

BEGINNINGS OF A DREAM

*Birth is the beginning of a dream
a meditative pose over knights and queens
on the tightrope,
a juggle of divining bones
striving to interpret man's prodigal wanderings
through the Minotaur's labyrinth...*

BIRTH IS THE BEGINNING OF A DREAM... In my old age, I am able to muse. My grandchildren dismiss my observations as senile rattling – and how can I chastise them for their ignorance, when even my four adult children push aside my accumulated insights as ‘grandmother’s tales’? Perhaps they are right, how can I tell? Increasingly, my thoughts are becoming blurred by dust and drifting winds.

I overheard Thekiso, my sixteen-year-old grandson, whisper to Itumeleng, his ten-year-old sister: ‘Hai! Tsamaya, go keep grandmother company. Can’t you see she is desperate for an audience?’

Desperate for an audience! This is how the insights of my old age are viewed. Trivialised and trampled upon. Dismissed as bothersome.

Maybe Thekiso is right. I know I am constantly talking to them – when they are doing their homework; when they are trying to enjoy their favourite television and radio programmes. In regard to interrupting their homework, I too feel I might be intruding. But I cannot agree with them when it comes to the other things. For, in my long years, I have learnt a lot. I have accumulated knowledge and information, and discovered that these two instruments, radio and television, offer nothing good. The parables and wisdom that age has nurtured in my head are lacking in them, as are the revelations and inner resourcefulness that rains and winds have nourished in me. Increasingly, with the advance of age, I realise that these appliances are contraptions designed to curb the growth of inner knowledge.

Innocent grandchildren, how can I chastise them? Their innocence and ignorance is the mandatory price of youth.

It is Raisibe whom I cannot forgive. Raisibe, my first-born. I could have excused her were she a boy, for then there might have been a wife whom

I could blame instead, since it is true that wives are experts at souring relations between mother and son. The worst was when she called me a witch. That was seven years ago. I wonder how that husband of hers copes?

Birth is the beginning of a dream... and a fragment of that epic dream exploded into a nightmare in 1980. That is when Madika died. At sixty-eight, I found myself a widow. Maybe because we had got so used to each other, the two of us had started believing in our immortality. Not that death didn't visit us; it was just that we were too stubborn to host him. We were prepared to sink into the grave together, so that we might walk side by side in the hereafter. It is now almost twelve years since Madika's death. And here I am, alone. Still, I am grateful for my luck. Few people can withstand the assaults of old age as I have. I have also given up counting the white hairs on my head. And you wonder whether I am grateful or not – of course I am. But here I am, all alone in this shadeless world. Occasionally, I venture outdoors. But a hostile world always sends me scuttling back into the familiar comfort of the house. My ears can no longer wander out to visit different sounds or voices. My eyes, too, no longer

can sprint about, entering the sealed windows of other homes. Only my voice strolls around the house. Still, my children and grandchildren, like everyone around me, at times erect walls around their ears. ‘Oh grandmother, *please*...’ In my old age, when the word ‘please’ should be pleasing to hear, it is now like a needle that pierces the core of my heart. I blame Raisibe for that. Raisibe is the worst. On her occasional visits, she uses the standard: ‘Oh grandmother, *please* – you’ve had your breakfast / lunch / supper / snuff... what more do you want?’

As if I live only for food and snuff. As if I were not her mother. She surely treats me like her stepmother – one of those frowned-upon fleas that drain the blood bond between fathers and their children.

That is why I feel betrayed by Madika. His sneaking away to the beyond without taking me. Had death made his advances to me instead, I certainly would have informed Madika, and invited him to come along – even dragged him.

‘Hai! Tsamaya, go keep your grandmother company...’

Thekiso has changed a lot. He has changed for the worse. It must be that mother of his who is

putting bad things into his head. I remember how attached the boy was to me. That was until he turned eleven. Then he discovered the bioscope. He stopped brewing grandmother's favourite coffee; stopped boiling grandmother's Maltabella porridge. He didn't care any more to bring her warm milk after supper. I spent hours contemplating these disappointments, and concluded that old age was a curse.

Looking after my grandchildren is my greatest pride. Caressing their innocent little faces used to thrill me. Mother! Foundation rock of the family. Like the baobab tree, sustaining life throughout the centuries; stretching out her firm hands to protect her children, like the bark of the baobab protects its roots so they don't get bruised when drawing water. And Madika is looking after our children and grandchildren from the beyond – the world of the ancestors.

I know I will join him. All the meandering footpaths in this world lead to death. One day I will escape from this lonely life... this bondage of old age.

Old age contains a curse, the curse of extreme loneliness. During the years of supervising the birth

of my grandchildren, I was always looking for the arrival of my other self, a granddaughter who would bear my name, thus ensuring my resurrection. I had seen her in my many visits to the other world, when dreams transported me to the beyond. On the left side of her forehead, immediately below the hairline, there would be a tiny pink spot. A red thread-like line would cut from her left collarbone down to her navel. After the birth of each girl, I would strain my eyes trying to identify these features. But each birth followed the last without the new arrival sporting these marks. Then I knew the waiting was going to be long. But it was a wait worth all my patience, for I knew the birth would signal my time to depart to join Madika.

Of late, he had been visiting me frequently, to give assurances that such a child would come. Still, I was sceptical. Wasn't he the same person who reneged on our promise to depart together? His visits, though, served to confirm another thing – the level of my perception. My eyes, in surrendering my journeys of discovery in this world, were now attuned to seeing the inviting doors to the other world.

Sleep is temporary death; Madika told me this on one visit. For nights after that, I awaited his

arrival. But he did not reappear. Later, I was to learn that his non-appearances were a protest against my quarrel with Raisibe. They are attached, those two. I understand. Raisibe was our first child. Her birth had a great impact on Madika's life. Already in his late thirties, he was a notorious skirt-chaser. I could sense his fear of not fathering a child. That was clear from the varied aphrodisiacs he drank before making love. I recall one time he brought home a litre bottle of bull's urine. Days later, in a hidden plastic container, I saw a stallion's testicles. Then I saw him eating them raw. Eventually he started accusing me of being barren. Meanwhile, his skirt-chasing continued unabated.

It was only when he started chasing fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds that I became alarmed. Then he said to me: 'Wena! Your parents should bring back half the amount of my lobola. So much for a wombless thing, e-eh!'

But Raisibe came, and Madika relaxed.

During his life, Madika favoured Raisibe. This attachment had to do with Madika's restored confidence in his virility. This close bond between father and daughter was viewed suspiciously, for in our village fathers were supposed to be closer to their sons. Also, I suspect our other children

were jealous, since they tended to tease her about everything.

Madika's repeated assurances that my other self would come filled me with pleasure; but there was also that uneasy feeling that I was waiting for my vanquisher. For though she was to issue from my daughter's loins, it was only by usurping my life that she would be able to carry on with hers.

My life and hers were intertwined like those of larva and butterfly, where the former must undergo complete transformation for the other to appear. Or I was like a snake, that must shed its worn skin to renew itself.

Would this girl, my replica, uphold the dignity and virtue which I had maintained throughout my life? Kana! Girls these days like competing with men. As if our ancestors were foolish to make them female.

Why couldn't it be a boy? Boys never become rivals to their grandmothers. How I wished for a little boy. And I realised that, in old age, I had fewer and fewer wishes.

My last quarrel with Raisibe took place after one of those rare good suppers she is capable of cooking. As I knew, things between her and Modise were

bad. It was as if she had made the meal to infuriate him, for it was said that good food was bad for tempers in his family. A pig is their totem; a pig is known to relish filth. So was it true that anything above filthiness raised Modise's ire?

As a son-in-law, he was not my favourite. I was only grateful that he had relieved me of a bad-tempered daughter – and, to a lesser degree, that he'd saved us from having a spinster in the family.

Shame, poor Tidimalo, my sweet younger daughter. She and her husband, Tshepo, hardly visited us. I understood. Their life was more settled. Two sweet things, they were like twins. Peaceful creatures who take after their names: Tshepo, trusty and reliable, and Tidimalo, quiet and withdrawn. But Raisibe and Modise... joo badimo!

I was quietly talking to my grandchildren. Sharing with them the wisdom old age had helped me accumulate. Modise, that hopeless horse-betting addict, was absorbed in his TAB calculations, while Raisibe was busy with her ironing. What was it that stopped her? Maybe it was Thabang's insistence that he would never again go to sleep. I remember that just before he said this,

I had said something like: ‘Yes, children of my child, we too as children used to hear of it from our elders. Of course we never believed it. Until two days ago...’

At which Thabang exclaimed, in the innocent high-pitched voice of little boys his age, ‘Two days ago! Nkgono, what happened?’

‘Your grandfather told me...’

‘Told you! How could he tell you? Dead people don’t talk.’ That was Mmabotle, my nine-year-old granddaughter. That one should have been named Tidimalo, after her aunt, who in her quiet way always insisted on finding answers. Her mother complained that she was dull. But I knew, and it filled me with grandmotherly pride to see this bright girl. With time I knew she would open up, absorb the sun and radiate. She was destined to be the exception in a family where daughters did not excel, despite the naughtiness they displayed when young.

‘They do talk, my little one – they talk to us during night visits that seem like dreams. Or at times it is we who cross over to their land.’

‘How come I sometimes dream of the stove and wardrobe chasing or fighting me, but I don’t cross over anywhere?’ That was Thabang.

‘Yes my child, we all do. We all do in our dreams. For sleep is temporary death, where the worlds of the living and dead merge into one...’

‘Ooo! Grandmother please, stop telling those children nonsense. I know it is because of that good food you ate.’

Was that talk from Raisibe, my own daughter!
‘What! Am I a pig?’

‘Yes! Grandmother, you are. Hoji ka mphela.’

‘Yes-yes, go on – I am one because you bewitched me.’

‘Howoo! What about you old people who refuse to die – killing young people so you can sustain your lives on theirs?’

At this point, Modise picked up the children and disappeared with them to the bedrooms. Finally he came and dragged Raisibe away.

Within me a voice kept repeating, ‘Damn your cursed good food.’ I was having great difficulty in breathing... and then suddenly everything stopped.

When I awoke, I was in a strange country. Birds, bees and flowers, all radiant despite the fog that was drifting about. All my deceased relatives were there, feasting in a welcoming ceremony. Except Madika. ‘Where is he?’ I kept on asking. I was finally told that he would not appear until

I had gone back to make peace with Raisibe. I started to look for her, but she was nowhere. I looked everywhere. And I was moving further and further away from the assembled relatives.

I returned to consciousness alone in my house. It took a while to forget the insult of my own daughter calling me a witch. After that, it was difficult for us to relate. I heard she had forbidden her children to visit me. Modise was the only one who did come by occasionally. He kept those visits secret from Raisibe – as I knew by a strange dream I had. In my dream, I saw a mourning Raisibe in a strange forest. She was wandering about in circles like a dog sniffing for the lost spoor of a hare. Then Modise and I appeared to her. When she saw us she turned into a python, which started its death-dance, preparing itself to strike. When Modise charged forward to face it, it changed back into Raisibe. And she fled from him, despite his vowing not to do her any harm.

When I asked him about her and my grandchildren on his next visit, Modise responded by weeping. That confirmed another suspicion of mine – that whenever my name was mentioned before her, Raisibe responded with tears.

After a year of us not seeing each other, I finally resolved to go and visit her. I thought it right that I not tell anybody about this visit. I quietly wrapped myself in my green and white mjajana and off I set.

I arrived at her house at noon. I was hesitant to step onto the dirty front stoep. I could see she was still busy cleaning. I stood for a while, not daring to venture across the accumulated dust that all households manufacture at night. For who knows, among those bits and pieces of dirt might be a pin or granule dropped by witches the previous night, with a spell cast on it to cause a stroke in anybody who might tramp on it. I did not trust Raisibe.

When I entered the kitchen door, she stared at me like someone seeing an apparition. She started sliding backwards, her arms raised protectively to her chest. And I knew what was happening, and started laughing.

‘Hela ngwana tena. Tlaa! Daytime is a blanket which the dead cannot wrap themselves with. Come. It’s me – your mother.’

That broke her trance. She shrieked, gasped, ‘Mme! Mme!’ and ran into my arms. It reminded me of years gone by, when she was still a little girl, always seeking my arms for reassurance and comfort.