# Welcome to Our Hillbrow

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PHASWANE MPE

Mpe was born in Limpopo, a rural South African province. At the time of his birth, South Africa was under the Apartheid State. In 1989, at 19, Mpe moved to Johannesburg to study African literature at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). As a student, Mpe lived in the inner-city neighborhood of Hillbrow, which would become the setting of his one published novel, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. After graduating from Wits, Mpe went abroad and received a diploma in publishing from the polytechnic school Oxford Brookes in England, after which he returned to South Africa and the University of Witwatersrand for a master's degree. Following his MA, Mpe became a professor in African Literature at Wits. Mpe spoke and read both English and Sepedi (both national languages of South Africa), although the majority of his published work is written in English. In 2003, Mpe began a doctorate at the university in sexuality in post-apartheid South African literature. However, he left this degree unfinished to instead train as a *ngaka*—a traditional healer. Mpe died rather suddenly at 34 from a disease that was never conclusively diagnosed. In his writing, Mpe engaged with the political issues of his time South Africa, such as the aftereffects of apartheid and colonialism, prejudice within Black South African communities, the divide between rural and urban communities, and biases and misunderstandings about AIDS.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The most prominent historical event related to *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is the dismantling of apartheid in the early 1990s. This serves as a critical backdrop for the book, even if it does not drive the plot. The apartheid era in South Africa lasted from 1948 until the early 1990s and was categorized by a system of laws that enforced racial segregation, with white people in control of the government. In 1990, longtime anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela was released from prison, and in 1994 he was elected president of the constitutionally new South Africa in the country's first election since discriminatory voting laws were abolished. These events all take place over the course of Refentše and Refilwe's lives, affecting their opportunities and worldviews.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (which Refilwe recommends to a bartender in the novel) also takes place in post-apartheid South Africa. It centers Black characters who must cope with the lingering effects of oppression and colonialism. Mda's novel, like Mpe's, also emphasizes the importance of storytelling in communal villages in South Africa (as well as the prevalence and pitfalls of village gossip), and it acknowledges prejudices from rural townships towards people in larger cities. Secondly, Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* relates to *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Though set 10 years after Mpe's novel, *Coconut* takes place in post-apartheid South Africa and follows a young Black South African try to navigate imperialism, racism, and income inequality. Lastly, W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, though written by an American author, shares themes with *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, such as the psychological effects of institutionalized racism and the importance of education, literacy, and storytelling. Mpe uses a quote from *Souls* as an epigraph, which suggests the South African author saw a direct connection between the struggles of Black Americans and Black South Africans.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Welcome to Our Hillbrow
- **When Written:** 2000
- **Where Written:** Johannesburg, South Africa
- **When Published:** 2001
- **Literary Period:** Post-Apartheid South African Literature
- **Genre:** Ubuntu Literature, Autofiction
- **Setting:** Johannesburg, South Africa; Tiragalong (fictional province), South Africa; Oxford, England
- **Climax:** Refentše commits suicide.
- **Antagonist:** Prejudice, AIDS
- **Point of View:** Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Alternate Universe.** *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is often understood as a work of semi-autobiographical fiction, since Mpe and his protagonist, Refentše, share so many historical similarities. Mpe, though, did not commit suicide, and he has suggested that writing this book saved his life.

**The Music Keeps On Going.** The real-life South African band Stimela, which formed in the 1970s and is very important to both Refentše and Refilwe in the book, is still making music today. They released a new album called *Catch the Train* in 2018.

## PLOT SUMMARY

*Welcome to Our Hillbrow* takes place in the Hillbrow neighborhood in Johannesburg, South Africa during the 1990's, when the country was transitioning out of the apartheid era. Refentše, born in rural Tiragalong, moves to the city to go to university. He studies literature at the University of Witwatersrand, eventually earning a BA and an MA, and is then offered a teaching post at the university. He falls in love with a fellow student, Lerato, and the pair live together in Hillbrow. Refentše is a writer and publishes a short story that he considers turning into a longer novel. However, he suffers from depression, which is triggered when Lerato has sex with their good friend Sammy. Devastated, Refentše commits suicide by jumping off of his high-rise balcony.

Once he is in heaven, Refentše is able to reflect on his life. There, he realizes that if he'd only spoken to Lerato about what had happened, he would have understood that she did not betray him, and that she loved him very much—the affair was just a moment of weakness precipitated by a concern for Refentše. Lerato, in her grief, commits suicide too, and she and Refentše meet in heaven and rekindle their relationship. From heaven, they can also watch all the people still living on Earth.

*Welcome to Our Hillbrow* also follows Refilwe, whose life is closely intertwined with Refentše's. Refilwe, like Refentše, is born in Tiragalong. The two briefly date when they are young (though Refentše ends up leaving Refilwe because she was seeing other people). Refilwe is still in love with Refentše, though, even after they break up. Refilwe, like Refentše, is a smart, young, Black South African who is trying to navigate post-apartheid life. She also gets a BA in literature (Sepedi and English), and then moves to Johannesburg to work as an editor at a publishing house.

Though she is bright, Refilwe—like most of the people from Tiragalong, with the exception of Refentše—is prejudiced against Makwerekwere, or immigrants from other African countries. She is bitter that Refentše won't leave Lerato, because she thinks Lerato is less worthy than herself. This is partly because she is skeptical of any woman who lives in the city, but also because Lerato's father might have been Nigerian (this is later proven to be false), making her a *Lekwerekwere*. When Refentše commits suicide, Refilwe wastes no time spreading hurtful rumors around Tiragalong about Lerato's family. These rumors fuel the grief that Lerato already felt after losing Refentše and play a part in her suicide.

Two years later, though, Refilwe realizes how wrong and harmful the prejudices of her youth were. She enjoys reading the short story that Refentše published before his death—the story's main character is a young woman who is badly treated by people in the village because she has AIDS, which most people from the rural townships only associate with *Makwerekwere*. Refilwe empathizes with this character, which makes her realize the cruelty of her biases. Additionally, she goes abroad to England where she studies Publishing and Media Studies at Oxford Brookes University. Getting outside of South Africa opens her eyes to the ways that people from other continents are prejudiced toward Africans in general, which upsets her and makes her want to be welcoming rather than judgmental.

Refilwe also falls for a man who looks like Refentše and happens to be Nigerian, which further helps eradicate her prejudice. Tragically, Refilwe is diagnosed with HIV shortly after beginning this relationship. Though she realizes people from back home will blame her having the disease on the fact that she had sex with a Nigerian man, Refilwe actually contracted the virus almost a decade earlier, before she ever left Tiragalong. Despite the cruelty and judgement she knows she will face, Refilwe returns home to Tiragalong so that she can die in the place she was born. The story ends with the narrator welcoming Refilwe into heaven.

## CHARACTERS

**Refentše** – Refentše is one of two main characters in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. The narrator addresses Refentše directly, even though Refentše is dead at the beginning of the story. Refentše was born in a small, rural village called Tiragalong. However, when he is accepted to the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, he moves to the city where he lives with his cousin in the poorer neighborhood of Hillbrow. The love of Refentše's life is a fellow student named Lerato. Refentše's best friend is Sammy. Refentše is also closely connected to the story's second protagonist, Refilwe, with whom he had a relationship when he was younger in Tiragalong. Refentše knows that Refilwe loves him and wants him to leave Lerato for her, and although Refentše rejects her romantic advances, he never stops caring for her. After Lerato cheats on Refentše with Sammy, Refentše spirals into a depression and commits suicide by jumping off of his 20-story balcony. Refentše is a thoughtful and observant character, who suffers depressive episodes even before the one that kills him. He loves literature and is an excellent student, earning a BA with honors and a scholarship for an MA. He reads and writes in Sepedi and English. After his second degree, he works as a lecturer in South African literature at the university—the first person from Tiragalong to do so. Unlike many other characters, Refentše is not prejudiced toward "Makwerekwere" (a slur for immigrants from other African countries), but he doesn't hold grudges against characters who are. Refentše publishes one short story before he dies, and the story is about how prejudice destroys South African society.

**Refilwe** – Refilwe is the second protagonist of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. She, like her first love Refentše, comes from the rural

village Tiragalong. Like Refentše, she also studies literature (Sepedi and English) at university, and she moves to Johannesburg—Hillbrow specifically—to work as an editor at a publishing house after earning her BA. Refilwe is a smart and caring character, but she carries some of the prejudices that many people from Tiragalong hold—particularly against "Makwerekwere" (a slur for people who immigrate to South Africa from other African countries). After Refentše commits suicide, Refilwe blames Lerato and smears her name in Tiragalong. Later in the story, though, Refilwe chooses to continue her studies at Oxford Brookes University in England and getting outside of South Africa helps her overcome her previous prejudices. She also attributes her change in attitude to Refentše's short story, which emphasizes the dangers of prejudice. While abroad, Refilwe falls in love with a Nigerian man, which further puts an end to her biases about immigrants from other African countries. Yet while Refilwe is in England, she is tested for AIDS and discovers that she contracted HIV at a young age. Refilwe comes back to Tiragalong to die and eventually succumbs to the disease, joining Refentše and the book's other deceased characters in heaven.

**Lerato** – Lerato is a student at the University of Witwatersrand studying literature, and she is the love of Refentše's life. The two start dating after they're both victims of a holdup in Johannesburg, and this brush with death causes Refentše to admit his true feelings for Lerato. Lerato lives with Refentše and loves him very much, but she eventually starts to feel as though he is slipping into a depression. She tries to get advice from his best friend, Sammy, and the two end up have sex—Refentše walks in on them in bed, which leads to his suicide. Lerato's father is Piet, a South African from the village Alexandra. However, after Refentše commits suicide, Refilwe spreads rumors that Lerato is actually a "Lekwerekwere" (a slur for people who immigrant to South African from other African countries) because her father is Nigerian. The backlash she faces from these rumors, coupled with the grief and guilt she feels over Refentše's death, cause Lerato to commit suicide. When Lerato arrives in heaven, she and Refentše begin their relationship again, and they forgive each other for the mistakes they made in life.

**Sammy** – Sammy is Refentše's best friend in Hillbrow. He's known Refentše for years, and he used to help Refentše handle depressive bouts when they were younger. Sammy is dating Bohlale, whom he loves. However, he cheats on her with Lerato, after she calls him to her apartment asking for help with Refentše. Sammy also occasionally goes out drinking, and one night a woman at a bar drugs him. He brings this woman back home, insulting Bohlale and even making her sleep on the floor. This behavior causes Bohlale to ask Refentše for help, which leads to Refentše and Bohlale having sex. Sammy never finds out about this, and he does not stop going out drinking. One night, he is stabbed, and Refentše miraculously finds him before he bleeds out. Refentše rushes Sammy to the hospital, and Sammy's first request when he wakes up is for Bohlale, which makes Refentše think that their relationship will survive. However, Bohlale is hit by a car on her way to the hospital, and she dies. After Bohlale dies, Sammy begins to lose his mind. Of the four close friends (Refentše, Lerato, Sammy, and Bohlale), Sammy is the only one alive at the end of the story—though this is hardly a consolation, because he has gone mad with grief.

**Bohlale** – Bohlale is Sammy's girlfriend and Refentše and Lerato's friend. She cheats on Sammy with Refentše once, during a low moment when Refentše is comforting her about Sammy's habit of going out drinking. Bohlale nearly leaves Sammy—she has her bags packed—but the night she is going to leave him, Sammy gets stabbed and is rushed to the hospital. Refentše tells Bohlale that the first thing Sammy asked for when he woke up was Bohlale, so she decides that she still loves Sammy, and that she'll stay with him and tell him about cheating on him with Refentše. However, on her way to the hospital to see Sammy, she is hit by a speeding carjacker and dies.

**Cousin** – Refentše's cousin is a police officer who lives in an apartment in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. Cousin houses Refentše when he gets into the University of Witwatersrand, and he takes Refentše to school on the first day. Cousin is good to Refentše, but he is prejudiced toward the "Makwerekwere" (a slur for people who immigrate to South Africa from other African countries). Refentše knows that Cousin treats immigrants very badly in his position of power as a police officer. Refentše also notes that this makes Cousin a bit of a hypocrite, since he always roots for other African teams in the World Cup (especially when they're playing against European teams) but can't seem to break his prejudices when it comes to daily life in Johannesburg.

**Refentše's Mother** – Refentše's mother lives in Tiragalong, where Refentše was born. She, like most of the people from the village, is fiercely prejudiced against "Makwerekwere" (a slur for immigrants from other African countries) and against South Africans who live in the city. She's never set foot in Johannesburg herself. She is disgusted that her son is living with a "Hillbrow woman" and she considers Lerato a "Lekwerekwere," even though Lerato having a Nigerian father is just a rumor. Refentše 's mother is convinced that Lerato poisoned Refentše's food to make him fall in love with her. She essentially disowns her son for being with Lerato, which is why Refentše feels like he can't go to her for comfort after he finds Lerato and Sammy together. However, after Refentše 's death, Refentše's mother stumbles during his funeral and falls into his grave. The other villagers of Tiragalong take this as a sign that she is a witch and had cursed her son, and they murder her by placing tires around her neck and setting them on fire (an act called "necklacing"). When Refentše, Lerato, and Refentše's mother all meet in heaven, Refentše's mother changes her tune and smiles at Lerato, telling her that she looks like her true

father, Piet.

**Piet** – Piet is Lerato and Tshepo's father. Piet died when Tshepo was very young and before Lerato was born, because he was murdered by a cousin. Piet was from Alexandra, a village very near Tiragalong, and he would visit both villages often even though he lived in Johannesburg. Piet and Liz, Lerato's mother, were employed by a white couple in the city (Piet worked as a gardener), and they lived together in the couple's servant's quarters. Back in Tiragalong, Piet's cousin Molori's mother fell ill, and Molori hired a bone thrower to explain the illness. The bone thrower disingenuously told Molori that Piet was to blame, and Molori and a few hired hitmen stabbed Piet to death the next time he went to visit Alexandra. In heaven, Piet is reunited with Tshepo, Tshepo's mother, and Lerato.

**Tshepo** – Tshepo is the son of Piet and a woman from Tiragalong. He grows up in Tiragalong and is the first person to leave the village and go to university in Johannesburg. The people of Tiragalong are very impressed with Tshepo, and he's something of a village celebrity (he was Refentše's idol) before he's struck by lightning and dies. Tshepo's mother dies of grief immediately afterward. A bone thrower blames Tshepo's neighbor for his death, and the people from the village murder her. Tshepo, his mother, and Piet (who was killed when Tshepo was too young to really know him) all reunite in heaven after their deaths.

**The Nigerian Man** – The young Nigerian man is a student at Oxford Brookes University and meets Refilwe at a bar while she is studying abroad. He looks just like Refentše, which is initially what attracts Refilwe to him, and the two become lovers. He, like Refilwe, is diagnosed with AIDS while abroad in England (though, just like Refilwe, he'd been HIV-positive for a long time). He doesn't want to burden Refilwe, so rather than return to Tiragalong with her, he flies home to Lagos after the program ends.

**Bone Throwers** – In South Africa, bone throwers are mystics who operate mostly in rural villages. When things go wrong (someone gets ill, someone is struck by lightning), the people of Tiragalong often consult a bone thrower to tell them who is to blame. That person is then accused of being a witch and murdered (usually burned to death). Bone throwers are not always genuine, though—in particular, the one who Molori (Piet's cousin) hires frames Piet for Molori's mother's illness, even though he knew Piet had nothing to do with it. Many times, people in the villages do find out that a bone thrower's pronouncement is wrong, but only after the innocent party has been killed.

**Jackie** – Jackie is a white British girl a few years older than Refilwe. She meets Refilwe when her parents send her to do volunteer work at a high school in Tiragalong. The girls strike up a friendship and stay in touch through phone calls and letters over the years. When Refilwe goes to school at Oxford Brookes, Jackie—who is also a student there—meets Refilwe at the airport. Jackie also helps Refilwe around campus, and she introduces Refilwe to her favorite bar in Oxford, Jude the Obscure.

**Refentše's Protagonist (The Young Woman)** – Before he dies, Refentše publishes a short story. The story's protagonist—an unnamed young woman—is HIV-positive and faces the wrath and the insults of people from Tiragalong. She chooses not to die by suicide, even though she is full of grief and is dying of AIDS. Instead, she writes a book about Hillbrow, Tiragalong, and the prejudices at play in all different corners of South African society. Though it is a good story, she writes it in Sepedi, a South African language (the same one that Refentše reads, speaks, and studies), and this, unfortunately, means that the story never gets picked up by any publishers in Johannesburg, since there's a strong prejudice against non-English literature in South Africa. She falls into a depression and loses a lot of weight. Later in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, the protagonist's story and Refilwe's life align in many ways.

**Liz (Lerato's Mother)** – Liz is Lerato's mother, who lived with Lerato's father, Piet, until he was killed. She and Piet lived in a white suburb as a housekeeper and groundskeeper, but after Piet was murdered (while Liz was pregnant with Lerato), she moved back to the village of Alexandra, where she and Piet were from. Liz finds Lerato after Lerato dies by suicide, since Lerato was staying at her home in Alexandra at the time. She meets Piet and Lerato in heaven after they all die.

**Molori** – Molori is Piet's cousin. Molori is from Tiragalong, and was very close to his cousin until, one day, Molori's mother fell ill. Molori called on a dishonest bone thrower to tell him what was wrong with his mother, and the bone thrower falsely accused Piet of trying to poison Molori. Molori became scared and angry, and he and a few other men murdered Piet by stabbing him.

**Terror** – Terror is a man from Tiragalong who knew Refentše when they were younger. Terror has a schoolboy hatred towards Refentše, blaming him for getting in trouble in school one day. Terror always used to try to sleep with Lerato, just to bother Refentše. After Refentše dies, Terror threatens to tell Liz, Lerato's mother, that Lerato cheated on Refentše. This threat is part of the reason Lerato decides to die by suicide.

**The Beggar** – The beggar is a native South African who is houseless and lives by the University of Witwatersrand. He used to call out to "Aibo!" to Refentše as Refentše went to school. Cousin told Refentše not to respond, but Refentše would always say hello. One day about five years after Refentše first saw him, the beggar is carried towards the hospital in a wheelbarrow and does not greet Refentše. It is unclear if the beggar lives or dies.

## TERMS

Apartheid – Apartheid was a period of legally enforced racial segregation in South Africa that lasted from 1948 to the early 1990s. The apartheid system enforced a strict racial hierarchy, depriving non-white South Africans of civil rights while ensuring that the white minority held onto political power, economic resources, and social influence.

Makwerekwere/Lekwerekwere – *Makwerekwere* (or *Lekwerekwere* as a singular) is a South African ethnic slur used to disparage immigrants from other African countries. The word comes from South Africans mocking the way they think other African languages sound.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### REGRET AND REDEMPTION

*Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is set in South Africa—in a section of Johannesburg called Hillbrow—shortly after the end of apartheid. The book follows Refentše and Refilwe—young, intelligent people born in the rural village of Tiragalong, north of Johannesburg. Throughout the novel, characters make cruel decisions that hurt one another, creating a tragic chain of events. After Refentše cheats on the love of his life, Lerato, with his friend's girlfriend and never comes clean about it, Lerato cheats on him with their mutual friend Sammy. Refentše is so devastated by the betrayal that he commits suicide. Refilwe, meanwhile, was in love with Refentše and resents that he chose Lerato over her. So after his suicide, she spreads mean-spirited rumors about Lerato that are rooted in prejudice against immigrants from other African countries (she wrongly believes that Lerato's father is Nigerian). The rumors compound Lerato's grief over Refentše, and she, too, commits suicide.

Although both Refentše and Refilwe make terrible mistakes that they deeply regret, they're able to channel this regret into self-reflection and grow out of their harmful attitudes and behavior. As a result, both characters are the book's heroes, even though they are imperfect. From the vantage point of heaven, Refentše can see that if he had confided in Lerato early on, she would not have cheated on him, which was the inciting reason for Refentše's suicide. Being able to analyze the mistakes he made in his life makes his and Lerato's relationship much stronger in the afterlife. In the same vein, Refilwe completely overcomes her prejudices toward the end of the novel, partly by reading challenging literature and partly by studying abroad in England, where she meets a Nigerian man and falls in love with him. Refentše and Refilwe's redemption arcs show that people can be a complex mix of good and bad, and that even people who make grave mistakes can change for the better and lead meaningful lives (or, in Refentše's case, afterlives) if they're truly remorseful. But given that Refilwe eventually dies of AIDS, the book seems to suggest that life itself can be unforgiving (or, at the very least, impartial), even toward those who make amends and better themselves—such people can still experience senseless tragedy. Refilwe is welcomed into heaven at the novel's end, though, implying that anyone who genuinely regrets their past mistakes will nevertheless be redeemed on some level.

### APARTHEID AND COLONIALISM

*In Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, the aftereffects of colonization and apartheid (a long-running system of racial segregation and discrimination) are still observable in South Africa, even though the novel takes place after the end of apartheid. The city of Johannesburg, for instance, is divided into wealthy and poor areas, and white citizens hold the majority of the country's wealth. Indeed, the remnants of colonialism and apartheid are all around Refentše and Refilwe (who are Black South Africans), whether in the way the city is still largely separated by race (with the wealthier areas being "lily-white") or in the British names of so many of the streets, bars, or buildings. Although South Africa has 11 national languages, Refentše, who is a writer, bemoans the fact that a story must be written in English if it is to be commercially viable there. This reality underscores the fact that colonialism will last long after the end of apartheid, since the dominance of the English language in South Africa is directly linked to how forcefully British culture asserted itself during colonization.

Additionally, colonialism leaves a lasting impact on how South African people perceive and interact with one another. For instance, many Black South Africans are prejudiced toward Black people from other African countries, and this prejudice eerily mirrors how the white colonizers—the British—are racist toward Black South Africans. There is, in other words, a certain cycle of racism and discrimination at play, and though Refentše tries to push back against this kind of prejudice when he encounters it in South Africa, it's quite difficult to challenge because these sentiments are so deeply sown. To that end, when Refilwe goes to England to study, she sees xenophobia (prejudice toward outsiders) and racism at Heathrow Airport, as customs officials discriminate against people from places like Nigeria and Algeria. This scenario reminds her of how people from South Africa judge other Black Africans, which itself is evidence of how colonizers' prejudices have infiltrated South African culture. Colonialism has led to cultural imperialism, or the overwriting of one culture with the colonizer's culture.

Thus, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* focuses on the long-term repercussions of colonization, illustrating that such problematic biases didn't simply go away after apartheid.

## PREJUDICE AND IGNORANCE

Although *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* explores the lingering effects of apartheid, the racial divide in South Africa is not the narrative's main focus. Instead, the novel primarily looks at other forms of prejudice, mainly examining the arbitrary biases that people often form about those whom they see as different from themselves. For example, people who live in a rural village called Tiragalong (where Refentše and Refilwe are from) are very judgmental about anyone who lives in Johannesburg. They see the city as a place filled with corruption and crime. They are also very xenophobic toward Black immigrants who come to South Africa from other African countries—there's even a South African slur for these people: Makwerekwere. The origins of this slur are rooted in the mocking sounds South Africans make when imitating the languages spoken in other African countries. What's more, people in both Tiragalong and Johannesburg blame migrants for the AIDS crisis that sweeps through the country, making it quite clear that the South African population during this time period was quick to villainize outsiders.

*Welcome to Our Hillbrow* investigates these prejudices by showing how thoughtless they are. For example, the people of Tiragalong think that immigrants bring disease into South Africa. However, at the end of the story, Refilwe is diagnosed with HIV and discovers that she might have already had it for almost a decade—long before she ever left Tiragalong. Additionally, Refentše points out to his cousin (who hypocritically cheers for Black African soccer teams but is racist and xenophobic toward Black immigrants) that many people who live in Johannesburg originally migrated from rural villages—like Tiragalong—in the same way that people are immigrating to South Africa. By showing the inherently illogical nature of the prejudices at play in post-apartheid South Africa, then, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* suggests that xenophobia and marginalization are often tied to a population's unwillingness to examine its various prejudices. Failing to challenge such ideas, the novel implies, causes societies to reinforce their own ignorance instead of working through their biases in open-minded, productive ways.

## STORYTELLING

Storytelling is central to *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, as the two protagonists, Refilwe and Refentše, are professionally invested in stories (the former works in publishing, the latter is a writer). But, really, all of the characters in the book use stories in their lives. The South African village that Refilwe and Refentše come from, Tiragalong, is home to people who feed off rumors, making ordinary people into either heroes or villains. In response to the way his community often uses storytelling to ruin reputations, Refentše writes a short story that speaks to the faults of prejudice in Tiragalong and South Africa more broadly. Even characters like the village bone thrower—the mystic person who travels between towns to tell people why certain things happen—relies on tall tales to make money.

More than just highlighting the prevalence of storytelling in human life, though, the novel illustrates the many ways in which storytelling can bring about real-life consequences that are both good and bad. The rumors that the villagers tell, for example, cause Lerato to be judged so harshly that she decides to commit suicide. Similarly, the bone thrower's erroneous stories often cause innocent people to be charged as witches and subsequently murdered. And yet, on the flip side, Refentše's short story sets forth a meaningful exploration of society and its prejudices, ultimately causing Refilwe—a previously xenophobic character—to change her outlook on the world. To that end, the novel even suggests that if Refentše had written a longer book, he might have been able to further work through his feelings and, as a result, might not have chosen to end his life so soon. Thus, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* demonstrates that stories are remarkably powerful: when used to cruel ends, they can be incredibly destructive, but when used with good intentions, they can have profoundly positive outcomes.

# SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

## HIT-AND-RUNS

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, hit-and-run car accidents symbolize the suddenness with which life can change. There are two significant hit-and-runs in the novel: the first is at the very beginning, when a seven-year-old girl dies, and the second is in the middle, when Bohlale is killed. Obviously, nobody can prepare for a hit and run—in fact, one of these accidents happens in the middle of a jubilant celebration, and another ironically happens on the way to the hospital. And the book shows that just like a hit-and-run, life as a whole is remarkably difficult—even impossible—to anticipate. Whether it is a sudden car accident, finding a partner in bed with someone else (like Refentše does), or an unexpected AIDS diagnosis (like Refilwe's), life can change in an instant. And, just like how no one is ever charged for these hit-and-runs, life's difficulties don't always have a guilty party that one can easily or obviously hold accountable. Of course, on a straightforward level, these hit-and-runs show the difficulties and dangers of

living in an underfunded neighborhood like Hillbrow. But also, on a symbolic level, they signify how misfortune is hard to prepare for, as it can happen in an instant.


### THE REFRAIN "WELCOME TO OUR…"

The prominent refrain "welcome to our…" symbolizes life's inherent difficulty and complexity, which exists regardless of where one lives. At the beginning of the novel, saying "welcome to our Hillbrow" is a way to express frustration and helplessness over some of the more brutal aspects of living in the Hillbrow neighborhood of Johannesburg, South Africa (like the death of a young girl during a **hit-and-run**). However, as the novel continues, the refrain expands, sometimes finishing with "welcome to our Alexandra," "…our Oxford," and even, finally, "…our Heaven." The constant use of this refrain underscores that there will always be good and bad aspects of places (just like people). In other words, characters can't outrun their problems simply by moving to another location, because everywhere—even heaven—can be a complicated place to live. The repetition of this refrain also softens the book's earlier critique of Hillbrow specifically, since it suggests that *all* places have the potential to be welcoming or hostile. Thus, "welcome to our…" works as a rhetorical symbol for the human experience in all places on Earth and beyond.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ohio University Press edition of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* published in 2011.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ You would recall the child, possibly seven years old or so, who got hit by a car. Her mid-air screams still ring in your memory. When she hit the concrete pavements of Hillbrow, her screams died with her. A young man just behind you shouted:

Kill the bastard!

But the driver was already gone. The traffic cops, arriving a few minutes later, found that the seasons of arrest had already passed. Most people, after the momentary stunned silence of witnessing the sour fruits of soccer victory, resumed their singing. *Shosholoza* […] drowned the choking sobs of the deceased child's mother.

Welcome to our Hillbrow! you heard one man say to his female companion, who was a seeming newcomer to this place of bustling activity.

**Related Characters:** Refentše

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 2

#### Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes early in the book, when the narrator recalls the scene in Hillbrow after the South African soccer team won the 1995 World Cup. The narrator addresses Refentše directly and will continue to do so throughout the novel—that Refentše is "you," and not simply referred to by his name, situates the reader more intimately alongside Refentše and creates an intentional closeness that wouldn't be there if the narration was third-person omniscient. This second-person narration sets the tone for the personal, oral storytelling-like mood of the narrative.

Additionally, the incident described in this scene happens during a celebration, which sets up how there will often be a mixture of triumph and tragedy in any given chapter throughout the book. A tragic death takes place in the middle of a triumphant celebration—these polar opposite things happening at the same time, mirroring how human beings (mostly) have good and bad inside them. The fact that the celebratory song "Shosholoza" mixes in the air with the mother's cries emphasizes the duality of Hillbrow (though later this duality will be seen in every location in the story, not just Hillbrow, suggesting that both tragedy and joy are inevitable parts of human existence no matter where someone lives). This scene also introduces the symbol of the hit-and-run, which represents how a seemingly stable life can change in an instant, a fate that many of the story's characters experience.

This passage also introduces the refrain "welcome to our…" (which is found in the title of the book). In this moment, the refrain is used sarcastically in conversation—a man welcomes a woman to Hillbrow even though something obviously awful has happened. The ironic way the novel uses the refrain here sets up the way it will be used throughout the book: sometimes to literally welcome a newcomer to a new place, but more often as a stand-in for a phrase like, "That's life!" Throughout the novel, the story plays with both the literal and the figurative use of this refrain.

On another level, this scene also shows the very difficult nature of living in Hillbrow, because if even a celebration can turn deadly, the area must be very unpredictable and hard to live in. Hillbrow is both intimidating and hospitable

for the characters in the story, so it is important that, early on, the book emphasizes its capacity for good mixed with bad.

> More specifically, certain newspaper articles attributed the source of the virus that caused AIDS to a species called the Green Monkey, which people in some parts of West Africa were said to eat as meat, thereby contracting the disease. Migrants (who were Tiragalong's authoritative grapevine on all important issues) deduced from such media reports that AIDS's travel route into Johannesburg was through *Makwerekwere*; and Hillbrow was the sanctuary in which *Makwerekwere* were based.

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 17

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage outlines the prejudiced feelings that many people from South Africa held against immigrants coming from other African countries. It is noteworthy that these prejudices come through two different sources: one more formal (the newspaper), and one more informal (the "grapevine" of gossip." This suggest that both methods are equally powerful, and that no matter the method, telling stories like these can really impact the way people see the world. In fact, this quote shows the life stages of a piece of gossip—it might start from something written in a newspaper, and then it might trickle down through the grapevine until even rumors are "authoritative." It is significant that people from Tiragalong are quick to accept the false belief that West African meat is what causes AIDS, since this shows their desire to distance themselves from the disease by using a xenophobic scapegoat. By disdainfully suggesting that Johannesburg is a "sanctuary" for immigrants, the people of Tiragalong are also able to validate their prejudice against those that live in the city, showing again their willingness to believe information that confirms their biases, which only perpetuates their prejudice.

> Like most Hillbrowans, Cousin took his soccer seriously. You and he had had many disagreements on the subject of support for foreign teams—especially those from elsewhere in Africa. You often accused him of being a hypocrite, because his vocal support for black non-South African teams, whenever they played against European clubs, contrasted so glaringly with his prejudice towards black foreigners the rest of the time. Cousin would always take the opportunity during these arguments to complain about the crime and grime in Hillbrow, for which he held such foreigners responsible; not just for the physical decay of the place but the moral decay.

**Related Characters:** Refentše , Cousin

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 17

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, the narrator talks about a conversation Refentše often had with Cousin when he (Refentše) was still alive. This quote proves that, throughout his life, Refentše had many conversations with Cousin about Cousin's prejudice towards immigrants from outside South Africa. Cousin's attitude is noteworthy because it highlights his prejudiced hypocrisy (which Refentše points out)—and asks how a person could root for someone in sports but not in life. This hypocrisy works with the story's larger idea that so many prejudices are simply illogical and are rooted in a lack of interrogation. Cousin's attitude is also particularly significant because it underscores how South African society used the idea of immigration as a scapegoat to supposedly explain broader social problems, many of which were actually caused by the destructive laws of the Apartheid era. Hillbrow is an underfunded area in the middle of a relatively wealthy city, but the fact that Cousin blames (mostly Black) non-South Africans for the "physical" decay as well as the "moral" decay shows that, even after Apartheid ended, racist ideology was prevalent in South Africa—the previous government was even capable of making Black South Africans racist against other Black Africans. This exemplifies the way that colonialism (and here, Apartheid in particular) does not only use laws and legal oppression but also cultural and social indoctrination.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

If you were still alive now, Refentše, child of Tiragalong and Hillbrow, you might finally have written the books you had hoped to write; completed your collection of poems called *Love Songs, Blues and Interludes*, that you wished to dedicate to our Hillbrow. Your one published short story about life in Hillbrow might have paved a smooth way to more such stories. You often used to think about the scarcity of written Hillbrow fictions in English and Sepedi. You asked around, and those who could read the other nine of the eleven official South African languages answered you by saying that even in those languages, written fictions were very scarce.

**Related Characters:** Refentše

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 29

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this quote, the narrator talks about something that Refentše could do if he were still alive, suggesting that Refentše would have written a book of poems specifically about Hillbrow if he'd had the time. It's significant that there are not many books with Hillbrow as a subject, which shows that there must not be a market for stories from the inner city. This speaks to the divide between poorer and richer neighborhoods in the cultural imagination (as well as in reality). It's also important that the lack of stories about Hillbrow isn't only in the languages that Refentše can read (English and Sepedi) but in other national languages that are spoken in South Africa and in Hillbrow. This suggests again that publishers are not willing to take a chance on books written either about Hillbrow (a poorer neighborhood) or in languages that won't travel outside of South Africa.

It is also significant that the narrator addresses Refentše as "child of Tiragalong and Hillbrow," because it shows that Refentše is becoming more and more integrated into the city, despite the prejudices that his hometown carries towards Johannesburg. This suggests that people can mature out of prejudice if they challenge themselves (like moving to a new, unfamiliar place) and can even find belonging in new settings.

As you look back now at your life on Earth, you find it grimly amusing that suicide could be so seductive. You are fascinated by the stories of your home boys and girls, talking about your suicide as if no thought had gone into it.

**Related Characters:** Refentše

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 30

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote takes place after a discussion about Refentše's literary goals and how he might have written a book if he had not committed suicide. This passage highlights two things: first, the way rumors travel from corner to corner of rural neighborhoods simply because of the force and power of storytelling. This emphasizes the extent to which stories—even in the form of gossip—preoccupy the people in this novel and influence the way they move through the world. This passage also underscores how there is likely a misunderstanding—and some ignorance—around suicide in Tiragalong, since Refentše is surprised that people talk about his suicide "as if no thought had gone into it." Refentše's surprise (and sarcastic, "grim" amusement) suggests the exact opposite, that he had actually thought so deeply about the subject he was eventually "seduced" by the idea. This suggests again that the people gossiping—the "home boys and girls" (from Tiragalong)—don't want to try to understand Refentše's position, emphasizing their unwillingness to explore ideas outside of what the majority of the people in the village say.

You gave her a hug, an embrace. The spiritual support had to be backed up by a physical one. You knew well enough that physical touch could work wonders. You yourself always felt better when a friend gave you a hug, a pat on the shoulder—something like that—when you were sad, hurt or even when you had achieved. So you did what you liked friend and close, caring relatives to do for you.

Bohlale returned your sympathy with a hug, an embrace of her own.

The boy in your trousers decided to express his sympathies too. You felt your heart begin to beat quite fast.

**Related Characters:** Refentše , Bohlale, Sammy, Lerato

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 37

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Refentše thinks back on the night that he and Bohlale had sex, meaning that Refentše cheated on his

partner Lerato, and Bohlale on her partner Sammy. This scene is a pivotal moment for the plot because it sets off Refentše's guilt, which causes him to pull away from Lerato, which—in turn—causes her to sleep with Sammy, which finally leads to Refentše's suicide.

The story's narrative technique—addressing Refentše as "you" rather than saying his name—really changes the structure of this scene, since it puts readers directly in Refentše's place, as if the *reader* is the "you" being addressed. It is important for the rest of the novel that the reader understand Refentše's feelings as he made this mistake, since it shows that Refentše is simply human, deserving of judgement and forgiveness, so this narrative technique is particularly significant in this passage. It is also meaningful that Refentše at first thinks he is only touching Bohlale like a friend, because he knows that physical touch makes people feel better. This seems like an innocent thought, and it suggests that Refentše's original intentions were pure, even though his thoughts then changed from platonic to sexual.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that Refentše's desire for Bohlale comes from "the boy in his trousers." This suggests that Refentše acknowledges that his decision to cheat on the love of his life was rather boyish and not very mature. This later contrasts with Refentše's decision *not* to cheat on Lerato with Refilwe, even though he had the chance, and with the maturity and growth that he shows in heaven.

> Your mother had never been to Hillbrow, nor any part of Johannesburg. But your mother was not interested in such details. She hated the Hillbrow women with unmatchable venom—a human venom so fatal it would have put the black mamba's to shame.

**Related Characters:** Refentše , Refentše's Mother, Lerato

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 39

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs during an explanation of Refentše's mother's prejudices, explaining why Refentše could not go to his mother for comfort after Lerato cheated on him. It is significant that Refentše's mother has never actually been to Hillbrow—or "any part" of the city of Johannesburg—because it is remarkable that she holds such intense feelings of hatred towards people that live in a place she's never seen. This feels unfair, and it speaks to the book's insistence that many prejudices don't make sense if thought all the way through. Refentše's mother hating "Hillbrow women" specifically speaks to a particularly sexist component of the xenophobia that people in Tiragalong had—often, women from Hillbrow are put down in a way that suggests they are sexually promiscuous, and that this is the reason they deserve bad things. Much like it is difficult for Refentše to wrap his head around prejudice from Black South Africans towards other Black Africans, it's particularly illogical to see that Refentše's mother has a sexist hatred towards other woman "so fatal" that it is measured against the "venom" of a poisonous snake.

> Refilwe rewrote large chunks of the story that Tiragalong had constructed about you, which was that you committed suicide because your mother had bewitched you. In an attempt to drive your heart from the Johannesburg woman, Tiragalong had said, your mother had used medicines that were too strong. They destroyed your brain.
>
> [...]
>
> Refilwe [...] rewrote the version of your suicide. In this version of things, you had been bewitched indeed—but not by your mother; by a loose-thighed Hillbrowan called Lerato.

**Related Characters:** Refentše , Refilwe, Refentše's Mother, Lerato

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 43

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage describes the two different ways that the people of Tiragalong explained Refentše's suicide. In the beginning, they blamed Refentše's mother because they thought she'd tried to give him "medicine" to make him stop loving Lerato and that the medicines backfired and "destroyed" his brain. The people of Tiragalong end up using this story to claim that Refentše's mother is a witch, which is why they kill her. Refilwe's reworking of the story still involved "bewitching," but she claims that Lerato used magic to make Refentše fall in love with her in the first place. These two differing narratives show how seriously stories and mythology are taken by the Tiragalong community and prove how destructive (even deadly) a false rumor can be. This also shows the way that prejudice against people from Hillbrow intensifies when the person is a woman, showing a

sexist nature to the rumors.

It's also very noteworthy that the narrative personifies the town of Tiragalong: the line "Tiragalong had said" shows that the village functioned like a single entity, which emphasizes how single-mindedness of the people living in the village. This speaks to the book's larger argument that this type of isolation and groupthink causes ignorance and prejudice, and that people often need to step outside of their community or comfort zone to learn to think for themselves.

That day, when Lerato brought you food—she was an outstanding cook—you told her you were not hungry. She knew immediately that things were not right. She was used to you swallowing once or twice more, even when you were already full, just to satisfy her […]. When you again refused her food and—the second indication—showed no sign of enjoying the games you often played together, she began to drift into depression. More so because when she asked what was wrong, you said:

Nothing.

*Nothing* could not be a satisfactory answer when love was crumbling before her eyes.

**Related Characters:** Refentše , Lerato , Sammy, Bohlale

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 49

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage narrates the day leading up to Lerato and Sammy sleeping together and to Refentše's suicide. Lerato appears as a caring girlfriend, one who loves her partner very much and who cooks for him lovingly. Usually, Refentše responds in turn, but his lingering guilt about sleeping with Bohlale causes him to retreat. This section highlights that Lerato and Refentše really love each other. Lerato usually cooks wonderful food for Refentše, and Refentše usually eats extra "just to satisfy her." This shows the close relationship they normally share, which is why Lerato can sense that something is off. This suggests that Lerato may have been understanding if Refentše had come clean about his affair with Bohlale, making it extra frustrating that he chose to keep his guilt to himself. Lerato is devastated by Refentše lying to her, telling her that "nothing" is wrong. Thus, the story suggests that if Refentše had been able to move past his guilt and communicate with Lerato while he was still alive, they all could have avoided heartache.

As it happened, you were spared the need for decision. Because the very next day Bohlale, on her way to visit Sammy at the hospital, was knocked over by a speeding car that jumped the red robot. It was driven by fleeing hijackers fleeing a pursuing convoy of Johannesburg Murder and Robber Squad cars[…]. Bohlale was run over because, although she had made way for the speeding cars, the hijackers had lost control of their newly appropriated vehicle. They ran into her right where she stood on the pavement. After her death, any confession seemed a needless complication.

**Related Characters:** Refentše , Bohlale, Sammy

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 53

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote comes just after Refentše and Bohlale disagree about whether to tell Sammy about their affair. In a twist of fate, Refentše does not have to live with Bohlale's decision to tell Sammy, because she dies on the way to the hospital. This emphasizes the unpredictability of life (which the symbol of the hit-and-run signifies) but it also suggests that it's possible Bohlale's fate would have been different if Refentše had been open to telling the truth. The narrator uses a bit of irony here when he says that Refentše was "spared" the decision—though it's true that he did not have to tell Sammy after Bohlale died, his life was worse off by not coming clean, and his inability to confess eventually leads to his suicide. Thus, "spared" is meant to be read ironically. The same is true of considering coming clean about the affair "a needless complication." Though, for a moment, it might seem as though Refentše is off the hook because Bohlale dies, Refentše's life crumbles around him because he cannot tell Sammy the truth, and so this "needless" fact (which is actually quite a big deal) is, in reality, a pivotal and important piece of information. Refentše's inability to share the truth with Sammy leads to death and tragedy, suggesting that Refentše made a big mistake when he did not agree with Bohlale to come clean before she dies. This emphasizes how Refentše is an imperfect protagonist, but it makes his later growth all the more meaningful.

> The diseased woman of your story did not resolve to tumble down from the twentieth floor of her building, to escape her misery. She chose a different route to dealing with her life. Her first resolution was to stop going home, to Tiragalong, where the wagging tongues did their best to hasten her death. But then she discovered, like you did, Refentše, that a conscious decision to desert home is a difficult one to sustain. Because home always travels with you, with your consciousness as its vehicle. So her second resolution was to pour all her grief and alienation into the world of storytelling. You had her write a novel about Hillbrow, xenophobia and AIDS and the prejudices of rural lives.

**Related Characters:** Refentše , Refentše's Protagonist (The Young Woman) , Refilwe

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 55

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, the narrator reminisces with Refentše about the short story that Refentše wrote before he died. The story was very important to Refentše, since it dealt with the issues he saw in his daily life, particularly xenophobia and prejudice. It's noteworthy that the central character in Refentše's story does not die by suicide and instead decides to write a book to process her grief, because it suggests that Refentše might also have been able to stay alive if he'd been capable of channeling his emotions into his art. It is also notable that both Refentše and his protagonist are unable to ever fully separate themselves from their home, Tiragalong, because it "travels" with them in their minds. This foreshadows the way Refilwe will return home when she is about to die, despite the terrible prejudice she will face with a positive AIDS diagnosis.

This quote also highlights how the novel itself is quite meta, since Phaswane Mpe—the novel's author—is writing a book about somebody (Refentše) writing a book about somebody (the young woman) who is *also* writing a book, which only underscores the novel's insistence that storytelling is a prominent and vital part of life.

> She did not know that writing in an African language in South Africa could be such a curse. She had not anticipated that the publishers' reviewers would brand her novel vulgar. Calling shit and genitalia by their correct names in Sepedi was apparently regarded as vulgar by these reviewers, who had for a long time been reviewing works of fiction for educational publishers, and who were determined to ensure that such works did not offend the systems they served. These systems were very inconsistent with their attitudes to education. They considered it fine, for instance, to call genitalia by their correct names in English and Afrikaans biology books—[...] yet in all other languages, they criminalized such linguistic honesty.

**Related Characters:** Refentše's Protagonist (The Young Woman) , Refentše

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 56

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Refentše's protagonist struggles with the fact that writing in an indigenous African language "criminalizes" her book, which dooms it commercially. One of the most important points in this passage is the distinction between Sepedi—a native South African language—and English and Afrikaans, both languages with European origins. That it is a "curse" to write in Sepedi proves that the publishing landscape of South Africa is still operating under a colonial mindset, meaning that it privileges the culture of the colonists over the languages that were indigenous to the country. It is particularly noteworthy that the exact same words in English or Afrikaans ("shit" and "genitalia") are "vulgar" in Sepedi, because it proves that publishers in Johannesburg have obvious double standards. To say that these words "offend the systems they served" further emphasizes the way African languages are discriminated against, because it suggests that their very existence is an "offence" to the publishing world.

After Apartheid's dismantling, there were (and still are) 11 official languages in South Africa, but it's telling that "all other languages" besides English and Afrikaans suffer the same fate as Sepedi. This underscores how, even after Apartheid's official end, European colonization impacted cultural aspects of South Africa. Given the meta nature of the larger story (the fact that Refentše shares many characteristics with *Welcome to Our Hillbrow's* author, Phaswane Mpe), it is possible to infer that Mpe himself believed that writing *his* novel in Sepedi—a language he was fluent in—would have similarly doomed his novel.

For every new personal experience adds to our knowledge of life and living, death and dying. Every act of listening, seeing, smelling, feeling, tasting is a reconfiguring of the story of our lives.

Yet, when Lerato and Sammy provided you with the chance to add to your storehouse of experience, you could not rise to it. It was at that point that you began to brood, a tinge too gloomily, about love and friendship and the whole purpose of living.

**Related Characters:** Refentše , Lerato , Sammy

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 61

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, the narrator assesses Refentše's response to Sammy and Lerato's affair. Before dying, Refentše clearly had an appreciation for life's complications, since he often noted how his friends and family were imperfect and even ignorant but wanted to change their opinions rather than write them off. The narrator is aligned with Refentše's outlook on the world when they talk about new experiences influencing "our knowledge of life and living," since Refentše often draws on his past experience to assess various situations. But that Refentše cannot "rise to" the challenge of overcoming his grief after finding Lerato and Sammy in bed means that he finally encountered a circumstance that has thoroughly overwhelmed him. His usual methods of reflection and thinking through situations aren't powerful enough to combat the hurt and isolation he felt when he thought Lerato no longer loved him. This highlights just how deeply he was in pain in the days leading up to his suicide, and how the thoughts he had about "love and friendship and the whole purpose of living" were unusually dark ("too gloomy") and therefore difficult to overcome. It is meaningful that the novel shows the pain Refentše was in before his suicide and even suggests that his suicide was uncharacteristic, since it shows that the novel does not blame Refentše for his death. It is a very compassionate stance that also doesn't blame Lerato or Sammy, simply suggesting that living is complicated and challenging and that without enough time or space for reflection, anyone can be overwhelmed by feelings of depression.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

You wished, Refentše, that you could return to Johannesburg to let Lerato know that she was never alone in these acts of well-intentioned generosity that we call betrayal, that you too had tasted their bitter-sweet fruits. But you were powerless. You could not return to Alexandra, where Lerato was staying at her mother's house, when she swallowed the tablets. You could not, because you were not in control of life in this Heaven. Just as you were not in control of life on Earth.

**Related Characters:** Refentše , Lerato , Sammy

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 67

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, the narrator addresses Refentše, who is in heaven after his death, as Refentše looks down on earth and watches Lerato commit suicide. This is one of the most direct scenes addressing Refentše's change in attitude towards the situation with Lerato and Sammy, since Refentše now sees Lerato's "betrayal" (sleeping with Sammy) as an "act of well-intentioned generosity." This is a radically different way to view the situation than how he saw it when he was still alive, when he felt so betrayed that he decided to die by suicide. This change in attitude highlights how self-reflection (even if it is from heaven) is an important component in growing and maturing. It is also significant that Refentše understands that he cannot "control" life, even from heaven; a large factor in his suicide was feeling as though he'd lost control, as though his relationship—and thus his life—was spinning away from him. By accepting this lack of control in the afterlife, the story again emphasizes how reflection has changed Refentše and made him a more thoughtful and understanding person.

She told you what it meant to exist with the fear that one's misdemeanor, one's open-thighedness—as people would construe her behavior—would be uncovered; the anxiety at the prospect of facing an incredulous mother, whose heart would sink into the abyss of dismay on discovering, suddenly, that her much trusted daughter was, in effect, a murderess; of existing with her life clouded by constant brooding over what fellow University students would have to say about her sexual looseness, that had driven their beloved lecturer into the Dark Chamber of suicide.

**Related Characters:** Lerato , Refentše , Liz (Lerato's

Mother)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 69

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Lerato shares with Refentše (in heaven) all of the fears that she dealt with before she died by suicide. This quote shows just how deeply worried and guilty Lerato felt after Refentše's death, and it explicitly states the reasons why she felt like she also had to commit suicide. Saying that "people" would "construe" the affair with Sammy simply as Lerato sleeping around shows how misunderstood Lerato felt by the rumor mill in Tiragalong. Lerato also knew that people in Johannesburg would be gossiping—Refentše was a popular teacher and she felt as though people would say that she'd "driven" the university's "beloved lecturer" to his death. This is striking, as is the fact that Lerato considered herself a "murderess" (or, at least, knew that people spreading rumors would call her that), because it shows just how much guilt she was carrying before she died. This emphasizes how dangerous these rumors and storytelling could be, since a big part of Lerato's death had to do with what people were saying about her (and what her mother would think of her). This highlights how people's feelings about their own actions can easily be manipulated by the way other people view and understand them, emphasizing the awesome power that stories and storytelling have in the world.

> It did not occur to Molori and his uncle to doubt the bone thrower's insights. His accurate knowledge of their family affairs was too impressive; where else could such knowledge have come from, they reasoned, other than from his reading of the bones? The uncle reminded Molori about the Tiragalong saying: witches have no distinct kin colour through which other people can recognize and identify them. Piet and his mother might put on the act of being good people. But who was to say that that was not the art of witches?

**Related Characters:** Bone Throwers, Molori, Piet

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 77

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage comes as Refentše and Lerato, from heaven, watch the "film" of Piet's ill-fated life in Alexandra. Molori's mother fell ill, and he and his uncle called on a local bone thrower to explain why she was sick.

This passage reads as ironic, since just a page earlier the narrator explained that this bone thrower made it his business to know all of the people in the area's family trees. Thus, the bone thrower is actually using his knowledge of Molori's family (not any mystical power) to accuse Piet and his mother of treachery. Molori's "reasoning," then, is supposed to show the difficulties of breaking from one way of thinking (here, believing in bone throwers) when a community is so isolated and closed off. Molori's ignorance—wondering "where else" the bone thrower could possibly have gotten this information—represents the ways that certain belief systems tend to go unquestioned, especially when they're so widely supported by an entire community.

> Your skull threatened to collapse at any moment, causing you the worst headache known to humanity. Your head spun at untold speed and you became intensely dizzy in these hot, whirling webs of sensory input, your memory picking out choice words here, scenes there…the infinite fragments combining and recombing in the containing frame of your head. Until the roaring pressure of your skull finally exploded:
>
> Welcome to our Hillbrow…Welcome to our Alexandra…Welcome to our Tiragalong in Johannesburg…

**Related Characters:** Refentše , Piet

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 79

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Refentše, from heaven, has just watched Piet get murdered. Refentše is devastated watching the scene play out, and he grieves for Piet (and for Lerato, since she is his daughter). He feels as though so many of the places that he knows in his life—Tiragalong, where he was born, Alexandra, where Lerato's parents are from—are similar because they contain both joy and tragedy. The fact that he thinks there is a "Tiragalong in Johannesburg," which of course there isn't, emphasizes the way that places end up overlapping in his mind because of their many similarities. This is particularly important because the world tells him that places are fundamentally different—Tiragalong tells

him that Hillbrow is full of crime, people in South Africa tell him that their nation is fundamentally different from the surrounding countries—yet Refentše comes to believe that there is a unity to all people and all places. The refrain "welcome to our…" followed by "Tiragalong in Johannesburg" emphasizes this point, since the refrain plays on the strange interchangeability of seemingly contrasting locales, ultimately suggesting that people from different places aren't quite as dissimilar as they tend to assume.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

She had not given up on the idea that one day you would be tired of these Johannesburg women, that your thoughts would then turn back to your home girl. She knew, like all Tiragalong, that there was always a return to the ruins; only to the womb was there no return.

**Related Characters:** Refilwe

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 82

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes when Refilwe invited Refentše over for dinner, technically to thank him for writing a reference letter but really to try and make him fall back in love with her. Refilwe, at this time, still held prejudices against people from Johannesburg and felt as though Refentše would be much happier (and better off) with someone from his hometown.

It is significant that Refilwe's thinking is "like all Tiragalong"—later, she will break entirely with the general groupthink of her home village, but here she is still aligned with the way that they see things. Yet this idea that there is "always a return to the ruins" foreshadows the way that she, later on, will return home after studying abroad and after finding out that she has AIDS. Still, by saying that there is no return to the womb but that there is a return to everything else emphasizes how many of the novel's characters will return over and over again to certain moments in their lives, and most of the characters will actually better themselves because of this return—they'll be able to learn from their past mistakes and grow from them. So, although Refilwe's initial thought is more about the idea that Refentše will "return" to her because they are childhood lovers and because they share a home village, the idea of "returning" is actually very important to the novel overall and can be seen as optimistic, since it suggests someone always has the ability to correct past mistakes if they take the time to reflect on them.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

She was excited by the challenge of the new position and looked forward to earning a better salary. But she soon discovered the frustrations that went with her new and prestigious position. Although she knew what good books looked like, the company kept on reminding her that good books were only those that could get a school prescription. What frustrated her so much was the extent to which publishing was in many ways out of touch with the language and events of everyday life.

**Related Characters:** Refilwe, Refentše , Refentše's Protagonist (The Young Woman)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 94

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Refilwe has just been promoted at the publishing house that she works for in Johannesburg. Still, she is bothered by the way that the company views "good books." Earlier in the novel, Refentše talks about how his novel's character's book gets rejected because it is too "vulgar" to be purchased by schools, and this idea of vulgarity comes from the fact that the woman uses Sepedi words for "shit" and "genitalia." So, when Refilwe is frustrated that certain books are not "good" because they won't be picked up by school prescriptions, the novel calls back to the earlier distinction between "good" and "vulgar" to again emphasize that only English-language books are publishable in South Africa. Refilwe underscores this by saying that publishing is "out of touch" with the "everyday" language, which means that people in South Africa actually use a mix of languages (and speak with words that aren't always perfectly academic). Refilwe's experience brings to life the experience of Refentše's protagonist. Refilwe's publishing house being uninterested in "everyday" language also accentuates the cultural repercussions of colonialism and Apartheid, and proves how the English language (particularly formal, academic English) still overwrites the many indigenous South African languages because of colonialism and decades of Apartheid.

[...] his story that looked at AIDS and *Makwerekwere* and the many-sidedness of life and love in our Hillbrow and Tiragalong and everywhere. His scarecrow heroine was a big influence on Refilwe's thinking. She had read the story many times, and each time it made her weep anew. Partly because of the memories it brought up of Refentše. And partly because it made her see herself and her own prejudices in a different light.

**Related Characters:** Refilwe, Refentše , Refentše's Protagonist (The Young Woman)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 96

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Refilwe reflects on the power of Refentše's story and on how much she resonated with the young woman who serves as the protagonist of that story. It is significant that reading literature made Refilwe see her own prejudices "in a different light," since this underscores the novel's insistence that storytelling can be very powerful (for good or evil). Refilwe recognizes the ways that she has previously been prejudiced, particularly towards people from Hillbrow and towards "Makwerekwere," and weeping for the fate of the young woman in the story is what brings her to this deep sense of recognition. It is also noteworthy that the story is a way for Refilwe to still feel connected to Refentše after his death, since reading it stirs up memories of him, and this further emphasizes the novel's overall belief or assertion that storytelling is full of meaning and significance.

Jackie thought that it would be a good idea to go straight to the administration block and get all the formalities of enrolment over and done with. Papers were produced and signed. No, Refilwe did not have to register with the Oxford police, as many Africans, including South Africans during the Apartheid days, had to do. South Africans, black and white, were very fine people these days, thanks to the release of Rolihlahla Mandela from Robben Island in 1990 and his push for the 1994 democratic elections.

**Related Characters:** Refilwe, Jackie

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 100

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Refilwe has just arrived at Oxford Brookes University with her British friend Jackie. Refilwe notes that, because she is South African, she does not have to register with the local police, even though only a few years earlier she probably would have had to, and even though most other Africans *still* have to. This idea that anyone arriving from African countries might be of interest to the police is a clear demonstration of the way that British society is prejudiced and racist.

There is also a sarcastic irony to the way the passage is written: by saying that South Africans, both Black and white, are "very fine people these days," the novel suggests that something must have shifted very recently to make it this way. Of course, something *has* shifted—when the Apartheid government was dismantled and Nelson (Rolihlahla) Mandela was elected president, it was only then that people from European countries began to see Black South Africans as "very fine people." The sarcasm comes from the idea that, only a few years before the change in government, these exact same people (Refilwe included) would have been treated very differently, which shows the way that this racism and prejudice is fundamentally illogical. This passage underscores the way that global and national politics serve as a way to judge individuals, which often leads to unwarranted assumptions and prejudices.

Refentše knew only too well that Refilwe as going to bear the brunt of their wrath when she went back to Tiragalong. These gods and devils of our Tiragalong would say:

So, you thought the ones in Johannesburg were not bad enough! You had to import a worse example for yourself!

They would say this, because the stranger-with-Refentše's-face that Refilwe met in our *Jude the Obscure* was a Nigerian in search of green pastures in our Oxford. He and Refilwe did find some green pastures in each other's embraces that following Wednesday evening. They had Refentše's blessing. His only wish was that he owned life, so that he could force those on Earth to give the lovers their blessings too.

**Related Characters:** Refilwe, Refentše , The Nigerian Man

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 112

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage comes when Refilwe returns from Oxford and has been diagnosed with AIDS. Refentše watches her from heaven, thinking about all of the hate she will face once she returns to Tiragalong with the disease. It is significant that

she chooses to return even though she's well aware of the abuse she will face, since this emphasizes how much her hometown means to her. The abuse that the people of Tiragalong come up with is both racist and xenophobic (suggesting that her Nigerian lover is even "worse" than the immigrants she could have found in Johannesburg), yet she is determined to die in her home country. Refentše is moved that Refilwe has found love since his death, and he wishes them well, which is why it is all the more tragic that Refilwe will have to part ways with the Nigerian man. They both found "green pastures" in each other's arms, which recalls the idea (which Refentše puts forward) that immigrants from other African countries are in search of "green pastures" when they come to South Africa. It also suggests that she and the Nigerian man are underdogs trying to find some comfort and connection in a racist and prejudiced world.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ She wanted to be laid to rest in our Tiragalong, even if it meant exiting this world amidst the ignorant talk of people who turned diseases into crimes. She knew, as Lerato had known, that it was difficult for a woman to face her friends, colleagues and the whole community, and say her name, when they all judged her to be just a loose pair of thighs with voracious appetite […]. Now it was her turn to be accused.

**Related Characters:** Refilwe, Lerato

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 116

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Refilwe decides that she wants to return to Tiragalong (and be buried there when she inevitably dies) even though she will have to face the village's gossip. The townspeople have not changed their thinking, but Refilwe has. This shows the very painful decision she had to make about whether or not to go back and suggests that her desire to see her home once more was stronger than her fear of the rumors that would surely circulate about her. This shows that Refilwe has become a strong character—someone not only able to break from her previous ways of thinking about the world but also someone strong enough to withstand rumors and gossip.

There is also, of course, a bit of irony to the fact that Refilwe must face the same cruel, sexist gossip that she once spread about Lerato. The narrative doesn't take any pleasure in this parallel, though, since Refilwe does not need to be punished to change her thinking—she already *has* been punished. This demonstrates that life is not always fair and that even if you become a better person, it doesn't always mean life will reward you.

❝ But she also knew in her heart that she was finished already. When she and her Nigerian were told that they had AIDS, they were also given to know that they had both been HIV-positive for a long time. Refilwe, in particular, must have been infected for a decade or so. Except that she had not known that. So when the disease struck, it seemed that it came suddenly, with no warning.

**Related Characters:** Refilwe, The Nigerian Man

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 117

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote explains how Refilwe knows that she will be stigmatized by the people in Tiragalong when she returns, especially because she was with a man from Nigeria and has now been diagnosed with AIDS. However, it is important to note that Refilwe seems to have had HIV before she ever met her lover—before she ever left Tiragalong, in fact. This proves that the feeling that most people in Tiragalong have towards AIDS—that it is a problem only for immigrants and city people—is unwarranted. This furthers the idea that the people of Tiragalong are willfully ignorant about the disease and, of course, that they don't want to accept that the disease can be found within their insular community. That Refilwe felt like the disease came on "suddenly," even though she'd had it for ten years, emphasizes the idea that life is unpredictable and hard to plan for, no matter how much self-improvement a person undergoes.

Heaven is the world of our continuing existence, located in the memory and consciousness of those who live with us and after us. It is the archive that those we left behind keep visiting and revisiting; digging this out, suppressing or burying that. Continually reconfiguring the stories of our lives, as if they alone hold the real and true version. Just as you, Refilwe, tried to reconfigure the story of Refentše; just as Tiragalong now is going to do the same with you. Heaven can also be Hell, depending on the nature of our continuing existence in the memories and consciousness of the living.

Like Refentše, the first real Bone of your Heart, you too have had your fair taste of the sweet and bitter juices of life, that ooze through the bones of our Tiragalong and Alexandra, Hillbrow and Oxford.

Refilwe, Child of our World and other Worlds…

Welcome to our Heaven…

**Related Characters:** Refilwe, Refentše

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 124

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage is the last page of the novel and explains the community of heaven that many of the characters—including Refentše and Refilwe—now live in. The story suggests that heaven might be similar to earth and that people might have the chance to reflect on their lives and live better ones in the afterlife. It is particularly important that heaven is made up of people "visiting and revisiting" the "archive" of their lives. This suggests that reflection is a key element of heaven, and the novel has shown that reflection is what helps people become better, more enlightened versions of themselves.

Refilwe, like Refentše, now understands the "sweet and bitter juices" of life, which is to say that she understands how life is a mixture of joy and sadness—and that without this combination, it would not be the same. The narrator addresses Refilwe as a "child" of multiple worlds, indicating that she has crossed over into the afterlife and that she understands the way that life works on earth *and* in heaven. The idea of "reconfiguring" a story returns once more, emphasizing the way stories are meant to be told and retold—something that will happen as long as people are around to tell these stories.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### CHAPTER 1

The narrator addresses Refentše, "child of Tiragalong," telling him that if he were still alive, he would have been happy Bafana Bafana (the South African soccer team) lost to France in the World Cup in 1998. This is because if they had won, like in 1995, Hillbrow's streets would have been rowdy and dangerous. In 1995, people celebrating the win drove so recklessly that someone **hit** a seven-year-old girl with a car, killing her. Nobody ever found the driver. The people of Hillbrow continued celebrating as the girl's mother wept, their chants drowning out her cries. When tragic or difficult things like this happen, the people of Hillbrow just say, "**Welcome to our** Hillbrow!"

*This lays the groundwork for several crucial aspects of the novel. First, it announces that Refentše, one of the central characters, is already dead. This indicates that the story will likely travel through time in a non-chronological way. Also, it is significant that the narrator address Refentše directly as "you," since this is an unusual narrative voice—one that intentionally draws attention to the narration itself. By doing this, the novel makes the narration a part of the story and brings the reader in closer, as though they are listening to a conversation rather than reading. This scene also introduces the symbolic significance of hit-and-run incidents—these happen frequently in Hillbrow, and they are tragic because a character dies, but they also symbolize the sudden way that life can change (and the randomness of life). Additionally, the refrain "welcome to our" will recur throughout the story (and is important enough to be in the book's title). Here, early on, the refrain is used to convey characters' frustration with the situation in Hillbrow and their feelings of powerlessness when it comes to changing anything.*

Refentše came to live in Hillbrow through "converging routes." He was born in Tiragalong but left that small village to attend the University of the Witwatersrand, located in Johannesburg. Hillbrow, a poor neighborhood within Johannesburg, was a "menacing monster" to Refentše. Industry was leaving Hillbrow, and it was known for poverty and crime. Nevertheless, Hillbrow had a certain draw for Refentše, as it did for many young people from Tiragalong.

*The contrasting ways that Hillbrow appears to Refentše is noteworthy, since it underscores many characters' ambivalence towards Johannesburg. Because Refentše was born in a rural village, he sees the city as "menacing"—this foreshadows the way many from his hometown will be prejudiced against people from the city. And yet, Hillbrow also appeals to Refentše, which shows that he has an adventurous nature and thinks for himself.*

The townspeople of Tiragalong, though, mostly saw the city of Johannesburg as a place of sex, sin, and sickness. AIDS, which people call the "strange illness," is sweeping through the country, and people from rural Tiragalong blame people in the city. They particularly blame those they called Makwerekwere, which is a slur for any immigrant who comes to South Africa from a different African country. The narrator points out that, most often, these immigrants are Black Africans.

*The townspeople of Tiragalong happily pass along rumors—this type of oral communication will play a huge role in the novel's plot. Rumors, another form of storytelling, prove to be extremely destructive to many characters' lives later in the story. It is also noteworthy that the people of Tiragalong are so prejudiced against immigrants from other countries, the majority of whom are Black. South Africa went through decades of legal Apartheid, where the country was racially segregated. During this period, Black South Africans had little to no rights. That the Black residents of Tiragalong hold such prejudices against Black immigrants from other countries show the ways in which the racist laws of Apartheid and colonization have seeped into the minds South Africans, even after the legal discriminatory system is no longer in place. Additionally, it is significant that the people from Tiragalong do not call AIDS by its name, instead referring to it as the "strange illness." In this way, it's as though they think they can keep the "illness" at arm's length. And by blaming people migrating from other parts of Africa, they can pretend that AIDS is not a problem where they live. In turn, the people of Tiragalong manage to convince themselves that they have no responsibility to learn about the disease.*

The people of Tiragalong tell all sorts of rumors about AIDS, like that it originated in West Africa because of a certain kind of meat that West Africans eat. This leads them to be even more skeptical of and cruel towards Makwerekwere, since they blame them for the disease. The people of Tiragalong also talk about "bizarre sexual behavior"—referring to men having sex with men—and claim that this is what causes the disease, which they think only happens in Johannesburg and Hillbrow.

*Again, the story outlines early on that Tiragalong is a place where rumors and gossip freely circulate, and that these rumors are often based on ignorance and prejudice. By making the implicitly homophobic suggestion that "bizarre sexual behavior"—or sex that is not heterosexual—only happens in other countries or in the city, the rural people of Tiragalong can pretend that they have the moral high ground and that they do not have to worry about AIDS. Also, suggesting that this is the* only *way that someone could be HIV-positive shows a critical ignorance about the disease. Moreover, by blaming AIDS on food that is only eaten in West Africa, they give themselves more of a reason to discriminate against immigrants while pretending there is no way the disease could show up in their village.*

For "formal" news (in addition to rumors), people listen to the radio, which always seems to be broadcasting stories of robberies, rape, drug dealing, or murder in the city. People from Hillbrow say "**Welcome to our** Hillbrow…" when they hear these stories, and the people of Tiragalong consider these crimes a city problem. But the young boys in Tiragalong also see crime glamorized on television and go around town "driving" cars made out of wire and tennis balls.

*The novel positions "formal" news like the radio next to the informal rumors that move through Tiragalong, which shows that radio reporting, too, is a form of storytelling and can completely influence someone's opinion about a topic. The young boys' desire to "drive" around toy cars is an eerie callback to the original story of the hit-and-run, since so far cars have been shown to be the bearers of death. That these toy cars are made from wires and tennis balls also highlights the poverty in the area of Hillbrow.*

Refentše stayed with his cousin in Hillbrow after getting accepted to the University of the Witwatersrand. Cousin did not live in the center of town, but rather in the suburb's outskirts, accessed by a winding array of side streets. His apartment was on the fifth floor of a building called Vickers Place. Refentše was amazed, at first, by the sheer number of people he saw in Hillbrow, rushing this way and that to get to work. He wondered when they have time to make their meals and sleep. Refentše, at first, did not see much of the violence Hillbrow is known for, though he did see a few "semi-naked souls"; Cousin told him that these people are sex workers.

*Refentše's reaction when he first comes to Hillbrow is one of awe—because he is so used to the rural way of life in Tiragalong, seeing this many people all living together shocks him. This shows how people often change their outlook on the world when they move to different places because they have to readjust to the reality around them. It is also important that Refentše's initial view of Hillbrow includes some things he expected to see (because of the way the city was described in Tiragalong) like sex workers, but also some things he did not, like a lack of violence. This shows that rumors and gossip, though compelling stories, very rarely tell the whole picture.*

Refentše thought that Vickers Place was surprisingly quiet—quieter than he expected because of the stories about what Hillbrow is like. He guessed that this was because Cousin's street was not in the center of town. He thought about the many central streets of Hillbrow—Kotze, Pretoria, Twist—where there was a large shopping center and a number of banks. Cousin's apartment was in a good spot because it was not in the noisy part of town and because was near grocery stores and a liquor store (called Sweet Caroline).

*Again, Refentše's believes that he understands Hillbrow because of the rumors that were passed around in Tiragalong, but he finds things different than he expected, and this helps him realize that it's worth judging something for oneself instead of unquestioningly believing what everyone else says. It is also noteworthy that so many streets and stores are named English words—"Twist" and "Sweet Caroline"—because this shows how African languages have been overwritten, which emphasizes the long-lasting effects colonization.*


Refentše thought that Cousin's place was more "harmless" and "pleasurable" ("to the extent that anything in Hillbrow could be either of these things") than deeper into the suburb. However, on the first night in the apartment, while Cousin is out, multiple gunshots woke Refentše up. The gunshots, and a woman screaming, made Refentše miss the safety of Tiragalong. That night, Refentše had nightmares filled with screams and sirens.

*The narrator editorializes Refentše's way of thinking: in other words, it is significant that the narrator acknowledges that "harmless" and "pleasurable" are not ordinary adjectives used to describe Hillbrow. The gunshots and screaming that Refentše hears show that there are real difficulties of living in the city, particularly in this poorer neighborhood, and that people in rural areas like Tiragalong do not understand what people in the city go through in their day to day lives.*

The next morning, Refentše washed himself in Cousin's apartment, which was a "treat" because he was only able to bath once a week in Tiragalong. Refentše was impressed with the running water that went right to the apartment. That morning, Cousin walked Refentše to his first day at the University of the Witwatersrand. They crossed Twist Street, Edith Cavell Street, and Clarendon Place. Before they reached the university, Cousin stopped and pointed to two different buildings, telling Refentše that if he wanted "it" he can go there. As Cousin said this, a "semi-naked soul" came out of one of the buildings, and Refentše realized that he didn't need a clarification about what Cousin meant by "it."

*Although Hillbrow clearly is not a wealthy part of Johannesburg, Cousin's apartment having running water shows that even people in Hillbrow have more amenities than those in rural Tiragalong. This suggests that wealth is concentrated in cities, which are where most of the colonizers lived during Apartheid. This emphasizes the continuing gap in wealth between native South Africans and colonizers. Also, again, the English street names are reminders of the legacy of colonization. Here, also, Cousin admits to Refentše that he sees sex workers, and Refentše has to process that there are ways of living that are different in the city than in rural life.*

As they continued their route, Refentše and Cousin saw a group of beggars, and one of them called out a greeting in Zulu. Refentše waved, but Cousin didn't. Cousin told Refentše that he can't "go around greeting every fool in Hillbrow." He said that this is dangerous, because although the beggar looked harmless, there were people in the city who might hurt him. Refentše noted that the beggar's clothes were dirty, covered in grime and urine, and that he was drunk. But the beggar seemed pleased that Refentše responded to his hello.

*Similar to the way people in Tiragalong look down on "Makwerekwere," Cousin shows Refentše that people in the city look down on the poorest among them. The fact that the beggar speaks Zulu instead of English (like Cousin does) perhaps suggests that there is a link between poverty and not speaking English—a link that exists in the wake of Apartheid and colonialism. It is noteworthy that Refentše feels empathy for the man who says hello—even though Cousin says he should be wary of the beggar—since it shows that Refentše is interested in working through the prejudices people hold towards the houseless people of Johannesburg.*

Refentše and Cousin continued walking, and they soon arrived in front of a large building called the Civic Theatre. People played soccer in a park nearby. Although they were now in the suburb of Braamfontein—which Refentše had heard was much nicer than Hillbrow—Refentše saw young kids huffing glue. They continued walking and finally arrive at University Witwatersrand's entrance. Refentše noted that just across from the university stands the headquarters for the South African Breweries, and he was pleased that "knowledge" and "relaxation" were right near each other.

*It is significant that Refentše is surprised that there are drugs and crime even in the wealthier parts of the Johannesburg—this suggests that the stories the news tells only focus on the crime in Hillbrow (which he is used to hearing about) and not crime in other areas (which he has never heard of). This shows that once a certain narrative gets popular—like that Hillbrow is the only part of the city dealing with drugs and crime—it can be hard to unlearn.*

As Refentše walked up the university's steps, he thought that the building was "dull" and that its gray appearance indicated how serious and important it was. In fact, all of the university buildings were grey. He sees the Ernest Oppenheimer Life Sciences Building and the Wartenweilder Library across from it. Although Refentše admitted to himself that he didn't know much about architecture, he wondered how a school with Architecture as a specialty could allow such ugly buildings to be built on campus.

*Refentše's idea that "dull" and gray are "serious" suggests that there is something oppressive about the university, even though it is giving him an exciting opportunity to learn more. This could be a reference to the fact that the university was built by colonizers, so even though he is happy to be there, it is a monument to European influence in South Africa.*

After he found the Central Admissions Office, Refentše was shown around campus. When his day was over, he leaves for Vickers place. On his way back to Cousin's apartment, Refentše responded again to the beggar's greeting ("*Aibo!*"). The beggar's warm behavior made Refentše want to give the beggar whatever change he had in his pocket. This scene repeated itself throughout the time that Refentše lives with Cousin while going to university.

*Again, the beggar's presence reminds the reader—and Refentše—that colonization has left South Africa a financially stratified country. Refentše's desire to help the beggar shows his interest in thinking beyond the commonly held ideas that colonialism and decades of oppression have forced upon the country. More specifically, Refentše critically examines cultural ideas about who deserves kindness and who doesn't.*

Refentše's family in Tiragalong did not have much money and, because of this, he could never afford the deposit for student housing. All of his applications for campus housing were unsuccessful, despite having excellent grades. This is why he lived with Cousin at Vicker's Place for all three years of his undergraduate studies. The money he needed for books and materials comes from "hefty" student loans. In 1994, Refentše graduated with a BA with honors and distinction. The next year, he received a scholarship to pursue an MA, and he finally had funding to move into student accommodations on campus. One year later, after he completed his graduate degree, the university offered Refentše a job as a lecturer.

*The narrative speeds up time here, moving through years and dates very quickly. This shows how the novel's plot is not organized by standard chronology and is implementing its own deconstructed method of storytelling. It is also noteworthy that Refentše needed to take out "hefty" student loans, which shows that a university education is not accessible to many people in South Africa, particularly poorer residents of rural neighborhoods. This only further stratifies a country already divided after years of racist laws and colonial oppression.*

Two months into teaching at the university, Refentše saw his "friend" (the beggar) being pushed in a wheelbarrow towards the Hillbrow Hospital. The beggar did not say "*Aibo!*" this time. Refentše knew the man for five years (his whole time at the university) and believed that they'd become friends, even though they only ever exchanged kind greetings. He was pained to see this turn of fate for the man.

*It is not clear whether or not the beggar has died, but he clearly is not well. It is important that the beggar was in the same place for all five years that Refentše was at university—this shows that, left without any type of support, people on the lowest levels of a divided society will likely not be able to improve their circumstances. Refentše's concern for the beggar—whom he considered a "friend" and whom he enjoyed saying hello to—shows that he wants to break past the feelings of indifference that most people have towards the poorest people in the city.*

The narrator again addresses Refentše, reminding him that, if he had still been alive, he would not have been sorry (despite his love for soccer and for Bafana Bafana specifically) that the South African team lost the World Cup. In this hypothetical world (where Refentše was still alive), he would have been able to easily walk to Hillbrow from campus, stopping for a drink at a bar. He would have ordered the South African Breweries Castle lager because he could not afford a Guinness. Some people at the bar would be saying how disappointing it was that someone had missed a field goal, while another person might be saying that the French goalkeeper was simply too good.

*This hypothetical scene shows the communal aspect of living in the city and how people gather to talk about current events at bars. This can be seen as a reference to the way that, in the rural Tiragalong, people gossip as a form of entertainment. Though there are so many differences between the city and Tiragalong, it is noteworthy that in the city, too, people gossip—here, about what the reason was that the South African team lost. This works with the story's broader insistence that all places share fundamental similarities, because they are made of up people who have both good and bad in them.*

Despite the fact that Refentše would have been working at his university office and would not have been able to watch the game, he would have known how it ended before leaving campus. This is because Refentše would have received a phone call from a woman named Lerato, who would have been calling Refentše to keep him updated on the game, knowing as she did that the "Bone of her Heart" loved soccer.

*Here, the story introduces Lerato and shows that she is a caring and loving girlfriend to Refentše. That she would have called to let him know about the game proves that the two are very close, because she would have anticipated that he'd want to know the score. This is a meaningful way to introduce Lerato—a pivotal character—because it suggests that her bond with Refentše was very strong when it was at its best, even if they will soon confront difficulties in their relationship.*

Refentše would have been able to picture Cousin's look of disappointment after South Africa lost. Cousin, just like most people who lived in Hillbrow, really cared about soccer. Cousin and Refentše had many discussions about soccer and politics, because Refentše noticed that Cousin was a loud supporter of Black non-South African teams (especially when they played against European teams), but this was in "glaring" contrast towards his prejudice towards Black immigrants or foreigners (Makwerekwere) in real life. Cousin always retorted that Hillbrow's high crime rate was the fault of these immigrants (and Cousin blamed them for Hillbrow's "moral decay," as well as its "physical decay"). Refentše noticed this attitude in many other South Africans (white and Black) who lived in Hillbrow.

*Here, Refentše points out the hypocrisy of Cousin's way of thinking. This emphasizes the way that Cousin's prejudice is illogical, but Cousin doesn't seem to care or to want to think past his biases. That this feeling towards "Makwerekwere" is held by many people in South Africa again shows the lasting impact of colonization and legalized Apartheid, and how the government has ultimately turned people against the most vulnerable instead of blaming those in charge.*

Refentše himself didn't hold these xenophobic feelings towards Africans from other countries. Refentše believed that the "moral decay" of Hillbrow was just the same as it was in Tiragalong (where there were thought to be no immigrants, only South Africans). Refentše used to tell Cousin to do the math—that Hillbrow only *seemed* more crime-ridden because it had a higher density of people, but that just as many bad things happened in Tiragalong if you considered the town's much smaller population.

*Again, Refentše's willingness to think beyond the unexamined prejudices that many other people hold shows that he is a curious and intelligent character. It also shows that so many biases are not based in fact, but in ignorance, and that they could be overcome if someone considered the actual realities of life in South Africa.*

Refentše also liked to remind Cousin that, if he thought about it, the Makwerekwere were just like the two of them—"sojourners." Many of the people who lived in Hillbrow (including Cousin and Refentše) migrated from more rural villages in search of education or better job prospects. This was hardly different than the immigrants that came from other African countries (some of them war-torn) in search of a better life in Johannesburg. Refentše liked to bring up to Cousin that the brutal oppression of Black South Africans under Apartheid caused many South Africans to flee to neighboring countries.

*Again, Refentše looks at the root cause of Cousin's prejudice and points out that it is illogical and based in ignorance. The story again emphasizes Cousin's hypocrisy, since both he and Refentše migrated from one place to another in the hope of a better life, just like the way immigrants from other countries came to South Africa.*

Refentše never pushed too hard, though, because he knew that Cousin already had all of these facts. Cousin was a police officer and even worked for the state during Apartheid, despite being Black and a South African native. Cousin also blamed immigrants for the AIDS epidemic, saying that "they" (Makwerekwere) had brought the disease into South Africa. Cousin believed that people should "remain in their own countries and try to sort out the problems of these respective countries" instead of moving elsewhere.

*Cousin proves that he is not interested in thinking through his own prejudice, since he has all of the information and chooses instead to ignore it. In fact, Cousin is an example of a Black South African who worked* with *the colonizing government, even as they installed racist laws during the Apartheid era. This proves that wealth and power are extremely seductive, as they can even make someone support laws that repress them and people like them if it means gaining just a little bit of power. Cousin continues to demonstrate a colonizer's mindset when he blames AIDS on people immigrating from other countries in Africa, since this is not based in fact and is only a way to scapegoat a vulnerable party.*

Refentše knew that Cousin—and other police officers—acted on their prejudices. They might drive an immigrant around in their car, telling them that they'd kick them out of the city unless they paid a bribe. The officers might accept sexual bribes from immigrant women who wanted to stay in the city and continue sending money to their family in another country (especially since the exchange rate worked in their favor if they were paid in South Africa). Refentše also knew that many immigrants usually tried to get work "in the kitchens" (the term for white suburbs) since police didn't come as often to areas that they didn't consider high crime zones. This meant that the immigrants were bothered less in these jobs.

*Cousin's behavior as a police officer shows the real consequences of prejudices, and how people's lives are made worse because of them. It is also noteworthy that immigrants think they will be safer in white neighborhoods—not because they are necessarily safer places to live, but because the police will not bother them as much. This shows firstly that police officers treat wealthy and poor neighborhoods differently. It also shows that police officers themselves are often a form of danger—sometimes even more so than crime itself.*

Refentše knew, though, that crime still happened in white suburbs. Refentše was nearly stabbed in Hyde Park Village—a place with a "lily-white reputation for safety and serenity"—because he bumped into some robbers stripping a car for its radio. Refentše and some friends were even robbed at gunpoint right by the university. During the robbery, which terrified Refentše, he and his friends could hear people in the streets happily singing a celebration song because South Africa had won the Rugby World Cup.

*Again, it is noteworthy that Refentše talks about crime that happens in "lily-white" neighborhoods, because it emphasizes that neighborhoods are often segregated by race and that whiter neighborhoods have a safer "reputation," even if that reputation is not based in fact. The scene where Refentše is robbed in this wealthier neighborhood harkens back to the novel's opening scene, where—in Hillbrow—a young girl is killed, and her mother's cries are drowned out by cries of celebration. This emphasizes that these moments full of a mixture of joy and tragedy happen in many places, not just Hillbrow, despite one suburb's reputation for safety and the other's for danger.*

Refentše knew of other "chilling" crimes that took place in the kitchens. He'd heard of white families being raped, robbed, and murdered. Sometimes this happened because a family didn't let their housekeepers go home to bury a dead relative. But sometimes it was simply because the white family was the "embodiment" of racial segregation. Refentše knew that these crimes were not committed by immigrants (who didn't want to attract any police attention) and thinks of these crimes as a counterpoint to the argument that immigrants brought crime to South Africa.

*Again, Refentše points out the hypocrisy of thinking that crime only happens in poorer neighborhoods. He also points out that it's unlikely any of the crimes in wealthy neighborhoods are perpetrated by immigrants, even though immigrants are so often blamed. This discrepancy speaks again to the ignorance behind people's prejudice. The crimes that he talks about—white families being murdered because they are the "embodiment" of segregation—underscore how decades of unjust racial discrimination have created a climate of anxiety, rage, and distrust in South Africa. Refentše acknowledges, then, that the immigrants are being scapegoated for crimes that happen as a result of colonialism and apartheid.*

These are all thoughts and conversations that Refentše would be having if he were still alive. After arguing with Cousin at the bar, his mind would have drifted to Lerato, and Refentše would have thought that the food she made him was probably almost cold. He would have arrived at their flat to the welcoming smell of good food, and Lerato would have been waiting for him.

*Again, it is meaningful that the story first shows the love between Lerato and Refentše, rather than lead with the problems that they later face in their relationship. This shows that there is clear devotion between the two and suggests that, when they hurt each other later in the story, it makes sense that they should forgive each other because they are both well-meaning people.*

Lerato was one of the friends who was with Refentše during the robbery near the university. After that terrifying incident, Refentše told Lerato that he loved her, since their brush with death made him want to confess his feelings. She replied by calling him a "coward!" and saying that he could have told her before that day—but then she kissed him meaningfully. They had been friends for a while through the university, but this kissed proved that they were much more than friends.

*Lerato lightly teasing Refentše after he confesses his feeling shows her love for him. The fact that they were friends before they started dating demonstrates that they have a long history and again shows that the difficulties they will face later on are worth overcoming.*

If Refentše had still been alive, he would have been rushing home with a full heart. He would not think that Lerato could ever do anything to hurt him. Yet, before he died, Refentše rushed home in a similar fashion and found Lerato, the "Bone of his Heart," in the arms of Sammy, their mutual friend. This led to a spiraling depression for Refentše and, eventually, suicide.

*This is the first mention of Lerato's affair with Sammy. The reader doesn't yet know the whole story, but it is easy to feel sorry for Refentše since it appears that he has been betrayed by his love. By only showing part of the situation, the novel allows the reader to form an opinion (and possibly judge Lerato harshly for her behavior). When the reality of the story is later unveiled, it is likely that readers will change their minds about Lerato. This is a way for the novel to emphasize its larger point about rumors and storytelling, and about forming prejudices and biases against someone without having all of the information.*

## CHAPTER 2

If Refentše, "child of Tiragalong and Hillbrow," were still alive, he might have written the books he wanted to write. These were books of poetry, and they were going to be dedicated to Hillbrow. Refentše had already published one short story, which could have led to more publications.

*It's noteworthy that the narrator now calls Refentše both a child of Tiragalong* and *Hillbrow (instead of just Tiragalong), because it shows that Refentše saw Hillbrow as an important part of his identity. It is also significant that the narrator tells Refentše he would have written a book of poetry if he was alive, because it suggests that writing and being alive are deeply linked for Refentše, showing how important sharing stories was to him before his death.*

Refentše knew that there were not many stories written about Hillbrow, particularly not in languages that could be widely shared across the country—like English—or in languages that he was familiar with, like Sepedi. Refentše found a "mission in this omission" and decided he'd write about Hillbrow himself, first in English and then translated into Sepedi. He had thought that maybe he'd turn his published short story into a longer novel. But his literary ambitions were not stronger than his eventual "conviction" to die by suicide.

*That Refentše felt a "conviction" to die by suicide shows how much pain he was experiencing before he died and suggests that guilt, regret, and isolation are very hard feelings to overcome. Refentše's literary plans were grand, but he wasn't able to follow through on his desire to write a novel. This suggests that he gave a lot up to die by suicide, again showing how tempting the idea of death was to him.*

Refentše, from the afterlife, is "grimly amused" at how quickly news of his suicide travels through his home village, Tiragalong, and how comfortable everyone is talking about it. One person who really "embellishes" the story of his suicide is Refilwe, an ex-girlfriend of his from Tiragalong. They split up when Refentše discovered that Refilwe had other boyfriends. Refilwe got back in touch five years after Refentše left for university and asked him for a job reference. Refilwe herself just graduated from another university north of Johannesburg (studying English and Sepedi) and was applying for an Assistant Editor position in the city.

*This passage introduces the reader to Refilwe, who is immediately linked to Refentše because of their connected past, shared home of origin, and shared love of literature. Refilwe's penchant for gossip, though, shows that she will be a complicated character, one who makes mistakes and hurts other people. However, her similarity to Refentše—who has shown a capacity for personal growth—suggests that Refilwe might be able to change. This passage again emphasizes the way that storytelling—in the form of gossip—flows through Tiragalong frequently, often with negative consequences (since Refentše does not approve of the way his story is being told).*

Refilwe talked Refentše into writing the reference—even though they had broken up—by reminding him that they'd been in love once. She told him that he knew her very well. Also, she mentioned his recommendation would mean a lot, since he was a highly educated person. Refentše (frustratedly) agreed that this was the case, thinking about how people took uneducated people much less seriously. As it turns out, he did not have to try too hard to write the reference, since Refilwe was an excellent, bright woman. Refentše wrote a meaningful recommendation, attesting to Refilwe's work ethic and pleasant personality.

*Again, the story suggests that Refilwe has many positive qualities, which hints that she might change her bad behavior by the end of the story. Refentše's frustration with the fact that people with an education are taken more seriously speaks to his ability to acknowledge the injustices within South African society.*

Refilwe got the job, and Refentše was very happy for her. He suggested they meet for a beer to celebrate at a university bar called Sweeny's. They did, and they enjoyed an afternoon together, and afterwards Refentše went home with Lerato. Everything was very pleasant, but then Refilwe called a few weeks later and invited Refentše to dinner at her flat. She offered to cook for him. Refentše accepted the invitation, even though he was pretty sure that Refilwe now wanted to get back together.

*Refentše seems to know Refilwe very well, given that he correctly guesses her intentions when she invites him over. This foreshadows the way that Refentše will have to juggle being both a mentor and a love interest for Refilwe.*

Back when Refilwe first cheated on Refentše, he had been upset enough to leave her. He did forgive her—in that he didn't want to cause her any pain—but he also judged her for sleeping with other people. However, the narrator reminds Refentše that, later in his life, he found reasons to "rethink his self-righteousness." This is because Refentše eventually had sex with his friend Sammy's lover, Bohlale.

*The fact that Refentše's feelings towards Refilwe have changed since he was younger (he used to be mad at her, but he's since realized that all humans are fallible) shows that the more life experience Refentše has, the more he grows and emotionally matures. Refilwe lacks the same experience as Refentše, and she is not yet on the road to emotional maturity or redemption. Also, importantly, this is the first time the novel mentions that Refentše (just like Lerato) cheated. This proves that the reader did not have all of the information in the previous chapter, which makes a point about coming to conclusions about a person or a situation based on just one incomplete version of a story.*

On that night, Bohlale called Refentše and asked him to come over. She was distraught because Sammy had brought home a woman he'd met at a bar in a seedy part of town, and he even told Bohlale to sleep on the floor. Bohlale confided in Refentše that if she allowed that type of behavior and didn't confront Sammy, he'd likely do it again. Refentše listened sympathetically. They both agreed that this was not Sammy's usual behavior—Bohlale even said that the "whore" Sammy was with had bragged about drugging him. But Bohlale was very upset nonetheless.

*It is noteworthy that Refentše originally went over to Sammy and Bohlale's apartment to comfort Bohlale, since it suggests that he didn't* plan *on cheating on Lerato. This idea of not having total control over a situation comes back later in the story, when Refentše, from heaven, eventually accepts life's unpredictability. It's also important that neither Bohlale nor Refentše blame Sammy (that much) for his bad behavior, which shows that their affair didn't come out of a place of rage, but vulnerability.*

Refentše sat next to Bohlale, wondering what could have made his friend Sammy go to that part of town, which he didn't even like. Then Refentše looked into Bohlale's eyes and felt remarkably close to her because of how hurt she was. Refentše said that he would talk to Sammy and that he was sure Sammy loved Bohlale very much. She began to sob. When he went in to hug her, she hugged him back, and this physical touch sparked a deeper embrace. They felt incredibly attracted to each other and had sex.

*Again, Refentše and Bohlale's connection comes from a place of hurt and empathy, so their actions are not too difficult to understand. This emphasizes the book's belief that ordinary people can behave in both good and bad ways, and that situations are often more complex and complicated than they first appear.*

Refentše thought of this night when Refilwe invited him to have dinner with her, since he knew "how weak he could be." He had no desire to betray Lerato. In fact, the more he thought about Refilwe, the more he focused his attention on Lerato. He decided that he'd leave work early on the night he was supposed to go to Refilwe's apartment—not out of eagerness to see her, but because he wanted to stop home and kiss Lerato first. The narrator reminds Refilwe that these "efforts at fidelity" ended up being useless—not because of Refentše, but because of Lerato and Sammy's affair. These are the topics—"love, betrayal, seduction, suicide"—that Refentše could have written about if he hadn't died too early.

*Refentše draws on his past experience with Bohlale to assess the situation with Refilwe, which shows that he is capable of personal growth and reflection. The story further emphasizes the complexities of being alive, though, when the narrative stresses how Refentše wasn't able to predict or control what would happen with Lerato and Sammy. It is also significant that the story again stresses how Refentše could have had more time to write if he had stayed alive, which suggests there is a strong connection between storytelling, processing emotions, and living.*


The narrator reminds Refentše of his weakened relationship with is mother and suggests that this was also a factor in Refentše's suicide. Refentše and his mother argued about Lerato because Refentše's mother thought Lerato had drugged Refentše into loving her. Refentše's mother was also prejudiced against people from Hillbrow, and she considered Lerato a Lekwerekwere (even though Lerato came from a township just north of Johannesburg) and a sexual deviant because she lived in the city. The fact that Refentše could never give his mother any money when he came home—because he still had to pay off his student loans—only made his mother more confident that he was "a victim of the cunning of Hillbrowans."

*It's clear that Refentše's mother's prejudices against Lerato are unwarranted, but they have a large impact on Refentše's wellbeing, since they make him feel isolated. It appears that Refentše's mother is quick to assume Lerato had bad intentions (simply because Lerato lived in the city), which underscores the intensity of Tiragalong's distrust of people from Johannesburg. It's also clear that Refentše's mother's biases are based in ignorance: she assumes Lerato is stealing Refentše's money when, in reality, he is paying back his loans, which again emphasizes how the real culprit (the predatory loan system that forces poorer families into debt) gets to scapegoat innocent parties (Lerato, who just loves Refentše).*


Because of her convictions about Hillbrowans, Refentše couldn't turn to his mother for comfort when he found out about Lerato and Sammy's betrayal. He also couldn't go to his closest friend, since Sammy was one of the people who hurt him. This made suicide start to look appealing. In fact, he began thinking that suicide would give him "relief" from many things: the pressure to succeed, the constant stress of financial worries, the heavy disappointment of so much betrayal in his life—even relief over the guilt he still felt about his affair with Bohlale. He ended up dying by suicide after jumping from his 20-story balcony. The narrator says, "Refentše, **welcome to our** Hillbrow..."

*Again, the story shows that Refentše's mother's prejudices have clear repercussions: Refentše's suicidal thoughts are directly linked to his mother being unable to accept Lerato. This demonstrates the way that unjust biases ripple out and have a variety of destructive consequences. The narrator's use of the refrain "welcome to our Hillbrow" after Refentše commits suicide shows the evolving use of that phrase—here, it's meant not as a sarcastic welcome but almost like a sigh, suggesting that life is unavoidably difficult.*

Refilwe still loved Refentše. She also hadn't known about his inner struggles and thought he was happy enough. Refentše did look successful, since he was the first person from Tiragalong to graduate with an MA from university, he was a lecturer, and he'd had a story published. When, in Tiragalong, people said cruel things about Refentše after his suicide—like that he didn't care about his own mother—Refilwe defended him. However, Refilwe's love for Refentše clouded her judgement and caused her to "retell" the story of his death in her own way.

*Refilwe defending Refentše shows how much love she has for him. However, that she "retells" the story of his death foreshadows that she will make up a story to fit her own needs, and it will likely not be kind.*

The people of Tiragalong came up with their own reason for Refentše's death—they blamed his mother. They said she gave him medicines to break the love potion Lerato had given him, but that these medicines were too strong and ruined his mind. When Refentše's mother slipped and fell into his grave during his burial, the people of Tiragalong took this as a confirmation that she was a witch. They bound her, poured petrol on her, and burned her to death (an act done often in Tiragalong and known as "necklacing" because of the tires filled will gasoline that were put around the victim's neck).

*The people of Tiragalong's response to Refentše's death shows the way that the village handles bad news—they often attribute death or illness to mysticism. This results in Refentše's mother being blamed and murdered, which demonstrates the difficulty of living in a village that would rather invent stories than get information from outside sources. This also foreshadows the grief and guilt Refentše will feel from heaven, knowing that his mother died as a result of his suicide.*

When Refilwe told the people of Tiragalong that Refentše had simply been "naïve" and had fallen for a woman from Johannesburg, she changed people's opinions about what happened. In Refilwe's "rewritten" version, Refentše was tricked not by his mother but by a "loose-thighed Hillbrowan" named Lerato. The people of Tiragalong were only too happy to believe such a scandal. Everyone, Refilwe included, was happy to say terrible things about people from the city.

*Again, it is noteworthy that the people of Tiragalong accept a new version of Refentše's death—not because they've gained new facts, but because they welcome a new story from a convincing storyteller (Refilwe). This story is particularly compelling because it supports the biases that the people of the village already have (against people from Hillbrow), not because Refilwe presents any new or realistic information. This demonstrates how prejudices can make people believe stories that support their beliefs, which only serve to reenforce their biases. It is also noteworthy that Refilwe is telling these cruel stories about Lerato, because it shows that she is still an immature character who has not yet examined her own prejudices. Refilwe will later reflect on the way that she told the story of Refentše's death, and she'll ultimately come to regret blaming Lerato.*

Refilwe even suggested that Lerato's father was Nigerian, meaning that Lerato was the daughter of a Lekwerekwere. Refilwe said all sorts of cruel things about migrant Nigerian men in order to further smear Lerato's name in Tiragalong. By the time Refilwe's story was done, Refentše's suicide was just "hard evidence" of the "dangerous power" of immigrant women for the people of Tiragalong. It didn't matter that Lerato's father was not Nigerian at all.

*Again, Refilwe slanders Lerato in the most forceful way she knows how—by saying that her father is a Nigerian immigrant. This underscores just how deep Refilwe's (and the people of Tiragalong's) dislike of immigrants from other African countries is. It is particularly significant—and ironic—that Refilwe's story acts as "hard evidence" to confirm Tiragalong's biases against immigrants, since the information Refilwe shares about Lerato* isn't *"hard evidence"—in fact, it ends up being false. "Hard evidence," then, is read as sarcastic, to highlight that Refilwe's story is the exact opposite.*

Many months later, it would be revealed that Lerato's father, Piet, was also the father of a beloved boy from Tiragalong, Tshepo. Tshepo was the very first Tiragalong child to study at the University of Witwatersrand, and he was a role model for Refentše (and a bit of a hero in the village). Tshepo was struck by lightning and killed years ago. His neighbor, an old woman, was accused of witchcraft and "necklaced" to death in Tiragalong. The people of the village did not know that Piet, who died when Tshepo was four years old, also had another family.

*That Lerato has the same father as a beloved boy from Tiragalong shows just how wrong the people of Tiragalong are when they call her a "Lekwerekwere." This only further emphasizes the power of ignorance and prejudice, and how willing people are to believe stories that match up with their biases. Tshepo's neighbor being put to death for Tshepo's death by lightning again emphasizes the village's desire to find a culprit when something bad or unpredictable happens, rather than admit to life's unpredictability.*

The village enjoyed gossiping with the newfound information Refilwe had given them. There was one person, though, who knew just how false all of these stories were: Lerato herself. She was heartbroken after Refentše's death. Lerato, too, found suicide "seductive" in the aftermath of Refentše's death.

*Lerato dying by suicide because of the cruel and false accusations coming from Refilwe again shows how destructive prejudice can be.*

The narrator tells Refentše that, from heaven, he gets to have a bit of hindsight and reflection. Refentše sits in heaven and sees that his choices resulted in the death of two people: his mother, and Lerato. The narrator calls Refentše a "killer." Heaven also lets Refentše see Sammy's mind deteriorate from guilt and sadness. Refentše sees from heaven that all of this suffering could have been avoided if he had forgiven Lerato and tried to understand the reasons for her infidelity.

*Refentše undergoes extensive growth from heaven, since he is able to sit and reflect on everything that has happened in his life. The fact that he realizes he might not have committed suicide if he'd spoken to Lerato about her affair suggests that open communication is a healing way of processing pain and trauma. Refentše's regret emphasizes his newfound understanding of the situation and suggests that he can now behave differently in heaven.*

If Refentše *had* tried to talk to Lerato after she had sex with Sammy, he would have realized that her reasons for cheating were very similar to the reasons Refentše felt when he had sex with Bohlale. In fact, he would have forgiven her and kissed her, simply saying, "such is the way of heart and flesh." He would have understood that Lerato felt ignored and overlooked, just like Bohlale, and that Sammy felt sorry, just like Refentše.

*Again, Refentše realizes—from heaven—that he could have empathized with Lerato after he found her in bed with Sammy, and that this would have been the more productive way of handling the situation. It is very tender and tragic that he might have just kissed Lerato on the head and said something that showed he understood her, because it highlights the extent of his regret and of his growth. Refentše's ability to understand Lerato's feelings by pulling from his own experience shows how he is capable of becoming a better person by processing his feelings.*

The day that Sammy and Lerato had their affair, Refentše was depressed. He hadn't eaten the food that Lerato prepared him, which disappointed her. She called Sammy, worried about Refentše's increasing loss of appetite for food, love, and even life. Sammy and Lerato did "exactly" what Refentše and Bohlale did—bonded through sadness and sympathy. But when Refentše found Sammy and Lerato together, his imagination ran wild, and he thought that they'd been sneaking around behind his back for months. This thought was too much for him to bear.

*Lerato is in the dark about what Refentše is feeling, which leaves her confused and lonely. This suggests that if Refentše had confided in Lerato about his guilt, he wouldn't have acted the way he did, and Lerato wouldn't have been worried enough to call Sammy. All of this signifies how Refentše's guilt overcame his ability to communicate with his girlfriend—to devastating ends. The novel also suggests that it is unfortunate Refentše couldn't recognize Lerato's behavior as similar to the night he had with Bohlale, since he had the tools he needed to understand her, he just didn't use them.*

The difference between Refentše and Bohlale's affair and Sammy and Lerato's was that Sammy never found out Bohlale cheated on him. Sammy kept going out and getting drunk, since he didn't see how his behavior was affecting his girlfriend. One night, he was beat up, robbed, and stabbed. Refentše found him when he happened to hear Sammy's screams and had rushed him to the hospital. When Sammy woke up in the hospital, he had immediately asked for Bohlale.

*The story suggests that Sammy actually would have benefited from finding about Bohlale and Refentše sleeping together, because it would have jolted him into behaving better. Yet, it is meaningful that he asks for Bohlale as soon as he wakes up in the hospital, since it suggests he still loves her. It's telling that he needed to be in a life-or-death situation to finally express how he felt about his partner, rather than showing her his love under normal circumstances. This further extends the idea that decent people can make mistakes if they do not have enough time, space, or motivation for self-reflection.*

Sammy asking for Bohlale should have saved Sammy and Bohlale's relationship. When Refentše came home from the hospital, he told Bohlale that Sammy had asked for her, and she broke down in sobs. She admitted that she'd been ready to leave Sammy that morning, but now she had proof that he loved her.

*Again, though it's moving that Sammy asked for Bohlale in the hospital, the fact that Bohlale was ready to leave him shows that he was not reflecting on the good in his life until he was in a life-or-death situation.*

Late that night, Bohlale called Refentše in tears, telling him that they had to confess and apologize to Sammy. Refentše was not as convinced—he said that Sammy was in a bad state at the hospital and that they wouldn't want to shock him. Bohlale disagreed, her guilt weighing on her, and she said that she was going to tell Sammy as soon as possible. Refentše nervously spent the rest of the night reading. The next day, Bohlale made her way to the hospital and was **hit** and killed by a speeding, stolen car. Refentše never did tell Sammy about the affair, figuring that his friend had enough grief to deal with. Refentše's secret remained "locked in his heart," eating away at his conscience.

*Refentše being eaten up by guilt and grief shows how difficult it is to move on from something if you feel like you've done the wrong thing but have no way to make up for it. The story suggests that if Refentše had agreed with Bohlale about telling Sammy, everyone's fate might have been different. The hit-and-run, a symbol for the unpredictability of life, may not have happened, simply because Bohlale might have been in less of a rush to get to the hospital. Refentše made a grave mistake, but this is part of the story's point—that people* do *mess up in life, and that they still deserve forgiveness.*

To find an outlet for this grief and guilt, Refentše started to write the short story about Hillbrow. This is the story that ended up getting published. It is about an HIV-positive woman from Tiragalong who is shunned by the village because of her illness. The people of Tiragalong say (like they would in real life) that the woman effectively killed herself by sleeping with a Lekwerekwere. Refentše wrote how "Tiragalong danced because its xenophobia—its fear of and hatred for both black non-South Africans and Johannesburgers—was vindicated."

*Refentše channeling his grief into a story is in line with his character's behavior, and it underscores the importance of literature and storytelling in this novel. He chooses an ostracized woman as his protagonist because he wants to challenge people's assumptions and prejudices, which demonstrates his strong desire to change people's minds in Tiragalong and beyond. By holding up a mirror to Tiragalong—by writing how xenophobic they are, and how they even take pleasure in their hatred by "dancing"—Refentše shows that he believes books are a powerful tool against prejudice and bias.*

Some people who read Refentše's story felt for the protagonist, which surprised him (they were the "exceptions"). These people seemed to sympathize with her, saying that she was just trying to survive. These people also noted the hypocrisy of people from Tiragalong, since AIDS was very much present there, too, even if they were in denial about it.

*That some people* do *empathize with Refentše's protagonist, even if they are they "exceptions," shows that his story worked the way he wanted it to. This is also foreshadowing that a very significant character (Refilwe) will be one of the people influenced into changing their behavior because of the story, again suggesting that books and stories, when told with good intentions, can combat unjust prejudices.*

The protagonist of Refentše's story does not die by suicide. She thinks she will not go back to Tiragalong anymore, because the cruelty of the townspeople is too much, but she finds it difficult to avoid home. She decides to grapple with all of her grief through storytelling, and she writes a novel about Hillbrow, the AIDS epidemic, and prejudice.

*This is where the novel gets very meta: Refentše has a character in his own story write a story about Hillbrow, prejudice, and AIDS. This only* further *underscores the way that the larger novel considers the potential power of storytelling to be extremely potent.*

Refentše works into his story, though, that it's a "big mistake" for this woman to write her book in Sepedi. When publishers review it, they call her "vulgar." This is because she called things like "shit" and "genitalia" their correct Sepedi name, but the publishers said this was crass, even though the same word in English or Afrikaans would have been socially acceptable. In Refentše's story—as in Refentše's life—publishers don't take a chance on languages other than the ones deemed safe by the market or by people that purchase educational texts. Writing in this traditional South African language is too "dangerous."

*It is very important that Refentše writes about his protagonist facing prejudice for writing in a South African language rather than a language with European origins (like English or Afrikaans, which emerged with the influence of Dutch colonizers in South Africa). This shows a clear double standard in the publishing world of South Africa, which speaks to the long-lasting legacy of colonization and Apartheid. It also highlights why Refentše writes his story in English rather than Sepedi—he knew it was the only way to get it printed. It is possible to infer, because of the meta nature of this story, that Phaswane Mpe also felt he had to write* Welcome to Our Hillbrow *in English for this same reason.*

The story that the woman in Refentše's story writes is "buried," and she is devastated. She begins to physically deteriorate, losing lots of weight. People say to her face that they are concerned for her, but she knows they would prefer if she faded away, since she "dared" to criticize the nation's prejudices. Refentše, unsurprisingly, found kinship with his protagonist because she represents many of the anxieties that he feels about Hillbrow, Tiragalong, South Africa, and the world.

*Refentše writes into existence a character that shares many of the anxieties that he has, and this showcases the usefulness of literature when it comes to processing emotions. The prejudices that Refentše's protagonist faces mirror all of the biases that Refentše himself tried to convince people against in his life. The protagonists' fate also foreshadows another key character's future, and the difficulties she will face against Tiragalong's prejudices.*

Had Refentše actually written the full-length novel, he probably would have had time to do even more reflection, and he may not have decided to die by suicide. This would have prevented his mother's death and Lerato's suicide. He might have told Sammy the truth about him and Bohlale. Sammy, meanwhile, deranged from sorrow, also began telling people in Tiragalong how terrible Lerato was. He started sounding like everyone else from the village: full of prejudice.

*The story makes the case that Refentše's link to life is also a link to literature and storytelling, which is why storytelling could have saved his life if he'd let it. It is significant that a benevolent character like Sammy has to lose his grip on reality in order to become prejudiced, since this implies that people who are prejudiced might not have a full grip on reality.*

Refentše knew he would never be able to write a story that held all of his feelings, though. This is because every moment that he was alive, he experienced new things and thus thought differently about the world around him. This didn't upset him—if anything, it made him intrigued. But his devastation about the affair he imagined between Sammy and Lerato was too great to think clearly. And so Refentše left the world through the window.

*Refentše is clearly a character who cherished being alive, feeling complicated emotions, and having new experiences. His overwhelming devastation and sense of isolation when he thought Lerato was cheating on him was stronger than his will to live, but that doesn't mean he didn't care about life. His only regret was that he wouldn't be able to put every feeling in a story, because his feelings were so complicated and everchanging.*

## CHAPTER 3

As Refentše watches from his "heavenly vantage point," he sees Lerato swallow the tablets that kill her. "See the World through the Eyes of a Child" plays, just like the day when Refentše jumped out of his window. Refentše wishes he could have talked to her before she did it, so that he could have explained that his death was not her fault. Refentše regrets that he did not tell Sammy that he slept with Bohlale, because then Sammy might not have felt so racked with guilt.

*Refentše, from heaven, understands his actions in life in a much more profound way now that he's had a chance to consider them over time. He regrets his decision not to communicate better with both Sammy and Lerato, which demonstrates his growth and willingness to accept fault. The song "See the World through the Eyes of a Child" again marks a moment of grief for a character, this time Lerato.*

Refentše also regrets that he was not alive to protect Lerato from a phone call from Terror. Terror, a cruel villager from Tiragalong, called Lerato and threatened to tell her mother that Refentše killed himself because Lerato had an affair. Terror had an old schoolboy grudge against Refentše. He had always wanted to sleep with Lerato, mostly to upset Refentše. Lerato's mother thought Refentše was an excellent boyfriend, an "ideal" son-in-law, and Terror knew that it would break her heart to hear the story about Lerato and Sammy. Lerato knew this, too, and so she took the pills before her mother could find out and be disappointed.

*Terror's part in Lerato's suicide highlights the idea of unpredictability in life, since he mostly wanted to call Lerato's mother because of a longstanding grudge between Refentše and Terror—in other words, his reason for calling ultimately had little to do with Lerato. Thus, Lerato was caught in a situation over which she had no control. It is also significant that something as serious as a suicide can result in not even a rumor but the threat of a rumor, which again shows the intense power that stories, including gossip, have on our lives.*


Refentše, from heaven, wishes he could have told Lerato that he'd also been unfaithful to their relationship, since this probably would have made her feel less guilty. However, in the afterlife, it is completely clear to Refentše that he does not "own" life—meaning he can't influence anyone else's choices. So, all Refentše can do is wait at the gates of heaven for Lerato. When she arrives, Refentše will say, "**Welcome to our** new Hillbrow…"

*Refentše's realization that he does not "own" life is part of his growth—even though it is painful—because it was a lack of control that drove him to suicide in the first place. When Refentše thinks that he will greet Lerato by saying "Welcome to our new Hillbrow," the story suggests that the two of them will be able to continue their relationship but with a "new" outlook. It also suggests, though, that heaven will be somewhat similar to Hillbrow, which argues that all places have a mix of good and bad—even heaven.*

When Lerato does arrive in heaven, she and Refentše spend a long time talking about their days as students at the university. Refentše admits that his mother's disapproval for their relationship made him depressed. Lerato says "coward!" and tells him he could have told her earlier. But she is relieved, because she understands Refentše's suicide was much more complicated than she thought.

*Lerato saying "coward!" is a callback to the earlier scene where she says the same thing, on earth, after Refentše tells her he's in love with her. This signifies, again, that Refentše made many mistakes throughout his life. But it is important that Lerato still loves him, and understands him, since this suggests that people do not have to be perfect to be loveable.*

Lerato then tells Refentše about living with the weight of a "vote of no confidence" from a loved one, which is what she thought Refentše gave her. She tells Refentše about the fear and anxiety she felt because she thought it was her moment of weakness that caused his death. She says she almost envied Sammy, since he was losing his mind—she thought that this protected him from some of the guilt and hurt. Then they both sigh, thinking about Sammy's deteriorating mind.

*Lerato telling Refentše how awful she felt about his suicide shows that both of their lives would have been better if Refentše had admitted his mistake and had been able to communicate with Lerato.*

Refentše then takes Lerato to go meet his mother. Refentše's mother slowly eyes Lerato from head to toe. Then, she gently smiles. She says she sees the resemblance between Lerato and Tshepo, and this pleases her, and she says she believes that they have the same father. Then, Refentše's mother takes him and Lerato to meet her father (Piet) and Tshepo. Piet was killed when Tshepo was four and Lerato was not yet born.

*Considering the intensity of Refentše's mother's prejudices on earth, it is meaningful that she accepts Lerato in heaven. This suggests that even the worst biases can be overcome with time and reflection. It is moving, even, that she acknowledges that she sees the resemblance between Lerato and Tshepo, because it means she acknowledges who Lerato's true father is (Piet, from the village Alexandra).*

After the introduction, Refentše and Lerato go to watch a "movie" together, just as they used to do on Earth. That evening's showing is a historical film. It tells the story of a man who was killed in the South African village called Alexandra a little over 20 years ago. The movie begins with Liz, Lerato's mother, when she is pregnant with Lerato. Piet kisses her goodbye. They live together as a gardener and a housekeeper for a white couple in a suburb. Every Sunday, Piet goes back to Alexandra, where relatives and friends live.

*That heaven allows for "movies" of past events shows that even in heaven stories are very important to people. This "movie" is really the story of Lerato's parents—her mother Liz and her father Piet. This information about her family was previously unavailable to Lerato, since her father died before she was born.*

One such relative is Molori, Piet's cousin. Their relationship is ordinarily very close, but Piet has no way of knowing that something is very wrong on that day. Molori's mother recently fell ill. The people of Tiragalong suggest that he go to a bone thrower so that he can figure out what is wrong with her. He goes to a bone thrower that is the "most famous—or notorious" in the area. This man helps "sniff out" the old woman responsible for Tshepo's lightning strike (though it isn't until afterwards that the village people realize he's wrong).

*Molori's desire to find a mystical reason for an unexplained event again shows a certain unwillingness in rural communities to accept the idea that things can happen randomly. The novel's attitude towards bone throwers is very skeptical, since it points out that the bone thrower's accusations are never accurate.*

This particular bone thrower is also cunning. Instead of telling people to pay ahead of time, he gives them his information first and then tells them to pay whatever they think the reading is worth. More often than not, through a combination of admiration and fear from the townspeople, he ends up with more money than if he'd set a fixed price. After meeting Molori's mother, the bone thrower tells them that this is an extremely serious case. He immediately sets to work throwing his bones, chanting, and speaking to the gods. He talks in a language Molori does not know.

*Here, the narrative comes down even harder on bone throwers, suggesting that their whole business is no more than a carefully engineered spectacle. This suggests that bone throwers are just storytellers who use the power of story for profit.*

After an impressive, confusing show, the bone thrower tells Molori that his mother was poisoned by someone in the family. The bone thrower says that a relative who lives east of Tiragalong is very jealous of Molori, since Molori works in an office and the relative works as a gardener. The bone thrower then describes Piet with startling accuracy. Molori does not know that the bone thrower makes it his job to know the details of everyone in the community. The bone thrower convinces Molori that Piet tried to conspire to curse Molori himself, but the curse landed on his mother.

*Again, the story shows the bone thrower's deviance. He blames Piet for Molori's mother's sickness, but Molori does not know that the bone thrower picked a plausible relative (that he'd already done research on) and randomly blamed him. This furthers the idea that the bone thrower's job is to tell a story that will satisfy the customer, not to actually solve a problem.*

Molori's uncle reminds Molori that they have no way of knowing who is trustworthy just by looking at them. The night after seeing the bone thrower, Molori keeps dreaming of a snake that tries to poison him. He imagines that the snake is Piet. By the time he wakes up the next morning, he is angry, scared, and "full of purpose." As Piet, unaware, walks to Alexandra, Molori and two hired hitmen stab him to death.

*Here, the fatal consequences of the bone thrower's story play out. Molori convinced himself that Piet was a killer because of the ideas that the bone thrower gave him. This again underscores the power of stories and how, when used dishonestly, they can destroy and end lives.*

As Refentše watches the story of Piet's life and death from Heaven, he thinks about the complexities of living. He thinks so much about the "complex paradox of life, death, and everything in between" that he gets dizzy and his head aches. He thinks about how difficult life can be in any place, whether it's Hillbrow, Alexandra, Tiragalong, or anywhere else.

*Refentše is moved by Piet's story, and this causes him to reflect on his own life even more. He is frustrated that life is so hard, no matter where someone lives. He reflects on the fact that life will always be a "complex paradox" of good and bad, emphasizing the novel's message that good and bad can be found everywhere and in all people.*

## CHAPTER 4

Refilwe did not know anything about Piet, Liz, and Lerato's story. All Refilwe knew was that Lerato lived in Hillbrow, which made her a Johannesburger, which meant that she may be (at least partly) a Lekwerekwere. Although Refilwe didn't tell her story using "vulgar words," the people of Tiragalong gossiped that Lerato's mother was "one of those women who could not say no to any drop of semen found flowing aimlessly through the streets."

*Refilwe still clearly holds prejudices towards people in Johannesburg and immigrants from other African countries. It is telling that one of the most vicious insults she could throw at Lerato is the suggestion that her father is a "Lekwerekwere"—this emphasizes how much hatred towards this group is in the air in Tiragalong. The villager's vulgar gossip—crude and cruel on account of the suggestion that she might not be fully South African—exemplifies the type of rumors she had to face before her death. It's also clear that there is a gendered element to the villager's prejudice, since they use Lerato's sexuality to further shame her.*

Refilwe loved Refentše, and she is devastated by his suicide. She always imagined—or hoped—that he would give up his foolish "adventurousness" and come back to her, a good woman from Tiragalong. Refilwe, unlike Lerato, could grieve without guilt when Refentše died. She thinks often about what she sees as Refentše's "foolishness" (for not choosing her), which he exemplified the day that he came over to her apartment for dinner.

*Refilwe is a complicated character because she is kind and devoted to Refentše, but she is also quite cruel to Lerato at this stage in the novel. By suggesting that Refentše's love for Lerato is nothing but silly "adventurousness," Refilwe looks down on Lerato. This furthers the idea that she is imperfect, but eventually she is able to learn and grow enough to understand her past mistakes.*

That night, Refentše arrived at Refilwe's right on schedule. Refilwe was an excellent host, and she started off the night by letting Refentše choose the music—he picked Stimela. Refentše liked Stimela's song "See the World through the Eyes of a Child" in particular because it was a song about both suffering and love. Refilwe was trying to make Refentše happy by letting him choose the music (and by cooking for him), but she had no way of knowing that this song just reminded him of Lerato.

*Refilwe and Refentše clearly still have a lot of love for each other, even if that love takes different forms. Refentše shows that he wants to share romantic love with Lerato, even while Refilwe wishes that the two of them could get back together. Refentše's emotions are connected to music, which we see throughout the story, and Stimela's song links him back to Lerato.*

As Refilwe let her food simmer, hoping to remind Refentše about how nice it was when they were together, she took out old photographs. Refentše and Refilwe were in many of the pictures, embracing each other as lovers. In one of the pictures is a boy Refilwe went out with while she was seeing Refentše. This makes Refilwe think about how disappointing it was that Refentše hadn't understood her back then and how he'd just left her. If he'd asked, he would have found out that none of those boys meant anything to her—at least not in the way Refentše had. But she also told the story about how she broke up with one of *her* lovers because she found *him* kissing someone else.

*Again, Refilwe's love is very different than Refentše's love, but that doesn't mean they are unequal—it just means they are different. It is noteworthy that Refentše ended up being cheated on by the same boy that she cheated on Refentše with; this mirrors the way that Refentše eventually experiences being cheated on after he cheats on Lerato. Throughout the novel, there are situations where characters inflict pain and are hurt in the same way, which shows that each character is imperfect but also that they are capable of understanding and empathy.*

Refentše and Refilwe talked about many different things that night. She mentioned that she was thinking of pursuing another degree at university, and Refentše responded with enthusiasm. Refentše said he was sure she'd do well wherever she ended up—whether it was Wits or somewhere else, like Oxford Brookes. This is where the first "seeds" were "planted" for Refilwe about attending school abroad. Refentše told her to dream and to think big.

*Once again, it is important that the novel shows how much Refentše cares for Refilwe, even though he is not interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with her. This suggests that there are many forms of intimacy and love and that they can all be fruitful. Refentše planting the "seeds" that end up bringing Refilwe abroad proves this.*

After dinner, Refilwe commented on how beautiful the music was. Then, she started to lightly cry, and Refentše embraced her. She told him that she loved him, saying she wished she could go back to the time when they were together, when they were "still children trying to find their way through the valleys and hills of life"—that is, when they were less cynical. She choked up, but Refentše knew exactly what she was talking about. He remembered both the "beauty" and the "bitterness" of their young love together.

*Again, there is a tenderness between Refentše and Refilwe, even though Refentše is not going to accept Refilwe's offer of romantic love. But their childhood connection shows how meaningful their shared link to the past is. Refentše thinking about how there was both "beauty" and "bitterness" in their young love focuses again on the idea of duality, and how both joy and sorrow can be found in almost every stage of life.*

The conversation with Refilwe reminded Refentše of the very first time he fell in love. The woman he fell for was honest with Refentše, telling him that, although she might love him, she couldn't be with him because he didn't have a car. Refentše was devastated because the shock of his poverty hit him for the first time. Back then, it was Sammy who had comforted Refentše, encouraging Refentše to find enjoyment in other outlets, like school. It was also Sammy who talked Refentše out of his first depressive suicidal thoughts.

*This is one of the first and only descriptions of Sammy and Refentše's relationship from earlier in their lives, and it reminds readers that they don't know everything about Sammy. He has been a good friend to Refentše throughout the years, even if he slept with Lerato. It is also important to see that Refentše struggled with depression when he was younger, which further shows that Lerato should not have felt as guilty as she did about his death. She blamed herself entirely, even though there were many other factors that went into Refentše's suicide. This underscores the weight of guilt and the importance of communication.*

The more Refentše thought about his past while having dinner Refilwe's, the more he thought about Lerato. He realized that he could not betray her. As much as he loved Refilwe—and he did—it was Lerato who was always the "Bone of his Heart." He told Refilwe this. He hoped that they could still be friends, since love doesn't always have to mean a "love relationship." He would be there for her, but not as a lover.

*Refentše choosing not to cheat on Lerato for a second time again shows that he is growing through self-reflection.*

Refilwe argued that Refentše just admitted to loving her, and it would make more sense for him to be with someone from his home village. But as she started to say cruel things about the women from Johannesburg, Refentše reminded her that there are untrustworthy people all over—in Tiragalong, too. When he left Refilwe's, he knew that she was unhappy, but he believed in that moment that one day she would find her own love, at which point they could and talk about their partners.

*Refentše's insistence that there are unreliable people no matter where you go (even back in Tiragalong) speaks to the book's theme that every place has both good and bad, and so you cannot outrun your problems—you can only learn and grow if you want to become a better person.*

## CHAPTER 5

Two years after Refentše's suicide, Refilwe leaves South Africa to study at Oxford Brookes in England. She was accepted into an MA program in Publishing and Media Studies—impressing the people of Tiragalong—though she had to delay her studies two years to look after her dying mother. In those two years, Refilwe stayed at the publishing house where she got her first job. Though she'd been promoted to Commissioning Editor, she was frustrated with the company. They kept insisting that "good books" were only ones that could be sold to schools. Refilwe thought that the language of publishing was completely isolated from the language "of everyday life" and that they only wanted to print things that made people feel "safe."

*That Refilwe takes Refentše's advice to study abroad shows that she was able to benefit from their mutual love, even if she did not get the relationship that she wanted out of it. This, in turn, demonstrates a certain maturity. Her frustration with the publishing house showcases the way that South African publishers value books only based on whether they're "safe," which is code for whether or not they're in English. This calls back to Refentše's short story, and the issues that he saw in the South African publishing landscape. Refilwe now has the same opinion of the publishing world in South Africa, which suggests that she is becoming more aligned with the way Refentše saw the world instead of the way people from their home village did.*


Refilwe wanted to publish stories that confronted the hard realities of life, with a philosophical edge. This is why she appreciated Refentše's short story so much. She still read it often, because she liked that it challenged her viewpoint of the world, ultimately making her reexamine her own prejudices and think differently about things.

*That Refilwe specifically connects to Refentše's story because it challenges her beliefs shows how much she's grown in the two years since Refentše died. This shows an initiative on her part to seek out ideas that contradict the ones she previously held. This also shows the power of storytelling—and in this case, writing in particular—since she is able to alter her worldview by reading a story.*

In fact, since Refentše's death, Refilwe has changed her opinions about migrants and about people from Johannesburg. She understands that there are good and bad people everywhere—and that most people have both good and bad inside of them at all times. She no longer feels better or worse than anyone from Johannesburg or from another country.

*Again, Refilwe's growth shows that she has reflected on the beliefs she held in the past and moved on from them.*

When Refilwe is finally able to leave for school, she flies thousands of miles to the "Seat of Learning" (as the Oxford Brookes brochure says). She lands in Heathrow International Airport—there, she meets up with the one person she knows in England, a young woman named Jackie. Jackie comes from a wealthy family that could afford to send her to South Africa for an unpaid internship years ago. At that time, Jackie came to South Africa and taught at Tiragalong High School. Refilwe met Jackie when she was on a weekend trip back home visiting family and saying hello to old teachers.

*It is noteworthy that Jackie came to Tiragalong to do an internship, as it suggests that her family had enough money to send her to another continent to do unpaid work. This, in turn, shows the huge gap in wealth between a colonizing country and the people they once subjected.*

Since they met, Jackie would visit Johannesburg a few times a year, staying at Refilwe's flat in Hillbrow. Jackie began studying at Oxford Brookes a couple of years earlier, and she and Refilwe stayed in touch through phone calls and emails. They'd talk about books and news in the publishing world, and they'd also talk about their love lives. However, Refilwe did most of the listening when it came to this last subject, because she was still not over the heartbreak of losing Refentše.

*The girls are able to connect to each other through telling stories about their lives, which proves that storytelling is a critical part of our communication with other people. Refilwe's heartbreak over losing Refentše shows how much she still cares for him, even after he died.*

At the Heathrow airport, Jackie takes Refilwe out for a traditional English breakfast. Refilwe is already familiar with this type of food because it's everywhere in South Africa, and she enjoys its familiarity. She does not, however, enjoy the warm English beer that they serve, which reminds her of cow urine (which she actually tasted as a child, because people in Tiragalong said it would help her learn how to whistle). Luckily—or, because of "global imperatives"—there is also a South African beer at the restaurant in the airport, and Refilwe sips on that.

*The anecdote in this section about Tiragalong emphasizes the way that people from the village have their own ideas about everything—sometimes this is harmless, like the idea that cow urine makes you whistle, but sometimes it's harmful, as evidenced by the undue amount of power bone throwers have in certain communities (so much power, it seems, that they're able to profit off of preconceived prejudices).*

After breakfast, Refilwe and Jackie take the tube straight to the Oxford campus (the "Seat of Learning"). They go to admissions first, so that Refilwe can get all of her paperwork out of the way. Refilwe does not have to register with the Oxford police, as many Africans do. South Africans used to have to, before the end of Apartheid. Refilwe thinks about Rolihlahla Mandela's 1990 release from prison and the 1994 democratic elections, which "miraculously" happened without large scale violence. Refilwe remembers how many of the news outlets prepared themselves for riots and political violence, thinking things were sure to get ugly, but the violence never came. She thinks about how all of the events that happened in those years have now culminated in her not needing to register with the police in Oxford.

*The fact that Refilwe does not have to register with the Oxford police shows that there are tiers within Africa according to Britain—with South Africa above other countries. This proves that Britain maintains racist and prejudiced attitudes towards people in other areas of the continent. It is also clear that the only reason South Africans no longer need to register is because of the change of government in 1994—this suggests that, during Apartheid, Black South Africans would have had to register. Refilwe is interested and unnerved by the fact that so many large-scale political things happened to change her standing in the world, even though she did not change, which shows the absurdity of racist policies. It is also telling that most media outlets around the world thought that there would be violence when a Black South African president took over, proving that there are racist attitudes across the globe.*

Refilwe, her eyes newly opened, has mixed feelings about her privileged status as a South African in England. She is relieved that things are easier for her, but she notices and is unsettled by the fact that other Africans (Nigerians and Algerians, for example) are treated badly, particularly at Heathrow Airport. She thinks that Nigerians and Algerians are treated "like pariahs" in "our white civilization."

*Again, Refilwe (much changed from the younger girl who was prejudiced against other immigrant Africans) is bothered by how terribly African travelers are being treated at Heathrow. This signifies a colossal shift in her attitude and outlook on the world. It also emphasizes the white colonial prejudice at play in England. Furthermore, it's noteworthy that Refilwe thinks of Britain as "our white civilization." There's some heavy irony at work here, since Refilwe is Black and likely doesn't* actually *think of civilization as "white," but she understands how much power white people—and, historically, white* colonizers*—exercise over the rest of the world.*

Refilwe knows that this treatment is based off the assumption that people from other African countries are drug dealers or smugglers, even though the vast majority of African people searched by Heathrow security are completely innocent. Refilwe notices that custom officials never have to apologize or even put someone's things back in their bags after a search. Africans, with the exception of South Africans these days, are often also forced to go through extensive medical checks at the airport. As long as a South African tells customs officers that they've recently seen a doctor and don't have HIV, they're able to go through quickly. Heathrow airport reminds Refilwe of back home because of people's prejudices. The British even have an equivalent of Makwerekwere: "Africans."

*Again, Refilwe picks up on all of the racism around her, signifying a huge change in attitude from the beginning of the book. Additionally, it is particularly significant that she notices a similarity between what people back home thought of immigrants—"Makwerekwere"—and the way that British people see "Africans." This startling similarity proves that the British have exported their racism and prejudice to South Africa through colonialism and Apartheid.*

In fact, Refilwe sees a lot of parallels between the prejudices of British people and the prejudices people held back home, particularly around where someone is from. For one thing, people in England seem fixated on the distinction between "Africans" and "South Africans." Refilwe also notices that when people say "South Africa," they mean Cape Town (where the first white colonizers landed), Durban, or Johannesburg—they see these as white (wealthy) cities. These "Oxfordians" consider Black townships in South Africa to be completely separate from the whiter, wealthier areas.

*Refilwe notices that people in England want to pretend that South Africa is different or better than the rest of Africa—this is because many white British people recognize the descendants of white colonizers who still live in South Africa as similar to them.*

Refilwe likes to tell people in Oxford about Hillbrow, specifically noting that there are poor white people—even white sex workers—alongside poor Black people. She does this to intentionally shock people into realizing that there is, in fact, crime and poverty, even in their precious Johannesburg. She thinks "that is your Johannesburg for you…!" She thinks about how all of these places—Hillbrow, Cape Town, Oxford—have bits and pieces of each other within them.

*It is noteworthy that Refilwe likes to shock people in Britain with the reality that there are poor white people in South Africa. She does this to mess with their heads and make them realize that they can't just separate the world into two categories and assume that white people are rich and Black people are not. This shows that Refilwe has changed completely from the young girl who once hated Lerato for possibly having a Nigerian father. It's also important that she recognizes how many of the places she has been have both good and bad in them, and that it is impossible to make easy generalizations the way that prejudice calls for.*

At Oxford, Refilwe's room is part of a dorm-style setup with four other people that share a bathroom, lounge area, and kitchen. When she sees her room, she is worried about how tiny the windows are. For a few days after she first arrives, Refilwe is claustrophobic and cannot sleep in her bed—it feels like someone has put a plastic bag over her head and mouth. She does like the time before going to bed, though, when the people in her dorm all talk together in the lounge area.

*The fact that Refilwe can't sleep because she feels claustrophobic at her new school speaks to the idea that it is impossible to make judgements about a place or a person without getting to know them. One might assume that a fancy academic institution would have good accommodations, but they make Refilwe claustrophobic, working against preconceived notions that all wealthy institutions are places of comfort and wellbeing.*

Refilwe's roommates are from India, Ireland, Spain, and Greece. Refilwe thinks it is "a United Nation of sorts." The students all get along easily, especially because an easy conversation-starter is to bring up bizarre British behavior. This ranges from the more innocent (that British people can be a little cold) to the more serious (accusations of racism in academia). The group even prepares a special dinner together, which they call "Chicken J9" (referring to the number of their dorm room). The meal includes cooking techniques from each country represented in the dorm.

*Refilwe's easy bond with the people in her dorm shows again how different she is from earlier in the story—she used to have difficulty accepting people who might have had a parent from a different African country. It's also telling, though, that this British institution has lumped all non-British people together in a room; this shows how, in England, there is the idea of an insider and an outsider. It is easy to see, then, how that mentality migrated to the corners of Tiragalong after decades of British rule.*

Jackie eventually introduces everyone to a bar that becomes Refilwe's favorite—it is called Jude the Obscure. The bar is just down the street from the university. "One might have said" that it is very important to have "knowledge" and "relaxation" so close together, since these two needs are basically two sides of the same coin.

*In this moment, the novel connects Refilwe's present with her past by recalling Refentše's idea that it's important to have both "knowledge" and "relaxation." This type of repetition makes the story feel almost like a song (where there are repeated bridges and choruses), which furthers the idea that the novel pulls from traditions of oral storytelling.*

The Oxford students like Jude the Obscure a lot, not because they care so much about the Thomas Hardy reference but because the bar puts on lots of events, like poetry readings, fiction readings, and live music. It also stays open late. Refilwe knows that there is "as much knowledge and relaxation to be found in pubs as there was in books." The students love to go, hang out, mingle with people outside of the university, and talk about books. There are also lots of literary references all over the bar, and Refilwe likes to talk to the smart Irishman who owns the place. He even buys Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* after she recommends it.

*Refilwe understands the bar as a place for connection and socialization, just like Refentše did. This shows that she is willing to connect with other people in the same unprejudiced way that Refentše did early in the book. It is also noteworthy that Refilwe recommends a book to the bar owner, who then buys it, since this furthers the idea of connections being made through books and stories.*


*Ways of Dying* is about a character called Toloki—an "ordinary person" who wants to professionalize the act of mourning. When she recommends this book to the Irishman in Oxford, Refilwe has no way of knowing that soon her family will have reason to mourn *her*. If she knew she was carrying the "notorious disease" that would soon make her the subject of gossip across Tiragalong and Hillbrow, she might not have been able to recommend such a story.

*It is hard to do conventional foreshadowing in this novel, because so much of the plot is given at different times across different timelines, but this does hint at exactly how Refilwe will die—she will contract AIDS, the "notorious disease."*

Refilwe tells Jackie and her J9 friends that Jude the Obscure reminds her of a bar back in South Africa called Sweeny's. It's a university pub for the students of Witwatersrand, and it's where she and her friends went to celebrate "small victories" or to "drown the sorrows" of the week. Thinking of Sweeny's reminds Refilwe of Refentše, since it was the bar that they met at after he wrote her a reference. She can't tell her friends in Oxford just how many "happy and unhappy" memories Jude the Obscure brings up for her, since it makes her think of Refentše, his suicide, and his rejection.

*When Refilwe thinks back on her time at Sweeny's, she is filled with both good and bad memories, which indicates that life is full of both joy and tragedy. This furthers the idea that no life can be perfect, just like no person can be perfect. This duality is also shown in the way she used to "celebrate victories" and "drown sorrows" in the same place.*

One night at Jude the Obscure, Refilwe sees a man that looks almost exactly like Refentše (just with slightly darker skin). This shocks her to her core, and she can't take her eyes off of him even as she pretends to talk and laugh with her friends. When she gets home that night, she cannot sleep, since she feels like the love of her life has been "miraculously transported" back to her. And this time, there's no Lerato to compete with. That night, Refilwe dreams that she and Refentše are kissing, embracing, and touching each other passionately. She wakes up drenched in sweat. She sighs deeply and thinks about her past—the good and the bad—in Tiragalong and in Hillbrow.

*Refilwe understands that life is made up of good and bad, and that it will always be a mixture of each. It is noteworthy that she is drawn to a man who looks like Refentše, because this demonstrates that even though she has changed as a person, she has not let go of the love she felt for Refentše.*

The next week, at Jude the Obscure, Refilwe sees the same man ("the stranger-whose-face-was-Refentše's"). Refilwe is completely drawn to him. She approaches him, daring to start up a conversation. Refentše, watching from heaven, wishes he could help Refilwe, since he knows what the people of Tiragalong will say after they learn about this affair. The man is Nigerian. But Refentše is "neither God nor gods." In fact, he thinks that God and gods are not at all like they learned about in school, and that good and evil can be found on Earth in the hearts of ordinary people—from Hillbrow to Oxford to Tiragalong.

*That Refentše watches Refilwe from heaven shows how much he still cares for her; it also suggests that their connection never broke even though he died. His acceptance that he cannot change things on earth—even if he'd like to—shows that he, too, is maturing even in heaven, since he has let go of his desire for control over life. It is also very significant that Refilwe falls for a man who is Nigerian, because this further suggests that her earlier prejudices are no longer with her.*

Refentše, watching from Heaven, knows that Refilwe will bear the brunt of hideous words from people of Tiragalong: "So, you thought the ones in Johannesburg were not bad enough! You had to import a worse example for yourself!" He knows that, even as Refilwe and the Nigerian man enjoy themselves and find happiness in each other's arms, their story will not end well. When Lerato, in Heaven, asks her love, Refentše, why he looks so worried, he says that he is watching a sad movie about a man and woman who have fallen victim to AIDS. They both have the disease. When they go back home to their respective countries, they will face cruelty and judgement from the people of their villages.

*The words that Refentše knows people in Tiragalong will say are cruel, and this exemplifies the prejudice that exists across the village. "The ones" that the people of Tiragalong refer to are immigrants from other countries—so this references the idea that Refilwe slept with a Nigerian man, making her subject to ridicule.*

Refilwe braved Jude the Obscure despite the tragic memories it brought up. She tried to move past these memories because she wanted to be happy and feel alive. She loved the bar, just like she loved Tiragalong and just like she loved Hillbrow. If Refentše were still alive, he would probably write a lovely poem for Refilwe. But it would ultimately become her eulogy. Refilwe, about to die, has learned so much about life and about the hardships and prejudices in the world—from Oxford to Heathrow to Lagos to Tiragalong. Addressing Refilwe, the narrator says, "**Welcome to** the World of our Humanity…"

*It is tragic that Refilwe will not live long after she has changed into a more tolerant person, although this does speak to the way that nothing can prepare you for the unexpected things in life. The narrator, addressing Refilwe directly and saying, "welcome to the world of our humanity," underscores a theme that is present throughout the novel—that all places share something in common: they are imperfect, just like the people who inhabit them.*

## CHAPTER 6

Refilwe comes back to South Africa when she finishes her program. However, she is succumbing to AIDS. When the Nigerian man, her lover, found out about his diagnosis, he went back to Lagos. He would have been happy to come with Refilwe to Tiragalong, but he did not want to be a burden to anyone there. Refilwe almost went with him to Nigeria, but she wants to die at home. She's passionate about being buried in Tiragalong, even if it means subjecting herself to the horrible things that people will say to and about her.

*Refilwe has truly changed over the course of the story. She would have invited her Nigerian lover back to Tiragalong if he hadn't gone back to Lagos—this act alone would have been unthinkable earlier in the story, which demonstrates how free she is of her earlier prejudice. Her desire to be buried where she was born, though, does prove how difficult it is to fully break away from her home, and this intangible pull is probably why so many people never leave (and therefore change their minds) in the first place.*

Refilwe thinks about Lerato, and how Lerato knew a thing or two about being judged by her community. Refilwe thinks that it is her turn now. But Refilwe takes comfort in knowing that although there are ignorant and prejudiced people in the world, there are also kind, welcoming people, like her lover, her J9 friends, and many others that she has come across in her time on earth.

*Again, Refilwe expressing concern over the way Lerato was treated suggests that she feels guilt and regret, but also that she understands her mistakes and deserves forgiveness. She now has to face the same prejudices she made Lerato face, which is part of her character's redemptive arc. It is meaningful that she can see that the world is full of all kinds of people, when previously she'd only separated people into "us" or "them" categories.*

In this time—while she is waiting to die—Refilwe thinks often about Refentše, and particularly about his suicide. She feels like she understands now that suicide is not just a decision between "stupidity and intelligence," but that there are far more factors involved. She knows that she will die soon, though she decides it will not be through suicide. The "Dark Chamber" is seductive, but she does not want to go just yet, and she'll hang on as long as she can.

*This recalls an earlier moment in the novel, when the people of Tiragalong misunderstood Refentše's suicide and wrote it off as him not thinking carefully enough. Since Refilwe was aligned with the thought coming out of Tiragalong at that point, she, too, must have felt this way. So it is meaningful that she now understands the nuance of Refentše's decision—this is part of her growth, maturity, and reflection.*

Refilwe remembers the moment that she and her lover, the Nigerian man, were told they had AIDS. Apparently, they'd both been HIV-positive for a long time. Refilwe, especially, may have had this diagnosis for over decade—she just hadn't known. But for Refilwe, it was as though the disease struck quickly, and a combination of cold English weather and homesickness made her health deteriorate almost immediately and very fast. In fact, when Refilwe got off of the airplane at Johannesburg International Airport, her family was terrified at how thin she'd become.

*The possibility that Refilwe was HIV-positive for over a decade proves that she must have contracted the disease in Tiragalong, confirming that AIDS isn't—and never has been—exclusively a city or an immigrant problem, even though no one from the village wanted to believe it. It is noteworthy, too, that she feels like the disease came as soon as she received her diagnosis, since it suggests that there is a mental component to illness as well as a physical one.*

Despite the facts of her situation, Refilwe knows what the people of Tiragalong are going to say—that she went abroad, became infected by a Makwerekwere, and even that she is now one of them, by association. She knows that she'll become a cautionary tale for the people in the village.

*Again, Refilwe has completely broken with the groupthink of Tiragalong—still, she knows exactly what they will say. She knows that they'll blame her Nigerian lover, even though the illness did not come from him. This shows that she chooses to think for herself even though she could easily slip back into the culture of Tiragalong when upon her return if she just lied about how she felt. It is brave and redemptive that she chooses to return and to maintain her own point of view, since it demonstrates just how much she has grown in the last two years.*

Refilwe wrote to her family to tell them about her illness, but the reality of her situation doesn't hit them until they see her in person. Her brothers, for example, are devastated, because as soon as they see her, they know it is far too late to give her the African Potato (a medicinal plant that people said worked even better than the Virodene medication to treat AIDS). Seeing Refilwe's deteriorated physical state shocks her family. Still, they can't help but comment on it, and Refilwe hears one of her brothers whisper about her "bony shoulders" and "sticks of legs" as they walk to the car.

*It's fascinating that even at such a difficult time, the rumor mill cannot stop working in Tiragalong and gossip is still being passed back and forth, even by Refilwe's family members. This again shows the way ignorance and prejudice can fester in a tight-knit community. It is also noteworthy that people in Tiragalong have their own medicine for combatting the illness, even if they are under the impression that no one from their village could contract it, since it shows a wariness of modern medicine.*

After being greeted by her family, Refilwe starts to question her decision to come back to Tiragalong to die. She thinks that such visible grief is "fatal," meaning she'll probably die quicker because she's surrounded by such "gloomy" faces. The narrator addresses Refilwe, saying "**welcome back to our** Hillbrow…"

*The narrator seems to commiserate with Refilwe: "welcome back to our Hillbrow…" sounds almost like "of course this is happening here…" This emphasizes the way this refrain takes on multiple meanings throughout the novel.*

When Refilwe gets back to Tiragalong, she knows that people are saying "welcome" to her face but gossiping behind her back about her appearance and the fact that she is sick. Some obnoxious men from the village, who Refilwe once rejected, even ask her to her face why she turned them down if she was just going to contract AIDS abroad. She knows that she is going to become the face of AIDS for the village—"AIDS incarnated."

*Here, Refilwe is the victim of the ugly prejudice that she'd herself believed earlier in the story. The men in particular have a certain sexist edge to their prejudice, since they judge Refilwe in ways that they might not apply to men. This mirrors the sad and unjust way that Lerato was treated after Refentše died.*

Through the "village grapevines," Refilwe's deterioration spreads. Tiragalong uses Refilwe's illness as a way to deepen their prejudices about Oxford, Johannesburg, and Makwerekwere. The narrator reminds Refilwe that, in Tiragalong, people will say terrible things even as you are dying, especially if you go against the status quo. This gossip—"linguistic chisels"—seems to speed up Refilwe's impending death.

*Again, Refilwe's condition is only mocked by the people in her home village, which shows how deep their prejudices go. The rumors are incredibly painful for her to hear—the words are like "chisels," which again shows the power that words can have over a person.*

But Refilwe anticipated that all this would happen. She does not care, since she mostly thinks about her two loves: Refentše, and the man who looked like Refentše. It is as though Tiragalong and Nigeria are "blended without distinction" by these two men. She knows that she will be in heaven soon. She wonders what Refentše will think of her when he meets her there. She thinks about how much she has changed since he knew her on earth, because she shed so much ignorance and prejudice. She knows now that she, just like Refentše, is a Hillbrowan, but she's also "an Alexandran. A Johannesburger. An Oxfordian." She's even a Makwerekwere herself, since she slept with someone from Nigeria. She knows for a fact that there is both good and evil in every village, city, and country.

*Refilwe has moved past her guilt, regret, and prejudice, and she understands the world very differently than at the start of the book.*

Before she dies, Refilwe's loved ones make her "Chicken Tiragalong." She happily learns that someone is buying Sweeny's and will reopen it, even keeping the name. She understands that life will go on without her. She knows she will meet Refentše, Lerato, and all the others in the afterlife. The narrator explains what heaven is: it is an archive, and it is a memory. It is a way to refigure and revisit someone's time on Earth. It can be hell, too, depending on the way people remember you. The narrator addresses Refilwe, **welcoming** her to "our Heaven."

*Refilwe has completed her redemptive arc, dying just after she learned so much about life. But the narrator welcomes her into heaven, using the novel's common refrain, which suggests that she will be able to live a good life in heaven because of the improvements she made on earth. She accepts that things on earth will go on without her, which is further proof of her maturity, since she has learned that nobody can control things on earth.*

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