

Tribute from Olea Nel

I first met Mariana while growing up in Green Point in the late 1950s. I recall a pretty girl with dark, wavy hair whose flamboyant gesticulations and loud laughter indicated someone with a fun-loving personality. As I got to know her better, I would also discover that Mariana had hidden depths of resilience. In short, she was an overcomer, especially when having to negotiate the apartheid laws on the Sea Point trams.

As some of you will doubtless recall, there were long parallel seats near the back entrance of the tram that were relegated to 'Non-Whites,' and double-seater seats nearer the front that were assigned to 'Whites Only.' Unfortunately, because of Mariana's dark complexion, the tram conductors would more often than not admonished her for wanting to sit in the 'Whites Only' area, whereupon they would point to the 'Non-White' seats.

Needless to say, her friends weren't going to stand for that. Despite Mariana's blasé declaration that she preferred those seats anyway, we always insisted that she sit with us. This often meant that one of us would have to resort to a silent mouthing exercise with the tram conductor to let him know that Mariana was actually classed as White. To their credit, they usually just nodded without saying a word.

However, one day, Mariana and I encountered a tram conductor who stood his ground in relation to the 'law,' as he put it. And he wasn't quiet about it either. At the time we were travelling from town back to Green Point. And as per usual, I had pushed Mariana onto the tram ahead of me so that she could quickly scoot to the 'Whites-Only' seats. The conductor, noticing her do so, called her back while pointing to the 'Non-White sign.

What was I to do? Despite being rather shy and introverted, I decided to stand my ground, just as my father had taught me to do when being confronted by the playground bully. Meeting the conductor's piercing gaze, I said loudly, 'I would have you know that my friend here attends Ellerslie Girls High School as well as the Three Anchor Bay Dutch Reformed Church.'

As I turned to join Mariana, who was already seated and studiously looking out of the tram window while trying to stifle a nervous giggle, I was amazed to discover that my declaration had met with smiles and even applause from some fellow passengers. Mariana and I exchanged relieved glances, having just realised that we were among friends and allies.

Being outnumbered, the conductor turned tail, obviously deciding to make a hasty exit by going upstairs.

At the time of the above episode, I was around sixteen, and thus old enough to realise how difficult these situations were for Mariana. But she never let on, preferring instead to wave it off with a flick of her hand, accompanied by her signature snort. Be that as it may, there were also little rebellious moments.

Late one afternoon, a large group of us were returning home to Green-and-Sea Point after attending a special event. As it was rush hour, we found ourselves having to wait in a long queue for the Sea Point tram. As the tram was taking far too long for Mariana's liking, she decided she needed to sit down. As the nearest 'seat,' so to speak, was the pavement at the edge of the gutter, we watched in astonishment as a coiffed and 'dolled-up' Mariana sat herself down on the dirty pavement there while taking no notice of our shocked indignant cries of MARIANA! that followed in her wake.

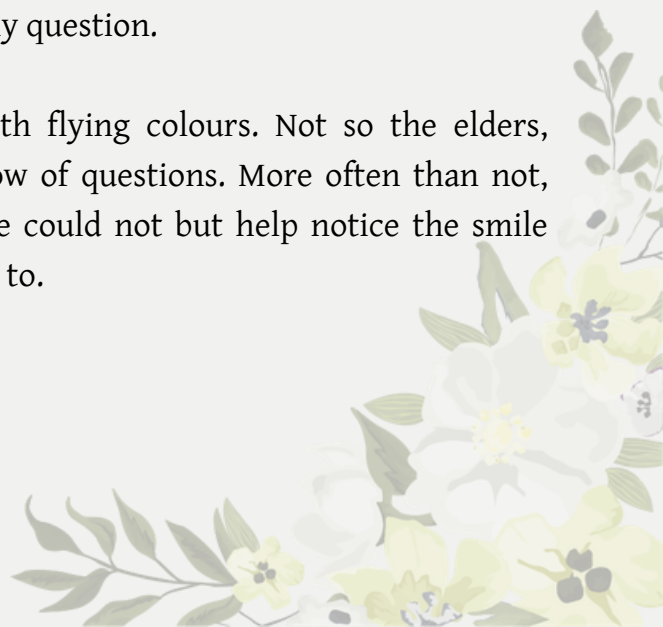
I realised then that this little display was her way of thumbing her nose at propriety. It was also her public declaration that she was rising above it all.

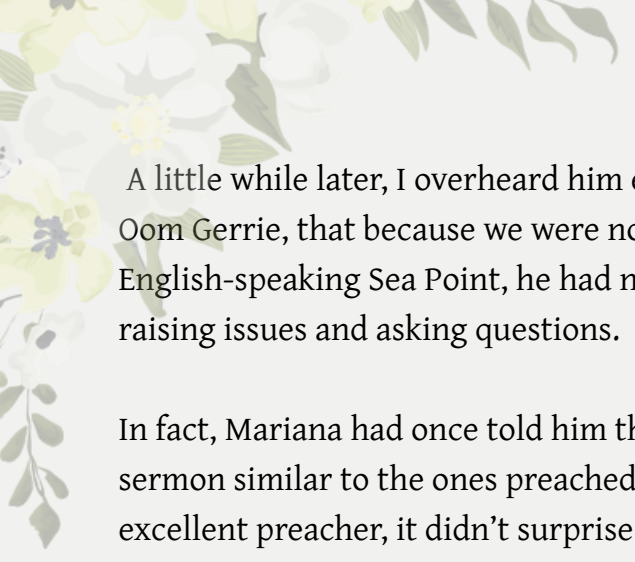
Needless to say, there were many sides to Mariana, two of the main ones being her deep Christian faith and her sense of fun.

As already mentioned, we both attended the Three Anchor Bay DRC, along with its regular youth group meetings. We were also members of a dynamic English-speaking youth group linked to Youth For Christ. Not least was the fact that we both attended the same DRC catechism class, where we spent two years working through the Heidelberg Catechism with our young and fun-loving minister, Dominee (Ds) Botha.

In order to officially pass the Catechism, our class had to front up as a group to a meeting with the elders of the church. As Ds. Botha explained beforehand, the elders would be seated in a long line across the table from us and could ask us any theological question covered by the Catechism. 'Needless to say,' he said, with a wink and a smile, 'you are also permitted to ask them any question.' Well, we didn't need any further prompting. Mariana, for one, knew exactly which elder she would be targeting with her curly question.

If my memory serves me correctly, we all passed with flying colours. Not so the elders, however. They were completely taken aback by the flow of questions. More often than not, they tended to look to Ds. Botha to help them out. We could not but help notice the smile playing on his lips, for he knew exactly what we were up to.





A little while later, I overheard him explaining to a very embarrassed elder, known to us as Oom Gerrie, that because we were not Platteland Afrikaners, and were being brought up in English-speaking Sea Point, he had needed to give us some leeway regarding our penchant for raising issues and asking questions.

In fact, Mariana had once told him that she thought it time that he preached an evangelical sermon similar to the ones preached at the Youth For Christ rallies we attended. Being an excellent preacher, it didn't surprise us that he actually followed through with Mariana's request. It was a brilliant sermon on the plumb line.

By 1974, Mariana and Jim were already attending Language School in Japan, while I was attending Bible School in Melbourne, Australia. As OMF needed a trained English language teacher on a short term mission assignment, I offered my services. My trip to Japan, also gave me the opportunity to pay Mariana and Jim a short visit. Unfortunately, that was the last time I spoke with Mariana face-to-face. But that didn't mean we couldn't keep up a correspondence.

With the advent of email and Messenger, our correspondence took on a whole new life, especially when Mariana started writing informative Christian books on Japan. As it just so happened, I was writing a set of novels on Andrew Murray's life at the time. Our mutual interest in all aspects of publishing, be it categories, keywords, titles, publicity, or advertising, resulted in a hectic flow of messages and emails. These would inevitably transfer over to supporting each other during the ups and downs of daily life.

What impressed me most about Mariana was her God-given resilience during hard times. She had run the race marked out for her with resilience and perseverance while fixing her gaze on Jesus. I will always cherish her memory.