Kindness

By Eric Miyeni.

Tintswalo was not dull, although at first contact you would not call him bright. Something was different about him; he had a slow way about him. But slow as he was to learn, his brain, once engaged, grabbed at information like a two-tonne steel clamp that would not let go. As a result, and despite himself, he remembered all sorts of things that seemed unnecessary to remember. For example, he remembered what every person he encountered on his first and only train ride to Johannesburg wore. He remembered the number of black stripes on the hat that his uncle Jerry wore the day he met him that first time in a Jo’burg shack.

His was a phenomenal slow brain. Things did not sink into it easily but once they did, they sunk in for life.

He was the first child born to a man steeped in tradition, a man who believed that at least one of his children should be untainted
by modernity and left untarnished to be the keeper of the family’s traditions, rituals and history, Tintswalo’s destiny was to be this keeper of the family lore. He was to stay out of school, herd the family cattle and learn everything about his family, his clan and his ancestors to preserve this information for future generations.

“If there is anything that takes away who we are and leaves us enslaved, it is the teachings of the white man,” his father would say. To understand family lore, Tintswalo needed to be kept away from competing foreign teachings. He did not need to read either, said his father. He just had to have a good ear.

But when he turned nine, his father died. His paternal uncles took over whatever his father had left his family. Ma Modiegi looked at her three brothers-in-law as they announced their business. She was a Sotho among Tsongas and was not welcome anymore, they said. They did not know why their brother had married a Sotho anyway. They gave her a week to pack her things and go. She listened to them speak. Each word they uttered felt like a sledgehammer blow to the head. The pain was so severe she felt like her head was going to implode and render her paralysed. She had loved her late husband so much. How could this love generate so much hate? As tall and strong as she was, Ma Modiegi felt as small as a fragile child. But she did not cry. Instead, she smiled and thanked the brothers for their honesty. Then they hounded her out of the homestead and left her almost destitute with three kids to fend for.

She did not mind what they were doing to her, she kept saying to herself. But what they were doing to her children, their children, was wrong. These men were supposed to look after their blood brother’s offspring, not rob them without even stopping to take a breath. But if these men never ever paid for what they were doing, then she was meant to accept it she told herself, it was meant to be. What was left,
she insisted, was to leave with her head held high and go and seek her own place in the sun, away from these men of no principles. Whatever reward or punishment they deserved the world would provide at the appropriate time.

She gathered together what meagre savings she had accumulated, sold off her few small possessions and borrowed some money from neighbours who had a few rands to spare. Then Ma Modiegi gathered up her dignity and her children and walked away.

And so it was that Tintswalo, whose name means kindness, came to ride a bus and see a train, inside and out, for the first time in his life. Their destination was the city, his mother told the children, because that’s where the work would be.

Johannesburg was big. Tintswalo found it so big, busy and scary when they arrived that he almost burst into tears the second they disembarked. The sounds seemed to literally plough into his ears. Everything was too bright, too loud, too brash, too harsh. He felt as though he was walking through a raging madness. What kind of place was this? Where was the grass? Would these buildings not fall on them when the wind blew hard? Where were the animals?

A crowded taxi ride later, complete with armpit smells, spit from shouting passengers and the perennially rude driver, they arrived at his maternal uncle’s shack on the periphery of what he was to learn was the famous township, Soweto. If only all uncles were like this and not like those they had left behind. Uncle Jerry was all smiles. Even when discussing disheartening things he seemed to find a smile to smooth them over. Of course they could stay with him and his wife and three children in his two-room shack until his sister could find her own space. Of course Tintswalo loved his uncle’s hat with the 26 black stripes.

A year into this overcrowded arrangement and his mother had managed to find a job cleaning and cooking for white people during
the week and for black people over the weekends. Although she never said a word, Tintswalo seemed to detect a much more pained expression when his mother came back from her weekend jobs than when she came back from her mid-week work. She did not say much about this. But once Tintswalo heard her tell a neighbour that apartheid had made black people hateful of each other. But none of this was going to deter her. She built her own two-room shack not too far from Uncle Jerry’s and she declared that it was time to find a school for the children. She could finally afford it.

At four years of age the twins, Nkhensani and Khomisani, were still too young to attend school. But Tintswalo, who was already ten, had to start going to school even if it was along with six-year-olds. But being older was just one of his problems with school, his main problem was that nobody who seemed to wield any real power in the township seemed to have any form of education. Rather, what he had observed since arriving in the city was that having money seemed to be the key out of poverty street.

There was Bra Biza in Zone Six. The man had four big cars and loads of gold around his neck, wrists and fingers. His house had been extended to have upstairs and downstairs floors with five bedrooms for his wife and kids. Yet the man had never set foot in a school in his life, Tintswalo was told. What was the point of reading anything then, Tintswalo wondered?

Besides, it was hard work learning to read. Back in the village his cousins had often tried to teach him what they learned without his father knowing. But, being the slow learner that he was Tintswalo had found it a nightmare to share in the enthusiasm or grasp the concepts. He needed time and there was no time to spare when all involved were only too wary of being caught. Tintswalo’s father would whip them raw if they were caught breaking his rules. So now he was
ten and expected to share a class with six-year-olds! Also, which part of his father’s “not to be tainted” law did his mother not understand? Wasn’t he to be the keeper of the family traditions? Would it not upset his dead father if he went to school? Wasn’t he too old to start now anyway?

“Your father is dead you hear? I am your mother and your father now. God forbid that you should defy me. You go to school and leave your father to me you hear? As for this Biza thug, if education is so bad, why is his eldest child a doctor? Why did he send her to school?”

And so began Tintswalo’s painfully late entry into school. So began the taunts and the laughs and the shame of being the biggest and oldest and, at least on the surface, the dumb one in class. Of course he did not at first understand everything as the lessons unfolded. He always needed time to ruminate. He took in knowledge like cattle took in grass. He swallowed it. And then only later, would he sit down, bring it to the fore like cattle brought out the grass they swallowed earlier to chew, and really take it in properly. Throughout his school career, he seemed to be the stupidest in class but then he would prove to be the brightest at exam time.

Tintswalo went to school and endured all that he had to endure to get through school because he loved his mother. No matter how tired she was when she got home, she would always ask about school, listen attentively and give advice. She did not read or write she would remind him, but she understood the power of knowledge. Slow did not mean stupid she would insist. Life, she would add, is not a sprint anyway. Then she would pat him on the back of the head and tell him she was very proud of him because she knew how difficult it all was for him and how brave he was.

“My hero”, she’d say without fail, “Work hard, but never sleep too late. Your body is needed fresh every morning.” And with a smile, she’d be off to sleep, leaving him to study for the next day.
She really did stoke the fire in him. But it was words themselves that sustained his desire to be more. The world of words opened worlds within worlds he never knew existed. Worlds he loved and could be lost in for hours on end. And so he moved swiftly through the classes. Being far ahead of most of his classmates in all his classes he was promoted thrice to finish high school almost on time, at the age of nineteen. The six As he got when he graduated from high school were no surprise. The B for Afrikaans was. Maybe he bore a grudge for his mother’s life. After all, Afrikaans was the oppressor’s language, wasn’t it?

Today he travels his country of birth, from school to school, extolling the virtues of literature in all its forms. He is a world-celebrated writer and teaches kids that his life taught him that the best things on earth, like learning to read, do not come easily. But that when they do come, it is well worth the wait and all the hard work one puts in.

Today his mother insists that his late father would have been proud of him. He could have handed down his family lore down to the next generation through oral tradition, she says to him, but the book he wrote, Sotho/Tsonga Marriages: a clash of cultures, is just as good if not better. As for Tintswalo, he says he’s just happy to have been educated enough to get a good enough job to be able to join hands with his brothers to build a beautiful home for their mother. His next book, he says, will be called “Kindness”. It is a book about his mother’s life.