

ROSE TINGED MEMORIES: A FAMILY OF STRANGERS

*by Nozuko Siyotula**

I took a drive to that dusty street whose length had once been filled with many families. To own the truth, I was led there by a longing to eat freshly baked cake in maTema's kitchen with the banana tree that blocked the light from the window and feel her motherly gaze from behind her sixties styled pink sunglasses.

A decade had passed since I was there last. So much had been happening then in the country. So much change in the air. That's the reason why we left, because staying meant accepting that life was always going to be the way it was and for us and for uMama it became a bitter pill. Ironically I had been led there now by a need to breathe in the familiar. To drive past houses where I knew how the furniture was arranged inside or how the black and white wedding photo hung so precariously on the nail hammered into the wall. I wanted to laugh about the day Bra Simon and Bra John had the whole street running out of our houses in our underwear going to intervene in their latest fray, once, long ago. I wanted the dust to cover my car and be the nuisance I remembered it to be, engulfing us in its restlessness.

Turning into the street I found it tarred and I felt instantly that I had been away for a while. All the neighbours had extended their houses or were in the process of doing so. There were still a myriad of colours of the painted houses competing to be noticed, the elaborate details of the metal gates and chained dogs in case there was a visitor during the day and at night, in case there was a thief. The dogs sat with their heads resting on their stretched out forelegs waiting for either. I arrived at maTema's house, two houses down from where I had once lived. I parked my car.

The working class have always been an aspirant class but with little or no opportunity to become the somebodies of the world we measured out our days with drama and reconciliation. The one thing that was always true was that we needed each other. A cup of sugar here and pots there meant that we lived in each other's homes and struggled to maintain any sort of privacy. Those who did keep others at bay were often thought to be filled with airs. Of course another reason for the lack of privacy was that houses were built on top of each other. Most of the people who did not need others were the happy families, the ones with both parents and the children who obeyed their parents and the parents whose wholesome example to people in general on how to get by in this life-inspired envy. The contrary was also very true. Some people regarded those families with

so much suspicion, in a worse position were those that had cumulated some possessions; they became targets. The neighbourhood had little patience for the elusive ideals that those families represented. Each member on our street lived in a house that stewed in its own tale which almost always ended up being aired in one or other public brawl.

It became public knowledge that Meiki's mom was an alcoholic, which is why she, Meiki, had fallen pregnant. Bhut'Sipho did not have a wife, which is why he was such a womaniser. Mule was going to be a soccer star like his older brother which is why his parents had him drop out of school. Usually these brawls were started by lending a neighbour a pot and them not returning it or the placing of hot food in a Tupperware.

'Don't you talk about my child like that, at least she did not abort, we know how your family hates responsibility look at your brother, he has children all over God's earth.'

'*Hooooo shem* Ma ka Meiki (Meiki's mother) just say that your child has defeated you and let my brother be, Sipho is a grown man he is not like that daughter of yours who opens her legs for anything. Sies man!'

'*Yazi'ni* Ma ka Nelli (Nelli's mother) I don't want to see you near my house, and don't ever ask me for my pots! Anyway it's not like your function was nice, you borrowed my pots so that you could cook *umgodu nje* and the way you were going on and on one would have thought you were going to show us *mara niks!* That tripe is still blocking my throat I'm so full of it!'

'*Ag man*, let me be, I don't care about you. Jealous people never notice anything good anyway, you're a hard hearted witch, I will stay out of your way and you better stay out of mine or else you will eat blood!'

But as it went on, it was not long before folks of this street needed each other again; we always needed each other. You see the times were changing as times often are and the freedom violence was escalating to new heights. There were frequent protests at the soccer field that was three streets down. Most of the freedom fighters would approach the older children who were playing on the street and tell them that Chuck Norris had flown in to come meet Mandela at the soccer field and that they had to be there at a certain time without their parents. The name Mandela alone ensured the streets were cleared at the named time, we were all high on his fever. 'Viva' would reverberate all around the neighbourhood during the protests and the older children would come back pumped with a new light in their eyes.

In those days, it was dangerous to travel to work. Boarding the train and making to work was an exception. It was almost impossible to climb a taxi and not take a different route or run late. Normal to drive your own car without it raising eyebrows as to how it was financed or subsequently get hijacked. It was a dangerous time and we all needed each other. The politics created the times but folks generally loved being close to each other and smelling the sweat of each other's backs. It made life worth it because for the most part it could be easy for life not to be worth it.

Then of course there were ridiculous things that kept life moving like the fall out of long time friends. Bra Simon and Bra John had been drinking buddies for decades since moving from their respective villages to come and find work in Joburg. This is the common thread between all the older generation that only the children are born in Gauteng. Nonetheless, on one of their drinking sprees Bra Simon ran out of money and Bra John naturally offered to cover him and since nothing was for old times' sake Bra Simon told him he would refund him at the end of the week when his wages were paid but he did not. Bra John, hot tempered as he was filled a quartz beer bottle with paraffin and a match inside and threw it into Bra Simon's house one Saturday morning. The window that the bottle had broken had a curtain shielding the inside which quickly caught fire and within seconds the house was in flames.

We were sleeping when a hurried rapping on the door woke us. 'Umlilo Ma ka Zaza. Fire!' The person then ran out of the gate and into the next yard to inform them as well. uMama broke through our bedroom door and violently pulled off our covers and told us to stop sleeping whilst our neighbours were in trouble. Alarmed at the abrupt manner of address so early in the morning, we jumped out of bed in excitement and slight irritation. The whole street came out. MaTema had her hands on her head screaming, 'Modimo, Modimo, oh Lord!' Her blue cotton night dress with lace trimmings revealed a bit of cleavage which I found a little embarrassed to see hang out for the whole world. Every neighbour offered their buckets. It did not take long to figure out what needed to be done. UTata was already with other men who had jumped the wall to try and save Bra Simon's belongings and the people inside. We were frantically filling buckets with water and throwing them into the house. The older boys were connecting hose pipes to various houses and spraying the flames from all angles, the yards were pretty close to each other so the pipes could reach. This action lasted for most of the day.

It was only then that the police were called and a new competition began; that of the eye witness accounts. The investigating officer asked people to form a line, since so many were willing to recount what had occurred in as much detail as possible much to the investigator's detriment. The investigating officer

though, relishing his importance to the community continued to take notes and 'number phones' of people he thought were relevant for purposes of testifying. This impressed people; the fact that their observations could be worthy to a court of law. As the investigating officer progressed further along the line the accounts became outlandish and more heroic. The one hung on a tree to exterminate the fire, the other ran into the house after seeing the smoke from three streets down, and another pulled the little girl out and so forth. Others garnered attention by coughing uncontrollably, asking for water and when the investigating officer walked over to them, they blamed it on the heavy smoke but then quickly began telling the officer their accounts of what had transpired. Bra Simon and Bra John had fought right there in the middle of the street. 'I said I would pay you,' said Bra Simon. 'But you didn't,' replied Bra John. Bra Simon was a lightweight man, tall and slender with thin biceps that stretched out along his torso. He was no physical match for Bra John who had the weight of a normal man and who was used to tavern brawls due to his hot temper. They threw each other on the ground their backs dirty from rolling in the dust. Nobody interfered really because Bra Simon needed to vindicate his manhood after watching his house go up in flames for a ten rand debt. We all knew Bra John would not kill Bra Simon; not in front of his family.

The days rolled by after the fire. Bra Simon and his family lived with different neighbours on the street until they rebuilt the house. It turned out that the roof had suffered the most damage. The younger boys were commissioned to paint the house. Bra Simon's wife attended to the donated money for the windows and other people donated curtains or old furniture they had stored in their garages (which hardly ever had cars). Bra John and Bra Simon no longer spoke, though Bra Simon called Bra John '*leVenda le*' with such contempt in his eyes that even we stopped playing with Tshilidizi (Bra John's child) for some time, fearing that our parent's houses might just be burnt down as well. The cold war did not last long; just a year. New Years Day was coming up.

New Years meant fireworks and new clothes; the only other time for new clothes was Christmas and confirmation. New Years also meant that we could countdown to the song of the year while stealing to some dark part of the street since only the main road had streetlights to drink Crown ciders in their gold and red cans. They were supplied to us by the older girls who also taught us salacious dances afterwards when we were light with merriment and a wash of warmth spreading over our bodies. UMama forbade us from going into peoples' backyards especially on busy days like New Years and on one year I finally knew why. We saw two figures, can't say who now, but they made sounds that we knew immediately our parents would have censored. We ran back to the party a little wiser now about backyards at night time. Each house on the street bought so many explosives to

shoot off into the night until dawn coloured the sky then only the drunks kept the party going.

The rest of the street retired to prepare for the later hours of the day when there would be elaborate dishes prepared. The youth would be in their shortest items headed for a park in the city to have a picnic and braai, leaving in a convoy of taxis blasting the crowned song of the year. We spent most of our times at maTema's house sitting in her kitchen with the linoleum floor and the banana tree that blocked the kitchen light eating vanilla cake with grenadilla frosting. Her burly body sitting next to us asking if we wanted more of everything through her pink glasses. Wisdom etched all over her face. We always said yes. Besides, most of us never had grandmothers who baked and who let us sit in their lounges with our feet on the sofa. She was the grandmother we all yearned for but only ever saw on television. MaTema worked *emakitchini*, she was a domestic worker, and most times we saw her on the weekends when the aromas in her kitchen wafted onto the dusty street where we were constantly making a nuisance of ourselves with all the other children. Soon after the games would end we would find ourselves at her door, led there by our poverty for some and false nostalgia for others.

After New Years, folks generally buried the hatchet because when times were hard, one needed every available person to be called a friend. That was partly why Bra Simon and Bra John slowly found their way back to each other and when Bra Simon held a function to re-open his house, as though it were a place of memorial with a red ribbon tied onto the gate. It was Bra John who cut it; ironically.

The investigating officer never came back to call the relevant witnesses and it was just as well as that turned out to be the largest ceremony we ever attended for the building of a burnt roof. Sheep were slaughtered. The elders spoke to the ancestors. The church women prayed. The programme director entertained the crowd which was largely made up of families who lived on the street. There were tables upon tables covered in white cloth laden with all the salads and meat in the world and there Bra Simon and Bra John sat, reconciled, drinking a *lala* of traditional beer.

Then the happy times ended. UTata, Bra Simon and Bra John accompanied each other every morning since they all worked *emafirmini*, in the industrial areas of Johannesburg. UTata missed his train that morning having misplaced his wallet. Bra Simon and Bra John left him to catch the early train out. They were both killed. Shot several times by anonymous men who left as swiftly and deftly as they had come. Sixty dead, going to work. UTata tried again but he missed the train again. Sixty dead, going to work. Then a hundred. Then all Xhosa and Zulu boys became the hunted. Then all Zulu and Xhosa men were feared. The protestors at the soccer field were scattered by tear gas and bull horns, whips cracked to disperse the crowd. Kangaroo

courts for snitches mushroomed and usually ended with tyre necklaces hanging on the accused's neck all black fumes and red flames with their heads shooting off their bodies.

UTata began using the car to go to work and with us inside they shot at him. He pressed the accelerator hiding his head under the steering wheel and rammed into the knees of the gunman who flew in all angles in the sky before landing as a heap on the side of the road as we sped on by. There was no peace, a locked door meant nothing for the style at that time was that they either kicked down the door and upon entering punished the occupants for their efforts or they pummelled the door down with arsenal without knocking first. Police sirens sounded all the time. Folks did not care about death they were so reckless. We, during those waves of violence, slept lightly on most nights forever worried about the slightest noise outside.

Then one day they charged into the house with guns so long it took two hands to carry them, but they were common thieves feasting on the times. They were not freedom fighters nor were they police informants or the police themselves. Four men walked in and asked for uTata's car keys. The leader slapped uTata around and the other man put a gun down uMama's throat. Her tears flowed so steadily down her face without a pinched noise or anything actually coming out of her, she kept her eyes on us all the time. I knew we were not going to be harmed, our bodies had not formed enough to be fodder for them but I wasn't so sure about uTata. They wanted to know where he kept the safe. The more he denied any knowledge of a safe the more the magazine of the gun brutally found his head. We knew not to cry, that might make them kill uTata but Cece didn't know that, she was a baby.

That irritated the one who was slapping uTata, he threatened irascibly to ease her discomfort permanently. The other one, the one who had a gun down mama's throat intervened and he ordered one of the other boys who were looting in the other rooms to take the baby to the next room with the rest of us. He had with him some gentleness that seemed so contrary to the vulgarity of his current act. It was to be years until mama confessed to me that she had once taught him at school. This interrogation continued for hours until they left with the car and some the appliances and groceries.

The gun uMama had eaten left her with an after taste so strong she stopped eating all together. She watched us all the time, paranoid about every stranger walking into our yard selling ice-cream or taking photographs for money. We tried to teach her the new hand game we had learnt from the television, the hand movements went along with the words:

South Africa,
We love you,
Our beautiful land,

Let's show the whole world,
We can bring peace in our land!

We sang that song along with Leleti Khumalo, Sarafina as she was known, all the time infatuated with her caramel even tone skin and the confidence she exuded in the fact that we could actually achieve what the words aspired to do. We sang that song so much that the peace people came to give each household a white t-shirts with a blue and a white dove imprinted on the left breast of the t-shirt. On the other breast, all the way to the navel were the words of the song in black print. We learnt the song. We taught our parents the song. We taught Lerato, Bra Simons daughter the song. We taught maTema the song. It exploded but uMama hardly cared, she had eaten too much of that gun that day and wanted to leave. UTata too had seen enough, buried too many friends and had missed death enough to know that his angels had grown weary of him. It was to be some years before we left, officially. We were separated from the neighbourhood by our medium of instruction in the different schools we attended, in the manner in which we played there's-a-party-round-the-corner and how we only slept in the house where we returned to from another life. We left long before the day the white truck pulled up in front of the house.

MaTema cried the whole day. She begged my mother to reconsider, the times were changing. Hani was the last. The vote happened didn't, we all thought it wouldn't but it did. The children were getting good education. UMama would not hear it though. She longed for the taste of food again, her senses to be invigorated by something other than that gun that was lodged forcefully into her mouth by a boy who she had taught how to calculate fractions, she was determined. Meiki's mother told her never mind the old lady since she was probably jealous of her going to live the high life. 'You must come back and tell us what it feels like to be a Madam'. We did not see maTema before we left; we left with the first load the truck took. Our minds were high about finally living near our school friends and having a maid accompany us everywhere and not having to wait by the corner of the school on the pavement to be picked up by a red taxi that collected those like us who were mere visitors in the suburbs. Our loyalties were reasoned out like those of children, never looking back at people who knew the insides of our homes and whom we had needed all these years. The dust kicked up in the air carried us away in its restlessness.

And so a decade passed. The excitement of the suburbs soon cooled and in our sober moments we realised that we longed for the kind of party we had had on New Years or for the drama of saving a neighbour in need. We longed for a family with strangers. I longed for maTema. I thought about her all the time with her pink glasses. One time I had pulled them off her face. It was a Sunday after church and

she was hosting us for lunch. The fourth lunch hosted by a family on the street we had attended after my mother's graduation from university. My mother sat in her gown, they all insisted she must wear it to every lunch, on the other end of the kitchen eating vanilla cake with the grenadilla frosting, the men were outside preparing the braai. This was normal: to have a braai after the formal meal. I pulled off the cat-eyed glasses off her face and wore them. The cat-eyed shaped sunglasses slid off my face, they were too big. She laughed heartily. I asked her about why she wore them all the time. Taking them and wearing them again she said: 'where else is there glamour in this life, in this dust?' Thereafter, she laughed so loud cupping my face in one of her soft fat hands, 'look at us, all of us, on this dusty street that hangs onto a person's palate so tightly choking the life out of them we need the glamour if not for the fashion then for ourselves, that is the Gospel!' She continued to laugh as she stood up to open a cupboard with canned peaches.

'You didn't know me when I was young. I wasn't beautiful but I had it elsewhere, where it mattered' she said, slapping her thighs suggestively her big arms jiggling with fat. 'in a few years you will know' then she laughed so loudly it spread to all of us, 'that is the Gospel'. 'Ma...' Mama laughed trying to cover up her mortification at maTema's unusually forward comments. I threw my eyes to the half empty Crown cider on the table. 'Ag man, they must know' she said waving away my mother's conservatism, 'no harm done'. Without asking she scooped canned peaches with the syrup onto my plate next to my thick slice of cake. 'No harm at all'. I remember her open her face laughing at her last comment, really throwing her head back and digging deep as if she realised seconds later the humour of it all. I cling onto that memory.

Opening the gate of the house, I walked around familiar territory noting the subtle changes, even the aging of things all the way to the kitchen door. I found Matlaku, her granddaughter sitting on the veranda kneading dough. My stomach sank as I thought about how I could have had those recipe's passed down to me and how these days I had my own ideas that vehemently resisted the scene currently playing itself in front of me but seeing Matlaku working from memory made me long for access to maTema's secrets on her domestic prowess. Matlaku looked up at me warily. 'Hello.' It took a minute for my face to shift focus in Matlaku's eyes. 'It cannot be!' she squealed raising herself up from her knees. Then we poked at each other, her rounded cheeks, my height, her wearing a dress, me wearing pants. We held each other in a long embrace, suspended in disbelief and relief that the moment was real.

'Come in come in,' she held my back with her hand covered with flour. The other arm cradled the bowl of dough that she set on the table and covered with a dish cloth for the dough to raise. She then

washed her hands at the sink. I stood next to her. 'So I see people are extending,' I said and we shared a knowing laugh about the competitive nature of the people on this street.

'It started with Meiki's mother when she got promoted.'

'Promoted? *Chesa!* I'm sure nobody lived that down.'

'Eh! It's like you were here, she threw the biggest party on God's earth, bigger than Bra Simon's, and it lasted days. A few weeks later she began complaining incessantly about how everybody was so jealous of her success'

'She loves people being jealous of her *ne?*'

'How do you know her? That was when she started buying bricks and things every month end. She didn't tell anybody what she intended to build which of course is always a question that needs answers. She just said she should be left alone, complaining about jealousy and whatnot. Anyway we eventually heard from Bhut'Oupa, because she stopped greeting and talking to everybody. She said that when your mother graduated from university she used her best table cloths made from silk to host a huge lunch but when she moves up in the world in the world the only thing she gets is the party she threw for herself and you know *mMa'Meiki*, she never lets anything go. So *Mama,*' referring to *maTema*, 'sensing the impending doom joined together with the other women and secretly organised a party for her inviting people from even three streets up. *Wwhooo* friend! It was so huge you would have thought it was a wedding,' she began laughing heartily that she resembled *maTema* so much, 'anyway after that everywhere she went people called her *Promotion*'.

'And I bet she loved that' I said in raptures of laughter.

'Eh! How do you know these old people!' we laughed in unison. We sat in the kitchen eating the vanilla cake she had pulled out from the fridge.

'Do they still call her that? Has she stopped drinking?'

'*Hai*, she says she has but...I don't know. Do you ever know with these old people?' 'True. Where is *maTema*?'

'What do you mean?'

'Is she at work?'

'*He e wena*, you don't know?' Then suddenly I knew. 'We told Bhut'Oupa to tell you because he said he had a relative who lived in Pretoria. We thought when you guys didn't come to the funeral, maybe you had other arrangements plus *Mama* lost your mother's numbers after she came here after school one time.'

'No, we would have come,' I said annoyed at myself, ashamed even.

‘Yho, she was sick for long time, cervical cancer. She bled and bled and bled; it was awful.’ Her voice filled with the memory of that time. She placed her fork on her plate. The flippant nature in which she spoke stung me a bit; she had the privilege and the time to reconcile herself with a world without maTema to speak about her this way.

Selfishly, I had assumed that she had remained frozen in that time and that only my life was asking me questions about who I am. It hurt to know she was mortal. ‘But she loved you guys’ Matlaku continued saying, ‘no matter who lived at number 56 they just were never the same, never quite fit into the groove of how we do things around here. She thought you guys were going to come back sometime, convinced herself really. She just could not believe that you would want to live elsewhere. You know old people.’

‘I do,’ I replied and I was left wondering about the sincerity of my answer. Matlaku put her saucer in the sink and walked into one of the rooms. I sat in silent grief, replaying the last time I had been on this street driving away in a white truck. I envied how Bra Simon and Bra John lived on, their ghost’s still part of this changed world. I resented myself for never having said goodbye properly, for being a child. I thought about death briefly. Our silent twin who walks with us everywhere, quietly biding its time until cervical cancer became the catalyst or a swerving car or a gun. I felt centred and rooted to the truth of life- that we all die. ‘These are yours,’ Matlaku said coming back to sit down opposite me. I took the pink glasses from her hands. I smiled. ‘My brother and I agreed that you would return one day, today, and that we would give them to you since you’re the only one who seemed to love those ridiculous glasses.’ ‘That is the Gospel.’ We smiled knowingly at each other, ‘thank you’.

A few hours later, I made my rounds up and down the street greeting old friends. People enquired about my mother and if she ever received another degree. How old Cece was now and what were our numbers. I even ran into ‘Promotion’ herself and she began telling me about her promotion which I pretended to not know anything about which for some odd reason upset her terribly. Lerato, Bra Simon’s daughter, holding her own child, kissed me on the mouth lightly as was the custom. She introduced the child who peered curiously from behind her mother. There were embraces all around. I promised to pass their greetings along to my parents and to drop by another time.

In my rearview mirror I watched them wave me off, my family of strangers. It looked like an old photograph you would find in a forgotten album, with the edges turning slightly red, rose coloured, with arbitrary trees framing the group that stood arranged in the middle of the photo wearing their widest smiles for the lens to capture forevermore. At an intersection, I pulled out my pink glasses and I put them on. This time they fit. I smiled thinking that this is how

she had seen me all those years ago, through this haze of rose. I drove off. I continue to live after that visit, when I'm alone in a room filled with expectations or bored by the droning voice of uninspired lecturers I take myself back there. To the length of that street and I live it again, if only for a moment, I am in that kitchen with the window shielded by the banana tree eating vanilla cake with grenadilla frosting.