

## The Soweto Riots - Grace's Story

By - Aamilah Khan

Hello.

My name is Grace. I've been asked to share with you some of my memories of what it was like to live in Soweto in 1976 during the African apartheid. This is my story.

When I was only a small 'angel' (as my parents used to call me) I found myself at the corner of a white's only shop (we had different shops and amenities back then, whites and no-whites forbidden to mix according to government law) on my way to school. Peeking around the corner I saw an elderly woman on her knees, her hands and legs scratched and bloody against the rough floor. She was cowering at the hands of a ridged devil like man, dressed in a dark blue uniform.

He grinned, as if terrorising a poor old woman was a satisfying thing to do! My anger levels rose but I never completely understood why. It's not like she's part of my family or anything, but I can relate to her being one of my fellow blacks. I swallowed and made up my mind. I was going to save her... but I stopped. Deep down, I knew that I stood no chance against the pompous police man.

I took a long, deep breath. 'In and out Grace, in and out' I chanted to myself. My heart was telling me to fight, to be brave, but I knew that for my own safety, I needed to go home. My brain won out and I made my way to school, trying not to draw attention to myself. I didn't want to end up being the next black on the floor under the hands of the merciless police.

How I wished that I could have save that lady, but I just couldn't. At school there were a couple of rumours; protest march, speak up for our rights. Could we really do it? Would it really happen? Could we speak out for what we wanted? Equality for blacks wasn't too much to ask for really. Was it?

June 16<sup>th</sup>

Today was a day of horror and flames! As I recall my brother (Dumi) and I agreed on one very important thing, to both of us... WE HAD HAD ENOUGH! Enough of learning only what the white government wanted us to learn. Enough of being treated like

trash. So we joined the march, the protest of hundreds of black children, protesting for their rights.

The rumours I'd heard had been correct. We arrived at school that morning to find that the other children were marching, speaking out for changes that they wanted to happen, so we decided to join them. It was a **joyous occasion**. There was laughter, happiness, and even tears of joy.

We were singing a song in unison, Dumi's companions waving a large banner that read "Blacks aren't dustbins" in mammoth size letters. In unison, the 20,000 of us (which was a surprise) marched down the streets. That's when the fear suddenly struck - you could feel it ripple through the crowd. It began with the sound of a gunshot. The gunshot that robbed and emptied us of our joy in one quick second. And filled us back up with **sadness, anger and pain!**

I didn't understand! Why? Why, why, why? We were protesting peacefully - it didn't make any sense. I was so scared. Up ahead a man started to try and move some barriers that the police had blocked the street with. BANG. BANG. He fell and moved no more. Shot down to the ground as if he were NOTHING.

It all became pandemonium. I could see such fear in the eyes of some of my companions, and in others I saw fire and rage. Rage at the injustice in how we were treated. 'Police are macabre' I thought to myself. 'Rotten to the core - they will NEVER listen to us'.

The police were powerful - so much more than we were. They came armed with their guns, batons, aircrafts and tear gas. This was never going to be a fair fight - the only weapons we had to hand were things that we could find on the floor - rocks and stones to throw. Not enough to do any real harm. A young girl, far too young to understand the situation she found herself in was hit by a bullet that flew right passed me. If I'd been a little to the right, that bullet would have hit me...

Eyes watering, I bent down to help the little girl. She was very still, she'd lost a lot of blood. Around me mad people grabbing whatever they could and hurling them at the police. Where was Dumi?

"Dumi! DUMI" I bellowed. "HELP, OH PLEASE, HELP ME"

Dumi appeared by my elbow and put a tender hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry Grace", he said. "She's lost too much blood." We both felt so powerless, knowing there was nothing we could do.

"Grace - we have to go."

I didn't move.

"Now Grace, we have to go."

Still not moving he grabbed my arm, ordering me to move. Now.

The tear gas in the rancid air, along with my heart shattering into tiny pieces over the death of that young girl made my eyes leak, but there was no time to grieve. No time to cry. Only time to run.

Air tanks and air crafts were closing in. Helicopters circling above us like eagles ready to dive in for their prey. Was this really the end?

I ran! And I ran, and I ran, taking cover in the shell of a burnt out car. I turned to nestle myself into Dumi but Dumi wasn't there. Peeking over the top of the car I spied someone being pushed to the ground and dragged to the police car. I recognised the figure immediately and it was like someone had shoved a dagger through my heart.

"DUMIIIIIIIIII" I screamed. All my attempts to get to him were stopped and I was shoved away again and again until eventually the police car drove away and I was left sobbing on the ground, broken.

I fled. The only choice I had was to return home. Alone...

I would never forget that scary day. Occasionally I get flashbacks of the day; terrifying memories that haunt my sleep. I dwell on every little thing and have done ever since. I never did see Dumi again, and I stayed in Soweto, living in our tiny home made from tin boards for many many years, before finally... finally our freedom came.