

The Soul Crab

by Maxine Meixner

I have found more lives than there are stars. I am a helper, picking up what others found too heavy to be carried anymore, filling the spaces that they have already left behind.

When I step into my new self this time, I am struck by the hollowness of my bones – one knock and I might shatter like a bird falling from its nest. There is a tremor that accompanies everything that I do, a stiffness to the muscles that are so firmly twined in place that to try reach further than they're accustomed to brings agony. I am standing in the bathroom, naked, the plug gurgling as it swallows the remains of my bathwater. I won't be here long; I can feel it.

I shuffle through this new home to the kitchen, back hunched and lips quivering, my tongue thick with thirst. The space is filthy. Bin overflowing, the faint scent of curdling cream clotting the air. Leftovers fused to dishes stacked precariously on the side of the sink. I've seen it all before, but it doesn't make it easier.

An old landline rings from the living room. I finish my glass of water and run my tongue over my lips – they're thin and cracked, twisted under themselves. 'Alright, I'm coming, I'm coming...' I say out of this body's habit. My voice is thick, gloopy with age.

Next to the phone is a sepia-toned photograph of a man and a woman, smiling, arms around each other. The house is dark and dirty, but the glass on this photo is free of dust. Even now, after what I know to be so long, I feel the grief spill out from his belly and ripple through his body.

'Mmhm?' slips out from my throat as I answer the phone. 'Is that Mr. Donahue speaking?'

This foggy brain nods before I realise that of course they can't see me; I can feel the wattle below my chin shake with the movement as I answer the affirmative.

'Hello, it's Mr. Rind. I'm sorry to tell you that despite your best attempts, we're going to have to foreclose—'

I stop listening, the effort is too much. I am tired in this body. My heart stutters out of rhythm, heavy, dragging itself beat to beat. It's so very tired. I feel a coldness spreading from the tip of my skull, like someone has cracked an egg there, and spread through my veins. I know it well.

As the last breath leaves my lungs, I realise that I never dressed and am indeed still naked. How funny.

*

I shift into someone else and instantly know something is off. Rather than a firm, abrupt step into my new self, I ooze in like a slug, slowly, the body reluctant to take me in. It's uncomfortable, taking longer to acquaint myself with my new skin and sinews.

Memories don't come to me as quick as they should and I don't know where I am yet. Noises swell around me – engines, car horns, faint thuds of music. I'm in a car, hands on the wheel, stopped at a busy four-way junction. My skin is slicked with sweat despite the A/C straining out on full blast in an attempt to assuage the dry heat. Nearby voices surge above the din as people flog their wares on dried grass beside the road, or even in the middle of the road in between lanes on the baking tar. They hold up sunglasses and DVDs and parade up and down the stationary cars, staccato whistles escaping from their lips as they call out to catch our attention.

A rhythmic, resonant cawing sounds out overhead – I lean forward, my chest against the wheel and squint through the glare on the windshield to see a group of thick-bodied birds in flight.

Hadedas, my brain tells me, finally volunteering up the first trickle of information. The dam finally breaks and a rush of this new being sweeps over me and I'm immersed in my new self. I sigh, settling into the waters of my frame.

But there's something – someone – else here too.

I can feel it. Someone else is here. Someone else is *still* here.

I send my mind inwards and I see her. Lesedi. I know her name because I am her. She's as small as she can possibly be, so small that she shouldn't have the grip to hold on to be here. Her back towards me, she's hunched over in a tiny, barely noticeable crevice.

'What are you still doing here?' I ask her, frowning. I approach her slowly, not wanting to startle her.

She turns to me, eyes wide with alarm, as the sound of a car horn yanks me back to the outside. The traffic lights – the *robots*, this mind calls them – are green, and I shift gears and drive, letting this body follow its natural rhythms.

I can feel her fluttering in my mind like a sick butterfly, her panic slowly starting to thrum through my skull.

Who are you? What's happening? Ey wena, why are you here?

In her panic, Lesedi is tangling herself up in me, bouncing around our body looking for answers and my new heart is racing as I drive on. I take a deep breath to calm us down and find a safe place to pull over.

I sit in the almost-silence on the side of the road, scrambling for the right words to say to get Lesedi to calm down and move on.

'This must feel very alarming for you, but you can trust me,' I say. The t's of my new accent hit a lot harder than Mr. Donahue's did, the vowels slipping lazily from my mouth.

Trust you? Haibo, you've taken over! Get out! Phuma!

'Lesedi, please calm down. I'm only here to help you, I promise. Usually, the bodies I help are empty already and I just – carry on.'

Empty?

'They're all like you. They all feel like you do.'

Lesedi chews this over, fading a little. A part of me hopes that she'll go completely so we can both be at peace, but then –

Am I dead?

'No,' I say.

Then what do you mean by empty?

'I fill the space so that you can let go,'

And do what? Go where?

I blink. 'I don't know,'

I just disappear? Lesedi says. *And what, no one ever knows because you're just, here now?*

'But isn't this what you want?' I ask, confused. 'You don't want to be here anymore...? So, I'm here to help – you don't have to exist anymore, you just – poof – fade away, completely.'

Poof?

'Oh, don't be like that,' I say, flustered at my faux pas. 'I'm only trying to help,' I repeat pathetically.

Lesedi is quiet for some time, before she says, *But why am I still here? Do I not want to go?*

'I don't know,' I say truthfully.

Maybe I was in two minds about it.

'I'm not sure –' and then I sense she's smiling softly, and I laugh. 'Ah! Sorry. Humour can go over my head sometimes when I'm thinking a lot.'

Do you often spend a lot of time in your own head?

'Funny.'

Lesedi lets out a quiet beat of a laugh. Then she sighs and says, *I'm tired.*

Our body slept alright last night. But I'm so very heavy.

'I know,' I reply.

*

We used to come here, Lesedi tells me, as if I don't already know. But I listen quietly, letting her speak. My brother and me. At least four times a week after school. We'd stop and get a bag of biltong and fight over who got to carry it because they'd always get the best bits.

I feel waves of longing sweep over her as she remembers all that her life was. I'm standing on what is either a massive hill or a small mountain, under the wide-reaching branches of an acacia tree. We have left the car parked down below and hiked for almost an hour in an attempt to calm Lesedi down enough to allow her to drift off. My baggy vest is sucked tight against my body by the sweat, my throat a sheet of sandpaper from the baking heat. I wish we had thought to bring water.

The great hill spills out beneath us onto the veld below, where the long swathes of grass have been leached of their colour by the sun. The steady hum of cicadas fills the silence as the sun slowly begins to sink towards the earth and soon the sky is aflame with colour, red and bursting like an overripe pomegranate.

'It's beautiful,' I murmur. I can feel Lesedi sobbing quietly, tangled together as we are, and I wish she would let me take it away. 'Hey, hey,' I say, mentally wrapping my arms around her. She falls into me, feather-light and fading.

What is there to say? I'm here. That can only mean she didn't want to be anymore. She shakes with her tears and her shame and I ache with the need to help her somehow – make it easier for her to let go.

We close our eyes, the sunset tinting the insides of my lids amber – like my own private African sky. 'Tell me about it,' I say. 'Tell me about your life.'

There's nothing to tell you, she says, her mental voice hitching with tears.

'Come on, there must be. Where were you born? Where did you go to school?'

Those are just facts, they aren't my life, Lesedi says.

‘Well, what is?’

And she doesn’t speak but shows. Memories unearth themselves suddenly, like the first buds of spring, and I watch as Lesedi slowly treads into her life. Her school years are brushed over quickly with a neutral feeling, the awkward years of self-discovery and acne. I see the moments where her heart trembles like wings as she soars into love – only to plummet, a despondent stone in a river of heartbreak, again and again.

There are nights of laughter and dance with her family, board games, trips to the bush. There’s the pressure and freedom of university; smoke from the braai seeping into her clothes, and she’s laughing; her first apartment, her first job, overdue bills, the grief of losing her parents so suddenly, so young – all the rhythms of her life laid out before us to see.

As I watch Lesedi explore her memories, I see, slowly, creeping in the edges of each moment, a small, black spot. Despite its size, I can sense its heaviness and I watch as it spreads thickly like spilled ink across her life as time goes on and she sinks further into loneliness. The aching sense of wanting to be more than she is, to escape herself for a minute, a day, a year...

Lesedi caresses each beat of her life slowly, wrapped up in regret and hurt and longing. Wrapped in a reluctance to let it all go and a burning desire to be free from herself.

She exhales heavily, turning away from her life to look at me. *Are you happy?* she asks me suddenly.

I open my eyes and gaze out at the world below, thinking. I can see for miles – can just about see the haze of the suburbs if I squint hard enough. Hadedas cry somewhere in the distance.

‘I’m not unhappy,’ I say at last.

I was like that too, Lesedi says. *And then... I just would float, do my best to just survive each day. But it was so heavy. I was weak. I am weak.*

‘No, you aren’t,’ I say truthfully.

Well, what am I? I mean, right now, I'm an echo in my own mind. Jislaaik, what is it all worth in the end, hey?

I think on my own existence. The relentless shuffling from one coil to the next, filling the husks of the people who faded away. I had never given much thought as to how it must feel too slowly fade out like they do, the weight of life too much to bear. I thought what I was doing was helping, I saw filling their space as a solution when really, it was nothing at all.

Eish, I didn't know I was this bad, Lesedi breathes. I just was. And I thought that was fine.

A tear rolls down my cheek. I can't tell if it's mine or hers.

Lesedi says nothing. I say nothing for a while, too. Somewhere in the distance, an animal calls out.

I think of what I might be able to do, now that I'm here.

'I like to think of life like a Ferris wheel,' I tell her, as the colours of the sky dance in front of us. 'Sometimes there's lows and you'd give anything to be at the top to see the view, and it feels like it's taking you so long to get there that you're not even moving at all. But you are, and you will, even if it doesn't feel like it. You just have to stay on the ride. This too will pass, and you'll be able to see all there is to see again.'

Like sunsets, Lesedi whispers.

'Like sunsets.'

Slowly, I move to sit down on the ground. Orange-brown dirt clings to my palms as I lower myself onto the warm earth.

You know what sucks? Lesedi says, and I feel a surge of release as she speaks. *I can never truly go back to what once was. To the moments that made me so fucking happy I could've burst. They're lost forever and I can never live them again.*

'They're not lost, they're right there,' I say, pointing to her memories.

Echoes.

‘Isn’t that enough?’

I’m sick of it. I want to be more than enough, more than just fine, or okay, or just fucking surviving.

Why can’t I be someone who’s thriving? Who is actually happy? Instead I’m myself and I’m sat here wanting to go but wanting to stay and that’s just pathetic.

‘I don’t think you’re pathetic,’

You don’t know me.

‘I do. I am you.’

If you were really me, you would think I was pathetic.

‘But I am you, and I don’t.’

Lesedi lets out a noise of frustration and throws her mental hands up in the air.

‘Look,’ I say, trailing my fingers slowly through the dirt. ‘I see a woman who has been scarred and who also is strong. I see you like an unfinished story in its hundredth draft, still with so many rough patches and things to rework and improve, but that can only happen if you keep turning the page and create something that is so perfect and so messy and so *yours*.’

I don’t want to be me anymore. What’s the point?

‘Life. All of it.’

Nothing lasts. None of the good times last. They always fade away and never come back and it hurts. It hurts so much.

I feel her pain. Swellings of loss in her body as she mourns the times, she felt like she was someone, just by being herself. ‘Everything is temporary. That means the bad stuff too,’ I remind her gently. ‘And there will always be better to replace the good that didn’t last.’

She sits for a while, for what feels like hours to us but is only minutes to our body, to real time. *I don’t know if I can do it.*

I flit through her memories, lingering on friendly faces, pulling the most familiar ones forward to rest in front of her. ‘Talk,’ I say. ‘They will listen.’

Lesedi sits, a small spirit in her own mind, and thinks.

‘You’re lost,’ I say, when she’s quiet for a time. ‘You aren’t fading, or faded, or going poof. You’re only lost. But now I’m here.’

I mentally reach out a hand to her. Slowly, she takes it, and I pull her up.

‘There is always more to see. There will always be another something as beautiful as this sunset, even if it’s never going to be the same one again. At least you got to see it, and know it, even for only a short time.’

Lesedi shakes her head at me. *You don’t know – I don’t know if I can.*

‘Why not?’

I have been trying.

‘Then you can.’

Exhausted. It’ll get too much.

‘Then I’ll come back as many times as I need.’

To take over?

‘No. Never again.’

She nods.

So, where are you going to go now? What are you going to do?

‘This,’ I say, gesturing between her and me, and sweep my arms up towards the rest of the world.

Slowly, gently, we begin to untangle from each other. Lesedi feels fuller of herself, literally.

What is it worth? she asks me. *Life. What is it all worth?*

I mull it over. ‘I don’t know,’ I reply honestly. ‘I’ve never stopped to wonder.’

Maybe one day I'll find out.

'Or maybe you can just live.'

She smiles at me, and I feel the corners of our mouth lift. A wave of relief sweeps over her, and she stretches and scratches her knee – her *real* knee, on her body. I am pushed right up to the edges of her skull.

'I'll see you again?' she says to me softly, worry creasing her brow.

This can be a part of life, too, our chats. Only a part of it though, not an ending.

'Thank you,' Lesedi says.

Don't thank me. Right now, I'm you. That's all I have been.

We watch as the sun finally vanishes below the horizon and the stars start to come alive again. And then I am gone from her, whirling on, into the next, and the next, and the next, breathing light into the weight of it all.