

## **Sumbridge Drive**

### **A Short Story**

**by Natalie Arle-Toyne**

The worst house on the best street, that's what you buy. My mother was an estate agent. On Sundays I played in sprawling mansions while she accompanied families around the show-property of the week, but I loved our cosy something the best. *Cosy* was an estate agent's way of saying small, my mother would tell me. I didn't care, we'd made it. We'd pulled up carpets and sanded floors, scrubbed tobacco stained walls until the cream showed through, and separated one room into two so that I could have my very own cosy bedroom.

Late afternoon on the fourteenth of November 1988, our first unannounced visitor arrived. She had just opened the gate, come into the front garden and knocked on the door. Brave - we had a dog.

It was raining that day, the type of rain that breaks glasses left out on veranda tables, overcast and steamy. There was a collected panic about her, this short bent gogo. She wore a maid's uniform, drenched now.

I could make out a shadow behind her on the road, a woman standing stock-still, hands loose at her sides, nightie slick, protruding out over her heavily pregnant frame.

I was ordered to take the dog round the back, and my father was put on get-an-ambulance duty while my mother ushered the young black woman into the lounge. She was tiny and beautiful and didn't say a word. I don't think she said a word the whole time she was with us.

When Dad - red-faced - came blundering into the lounge, my mother went to the bedroom with him to call and convince the hospital that this was in fact, not a prank call. So it was just me and the gogo and her pregnant silent daughter.

I liked them both, I remember that. I liked the gogo's calm manner, asking me to forget the tea but bring her a bowl of hot water and some towels, while she gently rolled back our prized rug and got the young soon-to-be-mother onto all fours. I liked how she answered all of my nine year-old questions about waters breaking and why she wanted her daughter to give birth like an animal. "We're all animals," she said. "You mlungus don't let gravity help you lying on your backs". That made sense to me. If I ever give birth, I'll not do it lying down. I liked the way she smelled like lavender and sweat and the way her tight grey curls

held the rain water. I liked the way she spoke softly in Zulu to her daughter who was breathing silently through her contractions.

It felt like everyone came to witness the birth, the neighbours followed the ambulance men in. I was barred, being nine. My godmother did a good job of holding me on the patio but she couldn't stop me from peaking through the burglar-barred windows. How seeing the most natural act in the world would have scarred me, I don't know, but there I was straining to see, catching glimpses of them flipping her onto her back. Then one of them blocked my view. I couldn't hear much with the rain still beating down like an amateur steel band on the patio's tin roof. I'm told she made one noise the whole time. That's it. One little grunt.

The ambulance men tried to convince me that the umbilical cord was wrapped around the baby's neck so it was lucky they flipped the young mother over. He could have suffocated. I wasn't buying it. I still got to wash the baby in our bathroom sink. That was something. It was covered in blood and yellow pus-like stuff. It wasn't pretty, but it was magical.

Gogo said they'd name him Sumbridge after our street. That would be his English name anyway. We wrapped him in a sun-dried cotton sheet and when my father offered to drive them back down the road to where they both worked, the new mother shook her head. She had just given birth but she stood up, baby Sumbridge in her arms, and

she *walked* home. It seemed weirdly defiant and rather wonderful to me, as a nine year-old that had been part of this miracle birth on our lounge floor.

The next day no-one believed me at school, not even the teacher. Later, I went down to Sumbridge's house to visit him. "He's kind of like my new brother", I whispered to my mother.

I rang the intercom next to the giant filigreed gates and waited. Their dog came at me making an odd sound - they'd removed it's voice box. A woman informed me that both Regina and Rose no longer worked for them and no, they didn't take a forwarding address. I stayed for a while outside of their mammoth property following the electric wires - little veins, running along the top of their skyscraper walls.

For years I had a fantasy that Sumbridge would come back to see us. He'd be stoic and silent like Rose, smelling like lavender, with curls that held rainwater. I imagined he'd walk right past Peaches who'd recognise his scent, and he'd tell me about how he was studying law and was a keen runner. I'd show him where he had been born, and we'd thank the heavens for a gate that easily opened and a fence you could hop over. I had a fantasy that he'd show up on our doorstep like his gogo before him. He never did.