



Nimet Kanji's story of

Zarina



This is my mother Zarina Kanji's story. She was born in 1940 in Nairobi, Kenya to Nurbanu and Suleman Kassam. She is second generation Kenyan. Her paternal grandfather settled in Africa having arrived from India. She has five brothers and four sisters. Three brothers and 1 sister have passed on. She is the 7th child.

Zarina was the primary caregiver for her mother when her mother took ill (Nurbanu had a stroke and was diabetic) since the older siblings had married and moved away and the younger siblings were too young. As a result, Zarina had to quit school at the age of 14 (Grade 9) to look after her mother. She was sad to leave school but accepted her duty as a daughter. During this time she also got a job as a ground hostess with East African Airways. She was one of three Indian ladies to get the job in a time where those kinds of jobs were mostly dominated by Caucasians. She had to give it up though because her strict father did not approve of such a job since it meant odd hours and night duty. Their family was considered wealthy so she didn't need to work but she was very sad to give it up because she wanted to travel and see the world.

My mother got married at the age of 21. She had taken care of her mother but now her younger sisters were old enough to do this. My mother got married on March 25, 1961 and her mother passed away on April 15, 1961. She had an arranged marriage with my father, Sadrudin Kanji. It was the norm at the time to have arranged marriages. She had me when she was 23 and was thrilled to give birth to a bouncing baby girl (first born) and then 5 years later my brother, Feisal, was born.

After marriage she worked in Sales & Marketing at Singer Sewing Machines for many years. Then she worked at Bernina Sewing Machines. While at Bernina she was their best sales person and was sent to the Bernina factory in Switzerland for further training. Most of her customers were a mixed crowd; Caucasians, Indians and Africans. There definitely was a class system in Kenya at that time because of British Rule so the Caucasians were the cream of the crop, then the Indians in between and the Africans at the bottom. My mother didn't care. One day an African lady walked onto the Bernina shop floor and Zarina proceeded to give a demonstration of the sewing machine the lady was interested in. Unbeknownst to Zarina, the African lady was the daughter of the then President, Jomo Kenyatta. Zarina was invited to State House the following day to continue with the demonstration and sat and chatted with the President and sold the machine!

Her next job was as a Tour Coordinator for Highways Tours and Safaris and she was their sole representative in Nairobi with HQ being in Mombasa. Part of her duties was to receive French tourists at the airport. I always wanted to go with her to see the good looking French men. We got to visit many lodges and hotels at a discounted rate. She loved being out in the field and meeting people.

Then Zarina was a social worker with a group called 'Maendeleo Ya Wanawake', an African women's group that donated food and clothes to needy children.

She then got into her own business, running a coffee shop for a number of years before emigrating to Vancouver, Canada in December 2000. She and my father decided to leave Nairobi to live near their children i.e. me, here in Vancouver, and my brother and his family who live in San Antonio, Texas. The health care facilities were better here and Nairobi was unsafe to live in – lots of crime, revolts, political unrest. All these reasons propelled them into moving to Canada. Yes, it was hard for them to leave the life they knew and start afresh in Canada. It was particularly difficult for my father. Nairobi's weather is

tropical so it took us all a couple of years to get used to the weather here. Domestic help is also cheap in Nairobi and we could afford the luxury there but not here.

My mother's ambition and people skills have taken her far. She could even sell sand to the Arabs if called upon to do so. Both my parents spent 6 months in Waterton, Alberta last year working at a resort. Mum worked in the gift shop. It was a great Canadian experience for her and her first job in Canada.

My mother always encouraged me to follow my dream. She didn't understand my wanting to be an actor at first because 'nice Indian girls didn't do that' but when she saw my passion for it and saw how happy it made me she encouraged me. By encouraging me I think she broke through one of her own barriers and society dictates, a very big step for her. She continues to support my dream. She always comes to see my plays and watches TV and film shows that I'm in. She also helps me prepare for auditions. She's my line-reading partner.