

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE BOTSHABELO VILLAGE

This is a letter written by Marion Clote, the founder of Botshabelo, which describes a day in their life of her family and the orphaned children who reside at Botshabelo. Botshabelo means a resting place for these orphaned children.

It's freezing, but I have to finish taking the last of the babies and some teenagers to the toilet. It is 2:00 clock in the morning, the only sound, is the sleeping children all 98 of us. Some children whimper in their sleep while we hustle the babies to bed, the cement floor sends up waves of freezing air. Our home is large but has too many holes to count. I wake up through waves of tiredness, it is time to wake up, and for a moment, I wonder what the new day will bring. Dire poverty and all its permutations make each day unpredictable.

Doves, the undertakers who help us with cheap burials send for me, my daughters and the foster children follow me. Well that's it my day has started for me. I see the coffin is for a child of 10 and not a one-day-old baby! Robert, the undertaker apologizes; they were out of baby coffins. The mother a 15 year old comes and stands next to me as she slips her hand into mine. Her 15-year-old face strained and drawn, the baby strapped on her back that she had at 13. The father of the baby, not yet twenty, stands next to her, judgments and anger at the whole situation stay on my lips as I observe this time immemorial picture of poverty. The young father and mother, who look like an old couple, her bent over mother who is illiterate and stunned at dealing with yet another unexpected burden. As the lid is lifted, Richard my five-year-old grandson asks why we are burying a doll. The terrible bruises on her face testimony of her struggle to enter the world through a girl child and not a woman. She looks so small and isolated in the coffin, we decide to put in a soft toy next to her minute head. I watch as the children and adults move past the coffin giving her a blessing for her journey. Nobody cries, this is our life, most of the children filing past have been raped, lost a parent, relative or sibling from AIDS, experienced severe cold and or hunger or being abandoned. The face of poverty normally hidden from most people is our everyday companion.

The funeral does not take long. I watch the children and adults looking forlornly towards the grave next to us, Israel, my foster son who died from kidney failure in May, his short life as a child diabetic so difficult. His biological mother's absence from the funeral glaringly obvious, especially since she lives in the area. Israel, the abandonment cycle completed from birth to death. Not sure what Israel thinks of it but his sister and brother, Dipuo and Daniel carry the emotional strain in their posture, their shoulders bent over in pain and despair torn between supporting the teenage mother and their dead brother. Our eyes remain fixed on the small coffin there is no other place to look without seeing the grave of a mother, friend, brother or sister.

I stare at Richard, the young boy who left his home in Zimbabwe after his mother died, traveling over 1000 kilometers before reaching our Village, crossed the border hiding on top of a truck. An adventure according to any person's standard, except when done for survival. He sees my glare to take his foot off Bennet's grave, an eleven year old that died from a puff adder bite. Suddenly the tears come from all of us, for whom? Perhaps for all of us the witnesses' and participants of a life that should not be happening in the 21st century. The sky a large open panorama of blue, streaked with wisps of cloud, the poignant singing hanging on the wind, we huddle closer to each other, knowing that while we are together we can endure. We bear the most appalling heartache and challenges but that is life and we have to continue.

Lunch is rather a bland affair; we have run out of chicken heads, which a supplier gives to us, the attempt to make the soya and mealie meal tasty, fails without enough spices.

Pauline, a young trust member calls me to examine one of our outreach woman who is in labour. I immediately call the ambulance, our closest hospital 45 kilometers away. I am worried about this delivery because she is HIV positive and needs to take her Nirviropene to reduce the transmission rate of mother to child infection. We debate amongst us whether to give her the Nirviropene, she has to take it at least two hours before the birth, and we give it to her. I leave a

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group of woman with her monitoring her contractions while I help my daughters feed, Gopalang and Palesa, 7 months old, both from HIV mothers. Gopalang known as our 'Box Baby', his mother left for hospital with AIDS when he was fourteen days old, and never returned, his father a farm laborer left him with an alcoholic granny who relegated him to an apple box for six months. The father brought him to us as a silent and frustrated baby unable to move much. I am interrupted to confirm that a snake caught is a puff adder. I phone to confirm with emergency services that they will collect it for their venom bank, the paramedics will take it with them.

They are calling us for the birth, Con phones the Emergency Services, frantically trying to impress the urgency of the situation, they apologize, it is one of those days, they have lost [have died] three children consecutively at calls. They are trying their best to get to us. Too late! We have to call down the child's angels and ours to help. Her cervix is completely dilated I realize that the baby's head will crown any moment. We put on double gloves, hoping it will help. My daughter helping diverts my attention; I am worried about her being three months pregnant, around so much infected blood. My other daughter is phoning the nurse who helps us. The sister is nonchalant, joking that I am already experienced enough in birthing not to have to phone her. I know this but I have never seen a bubble coming out in front of the head. Suddenly we realized that this must be a cowl baby. As the baby begins to birth, my daughter and I try frantically to remove the sheath off her face so that she can breathe. The squeaking protest that comes from her small mouth ensures us that she has made it. Another Angel birth completed the possible birth complications pushed from my mind. I clip the cord in two places cut it and she begins her journey. Wrapped up warmly she is introduced to all the children waiting outside, who bless her, Lesedi (Light), Gabrielle Twala! Bafana all of 5 years becomes an uncle. The ambulance arrives, our joy and excitement of the birth, softens the strain on the faces of the paramedics who had to endure the pain and anguish of the family's who lost the children. The mother and baby are in the back of the ambulance and the puff adder is in the front with the driver, the bucket well sealed.

The children rush off to catch the last of the sun to finish their games; we wash the bedding. At last, we sit down to enjoy a cup of coffee together discussing the day. The setting sun gives us a spectacular showing, a blessing? These are nuances of humanity such as celebrations and grieving intertwined and complementary, no place to hide our acceptance and love added to this tapestry freeing us from fear and bitterness. We wonder what we are going to face tomorrow.