

# In the Spirit of McPhineas Lata

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This tale begins at the end; McPhineas Lata, the perennial bachelor who made a vocation of troubling married women, is dead. The air above Nokanyana village quivers with grief and rage, and not a small amount of joy because the troubling of married women, by its very definition, involved a lot of trouble. But, maybe because of his slippery personality, or an inordinate amount of blind luck, McPhineas Lata seemed to dodge the bulk of the trouble created by his behaviour, and left it for others to carry on, on his behalf. He had after all, admitted to Bongo and Cliff, his left and right side kicks, that troubling married women was a perfect past-time which was ‘all sweet and no sweat’.

Women in the village of Nokanyana, named after a small river that no one had yet been able to discover, were notoriously greedy, and, without exception, surly. Husbands in the village were all small and thin with tight muscles worked into knots because they spent all of their lives either working to please their wives or withstanding barrages of insults and criticisms for failing to do it up to the very high expectation of Nokanyana women. For Nokanyana men, it was a lose-lose situation and, as a result, each and every one of them despised McPhineas Lata merely for remaining single – he had made the right decision and they had not.

McPhineas Lata, though thus despised by most husbands, was adored by most wives. His funeral was full of dramatic fainting and howls of grief echoing as far as the Dithako Hills. Tears fell by the bucketful and nearly succeeded in creating the village’s missing namesake. The husbands stood at the back of the gathering wearing variations on the theme ‘stern face’ while the minister said his last words. When it was

time to pour dirt on the coffin of McPhineas Lata, the husbands rushed past their crying wives and grabbed up the shovels. Some even came prepared with their own to make the work faster. Indeed, no one could remember a burial that had lasted for so short a time. No sooner had the wives heard that first shovelful of soil hit against the wooden coffin, as they were still organizing themselves for their final grand crescendo of wailing, than the soil was seen to be heaped into a great mound over the grave. The men then piled stones on top, of a great number sure to keep McPhineas Lata firmly in his eternal bed. The men stacked the shovels by the grave, slapped the soil off their hands, and led the way back to the village leaving all their McPhineas Lata problems in the cemetery for good. Or so they thought.

As the husbands made their happy ways to Ema Rengwe Bar, MmaTebogo, one of McPhineas's greatest fans, lingered behind looking longingly at McPhineas Lata's grave. She wondered how the women of Nokanyana would manage without such a talented man. She also wondered what the women would do with all of their spare time. There was only so much husband haranguing a woman could stand. She thought about how much she personally would miss McPhineas Lata and without so much as a warning her mind floated away into McPhineas Lata Land.

Naledi Huelela stopped on the thin lane leading from the cemetery to the village and looked back at McPhineas Lata's grave and spotted MmaTebogo. 'What does she think she's doing?' she asked with indignation. The wives stopped and turned to see MmaTebogo lying on top of McPhineas Lata's grave. 'She can't do that!' Naledi said. She felt quite proprietorial over McPhineas Lata since he had died in her bed in the middle of one of his more gymnastically performed sessions. It really had been quite extraordinary what he could get up to. People said he read books.

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'Read books?' Bongo responded with a sceptical air when asked by the husbands who had gathered at Ema Rengwe Bar after the funeral.

Though they had left the cemetery in a jovial and confident mood, a comment by Zero Maranyane put paid to that. He had looked up from

his first beer and said, 'I doubt our wives will forget him as quickly as we will.'

It was a bitter taste of what their McPhineas Lata-less future was going to hold. No, Nokanyana wives would not forget McPhineas Lata. It would have been better if he had lived to a ripe old age where his muscles and frail, old man body would have let the wives down and would have had them drifting back to their hard-done-by husbands. Instead, he died as virile as ever, for god's sake, he died in the act of one of his more acrobatic performances, or so the husbands had heard.

The husbands were in a predicament. They knew enough to realize that a dead and buried McPhineas Lata didn't mean dead and buried McPhineas Lata *memories*. Memories that would likely swirl and twirl in their wives mind, adding salt and strength until McPhineas Lata became an untouchable super-sex hero with whom they could never compare.. They realized then that they had quite a problem with McPhineas Lata dead and buried. Their wives had been almost manageable when he was around, but now the husbands expected the worst.

So they grilled McPhineas Lata's left sidekick, Bongo. 'McPhineas Lata reading books? No, he was far too lazy for that. Mostly, I always put it down to a good imagination,' Bongo offered. 'Imagination?' the husbands asked. If that was the case, they were most certainly doomed.

RraTebogo stood up to address the husbands. He was in the same rudderless boat as they were, but he knew they needed a plan if there was to be any hope at all. 'Men! Men! If McPhineas Lata had imagination, why can't we get some of it? Why not? Just because we never had imagination before, doesn't mean we can't change. To be honest, I don't think we have a chance if we don't.' Then he turned to McPhineas Lata's right hand sidekick, Cliff, 'So did he ever give you any pointers? Any advice?'

Cliff, not the brightest bulb in the box, looked to Bongo for help. 'He did say once that it was good to regulate speed,' Cliff offered up as assistance. The crowd nodded in approval.

Some took out pocket-sized notebooks and wrote down the advice, but before they put a full stop on the sentence, Bongo added, 'But he said speed was also dependent on the woman's likes and dislikes.' The crowd's elation at their perceived progress fell like a lead balloon when they found they were back to the start line.

A particularly gnarled and knotty fellow named Tobias Oitlhobogile stood up. Hunched over, he said in a battered voice, 'Maybe we should work together to come up with McPhineas Lata's method. I don't see any of us finding it out on our own.' The husbands nodded. It was better that way, at least if they failed, which in all likelihood would be the inevitable outcome, together it wouldn't feel so personal. And they could always meet at Ema Rengwe to commiserate; at least that would be something to look forward to.

So while the wives were fighting it out, trying to climb on top of McPhineas Lata's rocky grave to give him a few last humps, the husbands made a plan of how together they would, by the process of elimination, come up with McPhineas Lata's secret for satisfying their wives.

RraTebogo, the headmaster at the local primary school, rushed to collect a blackboard which he and Ntatemogolo Moeng carried back to the bar. They would use it to map out their plan. They knew that there were only so many things that one could do when it came to making love so they divided the work into a few main categories. The husbands had decided to work in a logical, deductive manner. They would start broadly and work down to the intricate details. All evidence collected would be brought back to Ema Rengwe, discussed, and compiled into notes by the elected secretary, Mr Mokwadi Okwadile, the local accountant. They were going to be systematic and with a good effort by everyone, they were almost assured of success.

The women trickled home from the cemetery over the next week, tired and hungry and more surly than usual. A thunderstorm on the weekend meant no woman could buck and ride on the grave as she mourned McPhineas Lata, and the men knew the time had come to begin collecting the information they needed.

RraTebogo was given the broad topic of foreplay. Once Tebogo, their son, was born almost thirty-six years previously, RraTebogo had thought as the natural course of things, foreplay should be abandoned in lieu of sleep. Reintroducing such a long forgotten activity after such a substantial period of time proved to be a bit touch and go. On his first attempt, which even he recognized later as slightly overambitious, MmaTebogo stuck her head under the covers and responded 'What the hell do you think you're doing Old Man?' Lost for words, RraTebogo rolled over and went to sleep.

The next day he decided he'd have to take things a little slower. Before getting down to business, he rubbed her right shoulder for three minutes. The time-span he knew for certain as he made sure the digital alarm clock Tebogo had bought them for Christmas was positioned at the correct angle as to be seen from the bed. Then he stroked her left side four times in sequence and then promptly proceeded with the business. Since MmaTebogo neither shouted nor hit him, he marked it up as a success and passed his news on to the others that night at Ema Rengwe.

Mokwadi looked up from his notebook, his eyes swimming behind his thick, Coke-bottle glasses. 'Was that four minutes on the shoulder and three strokes on the side?'

'No,' RraTebogo corrected. 'Three minutes on the right shoulder and four strokes of the *left* side. Don't forget that left. I might be a bit subjective, but it seemed that the left side is the right side for the stroking. Anyway, we'll know soon enough.'

And indeed they would, for once something was seen to work all of the husbands took the bit of information home and put it into practice in their beds. So for a week of nightly sessions in each and every home in Nokanyana, husbands were giving their wives three-minute rubs of the right shoulder and four strokes of the left side before getting down to the business. The wives were curiously quiet throughout the week. A few hardcores still climbed up the hill to the cemetery to cavort with the memory of McPhineas Lata, but the rest stayed at home, more confused than anything. Something strange was happening in Nokanyana and they didn't want to be up on top of McPhineas Lata's grave and miss the uncovering of all this mysterious activity.

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Back at Ema Rengwe the husbands were in a jubilant mood. Things were going well with the foreplay. 'It is time to move on!' RraTebogo said, bringing out the heavy blackboard from the bar storeroom. 'Okay Ntatemogolo Moeng. You've been assigned breasts, any progress there?'

The husbands' eyes moved to the old man sitting on a stool in the corner. He stood up straight and repositioned his jacket, circa 1972, evidenced by the massive lapels and 4 cm by 4 cm checked pattern, red on tan. 'Thank you, *Modulasetilo*. I am happy to report that I have

nothing at all to report.’ The old man bowed slightly and repositioned himself with no small amount of effort on the tall stool.

‘Well, have you tried anything?’ RraTebogo asked in desperation. ‘Even a negative result is helpful.’ The husbands nodded their heads. They all knew that a hard smack from a big, disagreeable wife would teach them a lesson they wouldn’t soon forget.

Ntatemogolo Moeng stood up again. ‘Thank you *Modulasetilo*. Yes, I have tried a few things but they seem to have just made MmaMoeng very annoyed. She has taken to bringing a softball bat to bed, so considering my age and the fragility of my bones, I thought it best to stop along the way. It was a matter of health.’ He climbed back up on the stool.

RraTebogo was annoyed. ‘Bloody hell man, just tell us what you did so we all avoid it. I don’t think any of us cherish the idea of getting hit in the head with a bat!’

‘Thank you, Modulasetilo. I can say that it appears squeezing of breasts is a bit tricky – considering all of the patterns and rhythms and varying levels of pressure – I really didn’t know where to start. And then, I know some of you more ambitious young men might even add in some mouth activity. I just didn’t know where to start, honestly, so I thought since the two milk cows in my kraal seemed to accept the pattern I used on them, I started there. Sort of a milking action. But as I said, MmaMoeng didn’t take kindly to that.’ As he climbed back up on the high stool, the husbands let out a collective groan and shook their heads.

RraTebogo tried to be respectful of the old man’s age. ‘Are you saying you were milking your wife?’

Ntatemogolo stood up. ‘Yes, Modulasetilo, that is exactly what I am saying, but be warned, I wouldn’t advise it.’ He sat back down.

RraTebogo looked at Mokwaledi. ‘Did you write that down? We certainly don’t want to go that route again.’ He turned to the husbands. ‘Does anybody have anything to report? Anything at all?’ He couldn’t help but sound discouraged. He knew a few shoulder squeezes and side strokes were not going to push the legend of McPhineas Lata out of the wives’ minds. ‘I have noticed a few of our wives have taken to drifting back to the grave in the late afternoon. We husbands are losing ground!’

RraTebogo looked around and saw nothing but a crowd of disappointed faces. ‘Come on men, we need to put in more effort.’ Then

hesitantly, the secretary raised his hand. 'Yes, Mokwadi, do you have something for us?'

'I'm not quite sure. As you know, I was given speed as my area, but I discovered something that has nothing to do with that. I don't know if it is in order to mention it or not.'

'Give it over Man! Can't you see we're desperate here?'

'Well, I was experimenting with quite a fast speed and MmaMokwadi shifted to get a better view of the TV and I slipped off her and fell to the side. I happened to settle right next to her and since I was slightly out of breath, being not used to such high-energy activity, I was breathing hard right in her ear. Suddenly she picked up the remote and shut off the TV. As the week progressed, I added a few flicks of my tongue and kisses on her neck and I believe I'm on to something.'

The Nokanyana husbands burst into cheers. Some rushed forward and slapped the shy accountant on the back.

RraTebogo stood up to get some order. 'Okay, okay. This is only going to work if we can reproduce the moves in our own homes. Mokwadi, show us on the blackboard.' The slight man stood up and took the chalk. He quickly drew a diagram complete with arrows and times as to how the husbands should approach this new move. The house agreed it should be inserted in the routine after the shoulder rubbing and the side-stroking, and before the business. That night the Nokanyana husbands went home a happy lot. They began to believe that they actually could replicate McPhineas Lata's moves and that their wives would forget all about that dead wife-troubler.

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MmaTebogo was at the communal tap filling her water tank when Sylvia Okwadile pushed up with her wheelbarrow loaded with two large buckets. They greeted each other and sat quietly together; Sylvia on the edge of the wheelbarrow, MmaTebogo on a turned up cement block, both nibbling at the words they wanted to say while watching the thin stream of water fall from tap to tank. 'Too bad about McPhineas Lata,' MmaTebogo started, hoping that Sylvia would pick it up and lead them to the topic filling both of their minds.

Sylvia adjusted the purple and red doek on her head, and then glanced at MmaTebogo from the corner of her eye. 'Everything fine there at home?' she asked.

'Yes,' MmaTebogo answered. 'Why do you ask?'

'Nothing unusual?' Sylvia wanted a bit more before she let her tongue wag freely.

'Well, now that you mention it.' And MmaTebogo began explaining the changes taking place in her matrimonial bed.

Sylvia listened, but like most people, she listened through ears that filtered things to be skewed in a general direction already decided by her. When MmaTebogo finished she asked, 'So is it three minutes on the right shoulder and four strokes on the left side?'

MmaTebogo's eyes widened. 'Yes! Yes! That is exactly it! Every night like clockwork. Then there are a few minutes of blowing in my ear, five to seven kisses on the neck, and then the business.'

'Aha! I knew it!' Sylvia said, jumping to her feet. She now had enough evidence to confirm what she already believed. She told MmaTebogo her theory. 'He's here ... with us. I knew he couldn't just leave like that. McPhineas Lata has taken up the bodies of our husbands. He has taken spiritual possession of the husbands of Nokanyana.'

MmaTebogo, a practical woman, said, 'Do you think so? Can that even happen?'

'Sure, why not? What else could it be?'

MmaTebogo had to agree she had no answer to that question. Maybe Sylvia was right. The two decided to call the wives to see if in their bedrooms they were experiencing the same transformation.

'It starts with three minutes on the left shoulder,' Karabo John said the next morning, at the meeting at the church at the end of the village.

'Left? Now that's an interesting twist,' MmaTebogo commented. 'Why would McPhineas Lata change things for only one of the wives?' The wives nodded their heads in agreement. It was indeed unusual. Maybe the theory was not correct after all.

But then Karabo John remembered, 'Okay, no ... you know Dimpho has a problem, he never could keep left and right straight.' The wives giggled. That was the answer then. It was true, they decided, McPhineas Lata had not left them when he died, he had only taken up residence in each of their husbands' bodies. They were so relieved. Many

had wondered how they would go on without their weekly visits with McPhineas Lata and the grave humping was just not cutting it.

‘Now it’s even better,’ Naledi Huelela added. ‘Now we all get McPhineas Lata – *every night*. No more sharing!’

‘He really is a wise man,’ MmaTebogo said, nodding thoughtfully.

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As the sun set in Nokanyana, husbands and wives had big, wide smiles planted firmly on their faces and deep in their hearts. Once darkness descended, they hurried off to the bedrooms, leaving children to fend for themselves; favourite television dramas were abandoned in this rush, as husbands and wives could hardly wait to discover what new between-the-sheets tricks and treats McPhineas Lata had in store for them.