

Title:

Author:

Occupy Climate Change (OCC!)

*Creative story
entry*



FORMAS



In Dark Light

By Matthew Ross

The tunnel wasn't entirely silent. There were constant hums and murmuring voices coming from different directions but it wasn't clear exactly where. They created an echo chamber of discomfort that woke Axel from his semi-slumber. He hadn't been sleeping properly for fear of what lurked in the darkness. He lifted his head slowly from his forearms and rested it on the tunnel wall behind him. He was in the same position he'd fallen asleep in, hunched over himself as if he'd been crying into his lap. Despite what he used to put his body through, he hadn't grown accustomed to the thickness of the dust which coated the back of his throat and nostrils.

He remembered now that before he had fallen asleep he had faced the right side of his body in the direction he had been moving. There was no other way to tell. So now he got up and carried on walking, hoping not to step on anything that moved, or that had the potential to hurt him. The hums continued incomprehensibly despite Axel's familiarity with South African languages. His inability to speak other African languages was his weakness, which made the unidentifiable hums fearsome.

Axel had lost track of how long he'd been making his way to the Sandton Station from Park Station. The Gautrain Underground had become his dark escape—his only option. While traversing the deep abyss, he fantasised about what it used to be like when the train was operational, carting people around the metropolis for ordinary day-to-day activities. A time when you had to *pay* for such a luxury. A time when routines were sobering, but escaping was easier.

His legs ached from bracing with each step as he was trying not to get his clothes too dirty. He needed to look decent which was made difficult by the filth on the ground and dust in the air. Axel often wondered what the dust would look like if there was light in the tunnel. Would it create a mirage that coloured the distant views like it used to do with Joburg sunsets? Did the golden horizon out there still match the gold-rich land? He used this as motivation to reach his destination, otherwise he'd never know.

He eventually stepped on something that yanked away from under the pain of his weight.

“Fok!” exclaimed a gravelly voice that echoed down the tunnel. It was followed by a deathly silence.

Axel gasped inwards, relieved his dusty vocal cords didn't produce anything. It seemed as if the person to whom the voice belonged was shuffling in his seated or lying position. He heard what sounded like squeaking rats quickly scurrying away from this person as a result of the fright.

"Wie's daar?" whispered the voice.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. But... Why are you lying on the ground?" Axel whispered back.

"Mmmm." The voice sounded cocky, slowing down and lifting its pitch carefully. "You only speak English, I hear. Fuckin' watch your step, man. You'll get killed very quickly."

"I can't see anything."

"You'll get used to it, man."

"I hope so."

"Are you another one of those mense looking for a way out?"

"When you say it like that, it sounds stupid."

The other voice laughed. "Hey maar you've got a long way to go."

"Do you know the way? It is this way, right?" He pointed, forgetting that the man couldn't see him.

"Shhhhh. Careful. They'll stop you. You must mos follow the rats. They will always find a way out."

"Is that what you've been doing? Following the rats to get out?"

"Are you kidding? I'm not trying to get out. No way man."

"So, you stay down here on purpose?"

"Nobody stays here on purpose. Maar, where else can we go? I'm Freddie, by the way."

"Axel," he replied, hunching down so his whisper didn't have to travel far.

"Pleased to meet you, Axel."

He felt comfort for the first time since starting his journey. He could tell Freddie didn't have many teeth.

"Sê vir my, Axel. Why are you by yourself?"

"I have to get out of here."

Freddie coughed a smokey chuckle. "Ja but you can never come back then."

Axel was unfocused, trying to follow the sounds of the squeaking rats.

"What are you hoping to find?"

“I don’t know... A new life. But for now, water would be good.”

Freddie wheezed with laughter which progressed to a fit of coughs. He heaved up mucus and spat it out.

“Nee, my babies. Come back! These are my babies. Hold out your hand and I’ll show you.”

Axel didn’t trust Freddie enough but needed to find out more from him.

“Here,” said Freddie, “Waar’s jou hand?”

Freddie grabbed Axel’s hand and turned it, palm facing up. Straight away, Axel felt a small, furry animal with claws, tickling his palm. It immediately scuttled up his arm. Axel shook vigorously, sending the creature flying to the right. And it screeched upon landing.

“Hey, why the fuck did you gooi my baby like that? Poes!”

“I’m sorry. I got a fright.”

“You still get frights, hey?” Freddie laughed again, expelling more bile. “Do you believe in ghosts, Axel? You would if you lived around here.”

“Was that a rat?”

“These are my children.” He started talking to the so-called children.

Axel realised with alarm that there were many rats in the tunnel, all gathered around Freddie. “Can you show me which way to go?”

“To get where?”

“Up there.”

“Up where?”

“Where the ones who made it are.”

“Ag fuck them, man. What do you want from them that we don’t have?”

Axel’s fatigue tempted him, for a brief moment, to consider giving up and joining Freddie’s sloth-like life. “Just... can you tell me where to go or not?”

“The only way out is up, to the heavens where the gods dine with cutlery made from our gold.” Freddie chortled at his own comment.

“Am I close to Sandton Station yet? I can’t go up until I’m there.”

“Shhhh!! Don’t say that you mad fok.” Freddie laughed again. “So you’re looking for the light, hey?”

“Is that where it is? Where there’s light?”

“Follow the rats until you get to the light and then ask for a guy named Pieter. He’ll help you. But you better have some skyfs for him.”

Axel quickly patted his front and back trouser pockets but found nothing tradeable.

“Freddie, do you have any—”

Freddie wheezed with laughter. “Don’t be greedy now, my cousin. I have nothing for you. Nothing but the happiness in my heart, and my beautiful children here. Now you better fuck off before that changes.”

Axel wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but it sounded like he was still smiling. “Thanks, Freddie. Thanks for your help.”

“Follow the rats!” Freddie said as Axel began down the tunnel towards the light he couldn’t see. “Oh, I almost forgot,” he continued, “you will find him after the third station. You know which suburbs they are—the main ones, in order. And don’t worry, only when you’re in the dark, can you truly see the light.”

As he walked through the darkness, Axel repeated “the third station” in his head over and over again. He remembered the stations stopping at Killarney, Rosebank and Sandton, but that was a long time ago, and they had all been above ground. Was it the same? Had he perhaps not known of another station? He moved slowly, keeping his ears open for the rats.

He didn’t like to be alone this long because sadness swelled inside him, slowing him down, reminding him of how sobering reality was. But he felt he didn’t deserve to go back, not after what had happened. He was too far down this road anyway. He did however miss the days spent outside, wishing he hadn’t taken them for granted. The warning signs had been clear in the way the rich had been building their shiny, incubated ‘Towers of Babel’ to escape the trash on the ground and the dust in the air, the same rich who had created all the rubbish and had mined the land to death. Axel used to be too proud to be part of the change he was seeing around him, but now he saw it as his only escape.

The hums became identifiable, and Axel could hear a murmuring community up ahead, speaking a language he did not recognise. French perhaps? He approached cautiously, thinking this had to be the Killarney station. He could see what appeared to be firelight on the side of the tunnel ahead of him. The sound seemed to be coming from the same place.

As he approached the platform, Axel was astounded by the number of people moving like a swarm of bees, holding flame torches above their heads, conducting transactions with vigorous

arm gestures. There must have been about 200 of them, engaging in an entire trade economy of sorts which took place in a self-sufficient hub of a common tongue. Axel recognised their colourful, patterned clothing comprising three pieces seemingly made from the same material: one for the blouse, one to wrap around the waist, and the last to wear as a headpiece. He knew which country they were from, and he knew what business they were into. Previously, they had hijacked many of the buildings in Doornfontein, the place Axel wished he could forget.

His last encounter with them sent him down a gluttonous pathway of *Apples*—that’s what they called the common street drug they sold. Axel was reminded of the months that became a haze of unreliable memories. He lost his naivety to them having been introduced by his brother who was equally beguiled by their beautiful clothing and inviting characters, by their lifestyle of sex, drugs, and online crimes. Axel hadn’t seen his brother since then, and he still carries the blame. He was angered by their ability to carry on as if nothing had happened, as if the past didn’t exist. And they clearly felt they “owned” this area that didn’t belong to them. What annoyed Axel most was the jealousy he felt at their sense of community, something he hadn’t felt in a long time. But he had fallen for this before and wasn’t going to do it again.

Despite his aching stomach and dry mouth, he continued past them towards the darkness, away from the light of the first tunnel. After a while, he began counting the steps, hoping it would keep him moving. Every ten steps, he told himself to do “just ten more”. That went on until he reached 3480 steps. Lights appeared in the distance and the sounds homogenised again. Axel hoped it was a sign of underground Rosebank. These voices seemed more aggressive, like they were fighting with each other.

This time, his presence did not go unnoticed. As he approached, he could hear the language was different from what he had heard before, though he still could not understand it—African, but definitely not South African.

“Welcome!!” sang a woman’s voice. It was followed by an eruption of celebratory jeers from others around her. This was a striking contrast to the whispers by which he’d been previously addressed. “You are welcome. Come here, with us,” she continued.

Axel’s throat had dried out from breathing in the dust for too long. They looked like the ones from Ponte Tower. But he couldn’t be sure.

“You are welcome!” they all chanted. There must’ve been a couple hundred on this platform too.

“Do... Do you have water?”

There was a sudden silence followed by a collective laugh. Axel was absorbed into the masses which spilled into the main tunnel from the platform. They were all very affectionate, embracing him one after the other such that the direction in which Axel was moving was dictated entirely by their welcomes. None of them had water.

Axel was nearly carried to the staircase, the exit of which seemed to be barricaded from the outside. On the far side of the platform, several people lounged around on dishevelled cushions all pushed together to create one endless bed. Draped fabric cordoned off sections of the station, haphazardly creating separate rooms. It was cozy. Comfortable. The warm firelight and soft make-shift furnishings made this the most inviting place Axel had seen in a long time. It was almost romantic.

The ushering conveyed Axel halfway up the stairs. From there upwards, on each level, sat a bunch of strong, proud-looking men. At the top of the pyramid sat the grandest of them all, his massive body clad only from the waist down in colourful, striped trousers. Axel was positioned in front of him, and left alone.

The godly human looked down at him. There was a long silence and then Axel swallowed painfully and spoke.

“I don’t mean to cause any trouble. I’ve been travelling a long way and... I could use some help. Do... Do you have just a bit of water?”

Axel could feel the eyes of everyone else behind him looking at the back of his head, and at the man at the top of the stairs. Axel was the only one with dreads, tied up in a bun on top of his head. Everyone else had shaved heads. Everyone. And they were still silent. The only thing he could hear was his own pulse thumping in his ears. Eventually, the man cracked a smile, followed by a lazy chuckle, which sent ripples of relief through the crowd. The man gestured to someone a layer down from him, pointed at Axel and then at the fabric rooms.

One of the men on the stairs quickly stood up and made his way towards Axel, wrapping his arm around him so tightly that his armpit swallowed Axel’s neck. He led the way over to the draped rooms, yelling an instruction to a collection of thin men who stood around the sides of the pyramid. They all moved in different directions, on a mission to fulfill their orders. Axel was pushed onto a small heap of stained cushions which exhaled dust when his tired body fell onto them. Within moments, curtains of holey fabric were drawn around him.

He barely had time to sit up properly when a figure, wearing a puffy blouse tucked into a floor-length, vibrantly coloured and patterned skirt, came into the room holding a cup of water. The figure sat delicately beside Axel without spilling a single drop. She smiled at him and opened the slit in her dress to expose her legs rather lustfully. Axel was unsure of what to do, his eyes continually glancing to the cup. She leaned forward to offer him the water, smiling. Axel looked at her, in disbelief that anyone would be so willing to part with water these days. He looked at it swirling around in the tin cup. Then he grabbed the cup of water and drank it in three satisfying gulps, pushing her slightly aside in doing so.

She seemed startled by his greed, but remained by his side, elegantly sitting with her legs folded neatly to the side, like a princess. Axel had forgotten how soothing water could be, cooling his body from the inside, filling his blood with the elixir of life. He couldn't help but feel distracted by her eager smile. And then it dawned on him: this was too easy. "What's in the water?"

"What do you mean?"

"The water. What did you put in it?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"No one gives away water this easily. I should have guessed. How could I be so stupid!"

"What are you on about?"

"Don't treat me like a child. I know your kind. And I've been down this road before: you give me something I desperately need, making it seem out of kindness, only to hook me onto whatever you've laced this water with, and then I spend the rest of my days wanting more and paying you back."

The smile left her face. "This isn't your first time. It's funny, you seem so—"

"It doesn't matter what I seem. I'm not going down this road. I didn't run away from the last debt just to land myself in more." Axel got up to leave.

"Then how are you going to pay for this?"

"Pay for what?"

"If you're so experienced then you should know what was in that water."

Axel clenched his fists, not sure if he was angrier with her or himself, already feeling his body losing its strength. He crouched down to her level and looked her dead in the eye, grabbing each of her shoulders, remembering what Freddie said about fear."

“I’m not afraid of you people.”

“Ah. There’s the inexperience I suspected earlier.”

Before he could get a firmer grip on her, he felt himself being yanked into the air and thrown onto the floor, hitting his head on the ground between two cushions. A while later, he opened his eyes slowly, aware of a dull headache. He was unsure of where he was as it was darker and he was no longer surrounded by the hanging fabrics. His body felt numb and his face tingling. Moving wasn’t an option. He was lying on a cold floor with his neck bent, head pressed against the wall behind him. There were a few tall figures standing around him, waiting for him to wake up—three of them, not allowing room for escape. Axel mumbled, knowing his numbness wasn’t a result of the headache.

“Ahh the thirsty man can’t move now, can he?” said a man with a thick accent, laughing at him.

Axel was able to move his feet and his fingers, but not much else, other than some sloppy rocking from side to side. He dropped his head to the left, seeing the tunnel he needed to traverse in order to get to the next intersection, to get to Sandton. His will was stronger than ever before, but his body was immobile. He tried to speak, but all he could do was drool.

“Next time, you won’t drink our valuables so quickly, will you?” asked a voice smoothly.

Axel was struggling to coordinate himself but he managed to sluggishly hoist his right leg over his left to sway his body onto its side. His mouth tasted the sooty ground while his right arm flopped forward, just as he hoped it would. He pushed against the floor, lifting his heavy body as if carrying the weight of the abandoned Gautrain itself. The men standing near him were laughing and commenting, enjoying his feeble efforts to get away.

One of them leaned down and grabbed the back of his neck. “Your debt will never go away. We own this tunnel. And there’s nowhere to hide, nowhere to go.” He slammed Axel’s face onto the ground again, cracking his nose. They left him there with nothing but wrath coursing through his muddled veins.

His eyes were heavy and wanted to close but he knew he needed to fight the drug. After what seemed like hours, he saw another blurred figure walking towards him from far away. The figure moved closer, stopping every once in a while until it was right next to him, hunched beside him as if trying not to be seen. This person held a flame to Axel’s face.

“Axel?” he whispered.

Axel could only move his eyeballs to look at the rather small man as if that were an adequate response.

“Let me help you up. We have to get moving. Quickly.” The stranger helped Axel to his feet, pulling his arm over his short frame to support his weight. “We have to walk now,” he whispered.

Axel could feel the urgency as the stranger ushered him along the tunnel with considerable force for his stature. Axel managed to slap one foot forward at a time while the tunnel spun around him. He mumbled incoherently.

“Shhh. Don’t speak.”

“Whreltheyf?”

“Shhh,” the small person lowered his voice even more. “I know what you’re asking but we don’t say where they’re from anymore. They have ears everywhere.”

“Hmryoo?”

“Oh, I’m Pieter. I’ve been expecting you but I wasn’t sure you’d make it through the second station. Few people have since it was hijacked. Lucky they didn’t *knife* you hey.”

Pieter didn’t say much after that, needing to catch his breath and slow down his pace. Axel had so many questions but couldn’t form the words properly in his mouth. They seemed to walk for ages although there was still no change in the surroundings. But Axel kept going, knowing that he was nearing Sandton with each step. Eventually, Pieter sat him down on the ground, between the tracks and the wall of the tunnel, seemingly unable to carry the weight anymore.

Axel was finally able to gain some strength in his tongue to articulate his words better, although they were still quite slurred. “Why are you helping me? What do you want?”

“Nothing. Your brother got me out of my mess with them and guessed you’d be coming this way too, either to find him or to run away.”

“My brother? Where is he?” Axel was dizzy with shock.

Pieter held each of Axel’s shoulders and whispered carefully into his ear. “We are far away from the second station now so you should be safe. And it’s dark enough that no one can see you. I’m leaving some pills by your left hand side. Take them when you wake up but try not to sleep for too long. As soon as your body hits the floor it means you’ve dropped out of consciousness for long enough. The pearly gates are above us; just follow the light.

“Why are you leaving? Where’s my brother.” Axel could barely fight the fatigue anymore.

“I have to go now. Just remember, our mines may be empty, but our dust is made of gold.”

Before Axel could respond, he felt himself drifting off again, despite his urge to find out more. The exhaustion was like nothing he’d experienced before and he had no choice but to succumb to it. When he woke later, he wasn’t sure if it was the following day or twenty minutes later. He felt the familiarity of a hangover in his head so he assumed considerable time had passed. He padded his hand along the ground on his left hand side and was relieved to find the pills still there. He held them in his hand, still with his eyes closed, wishing the pills could take him away.

He opened his eyes and was surprised to see light, right in the palm of his hand. He wasn’t sure if it was the wearing off of the previous high but the pills were shining in the dark—a soft, golden light. He was familiar with the different types of pills, but he had never seen ones like this before. He remembered what Pieter said about their dust being made of gold and wondered if that had anything to do with what lay in his hands.

Axel looked to the right, down the long dark tunnel that lay before him, wondering if he’d ever get there. He thought about how far he’d come, realising that Freddie was right—he’d never be able to go back. He existed somewhere between two places no one dared to mention. And no one was coming to find him. He knew he didn’t want to go back, but didn’t know what lay ahead. Axel began breaking open one capsule at a time, so the contents fell into his other hand. He took a deep breath in, not knowing where this stuff would take him. But he knew his options were limited. If he couldn’t reach the next light, he would have to bring the light to himself.