

Title:

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Occupy Climate Change (OCC!)

*Creative story
entry*



FORMAS



The Maltese Embassy

By Adam Potterton

The steel door clangs shut behind her casting the small concrete entranceway into darkness. Her breath clouds in the icy air. A shiver runs up her spine and her body gives an involuntary twitch. She pushes open the wooden door. Light spills into the entranceway casting it in soft orange. She feels the warmth from the room wash over her and it brings a faint smell of disinfectant mixed with cooking oil. At the bottom of the three steps is a coat stand and she takes her purple coat off. She examines the room. It's small, some three meters wide and seven meters long. The floor is covered in a brown carpet patterned with orange shapes. There are the usual geometric ones and some other more interesting shapes the colour of whatever liquid was spilt. The bar is your standard plank of wood with stools lined up. An old man stands behind it. His chin rests on his chest. A game of soccer is playing on an old holoscreen. She feels a pang when she sees the red ground they're playing on. The carpet muffles the stomps of her boots as she walks to the bar. She sits on one of the stools waiting for the man to stir. Behind him, there is another door that she presumes to lead upstairs. Next to it stands a large metal filing cabinet and another small counter. She is uncomfortably upright in the stool and his head has flopped further down his chest. They must have been like this for five minutes before she eventually removes a glove and raps her knuckles on the bar. She has a thin red band on her left thumb. The man slowly stirs, blinking up at her and giving her a smile.

“Sorry about that. I dozed off. We don't get too many customers these days. What can I get you?”

She looks at the faded menu behind him, “No worries. Can I get an old fashioned? Thanks.”

The man nods before bending to get a glass from beneath the counter and a clear bottle. He fills the glass up halfway before sliding it to her.

“What's this?”

“An old fashioned.”

She takes a small sip and gives a small cough, “It's just vodka!”

“Well, yes.”

“But you said it was an old fashioned.”

“It is.”

“What do you mean it is?” She glares at him.

“Well that’s all we have. Whatever you order it will just be vodka. But still, it’s nice to give the customer options.” He points at a silver urn behind him, “I can add some hot water if you would like.”

“For the next one,” she sighs and downs the drink.

He takes the glass. The scratch of the lid unscrewing blends with the low hum of a reclimatiser. The sides of the glass fog up as he pours in some hot water.

“Cheers,” she sits with her hands cupped around the glass. “So why only vodka?”

The man waves a hand in the direction of the roof, “I’ve got a little potato farm going above us. The highest floors are too cold to do anything in but one can use a small reclimatiser in some of the lower ones, if you have the energy.”

“You couldn’t get some crop diversification?”

“No,” he spits some phlegm into the bucket next to him. “I only know potatoes. The vodka is easy enough to make too.”

She turns her attention away from him, focusing instead on the soccer and letting her mind wander. The old man is scowling at a knot of wood in the bar. He clicks his tongue before turning back to the urn. He fills a mug with boiling water for himself and then settles back to watch the holoscreen. The match provides poor viewing, one team content to pass and the other quite happy to watch them.

“Shit game.” he refills her glass.

“Yes, I’ve never cared much for soccer.”

“No... I mean.”

“I know,” she briefly smiles. “How about you? Do you care much for soccer?”

“What a question!” His posture straightens as he launches into a “It was twenty one fifty... or somewhere there about, the maths gets tricky sometimes. Before all this ice shit, I don’t know if you’re old enough to know what things were like before this. Hotter I’ll tell you that much. We, Bafana Bafana I mean, were playing this consortium from the EU. It was in Ellis Park, a full house too. They had just finished a roof upgrade, and I must have been about seven or eight. Anyway, I was there with my uncle, ended up on his shoulders a lot in that game, and my what a game. I don’t know if my ears ever recovered. The vuvuzelas, well them combined with that roof – have you heard a vuvuzela? Well, they’re loud and after we scored the first goal they went off and the whole roof was buzzing along too. My voice was gone from all the singing and shouting just from that goal. The final score was two all but after that, I became soccer mad. It was a short walk home, but my uncle was worried I’d collapse from a heatstroke. Hold on,” he ducks out of the room.

When he returns he is holding a large frame. He places it on the bar. "I got this one after another game. It's Modise Moeng's shirt. Do you know Modise? You don't know what beauty is till you've seen him on the ball. Let me show you. Rose can you bring up highlights of Modise's game against the USA, the 5-2 one. Just replace this other game that's on." The holoscreen briefly goes black as it searches for the video.

She has forgotten about her drink in the bartender's barrage. Seeing it again she takes another sip, "Great old fashioned."

"Thanks, I haven't even done a bartending course would you believe it? But look here," he points at the screen. "That's Modise right there, see his movement. It's so subtle, the way he uses it to draw players away from where he wants to go."

They watch Modise weave and bounce the ball between players. "Oh this is good. I still wish he had scored this."

The ball rolls to Modise on the left-wing, he drops his right shoulder sending the defender to the left before flicking the ball up to the right. He catches it on the volley and the ball arcs upward before dipping viciously down. The keeper's fingertips just send it onto the crossbar. The crowd groans.

"I celebrated that one a bit early when I was there. He died a few years later. Got caught out in a lightning storm. Switch back Rose." The game from earlier comes on again.

"These matches on Mars aren't quite the same. The lower leagues can't afford to maintain grass pitches that's why it's red, some pitch they've made from dust on Mars. But the real difference is the gravity, you see how the ball bounces just a little off? I think the players move a bit differently too. When you remember all the history around clubs here it also can't be the same. I'm sure they'll try recreate it but it will take a couple generations to get it right. I'll be gone then, good riddance."

"Who's playing now?"

"M.K. Martians and Dons F.C." he picks up a rag and wipes the bar. He moves along the grains of the wood. The rag swirls around the knots. He works according to some standard unknown to her. The minute extra bit of sparkle from this polish is visible only to him. "I'm Al, by the way, seeing as I've bored you with all that soccer stuff."

"Q," she nods at him.

"Another drink?"

"Please."

The clear liquid spills sluggishly out the top of the bottle. Steam rises from the glass as Al places it back in front of her. "So Q, what do you do?"

“I make deliveries.”

“You’re a smuggler?”

She glares at him, “I never said that.”

“There aren’t many people who come to Earth these days, let alone Joburg, to make deliveries ‘cept smugglers.”

“You asked me what I do, not why I was here.”

“That I did.”

A short silence falls between them.

“So why are you here?”

“Personal reasons.”

“In Joburg?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what are they then?”

“Were they. I came to look for someone but I didn’t have much success. I’m now waiting for the Mars-shuttle to orbit above.”

“You should count yourself lucky you even found a bar down here let alone a specific person. There aren’t too many people who have stuck around. The bar is empty most nights.”

As if to prove him wrong the clang of the first door can be heard. The wooden door swings open and a large man stoops into the room. He is wearing a black trench coat and one of those fluffy Russian hats with ear coverings. His eyes flicker behind his mask. The room looks especially narrow in his presence.

“Hello Themba.”

“Sawubona Al.” He walks over and clasps Al’s hand. “How are you?”

“I’m good, I’m good. How are you Themba?”

“Same old, hey.”

“I have a new customer,” Al waves at Q.

Themba nods at her.

“I’ve got your stuff over here,” Al reaches beneath the bar. He brings out a fresh bottle of vodka and a basket. It is mainly filled with potatoes but Q also notes some kale, carrots, and mushrooms.

“Thanks Al, take care.” He walks to the door, the basket and bottle clenched in one hand. He swings the wooden door closed behind him.

“A regular.”

“I thought you only did potatoes?”

There is another clang as the metal door shuts behind Themba.

“Oh. Well I have some other small crops going. Enough to keep myself and two of the families nearby fed.”

“Are things bad here?”

“So so. We still make do and that’s what matters.”

“Have you ever thought about leaving?”

“No. I can’t say that I have, at least never seriously.”

“Why not?”

“Joburg is the only place for me,” he looks at her. “I couldn’t just throw it all away. My family has been here since the beginning. Add in this bar. Well it was actually a couple streets down but the building collapsed so I reclaimed this one. But that bar down the street, it had been a dream of my great-grandfathers. Now maybe I’m just sentimental but I’m not throwing it all away. There’s so much for me to remember, not just for myself but for everyone.”

“Noble.”

“I don’t know about that. It’s just all I can think to do. When’s this Mars-shuttle coming over?”

“Five am.”

“That’s early.”

“It is.”

“You better have somewhere to stay tonight.”

“My ship.”

“Your ship?! You’re crazy.”

“Crazy? How so?” She glares at him.

“The cold! Not to mention that some of these buildings are liable to collapse at any second.”

“My ship’s been warm enough the last two nights I’ve been here.”

“You’re lucky it’s summer. Two nights.” Al shakes his head. “I won’t have it. Tell you what. I usually lock up at twelve, maybe one if I have a customer. After that the bar’s empty. I guarantee it’s more comfy than your ship if you need a place to stay.”

“Thanks. I’ll think about it.”

“I can’t be sending someone out into the cold. My mother would die of shame. No, no, it’s nice to have some company. Otherwise, I’m just going to stand here in front of the soccer dozing for the rest of the night.”

“Alright,” she forces a smile. “I’ll take you up on it.”

“Excellent. For a moment I was worried that you’d be too stubborn,” he chuckles. “You know my mother once ended up housing nearly half this street.”

Q thinks of the blocks of flats lining the street, “This street? Impossible.”

“I swear. Granted there weren’t as many flats then. I don’t remember it really well, I was quite small at a point believe it or not, but it was one of her favourite stories.” He drinks some water. “Now that kooky scientist group who caused all this damn ice weren’t around yet so things weren’t quite as cold back then but the weather was a tad unpredictable. Anyway. There had been some tremendous winds, well I’m told, for almost the whole week and while the days were usually manageable the nights could get quite dangerous. Are you hungry by the way?”

“Oh. Not really.”

“Ah, I’ll get some chips going anyway. Can’t hurt can it?” Al cranks his neck and hops up. He pulls a small metal basket and chopping board out from under the bar. After laying these out he walks to the filing cabinet. He slides open the bottom drawer, selects some potatoes and kicks it closed before walking back. “Now where was I?”

“I believe it had been a week of tremendous winds.”

“Oh yes.” He starts cutting the potatoes. The dull thunk of the knife as he slices the potatoes keeps a steady rhythm. “Now these winds were almost hurricane-like in their intensity and after three days of creaking and groaning the power lines started collapsing. Now when I was little I always thought of it like some dominoes falling but I doubt they fell altogether.”

“I like the image. Pylons tumbling.”

“It has a nice scale, doesn’t it? So all the power was out. The wind was still going like crazy and the frosts at night were getting deadly. You can imagine how having no power would affect things. By this time it was pretty hard to come by gas which didn’t help. So my mom ended up taking people in. We had this early reclinatiser. It was atomised so the power wasn’t a problem. In the end, it must have been about thirty people all crammed into this little three-bedroom place. I’m surprised we even needed the reclinatiser with all the body heat. We were crammed in there for five or six days. My brother and I didn’t mind, we were at the age when people are endlessly exciting, but I’m not sure how my parents coped. My mom was a lawyer and there was a big mining dispute going on but somehow she still managed to keep everyone fed and somewhat happy.”

“She sounds like a great woman.”

“Oh, she was. She left far too early, diabetes. You would have thought that shit wouldn’t happen anymore but it did.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s what happens.”

Al scoops the chips into the basket. He gives the basket a jiggle as he walks to the small countertop. With a wave of his hand a contact plate appears. He places an old pot of oil on top of it. Immediately the surface begins to dance with bubbles. He dunks the chips in.

“I hope you don’t mind me using oil. I just think it doesn’t taste the same without it.”

“That’s no fuss for me. Where did you manage to even get a hold of oil down here?”

“Trade secret,” he tweaks his nose. “I can’t go telling you everything just yet now can I.”

“Got to stay one step ahead of the competition?”

“Exactly. As you can see it’s working well,” he says, gesturing at the room. “But what about your family?”

“Uh. I don’t have nearly as much to say about them as you.”

“Come on, there’s got to be something. I mean you’re speaking to a man who hasn’t been to Mars.”

“Well,” she picks at her sleeve. “Mars is alright. My dad and I went to live there when I was pretty young. He was a plumber-”

“There are always jobs for plumbers.”

“Exactly. He ended up working for the sewer works but he hated it. The part he liked about plumbing, apart from it paying the bills, was getting to meet all these different people. There’s an intimacy in plumbing was what he liked to say. But up there he’s just in the sewerage works all day.”

“Sounds shit.”

“That’s poor.”

“I know, I know. But couldn’t they just use those robots there?”

“They could, and do to an extent, but I think they find people more cost effective.”

“And your mother?”

“She couldn’t find a job so they refused to take her up. She was meant to join us at a later point but I’m sure you know how that usually goes.”

“Fucking hell,” Al’s face darkens. “All that stuff about a better world and they still end up keeping families apart.”

“It’s bunk.” Q takes a sip of her drink. It has grown lukewarm since her last. “We kept in touch but the communication dried up when I was about fifteen. Most families couldn’t even keep it going that long with the cost so I guess I was lucky.”

“Do you know what happened to her?”

“She died. But I don’t know about the years between then and whenever she died.”

“Ah. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“As you said, it’s what happens.”

“I’m old I can say that. The chips!” Al dashes to the pot. The chips are a golden brown and take turns swimming up to break the surface of the oil. He hoists the pot onto the chopping board. He gives another wave and the contact plate disappears. “Sorry to interrupt. I just don’t want these overcooking.”

“No no, please. They smell delicious.”

Al lays out a cloth on the bar top and places the chips on it. “Can I top you up?”

“Just some water for now.”

Al leaves the chips to drain and refills Q’s glass. “How did you find out she had died?”

“Thanks. Um. It was on this trip. I had been postponing it for a while, I’d even been back to Earth a couple of times in the past two years but had always avoided Joburg.”

“Been back to Earth a couple of times. You must be a smuggler.”

“Maybe. We don’t need to worry about that for now though.”

“Understood. So this was the trip?”

“This was the trip. It was a little anti-climatic in fact. I had expected a grand search maybe, little clues to follow, or hell maybe even for her to just still be here and I wouldn’t have to look at all.”

“But?”

“Well in the end it was all too easy. All that distance and time makes you think they’re lost in a funny way. But I went to our old street.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Auckland Park.”

“Oh, just down the hill.”

“Yeah. So I went there. The house we had stayed in was gone, collapsed probably. I left my ship and was just walking up and down. I mean I didn’t really know what else to do – I’ve never gone looking for someone. So I was walking up and down and feeling a little silly you know, like what did I think was going to happen?”

“What did?”

“Well, I had been strolling somewhat aimlessly for a couple of hours when this old lady poked her head out of one of the houses. She gave me this whole long spiel about the cold and it being dangerous. I mumbled an apology and was going to walk back to the ship, get some

sleep or something. I wasn't feeling too enthused about the possibilities of finding her. But I decided why not ask this woman if she knew anything, I mean she was on the same street. Next thing I was being bundled inside for a cup of tea amidst a bunch of exclamations of how much I've grown, honestly I couldn't place her face at all. I felt a little bad but I was young. She was a friend of my mom's, told me that with her asthma and the cold my mom just deteriorated more and more. In the end, pneumonia got her. It's funny, something like that is a non-issue on Mars but here all those sicknesses could still kill people."

Al smiles gently at her, "I'm sorry you couldn't see her one last time."

"Me too, me too. They had buried her up at the Brixton cemetery so I got to visit her grave. It was a bit haphazard. I." Q sighs, her thumb has been rubbing a chip in the glass. "I... just."

"I know." Al scoops the chips onto a plate and sprinkles a liberal amount of salt over them. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Q takes a chip blowing on it lightly to cool it before popping it into her mouth. "God these are hot."

"I would hope so. Would you like some tomato sauce?" Al now gets a large glass bottle of red sauce out from under the counter. "Now this is something you won't get on Mars. Not the tomato sauce but the brand. All Gold. My grandad knew this guy, Meneer Wessels, who was a bit of a hoarder. The company went under, well before you were born probably, but he had a room which was filled, wall to wall, with these. They're technically expired but you can't take those dates seriously when it comes to sauces."

"Sure, why not."

Al pours out a large dollop next to the pile of chips giving the bottle a slight twist as he finishes. They sit for a while, taking turns to swirl a chip in the tomato sauce, their eyes on the soccer. It is the 75th minute and M.K Martians find themselves under growing pressure. The one all draw they had held up till now is looking increasingly tenuous.

"I'm glad I made these. One thing I've learned here is that people always have room for chips."

"They're excellent."

The pile of chips grows smaller and the Martians' defence has disappeared. By the 85th minute, they find themselves hoping, more than anything else, that the opposition doesn't score a fifth. Disgruntled fans are filtering out of the stadium and the commentary has turned to speculation about the manager's future.

“Not looking good for him.” Q waves a chip at the holoscreen, a stray bit of tomato sauce flying onto the table. “Shit, sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry,” the cloth has reappeared in Al’s hands and he is quickly wiping the bar top clean. “It certainly isn’t, for the whole club in fact.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes, they were one of the first ‘Mars’ clubs so to say in that they weren’t just expressing nostalgia for cities or teams people had abandoned long ago. But there was some economic regulation stuff. You know they manage to make all that seemingly more and more complex just so it’s hard for a layman like me to understand. But let’s not get into economics.” Al scratches his head. “So, their owners ended up violating some terms or something and soon found all sorts of punishments and regulations against them. Since then it’s been downhill. They used to play in the Premier Division and now they’re kicking dust about in the third. I’m just glad I’m not a fan of theirs.”

“Do you think they’ll stick around?”

“Who knows. As far as I’m concerned all of the teams are the same these days.”

“You still watch them though.”

“That’s just because the habit is too ingrained.”

At full time the players walk off to jeers and boos, the brief moment of ecstasy brought about by the first goal seeming so far away.

“What’s the time by the way?”

Q’s eyes flick to her watch, “Around eleven forty.”

“Eleven forty and I’m already this tired. I’m getting too old for barkeeping.”

“I haven’t given you much time to doze.”

“That’s true. But any barkeep relying on dozing is not worth their salt.”

“Don’t be so harsh. If I had to make a list of bartenders you’d be up there at the top.”

“Hm. How about one more drink and then I think I’ll have to lock up. Another old-fashioned?”

“Sure.”

“Let me just go get some stuff for you for the night and then I’ll start making it.”

Al walks out of the room. Q studies the pattern made by the residual tomato sauce. She checks her watch, no new notifications. She selects the news feed, an EMP blast in the Northern quadrant. Inane punditry takes place on the holoscreen. The door swings open and Q hears some heavy breaths before a mattress slides through.

“Won’t you carry this around?”

“Of course,” Q says jumping up. “You should have called earlier.”

“Nonsense. It's good for me to stretch my legs. Here's a pillow and a light blanket. The reclimatiser will be left on so you shouldn't need much more.”

“Thanks again. This will definitely beat the ship.” Q drags the mattress around the bar laying it out on the floor with a thump.

“Of course. It's no sweat off my back. Now about that drink,” Al picks up a small crate and walks back to the bar with it. He lays out a cloth on the table and begins unpacking an assortment of items. Cubes of sugar, some bitters, a dusty bottle with what Q takes to be bourbon, and what appear to be mint leaves. “I've been experimenting with some genetics so this mint should have a more citrusy flavour. Orange trees are a bit tricky indoors.”

He claps a leaf, “Here, tell me what you think.”

Q pops it into her mouth and her eyes widen. It's not just the sour sweetness but also the sheer amount of juice contained in the small leaf, “Wow.”

“Not very natural at this point but I think it gets the job done.”

Q watches as he begins preparing the drink. First, he throws a sugar cube into the bottom of a glass. Next, he sprinkles some bitters over the cube. He takes a small wooden pestle out of the crate and gently muddles them together.

“I keep this crate for special occasions. Usually, I'm only making drinks for Themba and with him it's usually vodka and some juice or in the morning a Prairie Oyster,” Al says looking up from his work.

“Prairie Oyster?”

“Some hangover cure he's a fan of. Gin, or in his case vodka, egg yolk, hot sauce, and pepper. I would avoid it.”

“You mean you have eggs too?”

“Themba and his wife have some chickens, unbelievably well-trained mind, so I get eggs from them every now and then.” He pours out some bourbon before throwing in some ice cubes.

“You guys have a small farm going between you.”

“We need to, no one can afford the prices of things from Mars.” He twists two mint leaves and throws them in. Once satisfied that it is sufficiently mixed he stops stirring and slides the glass to Q. “Your old-fashioned.”

“Thank you.”

Al gets another glass and throws in three ice cubes before pouring some bourbon over them, “Cheers.”

They drink in silence each lost in their own thoughts. Occasionally the sound of the wind howling outside reaches them. Condensation gathers on their glasses as the ice slowly melts. Q downs the last bit. She gazes through the bottom of her glass as the ice swirls around it. She puts the glass back to her lips and sucks the last of the melting ice into her mouth, finishing it with a crunch. She slides her glass back to Al.

“I. Thanks, Al. For the drink, well for all this really.”

“Of course, of course. I enjoyed it. It’s good to meet someone new.” Al swirls his glass. “The place is all locked up but when you need to go just wave at the door and it’ll unlock.”

“Got it.”

He stands up and finishes his drink, “I’m going to sleep like a log. Q I hope we meet again.”

“Same. I’ll have to come back.”

“I hope you do. Could make something with Themba’s eggs next time.”

“That sounds great. Thanks. Again.”

“Travel safe.” He gives her a nod and walks out. The lights in the room dim as he leaves. Q sighs and walks to the mattress. She pops a mint in her mouth and inhales sharply as she bites into it. The blanket is old and worn and flutters down as she throws it over the mattress. Her boots come off with a clomp and she slips under the blanket, wiggling some stiffness out of her toes. The mattress is lumpier than she had expected and it pokes into her back. She twists the red band on her thumb and goes through her breathing routine. The lights go off. She sets a mental alarm. The mattress swims beneath her.

The buzzing of Q’s watch wakes her up. Four. She lies in bed her eyes straining to make out the room in the darkness. The lights filter a muted orange into the room. The blanket lies on the floor, discarded at some stage in the night. Her mouth is dry and stale. With a groan she gets up to get a glass of water. She times out the start of the morning in her head. There’s enough time to do the morning stretches, the knots from the night’s sleep slowly getting worked out. At four-thirty, she puts on her boots and grabs her coat. She scrawls a quick note and leaves it on the counter, placing her ring on top. The door slides open when she waves it and she steps into the concrete entranceway. She pulls up her hood when she feels the cold. The door swings closed and the entranceway goes dark. With a groan the steel door slowly swings open. A rush of cold air makes her pull up her mask. The wind, funnelled by the buildings above, is racing down the street. Q steps out onto the pavement. She pushes her hands deeper into her pockets.

Her breath comes out her mask in ghostly blue bursts. It is illuminated by an old sign's feeble glow. 'The Embassy of Malta'. The sign's plastic has long since been yellowed.

She looks down the street. At the far end, she sees the collapsed building which must have housed the original bar. She forgot to get its name. She hunches her shoulders forward and walks up the street. The ground is covered in a hard layer of ice and she holds her body stiffly as she makes her way back to her ship. Every now and then she casts a dubious glance at the icicles hanging from the streetlights. The brick-faced buildings look unnaturally smooth and shiny in their thin layer of ice. Q shivers looking at them. It is slow going walking on ice. She reaches the street corner. Her ship has started its defrosting process and steam rises from its blue and white sides. The drips from its nose freeze upon hitting the ground. The hatch slides open and she swings herself up and in. The faux leather seat still holds the night's coldness. She flicks the switches on the dashboards and there is a cough as the hydrogen engine comes to life. The headlights set the world a-sparkle and Q narrows her eyes. A fallen street sign is frozen into the pavement, the lettering spelling 'Putney St' just barely visible through the ice. The engine roars as Q pulls the joystick back. The ship slowly rises as Q leaves the dark, grey world behind. She hovers over the tops of the buildings checking her ship's screen to see the expected trajectory of the shuttle. The sky is a thin grey on the horizon. She keeps this to her right as she continues her ascent. The buildings shrink. The little red winks of communication between the Telkom and Brixton towers have long since stopped. As she continues climbing northwards she sees a frozen dam beneath her and has a flash of memory. They are taking a drive to Zoo Lake to go ice skating. She takes a deep breath and locks into the docking orbit. With the ship now on autopilot, she settles back. They are spinning on the ice; she is laughing as they fall. Snow falls on them as they lie on their backs catching their breaths. The last of the Egyptian Geese stand huddled on the island watching them.