

Brother Wiseman

by Tessa Santiago

It appeared in our midst suddenly one Sunday morning. Hopped off the double-decker bus across the road from Wayne's Bakery just as they were pulling the first buns, five cents a piece, from the oven. Although hopped is not exactly the word. More like he shuffled his little back body across the street and up the seven stairs outside Mowbray Chapel, corner of Grove and Main, Cape Town, South Africa. Our problem was that he shuffled up those stairs, his three-piece suit folding dove gray around his ankles, about two years before the priesthood was restored to all worthy members and twelve years before apartheid ended.

He had shuffled his slow way from the Sea Point, a wealthy Jewish enclave on the sea front, from a small dark room in the basement of a tall apartment building where he was the night watchman. I've seen those rooms in the basements of tall buildings or out back next to the dumpsters and the storage sheds—used to look in while playing hide-and-seek in friend's apartment buildings. Windowless brick walls, paraffin stoves to heat meals and water in blackened tin cans, a thin-matressed bed in one corner, maybe a broom or a row of clothes hooks in the other, but always an adult black face that stared as my white curiosity invaded his privacy.

Apparently, Brother Wiseman found a Book of Mormon in a dustbin (before it was the fashionable way to find a Book of Mormon). He took it back to his windowless room to read. It took him awhile, year, I think—the book was in English; he was Xhosa. Then one morning he appeared in the white suburbs, at what seemed to be a white church, and holding that book in his hands, asked to join.

My friends and I thought he was a beggar at first, albeit quite a nicely dressed beggar. Or perhaps he had lost his way—the Methodist church, where red-cassocked, black lady deacons kept audiences in check every Sunday afternoon, was just behind us. So we slid off the

iron railings and ran, calling for the branch president to deal with him. He was no beggar; neither was he lost. He just wanted to be a member of our church.

I was young; still in Primary, but at the stage where Primary programs got to be embarrassing. I heard only snatches of his story: found book—read it—wrote to Salt Lake City—read more books—wife and children in Transkei, sees them once a year—gets only one Sunday off every two months—saved money for bus fare—wants to be baptized.

And he was. Then he took his seat, three seats from the back door—the branch greeter. A perfectly round, black head, melting slightly around the jowls, atop a short, black body. As I passed him on his Sundays, he would nod his head, stick his pink palm out to be shaken, and smile showing three teeth and startlingly red gums. "Yes . . . yes," he smiled at me. "Yes . . . yes" became his refrain as we spoke at him at deaf-person's volume, as if louder English would help this Xhosa man understand. I think it helped him see only how awkward we were with him there.

His presence reminded us simultaneously that this church must really be true and that our lives were pharisaical. Why else would an elderly black man spend precious time, even more precious money to pass time with people he had nothing in common with, linguistically, socially, legally? How else could he climb to the pulpit one fast Sunday morning to hear his testimony in broken English: "I love God's church. I know Joseph a prophet. I know Book Mormon. I love church. I happy." He became a talisman of sorts. Our Brother Wiseman. Our black member of the Church.

But his membership only confused us white members living comfortably in that prejudiced land: his worthy black hand took the sacrament from the same tray as ours; his penny-pittance of worthy tithing paid Brother Martin, suffering from black lung, to care for the chapel; then his legally unworthy body climbed to the top of the bus and returned to his windowless basement, a paraffin stove and plodding night watch while the white people slept.

Once after church, waiting in the parking lot for the missionaries, I asked Brother Heibner, the most vocal bigot in the branch, what was wrong with black people. "They're just different, inferior, not capable," he replied almost jokingly, as if he had an "I didn't really mean it" waiting in the wings should I take offense.

"But what about Brother Wiseman? Is he inferior?" I asked, pushing the point.

His face straightened for a minute. "No, he's different. He's just a man like the rest of us."

Brother Wiseman had to be different for us. There was no other way we could allow him to stay. In South Africa, at the time, we had a legal label: honorary white. It was granted to visiting dignitaries, to foreign ambassadors, to blacks who needed to be in whites-only places without fear of harassment or arrest. I think we made Brother Wiseman an honorary white for the few short hours he worshiped in Mowbray chapel. If not, then all other blacks must be just like him: worthy, faithful children of the same God, brothers and sisters. And if that were true, our white lives were ethically and morally repugnant.

The lessons weren't so clear then. I never saw Brother Wiseman as a pioneer for black membership in South Africa. I just saw a little black man in my peripheral vision, sometimes there, sometimes not. But once, I think I saw Christ.

It was about two Sundays after the proclamation in 1978. Brother Wiseman had been interviewed, found worthy, and ordained to the office of a deacon in the Aaronic Priesthood. That Sunday he took a place in the front row by the sacrament table along with the other deacons in the ward. A short black man, a Xhosa patriarch, stood alongside three white twelve-year-olds. His black hand held the cut-glass bread plate, and he turned to the stand: the branch president, the first counselor, the two-and-a-half minute talk, the chorister, Sister Laverne in her stockinged feet on the organ bench. He served them all,

shuffling his way up steps and down, nodding his thanks as the plate returned to him.

The scene should have been familiar to us: black serving white. This was different. Our eyes followed the man, hoping he would walk to our end of the pew. I think we all wanted to eat the bread from Brother Wiseman's plate. We would somehow be more cleansed, more holy, more capable of seeing clearly after drinking from his cup. I think we believed, more than ever before, that bread and water the man our Brother Wiseman brought us was the real offering of Christ, a miraculous transformation of bread and water to holy elements, not just the homemade whole wheat bread Sister Pearl insisted on supplying every week. I think for a moment each heart in that chapel believed utterly that every soul was equal in the eyes of God, and perhaps one more than any other. And, maybe, just maybe, we might all make it to heaven.

After a rather longer Sacrament than usual, Brother Wiseman returned to his seat, third from the door. Silently after church he shuffled across Main Road to the bus stop. I suppose when the bus came he slowly climbed to the upper deck. There he must have sat, his gray hat with the satin headband and pheasant feather on his perfectly round head, until he disembarked outside the tall apartment buildings that sat atop his windowless basement room, in which he waited until night fell. Donning his uniform, taking up his truncheon, he must have walked his route while we slept—keeper of our night. I wonder if he knew he had been that day, for white members in a white suburb, our keeper of the gate. ■