

Some Things Remain

By Debbie Aminafard

It was raining the morning the trucks pulled up in front of their home, and the policemen, armed with rifles and batons, came to the front door. It was still dark when five year old Joanne, asleep in her bed, was awakened by loud pounding on the front door and a policeman shouting “Maak julle oop!” in Afrikaans, “open up!” She listened as the policemen came in and began shouting at her mother, ordering her to gather her possessions, quickly, and put them on the truck. The door slammed shut and then there was silence. Joanne came out of her room and found her mother on her knees, bent over, holding her stomach as her body heaved, releasing deep guttural groans that seemed to come from somewhere deep in her soul. Joanne was scared.

Outside she could hear children screaming and crying as the policemen went from house to house, banging on doors and shouting at people to gather their belongings and get on the trucks! Frightened, she longed for her father, who had not returned from his job in Johannesburg the night before. She went to the window and searched the streets for him, but all she saw was chaos: people loading their possessions onto the trucks and others resisting. She watched a policeman handcuffing a man while a group of policemen standing around him began kicking him, shouting “dirty stinking kaffir.” Suddenly she felt her mother’s arms wrapping around her, pulling her away from the window. Joanne rested her head on her mother’s breast and cried. She would remember the sights and sounds of that morning for the rest of her life.

Joanne and her mother sat on the truck in the pouring rain with all their possessions, staring at their home for the last time. They had been evicted from the home that they owned and ordered to live in a township outside of Johannesburg called Meadowlands. The South African government was forcing the residents of Sophiatown out of their homes so that they could build new homes to house an all white community. Bulldozers poised on steel haunches like predators ready to strike stood in the front yards of abandoned houses. Families were torn apart, ordered to live in different townships because they were different races. Husbands and wives were separated; children lost mothers, fathers and grandparents that day. The white man’s disease, racism, which had shattered lives throughout South Africa, ripped a community apart, leaving in its wake, the broken remains of what was once a diverse and vibrant community.

Joanne's mother's arms were like angelic wings sheltering her from the cold and the rain as the truck departed from Sophiatown. The truck roared through the town, past the tall bell tower of the Anglican Church of Christ the King where Joanne and her family worshipped on Sundays. Her mother's faith was the family's sanctuary in troubled times. No matter what happened, her mother always trusted God and reassured Joanne that He would take care of them and not to be afraid, but Joanne was afraid. Her heart was beating like a drum as she lay in her mother's arms, holding the tiny wooden giraffe that her father had carved for her. She thought about the lions in the story that her mother always told her and how God had protected Daniel from being eaten. She asked God to protect her and her mother and her father the way he had protected Daniel. "Maybe the lions would not eat them."

Her father worked in a gold mine near Johannesburg. He worked hard to provide for his family, but didn't earn enough money to survive, so her mother helped the family by making beer, something her grandmother had taught her to do. Her mother made good beer. On the weekends, people would gather in their back yard for her mother's homemade stew and beer. Souls worn down by hard work in the mines and factories during the week were resurrected on the weekends. Friday night the back yard slowly filled up with people, music and dancing and laughter continuing through the night. Joanne's father loved to sing. Joanne would sit on his lap pounding out the rhythm to his songs on the small drum he had made for her as she watched her mother dancing, the fat under her arms jiggling when her arms flew through the air. Everyone was happy. People forgot how poor they were, and for a while, they were the richest people on earth.

Joanne's mother hovered over her little girl, trying to keep her dry as the convoy of trucks rumbled through Sophiatown. She forced herself to smile to reassure Joanne, but beneath the façade, she was panicking. "Where was her husband? Had he been arrested again?" A couple of years ago he had not come home from the mines. Tortured by her imagination, she had laid awake all night, thoughts racing through her mind: "Had he been injured in the mine or had he committed some minor infraction and been beaten by the police?" She did not have a phone or car, and even if she did, she could not go into Johannesburg without a pass. There was nothing she could do but wait and pray. Finally, he came home, penniless! He had been arrested because he had forgotten to carry his pass that day and had spent the night in jail. He had to give them all of the wages that he had earned that week in the mine to get out. Her family would have gone hungry had it not been for their neighbors. When the community found out what had happened, there were people at the front door constantly with food. People took care of each other in Sophiatown.

When Joanne and her mother arrived in Meadowlands, they reported to the Native

Resettlement Board as ordered, where they were given two loaves of bread and a pint of milk.

After reporting in, they walked to the tiny match-box house that had been given to them to live in but never own. It had no electricity, running water or toilets. Joanne and her mother stood in the rain and stared at what remained of their prior existence, at their soaking wet possessions that had been carelessly dumped in front of their new house. Joanne spotted her drum in the pile and grabbed it, drying it off with her shirt. Joanne's mother picked up what she could carry, pulling and pushing what was too heavy. When they got everything into the house, she found a towel and began wiping off the water. She carefully opened a wet cardboard box, and there, on top of the pile of old photographs, was a picture of her husband holding Joanne when she was only a few months old, her tiny head resting on his shoulder as she slept. The tears came; there was nothing she could do to stop them. She held the photograph against her breast, praying that God would protect her husband and help him find his way back home. She had known hard times in her life, but nothing prepared her for what was to come.

What Joanne remembers most about her childhood growing up in Meadowlands was her father's absence. The sudden loss of her father was a gaping wound that would not heal - she longed for her father. Her mother tried to find out what had happened to him but leads led only to dead ends. One of the men that her husband had worked with told her that her husband had insulted a policeman in Johannesburg and had been arrested. The man said that he saw them take her husband away in a police car, but when she questioned the police about the incident, they knew nothing; they had no record of an arrest. After a year of waiting and praying for his return, she had a dream. Her husband came to her and told her that he was ok and that she needed to go on with her life. He held her in his arms for a long time and whispered into her ear how much he loved her, that he would always be with her and Joanne, and then he was gone. The next morning she began planning the ceremony.

The years in Meadowlands were lean years. Joanne's mother got a pass and worked for a wealthy family in Johannesburg. Her mother left early in the morning, before dawn, and returned late at night, so tired that she could barely talk, but somehow she managed to always have a home cooked meal for Joanne. Joanne filled the lonely hours with reading. There was a teacher at Joanne's school who recognized that she was a gifted student, and so he provided her with books which Joanne devoured. She was finding her way in a world full of endless challenges. Her father would be proud of her. The drum and the wooden giraffe that he had made for her when she was a little girl, sat on the table next to her bed. Sometimes she picked up the drum and began singing the songs that she and her father used to sing together, the songs that his father had taught him. In a world that is constantly changing, some things remain.

It was April 27, 1995. Joanne and her husband sat in front of the television waiting for the winner of the election to be announced. Then it came: "Nelson Mandela has won the election and is now the president of South Africa!" Joanne began crying, and her husband began jumping up and down, breaking into a victory dance. It was over! Apartheid has ended! Joanne began speaking to her deceased mother and father as if they were in the room: "Here that. It's over! We're free!" As they were dancing around the room, arms flying in the air with excitement, their three year old granddaughter walked up to Joanne and began tugging on her leg. Looking up at Joanne, she asked: "What is aberdide?" Joanne corrected her and said "it WAS called apartheid." When Joanne said that, she and her husband abruptly stopped what they doing and silently stared into one another's eyes as the reality of what had happened began to sink in -- Their grandchildren would not know the pain and suffering that they and their ancestors had known. Collecting herself as she wiped the tears from her cheeks, she took her granddaughter's small hand in hers, walked her to the couch and sat her down in her lap. Joanne wrapped her arms around her and began telling her the story that her father had told her when she was a little girl: "A long time ago before the white men came" Her granddaughter listened to her people's creation story: "A python, that had been tricked by a jackal and fallen into a spring, gave birth in the depths of the deep water. They were lifted up out of the depths of the water by a giraffe with a very long neck." In a world that is constantly changing, some things remain.