

An abstract painting with a complex, layered texture. The dominant color is white, with various shades of purple, blue, and orange. The brushstrokes are thick and expressive, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall composition is dense and somewhat chaotic, with a central vertical axis of white and purple tones.

Settled

By David Mann | Short Story

Settled is a work of short fiction concerned with the notions of value and extraction in the arts, and the unequal relationships of power this imposes. It was written as part of a collection of short stories that seeks, through the lens of fiction, to provide an alternative record and critique of the South African

art world. The collection was produced over the course of a Creative Writing Masters programme at the University of Witwatersrand, under the supervision of Ivan Vladislavic. The idea of the 'borrow pit' in the story is made in reference to South African theatre-maker Jemma Kahn's 2018 play *The Borrow Pit*.

It is still dark when they leave Bloemfontein, the roads blanketed with fog. Theirs is the only car on the road. Nicholas was meant to take the morning shift, but he is tired and groggy and so Ayanda finds himself behind the wheel. They make a brief stop at an Engen garage on the outskirts of the town to top up on petrol, snacks, and bad coffee before taking the onramp onto the N1 and continuing their journey into the Eastern Cape, towards Kenton-on-Sea.

'What are we listening to?' asks Ayanda.

Nicholas shrugs. He is gripping his coffee cup with both hands, slumped against the passenger side window and staring out into the passing darkness.

'Wake up, please. If you're making me drive, then you at least have to talk to me. I'm as tired as you are.'

'Anything. Just put on anything. I don't care.'

'Anything?'

'Anything good. Not that awful stuff you had on yesterday.'

'It's a pop-culture podcast, Nicholas. It's not meant to be anything hugely sophisticated.'

'It's mindless.'

'Well, I like it. It's helping me build my list of movies to watch once we get there.'

'No, no. I'm not watching any of that. I've got reading to catch up on.'

'I don't think I've seen you read a book in the last ten years.'

'Exactly. Now I'll have the time. Look, just put something on, it's too early for chatter.'

Ayanda opts for silence. He drives on, hunched forward in the seat to better see the unlit road ahead. It will be a while before Nicholas is out of his mood, he thinks. Might as well let it pass.

The drive from Johannesburg yesterday was in higher spirits. They were both excited to be on the road, out

of the city, finally making the trip down to their new home. It's a move they've been planning for a while. Ayanda has wanted out of Joburg for years. Nicholas has always been less keen on the idea. There is always some new project, a new exhibition to work towards, another installation to tend to. Such is life when you're in a relationship with one of the country's art darlings, thinks Ayanda. Someone always wants a piece of Nicholas and he is always happy to oblige.

It took Ayanda declaring that he was leaving on his own, flying down to set things up in the new house by himself, to force Nicholas into action.

'I suppose now's as good a time as any,' he'd said.

In reality, Nicholas could afford to pack up and go anytime he wanted. Probably, he didn't trust Ayanda to handle the move on his own.

Outside, only the soft, red lights of long-haul trucks are visible through the mist ahead of them. Ayanda yawns, stretches, readjusts his grip on the wheel. He embraces the silence, presses on, drives as fast as the road allows.

Nicholas sets down his coffee, still too hot to drink.

'Wake me up before we get to Gariep,' he says, pulling his jacket up to his chin and turning away from Ayanda.

The gravel road rattles Nicholas awake as the car makes the climb up the track overlooking the Gariep Dam. It's still early, but the sun is out and they can see the vast, shimmering body of water below. Ayanda is tired. He drove through the dark in silence, letting Nicholas sleep. They take the tarred road that leads down to the bridge arching across the dam. Nicholas sits up.

'Pull over at the parking lot, there,' he says, gesturing to an unpaved patch of land with a cluster of worn cement picnic tables.

'Can't we just pull over at the viewing point on the bridge? No one's around, anyway,' says Ayanda, slowing nonetheless.

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Ayanda takes out his phone and points it at Nicholas.

'Look here.'

'No, no.'

'Come on, just one. I can see you're all sentimental being here. It's sweet. Come on, just stand there.'

'No. I'm still waking up, I look awful.'

Ayanda pockets the phone. Moves closer to Nicholas. 'Is it good to be back?'

'Mm. Different.'

'Want to walk over the bridge?'

'No. Better get going.'

They walk back to the car. Nicholas gets into the driver's side and adjusts the seat, giving himself more legroom. They pull off and make their way over the bridge, looking out at the water and the hills as they go.

Twenty minutes outside of Steynsburg, they begin to talk. The day is growing hot and the sun has lifted their spirits. They talk as two people who've shared a life together for more than two decades do – speaking alongside one another, independently of each other's conversations, each pursuing their own line of thought without responding to the other's.

For a while, they talk about the accommodation from the night before, the small towns and farmstalls they passed on the way there. Ayanda jokes about the presence of satanic cults in the area. Nicholas talks about the drives he used to take through the area for research. Anecdotes about getting lost, running out of petrol, spending the night sleeping in the car in the middle of nowhere. Ayanda has heard them all before. Some time passes. They fall into a familiar silence.

'I took my first photograph there.'

'Hmm?'

'I want to walk,' says Nicholas.

'It's cold.'

'It's not that cold. Isn't this the whole reason we're driving down anyway? To see the country? Take it slow, make stops when we want? Just up here's good, pull over here.'

Ayanda brings the car to a stop and they climb out into the icy morning. They make their way to the viewing point, jackets zipped up and hands stuffed into their pockets. They walk in silence until they get there. From where they're standing, they get a view of the whole bridge, the hills beyond it, and the sky holding its pale pink hue. Below, uniform concrete pillars plunge downwards, supporting the length of road that stretches across the dam.

'It's off,' says Ayanda, chin still tucked into his jacket.

'Huh?'

'The water's not running.'

'Hmm. Well, if it was, I doubt we'd be able to have a conversation. You should hear it when it's in full swing. Like thunder.'

Nicholas walks over to another small lookout point that provides a view into the dry ravine below. Ayanda follows. The two of them take in the surroundings.

'At the dam. I took my first ever photograph there.'

'Oh.'

'They were still finishing some of the lower foundations. We went there...'

'...on a family trip. You used your uncle's camera. It was the last photo on the spool.'

'Have I told you this before?'

'No. You've told other people, though. I remember reading about it in an interview.'

'Before we met?'

'No.'

'Oh. Well, sorry to bore you with my stories.'

They stop talking. Nicholas capitalises on their stubborn silence and changes the music. Ayanda looks out the window, watches the gradation of the passing landscape – brittle greens and yellows, empty blue sky. He is upset, but he does not make a show of it. That sort of thing never works with Nicholas, only hardens his resolve. Nicholas can go hours without talking, just to prove a point. More often than not, the point being that he hasn't done or said anything wrong. Time will pass, Ayanda will apologise. They'll move on.

The two met in Cape Town, at a bar in Observatory. Ayanda was 20, then, an art school dropout – a lack of funds more than a lack of ambition. Nicholas was in his mid-30s although only just starting to enjoy his new-found fame, out celebrating the opening of a solo in town. Ayanda had gone out with friends because he had nothing better to do.

They met through an acquaintance, began to talk. Ayanda already knew who Nicholas was by then. Nicholas had no idea who Ayanda was, but he enjoyed the attention. Ayanda spent the night sitting across from Nicholas in a corner booth of the bar that stank of piss and beer, listening to him talk about himself, about making art in post-apartheid South Africa, about the international markets opening up again. The opportunities were pouring in, he said, he was

busier than ever. He was even looking for a new assistant to join him in his Johannesburg studio.

Certainly, Nicholas had no idea that Ayanda would show up at his studio a month later, ready to work. Ayanda worked in his studio, picked up some of the admin, screen-printed, reproduced endless amounts of landscapes and railway lines and electricity pylons in ink and charcoal – drawings to be cut up and reworked into whatever Nicholas wanted them to be. They maintained a non-committal fling for a few months while Nicholas saw other people. Ayanda was useful, eager to work and to learn, and so Nicholas kept him around. They became exclusive around the time Ayanda started managing the studio, handling Nicholas's admin, travel, his exhibitions, forthcoming publications.

He moved in. The years passed. They travelled, bought and sold homes, discussed the idea of marriage without ever taking it further. A gesture towards long-term commitment came in the form of Ayanda's eventual title of Director of the Nicholas Trist Foundation.

'Who else could I trust to manage it all?' Nicholas had said. Ayanda was happy, he reasoned. What else would he have done with his life? And life with Nicholas had been good, if a little lonely.

'I'm taking us through Cradock. I'd like to stop at the old Schreiner house if we have time,' says Nicholas.

'What about Alice? Didn't we say we'd stop over and see Athi?'

'What?' Nicholas turns the volume down. 'What's in Alice?'

'Athi's there. I told you. He moved back there a few months ago. I wanted to go and visit.'

'Oh god. I didn't think you were serious about that.'

'Why would I not have been serious about it?'

'You know what I mean. We didn't plan for it, is what I'm saying. You should have let me know earlier.'

'We can still go,' Ayanda insists, 'the turn off isn't until

another hour at least.'

'We can't just stop off there unannounced. Where does he even stay? How will we know where to go?'

'I have his address. He's told us to come and visit. He's dying to see us. He's been busy setting up that Pan-African Library.'

'Oh, that little project. I do remember that. Look, he can come and visit us once we're settled, I've already planned to see the Schreiner house.'

'What for?'

'Just to see it. I'm thinking of doing something around it. Might want to photograph it as part of a series.'

'Please! Do you even have a camera on you? You haven't done any of your own work in years.'

Nicholas's mood shifts. He speaks with a sharp, clipped tone. 'Not this crap again, Ayanda. This is why I was reluctant to take this drive with you. These little tantrums you throw. And for what? Because you're bored? Because you want to cause some scene to pass the time? I'm not doing this.'

Ayanda falls back, does not respond. Up ahead, roadworks slow them down. The heat and the trucks give them something to attach their anger to. They pass a large hole in the earth, deep and vast. They move past it slowly, both taking it in. For all the depth and scale of the hole, the amount of earth that has been removed in order to create it, there should surely be a mountain beside it, a pile of sand and stone, but there is nothing.

The roadworks come to an end and they leave the hole behind them, dedicatedly overtaking long-haul trucks and bakkies with trailers carrying livestock. When they eventually reach the turn off to Alice, Nicholas drives on towards Cradock. Ayanda does not protest.

The stop in Cradock proves to be a salve for their moods. They agree to take the tour through Schreiner House together. Ayanda has little interest in Schreiner, but he lingers and reads the many yellowing, laminated

posters detailing her early life, the influence the site had on her writing, the influence her work has had on others. He reads a copy of a letter she wrote to a friend, describing the joy she took in climbing to the top of a koppie one morning and stripping naked, feeling the elements on her skin. He takes a photograph of the passage and texts it to a friend with the caption: 'Listen, Olive was wild'.

Outside, Nicholas chats idly with the curator who explains that he lives in a room at the back of the house, that they hardly get visitors these days, no support from the government. They buy a few books – local authors and anthologies of poetry about the Eastern Cape. Nicholas leaves a small donation. They discuss the idea of making the trip up the koppie to visit Schreiner's grave, but decide against it. It is something they'll do once they're more settled. There will be time to do that sort of thing then, they agree. For now, they are happy to press on.

Back on the road, they are in better spirits, talking, listening to podcasts about architecture and literature and stopping at various points to admire the landscape, taking postcard-style photographs on their phones as they do. They pass Bedford, Glen Ambrose, and stop for a late lunch at a pub in Makhanda, where they're served by a listless student waiter who is animated only once Nicholas introduces himself in full.

After lunch they amble around, remark on how quiet the place is in the absence of artists and performers and the endless production posters that colour the small student town for a week or so during the National Arts Festival. They consider a visit to the Camera Obscura, where Nicholas says he spent a formative afternoon on a school trip many years ago, but decide against this, too. It's already late afternoon, they reason. They do not want to arrive after dark.

Past Salem, they see quarries and rocky hills, remnants of sustained blasts for shale and limestone. Ayanda drives and Nicholas thumbs through his phone. Potholes and slow-moving trucks keep them from anything faster than 80 kilometres.

It is the last stretch. They are both eager to be off the

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road, although Ayanda is not ready for the trip to be over. What then, he thinks? He agonises over the approaching finality. What to do or speak about once they finally arrive? They will unpack, sure. Spend the week orientating themselves, settling in. And after that? After the unboxing and the pleasant drudgery of sorting out their new home – what Nicholas says will be their forever home – will they take those trips they’ve been planning on the way over? Doubtful. How long before Nicholas grows bored, restless, finds a new project or production to busy himself with?

Around them, the landscape grows greener, the air feels cooler. Ayanda anticipates the ocean, the sand, the rocky shores of places like Kasouga, Port Alfred, and other seaside towns dotted along the Sunshine Coast. The road opens up, he drives on, leaves the trucks behind, races to beat the fading daylight.

‘It’s called a borrow pit,’ says Nicholas, not looking up from his phone.

‘What?’ Ayanda turns the music down.

‘That big hole we saw earlier. It’s called a borrow pit. Well, that’s what the Americans call it, anyway. I’m on some website about roadworks in the States and they say it’s called a borrow pit.’

‘What’s it for?’

‘It’s just the extraction of sand. They’ll be busy with a new section of road or building a bridge or something

like that and they’ll use some of the earth from nearby. It leaves one of those big holes behind.’

‘And what happens to it?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The pit. Does it get filled back in?’

Nicholas considers the question, scrolls through the text on his screen. ‘I don’t know. Doesn’t say.’

‘So, they leave a giant pit behind? They never fill it up?’

‘Well, I imagine they’d need more sand to fill it up. Which would mean they’d need to dig another hole. Either that or a series of small holes, taking sand from each of them, but I mean who’s got the time to do that? It probably just fills back in over time.’

‘Probably.’

It’s dark by the time they arrive in Kenton. Ayanda yawns, grips the wheel with both hands as the car moves down the empty, suburban streets.

‘It’s there, just up there,’ says Nicholas, sitting up in his seat. It is the most animated Ayanda has seen him since they started the trip.

They reach a boom gate and stop. A guard emerges from a security booth off to the left and exchanges words with Nicholas. The boom rises and they enter. They travel along the same road for a while longer, passing other people’s homes in the dark. Empty, thinks Ayanda. A neighbourhood full of holiday homes. They turn right onto a gravel road lined with trees. They drive slowly, trying to take in their new surroundings through the lights of the car.

They arrive at the house and get out. Nicholas takes the keys from his pocket and walks towards the front door. Ayanda stays at the car, watching Nicholas fumble with the keys for the security gate, the front door. He watches the lights go on in the entrance hall, hears Nicholas calling out for him to come and take a look. Cold, white light spills out from the house and onto the driveway. Nicholas goes upstairs,

his footsteps noisy on the wooden floors, the lights come on in one room and then another. He calls out again. Ayanda gets his bag from the boot. Tomorrow, he thinks, the vans will arrive with all of their things. Maybe then it will start to feel a little more permanent, a little more like home.