

PRETORIA

My aunt's family moved to South Africa from England a few months before us, and now we were going to stay with them. We'd all left India after independence. My aunt's family left in 1947, and my family in 1949.

But now, our two families migrated to South Africa for the same reason. My father and my uncle both needed to find work. England was still suffering from the consequences of World War II, and suitable jobs were scarce. The rumours were, South Africa was promising.

In Pretoria, I met my cousins for the first time that I can recall. In age order, they were a girl almost nine, a boy aged seven and a girl soon to be five. I was five years old, so the second youngest in the group.

My older girl cousin was tall and slender and reminded me of Wendy in the Peter Pan movie. I don't think she paid much attention to five-year-old boys, and I can't remember ever speaking to her. My younger girl cousin was a bundle of fun. She must have seen my leadership qualities, because she followed me into a heap of trouble over the brief period we lived in Pretoria.

Spoilt for choice, my cousins sparked my interest in girls, and I made discreet enquiries from my mother about whether one could marry one's cousins. She said it was possible but not advisable. Disappointed, but not defeated, I turned my attention to the girl next door.

A day or two earlier, I'd spotted Malka through the diamond mesh fence. Her dark, flashing eyes and thick brown hair caught my attention as she hung about near the fence, clearly interested in the kids living next door. So the next time I saw her, I ran straight to the fence to introduce myself, and discovered she spoke little English.

With only time to exchange names, her mother shouted, 'Malka, come inside!' The next morning, she was back at the fence, so I hurried outside to greet her. But her mother shouted, 'Malka, come inside, now!' It was the last time I saw her. Later, I realised the Boer War ended only forty-seven years earlier, and some Afrikaners still held strong anti-British feelings.

I needed to find another way to entertain myself, and that led to trouble.

My father and uncle sent their business shirts to a laundry to be washed and ironed. Each week, an African man delivered them on a bicycle with a basket attached. After a few visits, he got friendly with our female African housemaid and cook, and on one occasion, they invited him into the kitchen for a cup of tea.

This was the opportunity for fun. And what could be funnier than going to the garden tap, taking a mouthful of water, and letting it dribble into the basket containing shirts for delivery elsewhere? My younger girl cousin and I thought no one would know who was responsible.

Of course, this created a panic in the household. All the adults rushed to remedy the situation, with my mother, aunt, grandmother, housemaid, and cook spent the next hour re-laundering, ironing, and folding the shirts. What surprised us was we didn't get into trouble, but we realised we'd done wrong. The African delivery man may have faced trouble for returning late to the laundry, and I still feel guilty about that prank.

A week or two later, again seeking excitement, I noticed an empty milk bottle near the house's back door. Once again, my younger girl cousin was involved. The fun began with me throwing the milk bottle against the wall of the house, smashing it into pieces. And the beauty

was we could also throw the pieces against the brick wall, smashing them into even smaller pieces. The area behind the house was littered with tiny pieces of broken glass.

Soon, there remained few pieces big enough to break by throwing them at the wall. Then I noticed one larger piece that was a corner of the milk bottle's base. The finale would be my attempt at throwing the jagged piece of glass, left-handed, no less. All these years later, I still bear the scar on my left thumb.

About this time, my father decided I needed an electric train set to keep me occupied. The several metres of rail track and the frequent arrival of locomotives and carriages at the house fascinated both my male cousin and me. We watched as my father and uncle spent their weekends playing with the train set. When a speeding locomotive left the track and my cousin attempted to replace it, his father shouted, 'Don't touch it!' Thereafter, we stood well back from the train set.

The excitement was not over yet. Pretoria is renowned for its jacaranda trees and summer storms. One Saturday afternoon, angry clouds gathered and soon it rained, followed by large hailstones. With the house's corrugated iron roof, the noise was thunderous. I found it thrilling, and that's where my love of summer rain began.

The hailstones were enormous, only a little smaller than a tennis ball. My uncle brought one into the house to show us and threw it for my cousin to catch. The enormous hailstone hit him on the knee, and it wasn't well received. He was only seven, but he didn't get any sympathy from his dad.

Aside from the hailstones, high winds tested our roof, and we saw the house across the street lose theirs as it flew out of sight. When the storm finally ended, we walked outside to look at the damage. Every house in the street, bar ours and one other, lost their roof. It was a worthwhile sacrifice to experience the heavenly petrichor.

A lasting memory from those days was my Scottish grandfather cooking his porridge at night, in readiness for his breakfast the next morning. He didn't believe anyone else could prepare it the way he liked, and he wouldn't share it with anybody. My grandmother would sometimes sneak us a spoonful when he wasn't looking.

It turned out post-war South Africa faced many of the same problems as Britain. Finding a suitable job was almost impossible. One evening, I overheard the adults talking, with my uncle saying he'd heard Southern Rhodesia was booming, a country for the future. That seems ironic now. Soon after, my uncle and father travelled north to Southern Rhodesia, looking for work. The rest of us remained in Pretoria, waiting to hear if they were successful.