

Emma Vanga and Ingrid by Glenda Levitt

Abel and I with our four children, lived in a gorgeous ranch style home in Blair Road, Camps Bay, Cape Town, South Africa during the 60's and 70's. Across our narrow road was the breathtaking view of the beautiful forest known as 'The Glen', nestling in the cradle of the the mountain named Lion's Head because of its uncannily shaped apex. Living with us was Emma, Emma Vanga our live-in maid. This was a regular life style for a typically middle class white skinned family in those Apartheid days.

I won't go into the frustrations and anxieties we went through trying to get permission for Emma to remain legally in Cape Town and the dodging and hiding from ominous dark green vans serving the Bureau of State Security that intermittently drove around searching to arrest dark skinned people without the dreaded pass book, followed by expulsion to their allocated "Homeland," The Transkei. These were under developed areas, without any opportunities to find work.

However, this story is Ingrid's story.

One day Emma received a message from the principal of the high school in the Transkei which her daughter Ingrid was attending. The message explained that due to a serious eye condition, Ingrid could no longer remain in school. She had arranged for Ingrid to travel by train to Cape Town to join Emma in the hope that a specialist would be able to help.

After welcoming Ingrid, I phoned the optometrist who had taken care of me since I was a child, to make an appointment. When I gave her name, I was told that he didn't treat "those "people. That was my last contact with that optometrist.

I then phoned my brother Louis, a doctor, explained the situation and he recommended an ophthalmologist friend. We made the appointment and together we decided that I should take Ingrid to be checked while Emma remained at home taking care of my young children. I am not sure of the doctor's name, I think it was Dr. Friedman, but his face remains vividly etched into my mind. Following his very thorough examination, with a tone of professional detachment he said, "She has Cancer". Then caringly, he rested his hand on Ingrid's shoulder and asked" How old are you?" She replied "16". I felt as though I had been struck by a bolt of lightning. Ingrid had just been told she has Cancer and she gave her age as 16 when she was in fact 19 years old. According to the law, a 16-year-old does not require a pass book.

The insidious Apartheid doctrine was so invasive that Ingrid was unable to react naturally to the enormity of hearing the medical result; instead she instinctively responded, terrified of revealing her true age, even to a doctor.

When we returned home, Emma and I sat together with Ingrid and discussed what Ingrid would really like to do. She replied that her dream was to train as a secretary. Abel and I researched throughout Cape Town and were faced with the realization that there were no facilities in the city for a black student.

We then arranged a meeting with the Headmistress of a Coloured Secretarial College. Coloured was the official term used to describe people of mixed race. When we told her that Ingrid was Black not Coloured, the headmistress explained that it was against the law for her to accept applications from a Black person. Knowing the law, we had anticipated this and so had resolved to disclose Ingrid's story. The headmistress listened attentively without interrupting and after a long pause replied, "I am prepared to take the risk and make an exception for Ingrid. I will handle my students and do our best to protect her. Please stay silent about what we are about to do."

Ingrid, wearing her college uniform with such pride and dignity, completed her 9-month secretarial course spending her days in our home awaiting her results as the disease encroached itself into the body of this precious, lovely, gentle, intelligent, young woman.

It was some time later, while we on a 3-week holiday with our children in Israel, before we made Aliyah, that we received a telegram from Emma. The headmistress had contacted her with the news that the results had finally arrived. She explained that she wanted to personally present Ingrid with her diploma. She had graduated with an outstanding 90% result. Together they went to the hospital where Ingrid lay. They placed the diploma into her hand, took and rested her hand over her heart and whispered her achievement into her ear.

Ingrid died the next day.

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