

**The Long Letter Home #3:  
“Summer in South Africa”**

*(Written in 2007)*

Dear Loved Ones Across the Ocean,

I pray this finds you well and gracefully weathering the seasons of life...

June. July. August. Those are the hardest months for me. After two decades of growing up in the Northern Hemisphere (sunny, temperate Atlanta, Georgia to be exact), something just seems unnatural about using blankets and heaters in the middle of July.

“It’s Summer at home,” I think to myself sadly as I look out the window at the wind blowing grey clouds across the sky. I close my eyes and picture Atlanta: azalea bushes blooming, barbecues in the park, a lazy afternoon chatting on somebody’s front porch, and most of all the community and family I left behind.

But here I am in Johannesburg, South Africa on a freezing winter’s day and feeling more than a little depressed. But then I always tend to get a little depressed in the winter, no matter what side of the ocean I’m on.

It’s easy to blame it on South Africa. On this crazy country that I find myself living in and all the problems of this society and the messed up situation the people are in. That’s what I do on my bad days when I’m missing home too much and need an easy target to unload on. “This damned country. Look at that crazy man talking to himself on the corner. Look at that hustler with all that random crap he’s trying to sell at the stoplight. Look at that woman, too drunk to get home by herself, being carried there by two strangers almost as drunk as she is. I wish

I was home!” Later, when I’m in a more objective mood I remember that I’ve often seen similar scenes on certain streets in Atlanta. And that both in Atlanta and Johannesburg I’ve seen many other, more encouraging sights as well.

Like the young mothers I’ve seen trying to make a better life for themselves. Both here and in Atlanta, they are usually dressed to kill and wearing fly shoes—too high and probably killing their feet—but fly. Here these young women often have a baby strapped to their backs with towels or blankets. Other than that they look just like their ATLian counterparts, long braids trailing down their backs in the latest styles.

Or like the street hawkers that in a darker mood I had scorned. In my negativity I saw only their aggressiveness, their intrusiveness, and their seeming lack of creativity—corner after corner, it’s the same cheap products for sale. What I couldn’t see was the initiative it took for them to become self-employed, the dedication to rise at the crack of dawn to claim the best spots for sales, or the confidence it takes to face hastily raised windows and scornful glances again and again.

And like the old women I’ve seen comforting their families at the loss of a loved one. Both the South African and the African-American versions have the same kind eyes, strong backs and regal bearing. And both hug you oh-so-tightly while murmuring soothing sounds that aren’t quite words but speak to the heart just the same.

I’ve seen sad sights too, like middle-aged men who can’t find or make work, who stay out drinking all day rather than face their families at home. And women made old much too soon from carrying a household on their own. There are the young boys

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trying to become men without the benefit of a father's example. And the girls trying to find the male love they lack from their absent fathers anywhere they can.

On the other end of the spectrum there are the wealthy black executives, the ones who've become rich thanks to their hard work, enterprise and the Black Economic Empowerment initiative. They've made it and are the pride of their race. But there are too many who don't or won't remember where they've come from, don't see the point in giving back and won't even acknowledge other blacks when they come pass them on the street. Here there's the added dimension of a reluctance among some to use their mother tongues, even at home.

I've seen all of this on the streets of Atlanta and Johannesburg in faces so similar I sometimes forget which continent I'm on. The teller at the bank looks like my Aunt Pam. I swear I just passed Dr. Cobb, my history professor at Spelman, selling oranges on the street. When we go to Bethal, the small town in Mpumalanga that my husband's family is from, the feeling of déjà vu gets even stronger. In this small dusty town I'm sure that I'm witnessing what life must have been like in rural Georgia in 1955.

A rickety cart and donkey riding down the highway next to our car makes that feeling even stronger. In Bethal, many older blacks are still quite deferential to whites. Not speaking much in their presence, using Afrikaans or the hybrid pidgin language known as Fanagalo when they do, and sometimes even calling them "boss".

Although sickening, in a way it feels more natural than in the cities where in just over 10 years after the end of Apartheid people are claiming to live in a colour blind society. Blacks and whites shop together, eat in the same restaurants, and, to a lesser extent, live in the same communities. Integration has happened at a hyper-speed and what has taken the US nearly half a century to accomplish (and even then only barely), has happened here in a decade. People are already saying that Black Economic Empowerment is reverse racism and that we should no longer use the terms black and white. It scares me more than a little and I fear that by speeding through the process of healing and reconciliation, legitimate feelings of anger may be swept under the carpet. I think that perhaps just under the surface of the Rainbow Nation, simmers an angry grey stew waiting to boil over.

We can help each other, I think to myself time and again. We can teach them something about healing; they can teach us about forgiveness. They can be our link to our history; we can give them a connection to the future. Scientists say the San tribe of South Africa is likely the group of living humans most closely related to the original humans from which all peoples on the earth descend. You can see humanity on their faces: the broad African nose, the Asiatic eyes and cheekbones, the skin colour that ranges from very light to quite dark depending on the season. African-Americans are perhaps the newest people on the earth. Traces of humanity can be seen on our faces too. Newest and oldest, and yet so similar. United, what couldn't we do?

We are so much the same, we black South Africans and African-Americans. African-Americans and South Africans have been

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through so many near-identical struggles that we have been shaped to almost mirrors of each other. We wear the struggle on our faces. It spills into our speech. It wells up from our souls in song.

I teach my husband spirituals I've heard my mother singing, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child." That one makes him sad. He teaches me the toi toi songs he used to march to as a child protesting the apartheid government, "*Oliver Tambo, thetha no Botha akhulule u Mandela, azobusa, akhulule u Mandela*". That one makes me happy.

Different languages, different tunes and rhythms, but the sentiment, the soul is the same. An ocean, a hemisphere, it feels like a world apart. Yet closer, so much closer than we know.

So when winter returns to America and you're feeling hopeless and depressed. Remember...it's summer in South Africa.

Yours in the South,

~R