



7 SOUTH AFRICAN STORY

story collected in 2004

I decided to come here because of my five children. My eldest is 29. He has passed his A-Levels and wanted to do Business at university, but couldn't afford it. He passed his matriculation and has a diploma in Business Management. He's unemployed. My second son is a government worker and earning very little. My daughter passed her Matric. and is good at Speech and Drama. She has tried to get into university for three years, but couldn't afford it. I had no money. My youngest two go to what used to be an all-white school; it's very expensive for a good education. My youngest is 14. I've very ambitious children; they're involved in sports, the Junior Council...

In South Africa you pay 45% tax. With the salary being £700 per month, with debt of 45% and many deductions like medical aid, pension, by the time you go to net, it's £300

for five children. My rent is £250. There are no benefits for being a single parent. I just couldn't afford it. When I left South Africa, my house was sold, so my children were taken out of my flat. I pawned my room divider to pay for my ticket. The middle class can't even afford basic needs.

When I came here, because I hadn't registered, I applied for registration in Oxford. My registration was delayed from October 2002 to February 2004. If I'd a passport I'd have been at home.

While in London, a friend from Belfast visited and said I should go. There were nursing posts in Belfast. As I was about to go, I heard of other posts in Wales. Security at Liverpool asked for identification. My passport was with immigration to get registration. They stopped me from going. Took me into a room, searched and questioned me. Then they sent me to Maghaberry Prison. This was

July 2003.

Why send me to prison? They told me if they didn't, I'd disappear. I felt very degraded with procedure of admitting as a prisoner. I'd to undress before an officer, was only given a sheet. They'd to make sure I'd no marks or drugs. With only sheet, I'd to go for a shower. I really felt degraded. I didn't deserve this treatment; I'm not a criminal. It was a terrible experience to go to a cell. It was a single cell. It was clean and I found a duvet, bed, toilet next to the bed, TV, radio, wardrobe. The good thing about prison, each cell has a Bible. When I couldn't get out, I thought good, I can read my Bible. Days, months, one month into two, two into three and half months. I thought of the Israelites who took forty years, so I thought God has a surprise for me. The second week I was there, a Presbyterian chaplain came in and preached on the seventh Commandment. He spoke of

how Potiphar's wife got Joseph sent to prison.

In between, other ministers came. I thought I wouldn't be there by the tenth Commandment so I asked the minister for notes. He brought me a book on Ten Commandments, so I thought Israelites took forty years and got Ten Commandments, I went to prison to get Ten Commandments! Even in difficulties, good came. Even though the road was long, my faith grew stronger.

A Church of Ireland minister came. I used to think my father was coming! When people of the church came, I felt like family was coming. I felt special when Church of Ireland man came. He asked about my home and found out I was in the Mothers' Union in South Africa. He told the President of Mothers' Union in Northern Ireland and she came to visit me in prison. I felt sorry for her, it was cold and the dogs had to sniff her. I learnt what it was like to be in prison, and thought for the first time of visiting prisoners.

A Zimbabwean lady came to visit a friend, but I was called instead of her friend. I didn't know the lady, but we started singing gospel songs and prayed. Her friend was discharged, but she still visited me. Even today we still pray together.

The problem that made me stay in prison for so long was that forms kept being sent back. What surprised me was that they [immigration] never phoned me to say forms had come back. I phoned them every day. Even when forms came back, they kept them for another month.

The first time I went for bail appearance was after one month in prison. Most people here get bail same day. Bail was refused anyway because my stay had expired number one, I'd no documents on me and no one was here to support me.

The fourth December I was supposed to go to second bail hearing, but no one came for me. I'd a fax to say I'd been released. My solicitor was supposed to pick me up at 4.30pm. I waited in the room until it closed. I had to wait outside, cold and hungry. I'd to go back to Maghaberry and get them to phone solicitor. The solicitor came, took me home and fed me. I was then taken to accommodation called The Ark which would cost me £9.50 per night. Thankfully they found me someone to stay with in December. I stayed with nurse from South Africa for January and thought my papers would be back. They weren't, as they hadn't been stamped. I'd nowhere to stay.

I phoned Denise Wright (from City Church, Belfast) for help. I don't know what I would be doing if not for people like Richard. I could have fallen into the wrong hands. Another lady, Heather Moorehead, offered to keep me for a month. She fetched me. She was a lovely lady and suggested I go with her to her work to do voluntary work. I'm still there now. After five weeks, I had to move into Richard's [Richard Kerr is a Presbyterian minister and chairman of EMBRACE].

My solicitor thought it best for me to contact the South African embassy, but they wouldn't help, as they didn't want to interfere with immigration. Funny, as they're here with our taxes to help people like me. I couldn't get a passport, or even be sent home, as I'd no identification. I told them everything, but they weren't interested. They said they'd get back to me. It took a month to get the forms and I'm still waiting - it will take at least six weeks. I don't know if they will allow me to work. They said they will send me home. I don't think they care.

I'm so glad I'm a Christian, or I think I'd have fallen into the wrong hands where I couldn't eat, have anywhere