

And so she sought to understand Sello. In her mind the reward was something not even God could give her. To understand her son as clearly as she understood herself. In restaurants, in doctor's offices, in queues at the cinema, 'MaSello would fix her eyes upon any woman who happened to stand in her line of vision. She would wait to feel the heat from her navel. Her heart would beat faster. But nothing more than that would happen in her body, and that only increased her desperation to understand.

*That I'm going to Hell. For something I can't even change about myself. How does this look to you – going to church and having to hear that I'm sinning ... just for loving someone else?*

*Just because God says something, it doesn't mean He's right all the time.*

*Then how do you explain it? I can't change myself. But sometimes I wish I could. It makes me hate myself. I'll never love a girl the way I can a boy. If God created me, then why can't he understand that?*

And finally, some of the women would return 'MaSello's gaze, but she would always look away. How could she tell Sello that she only wanted to see the world through his eyes, that for her, this was the only way she could protect him from every pain in the world? What could a person say to even start those kinds of conversations with her gay son?

*We have to allow God the leeway to be wrong. We have to allow mankind the leeway to be wrong.*

*Why? Why should I allow them to fuck me over like that?  
Because, my love, that's how you love.*

Despite how badly their encounter went, in church, Sello kept looking at Breyten, and Breyten kept looking away. Then Breyten smiled. As if the last Sunday hadn't happened. They were back where they began.

Sello surrendered himself to their game. As if he could sense his surrender, Breyten looked back at him, and, this time, did not look away.

What was in Breyten's eyes? The intensity made Sello want to stand up and walk over to the right wing. To sit beside him so their bodies would touch.

*If you keep looking at me in church, I'll fucking kill you. I'm not a moffie. Okay?*

Sello looked away.

*Where you going?*

Outside the church, Breyten intercepted Sello like a bolt of lightning.

*Where you going?*

Surely he had mistaken Sello for someone else. It was impossible that the boy who had just brushed Sello's elbow with his fingertips was the same boy who had insulted him last Sunday. With Breyten before him, Sello felt a resignation anchoring him to the earth; as if the two of them, here on the church grounds, were an image predestined in the bibles of the world. They were like boys drawn on parchment paper, vines curled around their ankles, their upper bodies naked and bound with primordial scriptures.

Sello tried to remain calm.

*I'm going home.*

*Look. I came to apologise to you. I shouldn't have said those words I said to you. They were horrible.*

*You were right. It was wrong of me to make you feel uncomfortable. I apologise, too.*

*Still...*

Breyten's cheeks grew red. Only then could Sello muster the courage to meet his eyes. Didn't Harry Potter have green eyes as well? Breyten shifted his weight around and bounced on his heels. It seemed he was burning to say something;

*Can I ask you a question?*

*Sure.*

*Don't be cross with me, okay?*

*Okay.*

*Are you ... gay?*

Sello studied the sheen of sunshine against his cheekbones, his lips almost swollen against the summer heat. There was a smell coming off his clothes, of old rooms toasted to sterility from sunshine. A smell that reminded Sello of slow summers where the boredom could get so much he was nearly suicidal with it.

Sello didn't answer.

They stood in silence for a while, before Breyten took out something from his pocket that looked like a large battery. Only when the sunshine glanced against its screen did Sello realise it was a phone.

*Do you want to take my number?*

*Sure.*

Sello held out his hands for the phone, but Breyten recovered it with possessiveness not unlike how he had grabbed the tap at the stone fountain last Sunday. *If you keep looking at me in church, I'll fucking kill you. I'm not a moffie. Okay?*

*Do you mind if I take your number rather? I'll SMS you.*

*Sure. It's 078 ... 97—*

*Sorry, not so fast.*

*Sorry. It's 0...7...8...9...7...1...2...5...3...9*

*Yeab. It's Sello.*

*Cool. My name is Breyten. Thanks. I'll SMS you.*

*Cool.*

*Cool. Thanks.*

A short while after moving to Ladybrand, Sello started to have sex with an acquaintance of his named David.

They wouldn't have sex in Ladybrand itself. David worked in Bloemfontein, although Sello had met him in Ladybrand on a dating website. Sello took a taxi to meet him in Bloemfontein, travelling for two hours. Like Breyten, David was white, but much, much older. So old he had streaks of silver in his hair. His handsome smile suggested a boyhood beauty that must have driven people insane. A *white* boyhood where the world was also a feast, the WHITES ONLY beaches, the WHITES ONLY restaurants – David had witnessed the South African Dream. In spite of this, there was one more dream that Apartheid's mailbox-lined streets could never grant him. As young as Sello was, it was a dream the *born-free* years couldn't grant him, too.

And they attempted to find it in each other's bodies.

*Cor Jesu Sacratissimum* – The steel lance pierced in the Heart of Jesus. Like Jesus at Calvary, Sello shed some blood when David entered him. Sello wondered if Jesus had screamed, too. Had he, like Sello, felt the pain and the pleasure of surrendering his flesh to the madness of mortal men? Men whose muscular chests jiggled like earthquakes when they fucked? Sello and David filled up the sepulchres inside of each other, moaning in their hollow halls. It hurt so much, it felt like there was a crown of thorns around David's cock. As the condom dried up, the pain intensified; latex and flesh—it was also a kind of heaven.

When it was over, they picked their clothes from up the floor as if picking shed-off skin. Sello watched David in the darkness of the room, his back to him. After throwing the condom away, David would always leave. Sello hesitated. He finally broke the silence.

*I think I'm falling in love with you.*

*Keep that to yourself. I just came here to fuck.*

There came a fear, and Sello knew it was the same one that cut through his chest when he first laid eyes on Breyten. Or when Breyten said he would kill him. Sello was scared because it was true. They both knew it was true. Sello was scared because of the sheer physicality of

him; he towered high, he cast a shadow with his brawn. A fear like encountering God. Boys like him were skilled in building the kind of pyre Sello would gladly throw himself into, the flames licking his elbows and entering his mouth. He looked at Breyten's hands, rust-streaked with helping his father on their farm.

*I find that hard to imagine ... your father taking off his robes to drive a tractor?*

*You'll find that he's a normal Afrikaans man behind the theatrics. I'm like him almost.*

*Really?*

They were at Cranberry Restaurant on a Monday morning. He had kept his promise to text Sello, writing Sello's name in capital letters in what Sello assumed was a conversation starter:

## SELLO

But when Sello texted back, no reply came, and for a week, the now context-less SELLO hung between their phones like a tablet of stone. Until Sunday evening. Sello had stayed behind in his first successful boycott of the church. Though he'd fought with 'MaSello, his reward had been an SMS from Breyten.

Sello didn't question the choice of meeting on a school day. No more than he questioned which school Breyten attended, or who his friends in Ladybrand were. He was aware that Breyten was creating a secret universe for both of them, tightly woven so they could occupy it while their friends were at school and the adults were at work. 'MaSello had dropped him off at school just like any other day, but that Monday, Sello waited for her car to pass around the bend before he started walking back. She had surely crossed the border to Lesotho at that point. Sello changed out of his school uniform in the bathrooms at Wimpy and walked to Cranberry. When he got there, there were patches of sweat on the undersides of his arms, but he had no time to freshen up because Breyten was already waiting.

The conversation moved slowly. He was so beautiful Sello's heart

ached. Clouds passed over them. Pockets of sunshine. Shadows from the sky played across their bodies. Sello learnt that he was a Cancer, born on 25 June, that he had an interest in birding.

Every word Sello uttered in return was a sacred offering: *apology, summer, Lesotho*. Breyten had this way of looking at him, especially when he discussed things Sello couldn't easily understand. Birds. Rugby teams. An intensity his eyes gained as he waited for Sello's mind to assemble the pieces of information he needed for the idea to make sense. Breyten ordered a beer. When it arrived, the glass was perspiring from the chill. Sello wanted to transform himself into a liquid so Breyten could drink him in, too.

A strange look clouded Breyten's eyes. Sello saw it from behind the rim of the beer glass.

By the time he put down the glass, the conversation had fizzled out. Only the strange look remained. Sello recognised it immediately; Breyten had touched the walls of The Glass Castle.

In The Glass Castle, a hundred boys fumbled over each other's naked bodies. Their mouths moved, but no one could hear what they were saying; the castle walls were too thick. Breyten was one of them, as was Sello in his own way. The boys pulled the hair from their skulls, singing of a longing for release that would never come. Sello never had to 'come out' to 'MaSello', but he still remembered how it felt to be trapped in The Glass Castle himself. In many ways he still was – why else would he agree to meet with a boy still trapped like Breyten if he wasn't?

In the restaurant, the summer sunshine filtered through the foliage, creating a calm that seemed to stick even to the fabric of their clothes. Despite this, Breyten excused himself, and from his body, Sello could sense the weight of the unspoken words that shrouded the both of them. The weight of summer and all the small and precious things they said and did to each other.

After exactly seven minutes (Sello counted), Breyten returned.

Sello opened his mouth to speak. He went back and forth deciding if the words would be appropriate. He convinced himself that it was

his job to save Breyten. He would break The Glass Castle on his behalf. But as soon as he said the words, he knew that they were too big.

*I think I'm falling in love with you.*

Breyten made a strange sound in his throat. Sello's heart beat faster, but there was none of the self-loathing that stuck to his body in David's bed. A breeze moved through the restaurant. It touched Sello's skin, creating gooseflesh.

Breyten made some movement. He glanced at Sello before lowering his head and placing it between his hands. Wasn't there a painting like that somewhere in history? He could easily have been a boy in a famous artwork; a watercolour boy in a garden who couldn't handle the weight of his thoughts, so he held them in his hands instead. Sello couldn't see his face. What was he thinking? The restaurant's pet peacock strolled beside them, dragging a shock of feathers behind it.

When movement finally came, Sello was startled, because Breyten was still statuesque. Sello struggled to connect the too-still boy in front of him to the sudden, goading movement under the table.

It was Breyten's foot touching his.

Warmth spread across Sello's legs, summoning an erection. He allowed Breyten's foot to roam across his; searching, nudging. When people made their shoes, all those sweatshops in the Asian countries, had they envisioned such a grand future for simple patterns sewn into leather?

Sello laughed.

Breyten didn't laugh back.

His foot wasn't roaming anymore. It lay beside Sello's foot. Breyten peeked at Sello through his hands.

*I can't tell you what you want to hear. But thank you for telling me that.*

*I know you can't tell me. But can I get something more than 'thank you?' Please.*

*That's all I can give you for now. I'm sorry.*

Their eyes followed the peacock. It seemed aware of the attention and lifted its long neck. Sello turned back to Breyten.

*It's not as hard as you think it's going to be. My life changed the day I decided not to give a fuck about what people thought.*

Breyten shook his head.

*Let's not speak about this anymore.*

Sello felt around for him under the table. The foot was gone. Breyten was sitting up straight again. Like he did in church. His eyes were impenetrable.

*How you getting home?*

Sello's foot tingled. This was how his body had tingled when months ago in Bloemfontein, he woke up in David's bed but David wasn't there. The tingling across his arms when he used to wake up and hear 'MaSello arguing with his father. One night, Sello's father started his Toyota and never came back.

*Um, I'm walking home.*

The tingling didn't stop. Breyten took out a leather wallet and paid for their food. He asked if Sello knew that peacocks could fly. Finally, when the preliminary leaving-of-restaurant rituals were done, waiting for the change, signing off the tip, Breyten looked into Sello's eyes.

*Can I ask you for a big favour?*

*Sure.*

*I'm going to ask you to leave fifteen minutes after me. Fifteen minutes, okay? I don't want people to see that we're together.*

*Sure. Wh—*

Breyten got up and placed his chair neatly against the table. Without saying goodbye, he walked away. Sello held on to the tightness in his chest. Words were meaningless, as was the regret of either saying them or leaving them untouched. Watching Breyten disappear behind Cranberry's foliage, one of the last thoughts Sello had, lingering like the last guest at a party, was that he had a nice ass. By then, Sello's foot had stopped tingling.

Sello met David at the hotel. David had already booked out the room, telling Sello not to bother checking in at Reception.

*Just walk through to the room.*

Why was Sello back here, even after he promised himself never to return?

David wasn't a bad person. When they had sex, he would kiss Sello's eyelashes, as if to counteract the pain his flesh caused inside Sello. There was something beautiful about the gesture – Sello felt delicate under his weight. When they undressed, David would sometimes stand in the middle of the room, eyes roaming over Sello's naked body.

*I forgot how beautiful you actually are.*

David once told Sello that he had been married to a woman.

*What made you divorce her?*

*I was tired of living 'the lie'. Things were different when I was your age. If I'd been honest with myself, I would have avoided so many fuck-ups.*

Sello listened to the sound of David in the bathroom. Pee hitting the toilet bowl, David opening the tap to wash his face (he always sweated after sex). There was always something to hope for – to meet a boy, to fall into his arms and know that he would break his fall. Sometimes Sello would entertain the possibility that Breyten was that boy. Maybe with enough trying, Sello could still set him free. Other times Sello forgot why he even liked Breyten at all. When David was inside him, the sensation felt realer than anything he had ever experienced – the glances exchanged in church, his fleeting but palpable moments of joy in Cranberry – David tied himself like a knot inside Sello's body and Sello convinced himself that this was all there ever was. It was all there ever would be. Cheap hotels in Bloemfontein. Dilapidated apartments; a shirtless man smoking on the balcony beside a potted plant. Things seemed so easy for Sello's friends at school. He would watch them at discos while they danced under colourful lights. Boys with girls. Girls with boys. As the night approached its end, they would lean against other with all the freedom of unsupervised teenagers.

This bed, here with David, this was Sello's world.

He dreaded the aftermath of David getting 'done'. David would throw his legs off the bed and immediately start picking up his clothes. He would throw the condom away. Checking the time, his phone

would light up in the darkness. Sello expected much of the same; he knew the texture of David's back better than he knew his face. David didn't reach out for his phone this time. He turned around on the bed and faced Sello. There was an expression Sello hadn't seen in his eyes before, a glimmer of warmth, or was this something Sello was reading into a face that he really didn't know?

*You're quiet. Are you alright?*

Sello smiled.

He answered that he was.