

Miriam Makeba: Death and Everything Else

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It must be nearly midnight, but instead of feeling sleepy she feels a strange sensation—the feeling one has when there is something yet to be done but can't remember what. She once more goes over some details with an assistant and finds everything in order. She accepts this like someone who accepts she is getting older, not because it is a bother to be 76 but because in those same 76 years, she has seen many things—the most beautiful and the most horrible things. But she has never felt what she feels now. She goes and opens the window.

All the lights were off in Caserta. Taking advantage of the absence of traffic lights, a scooter flies by, breaking the overwhelming monotony. Her eyes fixate on the nearing palace, in the quickly approaching horizon; she unwittingly rests her fingers on something. What? A book. On the cover there is a man with a weapon, broken fragments, suggestions of blood all over the place. Its title is *Gomorra*. *Italy's other Mafia*, by Roberto Saviano. It is that man and his story that have brought her to Campania. A straight-faced Roberto has researched organized crime's business. He has documented his findings and published them. There are now five bodyguards living with him. Francesco Sciafone, of the Casalesi clan, has sworn to kill him before Christmas.

Just a few hours earlier they were on the phone. Roberto's friendly voice thanked her for

her support. She has announced her retirement so often that no one could say for certain if she was active or really retired. Did even she know? Roberto's story is so difficult, it is a wonder that the dangers that Saviano faces don't make an impression on her. She has faced many different dangers during her long life. What is important is a whole other matter, though. Africa is also *Gomorra*, an environment that is being poisoned with human trafficking, hit men, arms, drugs, fear, silence, violence, the involving of children, cheap labor. The South as a dumping ground for the North; coincidences that always make one return, once again speak out, this time for an African enclave on the edge of Europe. Speak out, sing, publicize—despite the arthritis and medical advice. It is necessary, because we are so forgetful: "If memory is what counts in this case, this man will be killed," she says, taking her hand to her breast. People flit from one thing to another, and even the most monstrous events end up buried by someone who may be banal, but also has the power to cover up things. Those daily 'burials' are crimes we commit in order to continue living.

Miriam's hand is still at her breast. Now she presses it against her heart, almost imperceptibly. Yet, the wrinkles on her ocre and orange-patterned dress can no longer be missed. The pain comes back with a vengeance. She has a dizzy spell, wobbles, and ends up sup-



porting herself on the table where she left the book, which is now on the floor, opened, with the cover side up. Her assistant flies towards her and catches her as she falls. All of sudden she is like two people: one holding up the immense, collapsing body, the other, flipping open a cell phone and dialing a memorized number that is also on a slip of paper in her handbag and stored in the phone's memory: 3854444.

A woman's voice answers: "Pineta Grande Clinic. Emergency." There is hardly anything more to say. The instructions come as though the collapse had been an anticipated event. The woman with the cellphone informs the physician on call at that particular moment, Doctor Vicenza di Saia, and a shoebox-like ambulance rockets towards Castel Volturno.

Meanwhile, the pain has spread to her lower jaw and along her entire left arm. She remains seated, with her knees bent. Something extremely heavy but invisible is crushing her chest. Suddenly she is short of breath, but this passes quickly. She is also aware that they are wiping perspiration from her, and of the bitter pill under her tongue.

She has survived cancer, a plane crash, and numerous car accidents. She is experienced in certain situations. Something is telling her that this time she is close to the end. Even so, it is hard to know what goes through one's mind when being taken to the hospital. Perhaps fear for one's self. Or, perhaps one leaves practical matters to the doctors and begins to remember beloved things, like when one is packing suitcases before moving. As they say, when you're going to die, your whole life passes before you.

If that is true, she has gone back to old Johannesburg, the city where she was born in 1932, the capital of apartheid, the Shaperville massacre, and diamond trafficking. She has also returned to Kilmerton Training, the Manhattan Brothers, the Skylarks, and the time they picked her for, yes—*King Kong*. Sometimes, the things we think about the least pop up at special moments, in a totally unrelated manner. Inexplicably, that's how it is.

The doctors slip an oxygen mask on her, hook her up to monitors, and inject her with something to sedate her heart, which is shot. They insert an IV through which they begin to



give her Streptokinase. Her breathing is barely audible; she cannot see the disquieted faces that surround and move about her.

The pain has finally subsided. She definitively puts herself in all those hands. She remembers 1960, her uneasiness just before the release of her first record: *Miriam Makeba*. She remembers Hugh Masekela, her husband. There might be a few trumpet notes piercing the air, perhaps those Hugh would play at her funeral just days later.

From Hugh she jumps to Coltrane, and from *Trane* to August 23rd. 1963. Reverend King marches on Washington, with 250,000 activists, and pronounces his famous *I Have a Dream* speech. Then she sees Malcolm X declaring all of that a farce, calling for and promoting revolutionary violence. Meanwhile, South Africa is excitement personified.

The ambulance arrives at the Pineta Clinic. The back opens up and the gurney flies through its corridors. She can hear the *tac tac tac* of its wheels as they slide along the marble

floor. It's strange but despite hardly noticing all the goings on, her senses become fixated on that rhythm, that repetitive *tac tac tac*—one, two; one, two, three—and while the hospital staff is taking her who knows where, she hears first the melody and then the lyric: *Sat wuguga sat ju benga sat si pata I. Hihi ha mama, hi-a-ma sat si pata....* For most, those are the catchy lyrics that almost no one outside South Africa can sing properly, much less understand, but are known the world over. Even after twenty records, her fans still associate her with that *Pata Pata*. A long time ago, she finally accepted this, because the song moves people and makes children laugh. That's not too bad.

She remembers when she got a Grammy in 1966 for *An Evening with Belafonte/Makeba*. It was the first time they gave it to an African woman. She recalls her recording sessions and thinks that Harry Belafonte is kindness and generosity personified. The 1959 Venice Film Festival pops into her head. She opens the event by showing the documentary *Come Back*,

Africa. How ironic, right? After it, she never set another foot in South Africa, until Mandela did, 31 years later. While in Venice she learns she cannot return. She has been denied, so Harry finagles a U.S. residency permit for her.

Then she sees images of a thirty-something year old black man. In one of them he is wearing a leather jacket, and dark glasses that make him look somewhat out of style; in the other, he is talking, all lit up like a torch, and behind him is a poster that says *Black Power*. She ended up liking Stokely Carmichael very much. They marry in 1968 and leave the United States, with federal agents on their heels. He's from the Panthers and the FBI uses his picture for target practice. They barely manage to escape.

Fidel Castro invites them to live in Cuba, but they eventually decide on President Ahmed Sékou Touré's Guinea. In the U.S., there's lots of talk of revolution, in Guinea things are seriously happening. It serves as a base of operations for guerrilla fighters from Angola, Mozambique, Bissau and Cape Verde. Kwame Nkrumah and folks from the African National Congress (South Africa) are there, too. Conakry looks like a world about to be born.

Perhaps Miriam Makeba remembers absolutely nothing, and is focusing on unfinished business. It is just a complex word that is pronounced rapidly. The world is so large, so many things in it are going badly, and she is dying. She thinks about forty million starving Africans, two million of them children. Again, she is remembering Roberto's thick, black eyebrows. Perhaps she is asking herself whether the death of the most famous African artist in the world is anything at all compared to the life of those who have everything to do before them. Just then, the curtain comes down on her forever.

A little later, while the press is being dealt with and important phone calls are being



made, her assistant goes back to the room to pick up her things. As the sun rises in Caserta, she is filled with a series of connected thoughts. *Mamá África* dies on November 10th, 2008, and leaves behind a continent of orphans. Things like that.

As she goes back in, she sees Saviano's book on the floor and picks it up. A page corner is folded and one of the paragraphs says: "I was born in the lands of Camorra, where there are more deaths by assassination than anywhere else in Europe, a territory where cruelty is intimately tied to business dealings, where something that does not generate power has no value whatsoever; where everything has the taste of a final battle." These lines have not been highlighted but are framed in a box. Like the one we make when we mark a classified ad or travel destination.