



My friend Miriam Ahmed An Eritrean tegadalyt

I would have preferred to write this letter to my friend Miriam while she was alive. But like all mortals I never thought that Miriam would leave me so soon.

My friend Miriam was a person full of life and while I have come to terms with the fact that she left us, it is incredibly difficult to reconcile my desire to see her again with my doubtful belief that there is no afterlife. I still look for Miriam everywhere, her home phone on my phone's speed dial; in my mind Saturday morning still rotates around our long telephone calls and Miriam's laughter. I long for signs she would send me and make me believe that she is watching over me. Honestly, I am still not at ease with her passing.

Miriam and I never downplayed the closeness of our friendship. I am incredibly sorry that I never told her how much proud I was of her as much as she told me of her pride about my struggles and my achievements. I took for granted that she knew she was closer than family and the definition "friend" could not express what she really was for me and many others in our circle.

I pose to listen to her voice telling her own kids and myself to eat and clean our plates; the sound of her voice growing distant by the day. My mind slides from the memories of the past when we met in Port Sudan to the images during our euphoria of her and our soldiers walking into a liberated Asmara, to this present made of a void she left behind.

Before Miriam, I lost family members that were old in age but looked invincible and it was painful. I cannot wrap my mind around Miriam, her young age and her sudden death; she just took with her my sense of immortality.

In 1989, I took a trip to visit my brother and my sister in the "field", such were called the liberated territories of Eritrea and governed by our valiant EPLF freedom fighters.

I reached Port Sudan around mid-day and asked for the host who was supposed to offer me a place to rest until the start of my journey deep in the night the day after.

I was told that he was aware of my arrival, but I had to find a chair and wait until he was free from whatever pressing matter he was taking care of. So I sat and talked with other fellow Eritreans that were visiting just like me. I was coming from the US; some were from all over Europe.

We were offered some tea and some food. I was impressed by the people running this "guest house". They were courteous and caring. They were applying all rules dictated by our culture and our parents towards guests. Late afternoon and no sign of my host. Early evening, nada!

I picked up my luggage and walked up the steps that took me to some private floors. I was suddenly stopped by a female soldier who abruptly asked me "where do you think you are going?" I explained to her that I was visiting and was looking for my host (I detailed his name). She told me that he was busy. I politely asked her to remind him that I was waiting for several hours and beside a bed to rest, I was in need to take a shower. She gave a glance that translated "wait until you go in with your need for a daily shower..."

She asked me to wait and she came back few minutes later. She told me that my host was aware of my arrival and asked if he could safe-keep any valuable I was carrying, as for as the bed issue I had to go back downstairs and look for one. If there were none available, I could sleep on a chair. I was beyond shocked. I asked her to deliver my message to my host and let him know that I was walking out in the darkness of the night and would look for a hotel. She shrugged her shoulder and I left her.

I reached the main gate and asked the guard where I could find a hotel. He looked at me as if I was out of my mind! Suddenly a truck 4x4 stopped and un-loaded some of our fighters. Most of them women. They looked so beautiful with their afro or dreadlocks and their Kalashnikovs hanging on their shoulders. They all had a smile to die for. I rushed to take my camera out of my bag when suddenly someone said "Ay ameneen!! Kiki dekhe?" {I can't believe it, are you Kiki?} I stared at my friend Miriam and we just hugged each other. We both had tears and could not utter a word. We kept on looking at each other and hug some more. I explained to her what happened; she just grabbed my hand and walked me back into the house I had just left.

You see, Miriam was always that kind of person. She would make people's problems her own and cut the way to complaining very short. She always found a solution to any problem, no matter how deep and how larger than life it could be.

She showed me the way to the shower and then she suddenly called my name all while saying: " Kiki, hazee" (Kiki grab this), she threw a clean "Jellebia" at me ("jellebia" is a large caftan used by women in Middle Eastern countries and several Arabic speaking African countries).

She smiled and told me to take a long shower, as long as I could because once in the field there could be days with no water.

I came back very relaxed and happy to be with my childhood friend. Miriam braided my long hair and asked me to keep it covered in a head scarf to prevent too much dust from settling in. "Just to prevent lice to settle in as well" she said My smile disappeared and I stared at her. Miriam laughed a very guttural laughter and she said "welcome to our world Kiki. We sleep with them, we get used to it. We just focus on protecting the country and our people."

I felt vain and looked at my travelling bag filled with all sort of travel-size shampoos and even perfumes. I showed it to Miriam. She grabbed some and told me that she could use them few days down the road when her husband would visit. Again, we laughed loudly and in a nutty way. We acted silly because we were so happy to have found each other.

All was so simply surreal and yet as true as life could be. I then washed Miriam's hair and rolled them in some "homemade" rollers. I took time to put some pencil around her beautiful eyes and snapped some photos. I left the day after and until then Miriam never left my side. Once it was time to say goodbye, I asked her if she would be around on my way back. She simply said: "If I do not die in a battle" her voice was so much matter-of-facts that I realized she really meant it.

I hugged her and told her "Please stay alive" She said "I will so we can introduce our kids to each other" she ended her farewell with "I love you".

I met Miriam after the fall of Asmara and each time I was in town, I would end up in her house. If her kids made too much noise, her husband would take them to another room and all women would have the freedom of talking fashion and tell jokes about people. There was so much solidarity towards one another at Miriam's house.

At one time, she was so much involved in finding a house for an elderly woman we all called "Mamma Eritrea". She did not give up until she settled Mamma Eritrea and then she assigned each of us with a schedule of providing groceries to Mamma Eritrea. Just like that my friend Miriam would take over someone's problems, make them her own, find a solution and move forward to help with other problems anew. Mamma Eritrea was an old lady that walked into a

liberated Asmara with our valiant fighters. Miriam literally adopted her as a mother and tried to find her a house and provide the basic to her. At this very paragraph I would like to bring some more lights to Miriam's kindness. Miriam is a Muslim Eritrean and Mamma Eritrea was Christian. In my beautiful country, religion never was a problem of society. We love each other; we marry each other and celebrate each others' religious events. Miriam just followed such intensively beautiful rule and fostered Mamma Eritrea in her own house until she could provide Mamma Eritrea with a small room of her own. She also asked her own children to respect Mamma Eritrea as their own grandmother. When we gathered at Miriam's house for coffee, Mamma Eritrea had the seat of honor and would bless the bread and enjoy coffee with us. We – Miriam's friends – never asked for the real name of Mamma Eritrea. After all, Miriam gave her the name she deserved. The old lady was a mother to all of us and to our beloved country at large. While my own family raised me with a sense of respect towards elderly, I was at owe about the fact that Miriam took this lady into her house without asking anything in return and gave her the place of honor in hers and all our hearts. I wonder if I would have done it so beautifully. I learned a lot from my friend Miriam.

I am filled with so many emotions. I am still angry at the fact that life's obligations made us live across borders and across oceans. I would have loved to throw a "jellebia" at her, all while saying "Miriam hazee" and rush to fix a cup of tea while she was taking a shower. So many things. Miriam and I, we talked about everything. Today I look at the photos she left behind. I hear our laughter; I can still taste her delicious food. I can see her image stressed because of a roof she tried to provide to Mamma Eritrea; an elderly woman she was not related to and Miriam's help prevented from homelessness! I look at the photos of our children when she finally made it to the US for a visit. I hear her saying "I will stay alive and meet you in Asmara if I survive the enemy" we both never knew we could not make destiny wait.

My dear friend and her voice will always resonate in my mind saying "Kiki hazee". I still turn around and can see her smile. **Miriam was the epitome of grace.**

Miriam, I loved you then and love you more now. You are forever a dear friend.

Kiki Tzeggai

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