

## MY STORY

By Monica Clarke

### **“IN MY FATHER’S HOUSE ARE MANY MANSIONS!”**

Our rent had not been paid for five months and eviction loomed. My mum was terribly worried. Our last resort was Pastor Cowley.

Pastor Cowley knew our family well; that dad had died, leaving mum with nine children to see through school and college. Something almost unachievable for a black family in apartheid South Africa in the nineteen fifties.

He also knew that hand-outs from the church and hand-downs from family were keeping us going, while mum carried on working at the local factory as a machinist.

And above all, stubborn woman that she was, he knew that she would not even consider adoption or fostering, despite continuous advice from everybody in authority.

When mum tiredly dragged herself up the steps of his immense, curved, marble front porch on that hot Sunday afternoon, I could see from the look on his kindly face that charitable Pastor Cowley felt a mixed emotion of sorrow at the sight of such suffering, but also anger at the pig-headedness of the woman. Or that’s what I thought he thought. At age thirteen I knew everything about life and people.

I saw him close his Sunday Times and stand up with military politeness and attention for my mum to sit down. He did not greet me – just a cursory glance – and I wondered (still do today) why Mum spoke of him as if he were God’s Mr Nice.

It took her a cup of tea, a cup of tears and a long time to tell him her latest woe. Pastor kept glancing at me. It was obvious to me that he could not understand why I was there. I wondered too, for I knew that my mum was wasting her time, that the plea would get the usual ‘I wish there was something I could do for you’ response.

I sat half listening, lost in my own thoughts. The coolness and cleanliness of Pastor Cowley’s house fascinated me. The birds were twittering in the lazy midday heat and I became intoxicated with the lovely smells and tranquillity of the place. So different from the confusion of our rowdy little wooden house on the wrong side of the railway bridge!

I came to my senses and jumped up when Mum was already standing up. Pastor had his hand under her elbow, saying, in his kindest voice:

“Don’t worry, sister. In our Father’s house are many mansions, which He has gone to prepare for us.’

On my way down the steps I turned and saw Pastor Cowley pouring fresh, cold orange juice into a sparkling glass.

The sound of crackling ice in a cool drink on a hot day still reminds me of the earthly mansion which we lost, and which my dear ma was still

waiting for 44 years later, when she died in her little backroom in someone else's rented flat on a dilapidated council estate.

She did, though, see all of us through high school, two through nursing college, one through midwifery training, three through teaching college and one of us through law school.

She also gave us the strength and conviction to fight and sacrifice our own wellbeing to see our beloved Madiba (Nelson Mandela to the rest of the world) released from prison, and together to free our country from apartheid.

**End**