

Tokolosh by Linda Frysh

Johannesburg. From the plane, the yellow, flat-topped mine dumps brooded over the landscape. The veldt stretched out in all directions, and along the highway, the shantytowns leaned against each other for support. Bricks or heavy stones weighed down the corrugated iron roofs. How familiar it all was and yet at a slight remove, like a favorite cousin you haven't seen in a while. It was 15 years since she'd been home. She glanced down at her hands lying calmly on her lap. She felt untethered now, as if she hadn't quite finished her stay in this place where she was born. She had been aware for some time of wanting to see Sophie again, but she had waited too long. Sophie had bled to death in a corridor of Baragwanath hospital, while she was living her life on another continent.

Getting through customs and passport control took forever, but finally there was Amy waiting for her on the other side of the barrier. She started toward her, then stopped, feeling suddenly and inexplicably awkward. But Amy opened her arms and hugged her, seemingly unaware of any hesitation. Amy's body felt frail and brittle. She seemed so much smaller than Ruth remembered. Her shoulder length salt-and-pepper hair framed the same soft dark eyes and square chin, but the fine lines on Amy's face made Ruth's throat ache.

"I can't believe you're here," said Amy. "God, what took you so long?"

"I don't know, the lines just weren't moving—they need more controllers."

"No, I don't mean now, I mean why has it been so long since you were home?"

Ruth paused. She rubbed the bridge of her nose with one finger. "Don't have a good answer for that."

They grinned at one another.

"Well, let's get going! You're here for such a short time, we can't waste a minute."

They collected the luggage and found their way to Amy's small car. Within 30 minutes, they had turned off the highway and were in the leafy, northern suburbs of the city.

Ruth's gaze took in the quiet streets lined with trees that met overhead to form a tunnel of dappled shade. The homes were hidden from view behind ten-foot-high walls topped with electric wires. Security guards stood outside some of the bigger mansions or sat in tiny wooden guardhouses. Ruth rolled down her window. She wanted to really feel part of this place, but the air outside was hot and oppressive. When they got to the house, Amy lowered her window and punched in the

security code, then immediately slid the window back up again, her fingers quick with habit. The electric gates opened and closed almost silently behind them. “I still love this house,” said Ruth, as she got out of the car. “We had some good times here, didn’t we?” The Cape Dutch-style home had a thatch roof and the graceful curved gables that characterize the style. She stood looking at the house, remembering a day when it was still being built—she and Amy standing in the hot sun, one hand shading their faces as they watched bundles of grass being thrown by one man on the ground and caught by another on the roof in a hypnotic rhythm. Ruth always felt comforted and protected by the thatch, even though it was actually highly flammable. But there had never been a fire, and now the thatch was weathered to a honey brown by years of exposure to the elements. The interior of the house smelled of polished wood. Miriam, Amy’s cook, came out of the kitchen to greet them. She had worked for Amy’s mother for many years and now worked for Amy.

“Why are you so late, Miss Amy? The supper, it will be dry and hard.”

Amy grinned at Ruth. “She thinks she can boss me around now that Ma is gone.”

Miriam muttered under her breath, ignoring Amy.

They sat outside on the patio. An afternoon thunderstorm had washed the heat from the air leaving it cool and scented with the sweet peas Amy had planted in big earthen pots. Miriam brought a big platter of boerewors with mealiepap and gravy. The aroma of the savory sausage filled the air. It was good, but not as good as Sophie used to make.

Eating it, Ruth remembered Sophie’s fingers deftly squeezing together a small amount of pap, which she then swished around in the gravy and popped into her mouth. She had shown Ruth how to do the same. Ruth glanced at Amy, then put down her knife and fork. She picked up a little pap in her fingers, dipped it into the gravy, and put it in her mouth. Amy looked at her and shook her head.

“But it tastes so much better this way,” said Ruth. She smiled at Amy, totally unrepentant.

Those stolen bites from Sophie’s tin plate had always tasted better than anything she was served for dinner. As an only child, Ruth was often lonely, and it was Sophie who would tell her stories or even, if she was in a good mood, play games with her. And so, many evenings after she had done her homework, she would go out of the kitchen into the concrete backyard where Sophie had a tiny room redolent of Pond’s cold cream and soap. The bed was covered with a spotless

white bedspread. For safety's sake, several bricks under each leg raised the bed so that the hairy, dwarf like Tokolosh wouldn't be able to reach Sophie and do her harm while she was sleeping.

"Are you still with us?" said Amy. "Sorry, I was just thinking about Sophie." "Oh," said Amy flatly.

"I keep thinking if only I hadn't left. If I had been here, it wouldn't have happened. I would have gone with her to the hospital, made sure they took care of her."

"Will you stop beating yourself up about this? You made a choice to leave—which was probably smart—and besides that, you are not responsible for Sophie. It happened so fast that nobody even knew about it. You can't save the whole human race, even though, knowing you, you may think otherwise."

Ruth listened to the crickets making their night music and watched the play of light across Amy's face, a face almost as familiar as her own. She felt the weight of time pressing down on them, the insistent and unstoppable journey.

The two weeks of Ruth's stay flew by. They bought plants for the garden and had lunch in the charming teahouse of Amy's favorite nursery. They stopped to look at the wares of the roadside hawkers and spent long summer evenings outside. And through it all, their talk ran like a silver thread, drawing her back into this world and reconnecting their lives.

On their final day together, they were stopped at an intersection waiting for the light to change. A woman with a baby tied to her back was begging, her eyes dark and expressionless. The baby slept, its head lolling to one side. The woman wore a shapeless dress, a *doek* on her head, and men's shoes several sizes too large for her.

"I always have some rands ready for them," said Amy. She leaned over Ruth, took a few bills out of her glove compartment, and signaled the woman to come nearer. She did so, stretching her hands out to receive the money as Amy rolled down the car window. Then she did a little bob of the head, a slight bending of the knees, a tiny genuflection that traveled through the air and hit Ruth like a fist, knocking the wind out of her and making it difficult to breathe. And then, suddenly, the impact was real. The sound of brick meeting the closed window on her side was brutal and unforgiving, followed by the scream of shattering glass and then hands fumbling for the handbag on her lap. It was a young man, just a boy really, she realized later.

His face was contorted: flared nostrils, bared teeth, and eyes crazed with fear. It was a face that would find its way into her dreams for many years to come. And then he was running in front of the car, across the street, and into a nearby park where he vanished into the trees.

Ruth sat quite still, numb with shock. Someone was sobbing. She turned to Amy and saw the pinpricks of blood on her face. Light reflected off the tiny shards of glass that were everywhere. Somewhere behind her she heard a car door slam, then footsteps coming toward them. "Shhh..." she said, reaching up one trembling hand to carefully brush the glass off Amy's face.

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## **Tokolosh written by Linda Frysh**

### **A word about me:**

I was born in Heilbron in 1948 and grew up there until the age of 6, after which we lived in England for two years and then moved back to Johannesburg. My husband Jeff and our three married kids emigrated to the US in 1978 and currently live in Atlanta, Georgia. I have always enjoyed reading and writing, mostly fiction, so I was delighted to read some of the stories on the CHOL website. The story "Tokolosh" was written after a trip back to SA some years ago. It is fiction, but of course based on my own life experience. I very much enjoyed writing the story because it evoked the sounds, smells and landscape of my home country.

**Posted on the 'Share Your Stories' CHOL site in March 2024**