

# THE CRACKED, PINK LIPS OF ROSIE'S BRIDEGROOM

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The wedding guests look upon the cracked, pink lips of Rosie's bridegroom. They look at Rosie's own lips that owe their reddish pinkness to artifice, they think, and not disease. Can Rosie see what they see, they wonder, that her newly made husband's sickness screams out its presence from every pore? Disease flourishes in the slipperiness of his tufted hair; it is alive in the darkening skin, in the whites of the eyes whiter than nature intended, in the violently pink-red lips, the blood beneath fighting to erupt through the broken skin.

He smiles often, Rosie's bridegroom. He smiles when a drunken aunt entertains the guests with a dance that, outside this celebration of sanctioned fornication, could be called obscene. He smiles when an uncle based in Manchester, England, calls the cell-phone of his son and sends his congratulations across nine thousand kilometres shortened by *Vodafone* on his end and *Econet* on the other. His smile broadens as the son tells the master of ceremonies that the uncle pledges two hundred pounds as a wedding gift, the smile becomes broader still when the master of ceremonies announces that the gift is worth two hundred billion dollars on Zimbabwe's parallel market. He smiles and smiles and smiles and his smile reveals the heightened colour of his gums.

They sit in the rented marquee from Rooney's, the wedding guests. The marquee is resplendent in the wedding colours chosen by Rosie, cream and buttermilk, with gold to provide the contrast. They chew rice and chicken on the bone and wash it down with mouthfuls of bottled fizzy drinks, beer and

an intensive colloquy on Rosie's bridegroom's reputation.

This is his second marriage, everyone knows.

He buried one wife already, even Rosie knows.

What Rosie doesn't know: he also buried two girlfriends, possibly more.

The evidentiary weight of his appearance, circumstantial in isolation, is corroborated not only by the death of one wife and two girlfriends, but by other incidents in the life of Rosie's bridegroom.

*For instance:* it is known that he was often in the company of Memory, now late, formerly of Glen View Three, notorious Memory with men from here to Kuwadzana, Memory who died with her cracked lips (also pinkened) protesting at her leaving.

*Another thing:* he drank nightly at the illegal shebeen at MaiTatenda's house, with MaiTatenda who has one Tatenda and no BabaTatenda, MaiTatenda who provided her clients with home comforts and then some, MaiTatenda who was seen only last week, just skin and bones, coughing – coughing and shivering in this sweltering December. One doesn't want to be unkind of course, they say, but that is what happens to whores who wrap their legs around men that are not their husbands.

*And finally, incontrovertibly:* Rosie's bridegroom's car was seen parked outside the house of a prophet who lives in Muhacha Crescent in Warren Park, he of the hands that can drive out the devil Satan who has chosen to appear as an incurable virus in their midst. This prophet has placed an advert in all the newspapers. He responded to that advert, Rosie's new husband, he must have, for his car, the silver *Toyota Camry* that was always in front of MaiTatenda's house, was seen outside of the house of the prophet.

*Is any Sick among You?* the advert says, *Let him call for the Elders of the Church; and let them Pray over him, Anointing him with Oil in the Name of the Lord. And the Prayer of Faith shall save the sick, JAMES 5:13-15. Jesus of Nazareth Saves,* the advert says. *Come to have His healing Hands placed upon your Troubled Hearts. All Illnesses Cured. For Nothing shall be Impossible with the Lord, GENESIS 18:14.*

There is but one disease that drives men to turn their *Toyota Camrys*, their *Mercedes Benzes*, *Pajeros*, *BMWs* in the direction of Warren Park. There is only one illness that pushes both the well-wheeled and un-wheeled to seek out the prophet. It is the big disease with the little name, the sickness that no one dies of, the disease whose real name is unspoken, the sickness that speaks its presence through the pink redness of lips, the slipperiness of hair, through the whites of the eyes whiter than nature intended.

They are gifted with prophecy, the wedding guests, they look at Rosie's bridegroom's lips and in them see Rosie's fate. She will die first, of course, for that is the pattern, the woman first, and then the man. The woman first, leaving the man to marry again, to marry another woman who will also die first. They will keen loudly at Rosie's wake; they will fall into each other's arms. Their first tears shed, they will talk of the manner of her death.

In the public spaces they will say: She just fell sick. Just like that, no warning, nothing. She woke up in the morning; she prepared food for the family. Around eleven she said: My head, my head. And by the time she should have cooked the supper, she was gone. So quickly, they will say. No one can comprehend the speed with which it happened. It burdens the heart, they will say. Where have you heard that a person dies from a headache?

But in the dark corners away from the public spaces they will say: *Haiwa*, we knew all along. Her death was there in the bright pink lips of her bridegroom, how far did she think it could go? Remember the first wife, remember Memory, remember MaiTatenda, remember the two girlfriends, possibly more?

How far did she think it would go?

And they sit now, the wedding guests, passing rice and chicken through their own reddened lips, complaining that there is not enough to eat, not enough to drink, they sit watching, calculating, wondering, how many of them will be there to see that death.