

After my mother passed away there was no-one at home for us to stay with so we had to move to my father's parents. The chief said he would find somebody to look after our home until we were old enough. We decided that we would come home once my elder brother was married.

At that time my grandmother was very sick, so there was no-one to cook for us. As the only person who could do domestic work, I cooked for everybody and was always late for school. During summer I used to fetch fresh mielies from the field, using a big basket so that I could get enough food for seven people, not counting my elder brother. He had run away and found work at Port St. Johns.

One day I met my class teacher on my way home from the field. I was carrying a big basket full of mielies and pumpkins on my head.

"Where do you come from, Alfred?" she asked.

"From the fields, Miss."

"What were you doing in the fields, Alfred?"

"Fetching mielies and pumpkins, Miss."

"Who helped you to put the basket on your head Alfred?"

"No-one, Miss."

"How did you manage to put a big basket like that on your head?"

"When it is half-full I put it on a high bank and fill it while its there. When I have finished filling it I go under it and pull it on my head. Once it is on my head I won't take it down till I am at home. When I reach home one of the family will help me to take it down."

While she was spoke to me the tears tumbled down from her eyes. Then she asked me to stop as she was going to take me halfway. She took the basket, carrying it on her head. For a few seconds she was unbalanced and then we were off. She spoke again.

"Is it nice to stay with your grandparents?"

"No, it's not nice because I can't do my school work in time. I have a lot of work at home: cooking, getting water from the river, collecting wood to make the fire, and then my school work. I am the one who has to think what the people must eat and then they will be eating while I am on my way to school. I always come home to find that the buckets empty and that there is no food in the pots. I have to start all over again."

"Haven't you got somewhere else to stay, other than your grandparents' place?"

"No, Miss."

"Where is your elder brother? I do not see him at school anymore."

"He ran away from home. He wrote me a letter to say he is now working at Port St Johns Hotel."

As I answered her questions she wept more and more. Then she said: "Is this the reason why you are always late at school?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Take your basket, I must turn now."

This time it was my turn to dance with the basket, loosing my balance. She stood still for a few seconds - like somebody lost in the big city, then she turned back towards the school. When I arrived at home I was so dizzy that I had to sit down for a while. After the dizziness passed I carried on with my duties. I was late for school again that day but from then on the principal never punished me. At recess time I was called to a meeting. All the teachers were there and they asked me to tell them all my problems. I cried as I told them and they begged me not to as they were trying to help.

On a later journey from the field with my heavy basket I met a coloured man who owned trucks, Mr Tommy O'Rielly. He was my father's best friend. He asked his work man to load the basket onto the truck and said I must come and sit next to him. He asked me where I came from with that basket. I told him I was coming from the fields.

"Are you attending school?"

"Yes."

"Are you not going to be late?"

"I will be late. I am always late because I have to cook first - before I can prepare to go to school."

"Would you like to come and stay with me in town - so you can have enough time to attend school?"

"Yes, I do want to."

"Right. Tomorrow evening I will pass here at 7:30pm. Take your things and wait for me under that big tree. I will pick you up there. OK?"

"Yes, I will do so."

After I was dropped off I went home. The sun took far too long to set, and the night too long to clear for the next day. I was worried about my younger brother, thinking that he might die of hunger. Who would cook for him? I went to school that day and when I arrived back at home, my father's sister from Durban was there. She was living at Mkumbane with her husband and her three children: Nobelungu, Nontu and Khanyisile. I was very happy, thinking that she would take over the cooking; that I would have time for my school work and for playing stick games with the other boys.

I was very disappointed to find that my auntie's arrival added to the burden on my shoulders. Early one morning I was sitting behind my grandmother; preparing beans for the pot full of stamped mielies on the fire place. My granny asked me to fetch a tin of sugar from the neighbours. I was sorting the rotten beans from the good ones and had to leave this work to ask my granny where the sugar tin was.

As I stood up my auntie drew a piece of burning wood from the fire place and beat me up with it, saying: "How are you looking after my mother? You are a cruel child, go to the graveyard and tell your mother to arise and go back to your father's house. I don't want you in this house because you are very cruel."

I ran out of my granny's place, to the graveyard, crying. The place of the grave is just behind my granny's place.

On the way to the graveyard I was stopped by my father's brother's wife who asked what had happened. I told her the story. She said it wouldn't be a good thing for the people's eyes to see me crying in the graveyard; that it was only two months since my mother had passed away and that this would upset the ancestors. She begged me to go back to granny so she could solve this thing. We returned together. She asked auntie about the story.

"This boy is a liar. How could I say such a thing to my child?" auntie replied.

"No, Makoti. She is the liar," said my grandmother. "It is just as the child has told you."

From my point of view, the time during which I lived at granny's place passed much too very slowly - and I was very unhappy.

My auntie was a beer drinker. She never went to the field but would leave early in the morning to hunt beer - and come back at night, joking and laughing. Once she came in at about 8 o'clock at night shouting, calling my name and demanding to know what I had cooked. She knew that I could cook. I told her that I had cooked samp with beans.

I told my brother that I was leaving and that I would come back to take him to my new place.

On my last day at granny's place I came back from school. I cooked fresh mieliebread, then collected my books and clothes and hid them in the long grass near the big tree. I would hear a truck passing because the road passed close to my granny's place.

15 minutes later I vanished and waited in the long grass near the tree. After 10 minutes the truck came and I said bye-bye to my granny's place. After 15 minutes I was welcomed at O'Rielly's place.

"As from today you are my child," Mrs O'Rielly told me. She called her son Patrick and he arrived, saying: "I am here, Mummy."

"This is Alfred. He is your brother. Welcome him." We shook hands, smiling at each other.

I was a bit afraid, thinking that I would have to work hard, even harder than at granny's place. Mrs O'Rielly told me what I had to do each and everyday: "When you get up in the morning, warm the water, put it in the bucket, go to the kraal and milk the three cows. After that clean yourself. By then breakfast will be ready. After breakfast you will leave for school.

"On the weekends you have to look after the cows. Every three days you have to clean the cowstable, cut new grass and spread it on the stable. After supper one of you will wash the dishes and the other will wipe them. After all that you do your school duty."

We had supper together and after supper Pat and I washed the dishes. The following morning Pat took me to the kraal and we milked the cows. After that we lit the coal stove - we had to cut the wood with the saw and then chop some with the axe to make small pieces to start the fire.

I enjoyed the new way of working - it was better than at home or at my granny's place. I did not work to be paid but for Mr O'Rielly to pay my school fees, books and clothing. They gave me about R2.00 pocket money. After a week they went to Kokstad where they bought us new clothing, shoes, briefcases - and new bicycles. It was just like a dream - I had never imagined myself on a bicycle.

Everyday I passed my granny's place on my bicycle, coming from and going to school - but I didn't stop. After a month my elder brother came and took my younger brother to Port St Johns to my mother's mother.

In 1953 my granny passed away and my auntie came to Mr O'Rielly to tell them that I should go home for my granny's funeral. I was released.

I was at my granny's for four days and then went back to O'Riellys until I finished my standard six. Mr O'Rielly asked me what kind of training I would like to do. There was carpentry, bricklaying, plastering, plumbing and painting. I chose plumbing and applied at Kokstad Vocational School. So I spent two years at Kokstad doing plumbing theory. When I

passed I started looking for a job, unsuccessfully until my cousin found me one at Carltonville.

When I was away at Carltonville, Pat O'Rielly was sick for a short time and then passed away.

I was very sad to hear the bad news as he was really my brother. The O'Riellys decided to move from Flagstaff - they had lost their only child. They went to Qumbu where Mr O' Rielly lost his wife. Bad things always happen to good people, I don't know why.

I heard that Mr O'Rielly married another women and had two children. The man who told me didn't give me their address. At last he told me that Mr O'Rielly also passed away, after promising for so long to give me the address and to take me to where Mr O'Rielly stayed.

In 1957 my elder brother married and we returned again to Flagstaff, where it was just like before - the only difference was that Mummy and Daddy were not at home any more. We went to fetch my younger brother, so we were four with my brother's wife, Mamphankome from the family of Majola at Maliwa location at Flagstaff.

In 1958 my grandfather was sick for a short period. When he passed away it was the end of our grandparents.

Although we came back home I spent most of my time at the O'Riellys. It was a happy family, although they were very strict. There was a shambok in the kitchen and if you did something wrong you would get it easily. There was no different between my parents and the O'Riellys.

I praise them for what they did for me. If I have even a little education it is because of Mr O'Rielly - that is why I am free to write about them. I respect Mr O'Rielly and his family very much and I won't forget them. I will remember them all my life.