

On the third of September, not so long ago, something truly wondrous happened on the Beauford Farm and Estate. At the moment of her death, Imogen Zula Nyoni – Genie – was seen to fly away on a giant pair of silver wings, and, at the very same moment, her heart calcified into the most precious and beautiful something the onlookers had ever seen.

A few had already been chosen to witness this event. However, most of you have eyes that are not for beauty to see, and because of this you will not believe that such a truly amazing phenomenon did take place. It is because some of you will have doubt, and those of you who do not have doubt will be curious, that this story is choosing to be told.

Like any event, what happened to Genie did not happen in a vacuum: it was the result of a culmination of genealogies, histories, teleologies, epistemologies and epidemiologies – of ways of living, remembering, seeing, knowing and dying.

In other words, the story of what happened to Genie on the Beauford Farm and Estate on the third of September is also the story of how Baines Tikiti, in a bid to quench his wanderlust, walked into the Indian Ocean; of how Prudence Ngoma learned how to build character; of how Golide Gumede shot down an aeroplane and in doing so created a race of angels; of how Elizabeth Nyoni sealed her fate with the turn of her ankle; of how Dingani Masuku came to be haunted by the blue-violet flowers on his mother's dress; of how Thandi Hadebe looked into the distance as though it held a future in which she was not particularly interested; of how Krystle Masuku, at puberty, welcomed guilt as her constant companion; of how, for Marcus Masuku, love happened under a jacaranda tree while he was listening to a story about swimming elephants; of how Valentine Tanaka became a hunchback with a heart of gold; of how Jesus came to be saved; and of how the Beauford Farm and Estate knew exactly what to do with its sacrificed darlings.

Genie's beginning was like all our beginnings – beautiful and golden.

After spending the night with Golide Gumede, Elizabeth Nyoni felt something give way in the space that he had come to occupy in her heart – it travelled through her body and found its way onto her mattress. When Elizabeth picked it up and placed it delicately in the palm of her right hand, she discovered that it was a shiny golden egg. It was at that moment she realised that her fate was sealed: she was bound to Golide Gumede for an eternity.

Golide Gumede had been born Livingstone Stanley Tikiti. But before he could be born, his parents had to meet. And before his parents could meet, their circumstances had to be such that when they did meet they could actually do something about it.

His father had been born on the Ezulwini Estate and christened Bafana Ndllelaphi. Bafana had had the great fortune of being born within the sphere of Mr Chalmers' benevolence. Mr Chalmers was a gentleman farmer, and, as such, had had the time to teach the young Bafana how to read and write. He taught him these things not necessarily because he believed that the boy would be able to use the skills when he grew up, but because those were the skills he could teach the boy when he was at his leisure.

As a result, Bafana grew up to be an enterprising young man who was a rare thing for his time: a moderately educated black man. Without much effort he got a job as the assistant of a Greek travelling salesman. Because of this he became an even rarer thing – a black man who had the opportunity to travel the length and breadth of the country. Bafana found that he loved to travel. He marvelled at the often incongruous nature of his country: a raging waterfall, rocks that balanced precariously on top of one another, and a flower that looked like a roaring flame that had once upon a time caught its breath and never exhaled. He often wished he had a way to capture the many sights he saw, but all he had was his memory. In Mr Chalmers' library, in leather-bound, sombre-looking books, were the journals of great men: David Livingstone, Thomas Baines, Henry Morton Stanley; men who had been able to record what they discovered on their travels. Bafana felt an affinity to these men, these explorers. He felt that he too was an explorer, or would have been had he not had the misfortune of being born in the wrong century. He felt that the name he had been born with, Bafana Ndllelaphi – which literally meant 'boys, which is the way' – was not fit for an explorer such as himself and so he changed it to Baines Tikiti. Tikiti – a ticket, something one purchased in order to go on a journey. Something that gave one purpose.

The Greek travelling salesman felt his fortune in having Baines as his assistant. Baines was a natural-born charmer who, even with the limits of language, was able to get the most miserly and frugal woman to reach into that space underneath her left breast that held the grimy handkerchief that held the even grimmer sixpence that stood between the woman and absolute poverty. There often was hesitation once the handkerchief had been brought out into the light of day, but after Baines said a few words in the seductive and universal language of commerce, the woman would smile and then nod resolutely before untying the tightest and truest knot, using her teeth and calloused, blunt fingers to pry the handkerchief open and reveal the thing that she had treasured most until that very moment: a sixpence that a husband or son had laboured for in the mines, on farms or in the cities. The once frugal woman would walk away with her new treasures – an oil lamp whose leak she had not yet discovered, a smooth blanket that she did not yet know might pill after its first wash, a dress she did not yet know was either several sizes too small or too big because she had not been allowed to try it on, a mirror whose silver edge would inevitably tarnish, then corrode and rust.

Women, young and old, single and married, abandoned and widowed, loved Baines, and Baines tried to love them in return, but he loved his travel more, and, as a result, he broke quite a lot of hearts. This, however, did not stop him from selling cheap European trinkets to unsuspecting African women throughout the colony.

Then one day Baines and the Greek travelling salesman arrived at Guqhuka – a village that was soon to be turned into the Beauford Farm and Estate – and something very surprising happened: for the first time Baines was not able to charm a sixpence out of a woman's hand. To make matters even more mortifying, the woman did not have her sixpence tucked away under her left breast; she held it, temptingly shiny and new, between her thumb and her forefinger, ever so ready to give it away, if only Baines would show her something that she liked. He showed her shoes that he claimed were of the finest Spanish leather; she was sure they would pinch. He showed her a mirror; she wondered what possible use her own reflection would be to her, since she already knew herself. He showed her a pair of pillowcases, baby soft pink with delicate lace edges; she wanted to know where the pillows that went inside the pillowcases were (a question that he had never been asked before). Not quite defeated, he showed her the one thing that he thought no woman could resist – a crown fit for a queen, sparkling with rhinestones and the insincere glitter of cheap metal; she asked what kind of queen would wear a crown that only cost sixpence.

It was his turn to ask questions: What is your name? Prudence Ngoma. Where are your people from? Here. You obviously have travelled, where have you been? The City of Kings. Would you marry me?

An arched eyebrow let Baines know that she had heard his proposal. She asked him a question in return. Where are you from? Ezulwini. I have never heard of the place. But she said this in such a way that he knew she would not mind hearing more about the place and seeing it for herself some day. They married soon after and settled in Ezulwini.

The temptingly shiny and new sixpence never passed from her fingers to his.

There was sunshine. And then there was no sunshine.

‘Jesus,’ a female voice said.

Vida opened his eyes, squinted and looked up. She was so ... incandescent. He had to shield his eyes. The sun behind her made her reddish-brown hair look like a flaming halo. It took him a second to realise who it was. It was Golide Gumede’s daughter, Imogen Zula Nyoni. The girl he had caught as she went flying through the air what seemed to be a lifetime ago. She inclined her head to the left, bringing the sun suddenly back, directly into his eyes. He shut his eyes tightly and swore.

‘You saved my life once. Thank you,’ she said, then waited.

What was he supposed to say to that? He had nothing to say. But she was obviously expecting him to say something. He did not like people expecting things of him. ‘There’s no need to thank me. I just happened to be there. Just at the right place at the right time, I suppose,’ he said finally, his eyes still closed.

Suddenly he felt the warmth of the sun full on him. Had she walked away? He hoped she had, hoped his indifference had let her know that he was a lost cause. But even as he was hoping she had left him alone, he knew he was not going to be that lucky. He felt her sit down beside him.

‘You saved my life. And now I’m here to save yours,’ her voice said.

The scent of vanilla ... and something else ... woodsmoke. He held his breath. He did not like smelling people. He tried very hard never to do so. He always held his breath when someone passed by too close. There is something highly intimate about smelling another human being. It is a taking-in of sorts – a sharing, an absorbing, a consuming of another. It is just one step away from taste. Hearing, seeing, touching, smelling and tasting; that was the hierarchy of the senses in ascending order according to Vida. He liked to delegate most of his human interaction to the first two senses. But here was Golide Gumede’s daughter, and after only a few seconds of acquaintance the scent of vanilla had already invaded his body and become a part of him. He exhaled and, having held his breath for so long, had to open his mouth. The scent of vanilla in his mouth was obscenely close to the sensation of taste. Something fluttered in the pit of his stomach and made him uneasy.

He had no choice but to open his eyes, turn his head and look at her. His eyes still adjusting to the sun, he saw her in a haze. She was sitting on a suitcase and in her arms she unabashedly held a rag doll and a teddy bear. How old was she? Too old to be walking around with toys in her arms, in broad daylight, in the city. She smiled at him, revealing the gap between her two front teeth, which for some reason made that something flutter in the pit of his stomach again, which in turn made him angry.

‘You’ve come to save me?’

‘Yes,’ she said, nodding her head and smiling.

‘Who says I need saving?’

She just looked at him and continued to smile. Perhaps something was wrong with her. Maybe she was not right in the head. She had, after all, suffered a head injury.

‘Thank you, but I don’t need saving.’

‘Oh, but you do,’ she said rather too quickly and matter-of-factly.

He did not like the way she stared at him. The way she held his gaze. The way she made him be the one to look away first. How old was she? She could not be older than eighteen and yet she looked at him like she knew things – things about him that he did not know himself. He

closed his eyes again, hoping she would be discouraged and walk away. Instead he felt her settle in and make herself more comfortable beside him.

‘Who’s the company?’ Mick’s voice said, speech slurred, as he staggered back to his rightful place next to Vida, reeking of alcohol and tobacco.

Vida, eyes still closed, shrugged his shoulders and turned his face up towards the sun. Maybe Mick was just what he needed to chase the girl away. But just as he thought the thought, he felt her reach across his chest. Vanilla ... woodsmoke ... No, too strong. He held his breath.

‘Imogen Zula Nyoni. It’s a pleasure to meet you.’