

The Fairway

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His pass said he was twenty but he looked older; unnaturally so in the hot Transvaal where such whiteness was an affront even to those who boasted loudest of its possession. He carried a tragic air of past illness, and the heavy glasses magnified his nervous blinks.

His job was simple: working in the parks and municipal gardens which were the pretty side of Johannesburg. He planted flowers and they grew well in the bright sun. He liked the trees: avenues of lowveld chestnut, or broad-leafed coral trees in the parks providing habitation and permanence in his changing world. He was tidy in his work and proud of it. It took no great effort and no great thought, and with two or three men assigned to him for the heavier tasks he coped well and had been commended by his superiors. He had not been ill for nearly a year.

He left the bus, then slowed as he approached the grounds where he worked. A wild avocado tree had sprouted through the mesh of the fence near the bus stop, and a young boy, squatting on his haunches, was selling its fruit to passers-by for a few cents a piece. The gates had been opened for an hour or more; the guards were armed but grinned at him and waved him through without challenge. He walked to the assembled Blacks and two men left to follow him: Mhlawli, a lolling great man, out of proportion in his tight jeans and chequered shirt, and Motaung. Thin, almost gaunt, with fleshy scars around his neck and a restless angry manner, he came forward, fidgety and dragging his feet, a half-smoked cigarette gripped by thin pinched lips.

They skirted the lorries which were already dropping their sand and gravel in heaps ready for the builders, and moved to a compound set apart for the Parks and Amenities group. His boss, a bright cheerful man, waved a greeting, "Hi Dave, you're to take number three. Finish the green you got to 'n then move onto the next. It's been pegged out."

David nodded warily. They had always got on well enough, but now his throat was dry and he was frightened to speak in case his voice cracked. He took the old tractor assigned to him. His helpers pulled the fine harrow forward and hitched it on. They balanced together, one astride each wheel as he revved the engine and pulled away towards a distant corner of the huge arena of land. He glanced back, and remembered riding in just such a way on his father's farm as a boy; he must have been about six then, and he remembered the driver - a Black called Jim who had

then seemed about ninety to him, though he was probably not much older than David was now. Jim used to tell tales of the northern Richtersveld beyond the Gariep river, where a solitary quiver tree or an overhanging cave were the only signposts in the harsh country that had remained unchanged since the dawn of man. His father had died soon after, and his mother had had to sell up the farm and move into the town.

The new golf course was a prestigious and extensive complex. A top-class professional had been flown from England to model it on the Royal St. Georges at Sandwich, with a full course length of 6748 yards. Each square meter of a total 92 acres of ground was being prepared with meticulous precision; much of the scrub and trees had been burned off and cleared; the greens had been leveled, and the larger boulders removed. Pipes had been buried to provide computer controlled underground irrigation before the spring rains came. Bunkers had been measured to the exact depth, and excavations prepared and lined with cement for the watercourses. Johannesburg financial assessors had predicted that 2500 people would pay R6000 each for the privilege of membership, and they further anticipated that 350 people would drive off each day across the rolling turf of the outward nine, or stagger through the sand-traps before finishing at the 19th for a glass of iced lager under fronded palm trees. It was even whispered that some players of international standing might visit and stage an unofficial tournament. The course was close to the commercial heart of Johannesburg under the flightpath of the nearby International Airport, and was to be a fitting tribute to the growth and vitality of the city, currently about to celebrate one hundred turbulent and varied years of history.

At noon, David towed the seed spreader back to the compound. His assistants wandered away to the sheds for some snack of their own and a game of dice. For some reason, he remembered Jim again as he watched the retreating figures. Jim and his family had moved to a black settlement near the Alexandra township; he had slipped down to visit Jim sometimes when he was older, but one day he was not there. The whole township of women and cooking pots, and children and dogs and hens, and lean-to shacks with corrugated iron roofs had simply disappeared, and bulldozers were leveling the site. His mother told him later they had been 'moved on'. They were 'surplus people', and an eyesore in the suburb. The whole community had been packed in trucks and dumped on a remote wilderness to fend as best they could, beyond mind and sight.

Suddenly, Henry saw him and called out, inviting David to lunch with himself and his wife at the

restaurant in town they sometimes used. Inter-tribal marriages were unusual where even the white races were segregated into immutable clans, and David admired Henry for having taken an English wife, and would normally have enjoyed lunching with them; but he again felt a sickening tug at his stomach and said, "I've dropped my watch. I think it came off on that last section. The strap was loose. I'll just go back and find it."

"I'll come with you," Henry replied.

David had not expected this and began mumbling excuses. He reddened and could feel Henry's look of suspicion when a car drew up at the gate and hooted insistently. Henry half turned and said, "I'd better go. Hope you find it," and he walked briskly through the gate to his waiting wife.

David unhitched the tractor. It was heavier than he expected and he did it clumsily, but he didn't want to attract attention from any of the helpers. Most of them had now gone inside and the whites had drifted away, leaving just the guards eying the compound. They rarely spoke to him and did not worry him unduly. He took the tractor and it pulled out at a steady pace on the hand-throttle across the yard to the embryo fairways where he had been working earlier. He returned after about half an hour and made a great show of strapping his watch on before hurrying through the gate to take a quick meal from a near-by snackbar. Henry returned shortly after and assigned him to the next area for grassing. Nothing was said about the watch, and a few weeks later he was moved to another part of the city to begin work on the Mklango Road - which was having an island of trees laid along its length - and he did not return to the golf course.

He did not enjoy sweating and waiting. From his window he could see the tower of the telecommunications centre in Hillbrow, with the tall building of the headquarters of the South African Broadcasting Corporation beyond. It used to be like this when he came in from the school, with his mother still out, wondering if she would come back as it grew later and darker. He had been slow to learn, for he had not enjoyed school where he was mocked for liking poetry, and disliking games. He remembered how he used to wish he could write what he felt as those great writers had:

“A poor old slave, infirm and lame;
Great scars deformed his face;
On his forehead he bore the brand of shame,
And the rags, that hid his mangled frame,
Were the livery of disgrace.”

Longfellow must have seen great misery, he pondered; but he was not afraid to say what he thought: to make a protest against the oppressions of his day. Then, the protest call had been, “Slavery - an insult to humanity.” Now it was apartheid. There did not seem to be much difference. Four and a half million Whites in South Africa controlled the lives of nearly twenty million Blacks and Coloureds, who were intended to serve the Whites but never join them as equal citizens.

He began to lose weight with his asthma, and his doctor said the fumes from the road were affecting his chest and he should rest. But waiting alone in the silence of his flat was unbearable, so he went back to work taking tablets and feeling tired and sick inside. It was good weather, and the new fairways would be well watered. It was a prestige project.

When the knock came, it was still early. They caught him before he left for work and took him to a local centre for routine questioning. There had been some complaints at the golf club. Nothing serious, but they had to make routine enquiries. They called him ‘Sir’ then and apologised for the inconvenience, and they said that it had all been explained at work and he needn’t worry. Just a few questions to answer, and they were sure he would leave again soon.

He felt himself reddening and sweat was on his brow, though the room was cool with powerful air-conditioning sighing in the box on the wall. A few flies buzzed lazily about him. One landed on the man’s balding head and his eyes narrowed and he sucked in his breath as he swept up and across with his hand to dislodge and catch the fly. He squashed it slowly and dropped it in the ashtray. It continued to kick intermittently for some time. His interlocuter paused and looked hard at David.

“I think you know something of the matter Mr Menze,” he said. He spoke quietly, but David caught the menace in his voice.

He did not take long to confess; he was not a brave man; his body was not strong; and they had found traces of the powder in his trouser pockets. David realised that they had been through his

flat and his clothing, and wondered what else they had found.

“You could have had a great life here. Do you really suppose anyone even saw what you did?” the man growled angrily. “It was barely legible. No more than a smudge on the grass. You can write I suppose?” he added sarcastically; “What did it say?”

David said nothing.

“What did it say, boy?” The man shouted, full of fury.

“Black power,” he half whispered, half sobbed with fear.

They drove him north, past the Hartebeesthoek satellite ground station, to a bigger centre outside Pretoria and kept him in a basement cell without windows, and he did not know the hour, or if it was day or night. They wanted to know who else was involved and what his political motivation was and who had paid him and who controlled him. His answer was always the same, “No-one! No-one! No-one!”

Now his chief interrogator was an older man with yellowing flesh and a thick flabby face with old pock marks in the tanned skin. Between his lips sat a fat cigar which he half chewed and half sucked, but rarely touched. His accent was broad Afrikaans and he carried a heavy stick.

David could hardly hear the questions, but he knew they were the same and his answers were the same, when he could speak. “No-one.” He whispered it, whimpering through cracked and bloody teeth. “No-one.”

He fainted again and the man swore softly. “Damn him. He’ll tell us nothing. Put him with the Blacks; tell them he’s in for raping a black girl.”

He did not remember much of the drive to the prison block, nor the rough tumble down the stairs. He was only half-aware of the angry muttering and growled accusations as a large group of men gathered round, waiting for him to recover enough for their taunts to be audible. He was feverish and shivered violently, and he moved to cover his head from the threatening kicks of the yelling mob, when one their number turned suddenly and shouted for silence.

“Wait. He’s too beat-up. This can’t be right. They never treat a White like this for rape. Not for raping a black girl. He’s too beat up, I say. Let’s see what he’s done.”

The man’s voice commanded authority and David sensed a warm relief from his support; a

second man stepped forward and crouched within inches of him then lifted and carried him to one of the beds, and brought water and small pieces of such food as they had, and nursed him. It was Motaung.

Motaung remembered him, and remembered the day the airport was closed and all flights diverted. He had been pulled in then and questioned too - before being re-arrested only weeks later on an unrelated matter. Motaung gathered little groups round him and told them of the work David had done on the newly seeded green of the prestige golf course; on the growing turf with the weedkiller in his pocket; of the letters etched for all to see as the planes flew overhead, defying the censor's ban; of black letters large and bold proclaiming in the fresh green grass, 'BLACK POWER'. And, in that prison, they were as brothers.