

## The Mourning Coat

~~~ *Puleng Segalo*

Keleabetswe wandered aimlessly around the shop, deep in thought. Looking at the baby clothes, she imagined the possibilities life could offer a child. She wondered which colours a little girl would prefer. Then she saw it – the cutest little black fur coat. She walked towards it as if pulled by a magnet. She took and caressed it, feeling its softness against her face. Her eyes filled with sadness and hope at the same time; she smiled as she held it up. She wondered whether the coat would shield the girl from the harshness of life, whether it would remind her of the gentleness, warmth and love that had cushioned her for nine months. In that moment, a sharp pain shot through Keleabetswe's veins, pumping sorrow through her whole body. She clutched the coat against her face and its smoothness calmed her. A tear dropped from her face, landing on the shiny coat and, as she touched it, it disappeared into the thickness of the fur.

In that moment, flashes went through her mind. She thought about her future, remembering that she was on the brink of obtaining her qualification, of how her family back home had high hopes for her. After all, she was the first in her family to attend university. Everyone was so proud of her, and looked up to her. She still vividly remembered her father's words, heavy and very loaded. She has been carrying this load ever since she set foot on campus, "Remember, my child, your future is in your hands, and we all look to you as the hope of this family." As the hope of the family, with five siblings to set an example for, there was absolutely no room for failure. Getting out from under the watchful eyes of her parents for the first time a few years ago, when she started varsity, left her feeling like a caged bird which had been set free. She wanted to explore, to experiment, to enjoy her freedom. The friends she met shortly after starting classes in her first year assisted in ensuring that her quest to explore life away from her parents, became a reality.

The first party she went to was like nothing she had ever experienced. The music was pumping loudly, drinks flowing freely, and everyone danced the night away. Feeling out of place, she found a spot in the corner where she could watch as people seemed to slide from one side of the room to the other. That was the night she met him – Thabo. She did not see where he came from, but heard a gentle voice from behind her asking, "Are you having a good time?" She turned her head to see where the voice was coming from, and that is when their eyes met.

He was the most handsome man she had ever seen. She nodded and smiled. Thabo teased, and said if standing in the corner alone, looking lost, equated to having fun, then clearly having a good time had a new meaning. Little did she know at the time that Thabo would become a permanent feature in her life over the months ahead. They became inseparable. He showed her places, took care of her, and she loved him immensely. Every university recess that saw her going home, always seemed to last an eternity. She dreaded leaving campus, as it meant time away from her beloved Thabo. Thinking back, she wondered how she could have been so blind. All the signs were there, but she chose not to see them. Now, Thabo was nowhere to be found, and she was left with a burden and very difficult decisions to make, all alone. She had a future to think about and a family to make proud. If only she had known. But how could she, a girl from a small town arriving in a new world filled with possibilities. She wanted to fit in, to be seen, to belong. That made her vulnerable, led her to make bad decisions, to compromise her studies and her future. She had to fix this, there was no other way. Back home there were expectations: sacrifices had been made, and she had no choice but to perform her role as the dutiful daughter. Every visit back home she was reminded of this. She could see the hope in her family members' eyes, the trust they had in her. She would be the one to turn their lives around, to change their destiny. Her siblings adored her because of what she represented. She wondered how she had come to carry such a burden, but she knew she was not an anomaly since many of her peers carried similar burdens, albeit in varying ways. She knew that her history had determined the circumstances which her family – and others like them – found themselves in. Again, she recalled her father's words, and how they echoed in her ears.

Those bittersweet memories pierced the core of her heart. She knew there was no way she could face her family without a degree. She had to obtain it, and nothing could stand in the way of that. She had to be the success her family wanted her to be, no matter the sacrifice and tough decisions she had to make, in order for that to happen. A voice calling her name brought her back to reality, and she remembered they had agreed to meeting in the shop. She turned her face in the direction of the voice calling her name, and saw them walking towards her. They looked at her with eyes full of joy, gratitude and hope. As they got closer, their eyes fell on the tiny coat she still held in her hands. She smiled as she handed the coat over to the couple now standing next to her and said, "I would like her to have this coat". They looked at her knowingly, and nodded approvingly.

~~~*Professor Puleng Segalo is the Chief Albert Luthuli Research Chair, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, P.O.Box 392, Pretoria, South Africa, 0003. Email Id: Segalpj@unisa.ac.za*