

3

Before I tell you about my working years, I must take you back to my childhood. This was not without its hardships.

I was taught to respect my elders, the hard way. Of course, I tried my best to keep out of mischief. You see, my parents didn't just give us a good hiding, they would almost kill us if we did anything wrong.

My father's name was Solomon and my mother's name Nonkululeko. My father was a miner at Egoli (Johannesburg). He worked underground, as a machine-handler. He was a very strict man, had a short temper and loved his drink. Like many other men, he would cough out to his family the same bad treatment he received at work and on the streets of South Africa.

He died drinking: somebody poisoned his drink and he died belching out blood one Christmas - I think in 1949. The story goes like this. He went to visit his friends for a drink as usual. It was rather a cold day, the weather was bad and I was home that day. I was helping my mother to brew beer - and she was teaching me how to brew it.

While my mother was looking through the window, she saw two men carrying my father by his arms, taking him to my grandfather's house. She took a bucketful of water, washed herself, and decided to go there and find out what was happening. On her way to my grandparents' place

she met the local doctor driving his car. The doctor gave her a lift to the old people's place. But they arrived there too late. He was still warm but they had missed him - he had gone resting. He had vomited a lot of blood.

Later the doctor checked his body, opened him up and found that he had been poisoned. His intestines were all messed-up, they had been severed. I remember his funeral: a cow was slaughtered; for his safe journey, the old men said. I also remember that during the burial I did not cry. However when I noticed my mother wearing black, I was overwhelmed or scared and started sobbing uncontrollably.

The case of my father's death was contested at the Flagstaff magistrate's office. Two men faced charges of fatally poisoning my father. One of them shared our surname and the other one came from the Mtambo clan. After a two year long battle they were acquitted. Not guilty and discharged. I am still in the dark - to this day I do not know what the trial was about. The world of adults conspired to keep it a secret.

From then on we could not afford an independent homestead so we moved to my grandparents' place. But my mother decided it was not nice there so we went back home and started from where we had left. We sold one cow in order to get enough money to live. We were left with two. My mother before long, and without warning, developed a very urgent approach to our lives.

"I want to teach you domestic work so that you can cook and take care of your siblings when I'm gone. It will be very difficult for you if I die," she said to me. One day I asked her why she never asked my younger brother to help with the household duties. She said she always asked me because when she was pregnant with me, she thought she was carrying a girl.

Every Saturday I used to wake up early in the morning, make up the fire, collect some firewood, fetch 20 litres worth of water five times, grind samp, make Mahewu (sour porridge), polish the five huts with cow dung, chop the wood and then sweep our yard.

After this my mother would say: "Thank you, my Miya (my surname). You can go now, you can go play stickfighting with your peers, you have finished what I wanted you to do for me; you are free to go now." And

without further warning she died. Though she had been very sick, she wilted without showing the slightest sign to us.

My mother had tried by all means to make sure we never lived like poor fatherless kids.

MOTHER

Even though I cannot see you through
these natural eyes
I can see you through my
imagination
The Lord only gave you a short span of years
And then you left for the land of the high
winds
Long before I came to appreciate
your presence
You left me
with endless years of solitude.
But I still hear that soft
echoing voice
guiding my way forward

Yes, Mother, all this leaves
me with a question -
What is a home without a mother?

When I am away, out on the road
Hungry, thirsty and full of tears
I think about you Mother
and I regain my strength
My hunger, thirst and exhaustion disappear
The road's sorrows and worries
disappear as I reach out
For you
My mother

Your word is the light in this
world of darkness.

In times of war, your counselling
becomes
 the weapon
 I conquer with.
Even in my solitude I do not
 feel lonely
 because of your instruction and lessons.
Though you left me rather early
 before I came to appreciate your presence.
 I say I don't regret.
The time had come for you to
 pass on to the land of the high winds
There too, your good work was needed,
 my Mother
Now Mother
 you must feel free
for your nation is feeling that way too.