

Small Mercies

BY BRIDGET KRONE

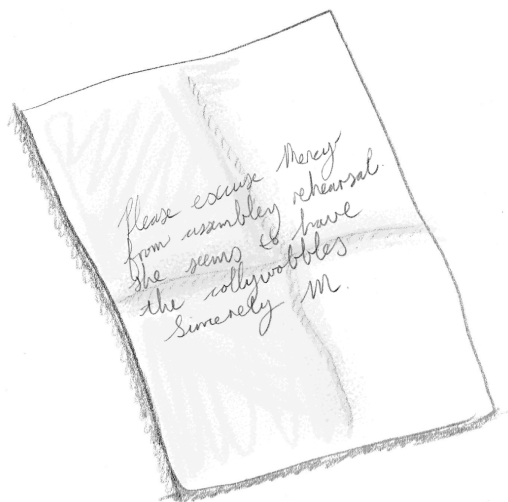
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In South Africa, the word "coloured" is used to describe mixed-race people whose descendents are a combination of Asian (Malay or Indian), black, white, and/ or Khoisan. Coloured people, especially those that live in the Western Cape, speak mainly Afrikaans, but about 20% have English as their home language. Many are bi-lingual or speak other African languages as well.

In America the term "coloured" is considered offensive but in South Africa its use is widespread and more acceptable, if sometimes controversial. The discussion about race and identity is on-going: some people reject the term "mixed race" as it suggests that they don't have a distinct race, and claim the term "coloured" with pride, while others identify themselves as black, Khoisan, or just "South African."

Though we spell "color" in this book the American way, we have kept the British spelling "coloured" to refer to this particular cultural group of South Africa to distinguish it from the American usage of the term, which has a different history.



CHAPTER 1

Mercy stood in front of the principal's desk, with the excuse note in her hand. Mrs. Griesel laid down her pen and looked at her over the top of her spectacles.

"Yes, Mercy?" she said, taking the note and opening it. "It says here that you are to be excused from the class assembly rehearsals because you have..." She paused and looked at Mercy as if she couldn't quite believe what she was reading. "The *collywobbles*?"

Mercy nodded.

"Are the collywobbles the same or different from the dicky tummy you had last week?" Mrs. Griesel heaved herself out of her swivel chair and clip clopped over to a filing cabinet from which she pulled a file.

"I must have about twelve excuse notes here," she said. "This one was rather good. It says that you are to be excused from inter-house cross-country because you have a bone in your leg." She raised one eyebrow. "Who wrote this note, Mercy?"

"My foster mother, Aunt Mary."

"Did she also write the one about you having a bone in your leg?"

"No, that was my other foster mother, Aunt Flora."

"Yes, I remember now. They're sisters."

Mrs. Griesel tapped her top lip with her index finger. "And, just remind me, how long have you been living with these aunts?"

"Since I was five."

"And they are...how old would you say?"

Mercy didn't know. When she'd asked Aunt Mary a few years ago, Aunt Mary said she was as old as her tongue and a little bit older than her teeth. They were old—but it was hard to say just how old. Their faces were lined and freckled and their hair was silvery white: Aunt Mary cut hers straight with nail scissors but Aunt Flora's hair stood up like dandelion fluff. Aunt Mary always carried a handkerchief and a bunch of keys in the pocket of her homemade dress. Aunt Flora liked comfy tracksuit pants that she pulled up high. How old is that exactly?

"I don't know, Mrs. Griesel."

"So why has Mrs. Pruitt sent you to me today? Tell me more about this class assembly and why you need to be excused from it."

It was hard for Mercy to explain why the instruction to do a folk dance from her own culture proved so difficult to follow. When she asked the aunts for help, they didn't make it any easier.

"Oh for heaven's sake," Aunt Mary said, when Mercy asked. "Can we pretend you are Polish and teach you the polka?"

Aunt Mary had ideas about education and they didn't include cultural folk dancing or anything "new-fangled" as she called it. She didn't even read Mercy's school reports. She thought education should include memorizing the



Latin names of plants and a lot of great poetry. *Oh young Lochinvar has come out of the West, through all the wide border his steed was the best...*

But Aunt Flora was more nervous: she liked Mercy to get the right answer and not get into trouble.

"What should we do, Mary?" Aunt Flora said. "Shall we teach her the quick step?"

But they decided in the end to teach her Morris dancing.

So Mercy watched while Aunt Flora played a plinky-plonky tune on the piano and Aunt Mary skipped about the sitting room waving her handkerchief in time to the music. Aunt Mary was not a person who skipped lightly and Mercy had been a bit disturbed by the sight—and then relieved when Aunt Mary had come to a breathless halt saying, "Oh, this is ridiculous. We'll have to think of something else."

After an awkward silence, Aunt Flora asked, "Well, what will the other children be doing?"

"Indian dancing? Maybe Zulu dancing," Mercy offered. "Mrs. Pruitt said that we all have a culture and we must celebrate it."

"Ridiculous," said Aunt Mary. "Almost no one has a single culture. If I were in your class at school, Mercy, which culture would I celebrate? White South African, whatever that is? Viking? English? West Indian?"

"West Indian?" Mercy was confused.

"Yes. After our great grandmother died, my great grandfather married a West Indian woman and it's one of the big regrets of my life that I've never gone to Barbados to meet that side of my family."

"Mrs. Pruitt wants me to do something by these people called the Cape Malay Minstrels," said Mercy. "Maybe it's because I'm...you know...coloured."

"Just because your mother's people came from Cape Town originally is no reason, dear child, to go capering about in shiny satin twanging a small guitar. Honestly! If you had grown up on the Cape Flats, it would be a festival that you could take completely to heart, but you've never even *been* to Cape Town!"

Mercy was relieved. She'd seen the Kaapse Klopse festivities on TV; seen the bright costumes, the brass bands and the colorful umbrellas, but the whole event was completely alien to her; it was as strange as a Chinese New Year street party with paper dragons.

"So," said Aunt Mary, "If we are to be accurate, I think what we are looking for here is a dance that has some Cape Malay, some Khoisan, a bit of Dutch Settler, some English..."

"I think we'll just write a little excuse note, shall we?" Aunt Flora said, always anxious to get Aunt Mary off her high horse. "Now where did I put those..." And she wandered off through the kitchen and out into the back garden, patting her pockets and the top of her head, looking for her spectacles.

So it was Aunt Mary who found a pen and wrote the note about the collywobbles—the same note that Mrs. Griesel was now adding to Mercy's folder as she waited for an explanation.

Mercy took a deep breath. "Our class is in charge of assembly on Friday and Mrs. Pruitt wants us to do folk dancing from our own culture."

"What a good idea!" said Mrs. Griesel, beaming. "I don't understand why your aunts would want you to miss out on this very worthwhile cultural activity. It sounds like such fun. Don't you agree, Mercy?"

"Yes ma'am."



Mrs. Griesel made her hands into a church steeple to support her chin and looked at Mercy with narrowed eyes.

"I have to confess, you're a bit of a mystery, Mercy Adams," she said, looking back down at the folder. "Your marks are excellent but you won't join in. You won't do sport at all. Or orals. Or plays. You want to be excused from *everything*." Mrs. Griesel sighed. "And the peculiar thing is that these foster mothers of yours seem to collude in this non-participation. They seem to encourage it."

She changed her tone of voice and tilted her head at a caring angle. "Mercy, is everything all right at home?"

"Yes. It's all fine," said Mercy quickly. "Everything's fine."

Mrs. Griesel looked back down at the open folder, flapped some pages backwards and forwards, and asked a bit too casually, "When did the social worker last check on you?"

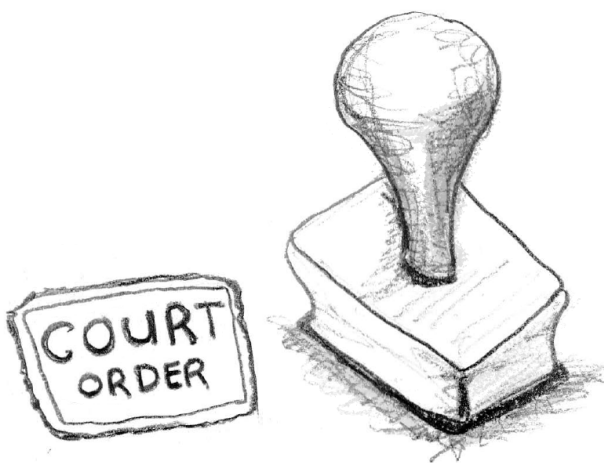
Mercy dug her fingernails into the palm of her hand.

"I think I need to contact Child Welfare to review your case." Mrs. Griesel made a note in her diary. "I'm sure it's time they extended the order." She paused and then she said under her breath: "It may be time to reconsider..."

"It's OK, Mrs. Griesel, ma'am," Mercy said as brightly as she could. "I'll do the dancing."

"That's the spirit, Mercy," said Mrs. Griesel, leaning back in her chair. "A little dancing will do you so much good." She wrinkled her nose. "You might even enjoy it."

Mercy was prepared to do almost anything, even skip around waving a white hanky in the air, if it would keep the social worker away from the house.



CHAPTER 2

Not long ago, Aunt Mary told Mercy that she was old enough to understand the problem with social workers.

"If we wanted to get a dog from the SPCA," she said, "someone would come to our house beforehand to check that we have a garden big enough for the dog to run about and bark, and a proper fence so that it couldn't run away and get lost."

Mercy nodded, thinking a bit sadly that even the smallest dog would be able to hop over the low wall that surrounded their house in Hodson Road.

"But if someone wants to foster a *person*, a child, like you," said Aunt Mary, "I just fill out a paper called a Form 36 at the Department of Social Development; then I can take you home and get the grant each month from SASSA. There's a social worker who is supposed to do a 'home circumstances visit,' but she might have about two hundred children on her files. So she probably won't ever come to check if we have a fence or if our garden is big enough for running about in. Or barking."

"But sometimes," Aunt Mary continued, holding both of Mercy's hands tightly, "the social workers do come. It's

usually on a Friday afternoon—just as the courts are about to close for the weekend, and they wave a piece of paper called ‘a court order.’ They might say that there is a relative who has come forward and wants to take you.”

“And then what happens?”

“Well, they can take you away.”

“Away! Why would they do that?”

“For money, I’m sorry to say,” Aunt Mary said. “They arrange with a so-called family that they will get the grant from SASSA and the social worker gets a cut.”

This information filled Mercy with dread. Would her Uncle Clifford come and find her?

“But the reason I’m telling you is that there is something we can do if that happens,” Aunt Mary said. “I’ve tried teaching Flora the words—in case I’m not at home and a social worker pitches up at the door. But she gets in such a muddle these days, so you need to learn these words off by heart as well.”

She handed Mercy a paper on which was written:

“According to the Children’s Act of 2010, each child has the right to legal representation and I demand that the order be held pending this process.”

“This means that you are allowed to get a lawyer to help you before *they* can take you away. It’s the law, though some people don’t know this.”

Mercy had the words engraved on her heart. And she repeated them to herself every day—like a lucky charm to ward off evil.



CHAPTER 3

On her way from Mrs. Griesel's office to her classroom, Mercy stopped at the bathroom. She stared at her face in the mirror and took a deep breath to calm the beating of her heart. Her face was changing into someone she hardly knew: her nose was growing like a mushroom; her teeth had become so big and long and, where previously she'd had soft cheeks, she now had bony angles. Only her brown eyes remained the same.

"Oh you've got a lovely face," Aunt Flora said when she saw Mercy sticking a tongue out at herself in the bathroom mirror. She cupped Mercy's chin in her hand. "Just like your beautiful mother and your Aunty Kathleen." But Mercy felt she no longer recognized this angular new face of hers.

She smoothed her hair with both hands to settle the curls that would not lie flat and pulled her small ponytail tight.

Back in the classroom, everyone was moving desks out of the way to make space for the cultural dancing. She hoped no one would notice her slip to the back of the room.

Mrs. Pruitt was standing by the blackboard looking tense and thin; the extension cable was too short to reach the

portable CD player and she was standing holding the machine in mid-air, looking for someone to help her.

"Someone shove that desk closer," she said. "I am not a shelf."

It was the new girl Olive who helped and she pushed the desk so hard, it hit Mrs. Pruitt on her leg. Olive had only been at the school for a week but already everything about her was "too much": her cheeks were too pink; her ponytails were too perky; her glasses were too thick; and she was too helpful. Also her nose was almost permanently blocked so she had to breathe through her mouth.

"Olive," said Mrs. Pruitt, rubbing her thigh, "if you could try not to be so vigorous..."

Beatrice Hunter and her friend Nelisiwe Majola both snorted with laughter and then pretended that they were having a coughing fit.

Olive said, "Sorry, Mrs. Pruitt, I didn't intend to hurt you." She walked to the back of the classroom.

Please don't come and stand next to me, thought Mercy, desperate not to attract any attention. But Olive walked straight towards her, squeezed in beside her, sniffed loudly, and adjusted her glasses.

Mercy moved quietly sideways so she'd be hidden by Olive if Mrs. Pruitt started scanning for volunteers. She had her excuse ready: she'd left her music at home and would bring it the next day. But the excuse wasn't needed because Mrs. Pruitt said: "Beatrice and Nelisiwe, if you are going to laugh at other people's misfortune, you can go first."

Beatrice gave a little yelp of joy and skipped to the front with her sleek blonde ponytail swinging. Nelisiwe walked slowly as if she couldn't really be bothered and slipped a CD into the machine. They stood with their hands on their



hips; one white, one black; both tall and strong and, to Mercy, both terrifying.

As they waited for the music to start, Nelisiwe kicked off her shoes and pushed out her chest. She was one of the first girls in the class to wear a bra and Mercy suspected that she liked everyone to notice. Beatrice undid her ponytail and shook her hair free so it fell in a lovely blonde curtain about her shoulders. Beatrice had the kind of face that everyone looked at; you couldn't help it. The previous year in Grade 5 she had caused a major commotion when she'd come to school with highlights in her hair.

"I can't help it if it's natural," she'd said, tossing it about. "My hair just goes this way in the sun."

Once, at the supermarket, Mercy had spotted Beatrice in the bread aisle wearing makeup. Since then Mercy worried about who was going to teach her about makeup when she got a bit older. Aunt Mary had just a pot of Vaseline and a hairbrush on her dressing table. At least Aunt Flora had a box of face powder with a floppy sponge the color of raw chicken. She dabbed this powder on her nose and then wound up her one tube of coral lipstick that she applied to her lips—and sometimes her top teeth—on special occasions.

The song that Beatrice and Nelisiwe put in the CD player came belting out at top volume. *Don't cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?* They waggled their hips and tossed their heads.

But they only got as far as the chorus when Mrs. Pruitt shouted: "OFF! Switch it OFF!" She held her head in both hands. "Folk dancing," she said, "is dancing done to traditional music. It is not boogying about like disco bunnies. Nelisiwe, you could have done some nice Zulu dancing."



"Kodwa ndingumXhosa," said Nelisiwe. She and Beatrice giggled.

"Oh well, if you're Xhosa, some nice Xhosa dancing then. I mean, is this so hard? Someone come and do me some proper traditional dancing and put me out of my misery."

Mercy held her breath and looked down: "Not me... not me...not me." She pushed the thought out with all her strength. *"I demand that the order be held pending the process."*

"Janice Matthews," said Mrs. Pruitt and Mercy exhaled.

Janice slunk to the front of the class. She was the tallest girl in the class by miles, although she hunched her shoulders up around her ears. She stood on one leg with an arm raised above her head, looking like a gloomy heron. There was a drum roll and then a sound like screaming cats came wailing out of the CD player.

Everyone flinched and covered their ears. It was bagpipes, which Mercy recognized because one of Aunt Flora's favorite records was *Songs of the Western Isles*—the one that made her hit her chest with her fist in time to the music.

Janice rose up on her toes and began to jig about, dancing on the spot.

Jump, jump, point to the ground, point to the knee, jumpy jump.

Beatrice started clapping in time to the music. Then Nelisiwe. Soon half the class was clapping along and smirking at Janice. Nelisiwe had to suck her lips in to stop herself from laughing out loud.

Mercy could sense Olive's alarm beside her. Olive was looking from Janice to Mrs. Pruitt and from Mrs. Pruitt back to Janice as if she was watching tennis. But Mrs. Pruitt did

nothing to stop the clapping or the jumpity-jump dancing.

"Thank *goodness*," breathed Olive when Janice eventually stormed over to the CD player and punched stop.

"Why did you stop?" asked Mrs. Pruitt. "That was excellent, Janice. And everyone seemed to be enjoying it. Did your parents show you how to do Scottish dancing?"

"No," said Janice. "I taught myself off YouTube."

"Well, it was marvelous, Janice. Do you see what a rich cultural heritage we have here, class? Here we are, just a small city on the southern tip of Africa and just in this classroom we have Indian, Xhosa, Zulu, Scottish, and Afrikaans...Who's next?"

On the other side of the room, Thando lifted his legs up and down and flapped his elbows like a chicken.

"What are you doing, Thando?" asked Mrs. Pruitt. "You look like a hen."

"It's the funky chicken, Mrs. Pruitt," he said. "The traditional dance of my family."

"Well, stop it."

Thando laughed and did a couple of jerky neck movements to conclude his routine. As he ran his hands through his thick afro, he caught Mercy's eye and she gave him a shy smile then looked down quickly.

"And get a haircut, Thando," said Mrs. Pruitt. "Yolanda, you are next. Please be sensible."

Yolanda strolled to the front of the classroom. She rolled her socks down low, hitched up her skirt and undid a few buttons on her school shirt.

JJ was part of Yolanda's act and his job was music. He hit "play." It was Jack Parrow singing "*Jy dink jy's cooler as ekka*" and Yolanda started to twitch like a robot. JJ's job was to cough whenever a swear word came up.



*As ek instep skrikkie hele (COUGH COUGH) bar,
Jy kry nog (COUGH COUGH) geld by jou ma*

Mrs. Pruitt soon put a stop to that one as well.

"Don't Afrikaans people have folk dances?" Mrs. Pruitt asked. "What about volkspele? JJ and Yolanda, this is not good enough. I want you to go home and come back with some volkspele."

"I might be Afrikaans, but I'm not a Voortrekker!" said Yolanda.

"Excuse me?" said Mrs. Pruitt.

"We moved here from Pretoria in a car, last year. Not an ox wagon."

"Well for goodness sake, that's what I would expect! But JJ, what about you?"

"I'm not even Afrikaans!" said JJ, looking shocked.

"What are you then?" asked Mrs. Pruitt.

"I dunno. I live in Hayfields," mumbled JJ as if that should explain everything.

Mercy looked at Mrs. Pruitt. She was sitting with her elbows on the desk in front of her, massaging her temples.