

JOY OF MY UN

Poignant and tragic story of the white Scots girl, her black 'twin' ... and the undying love which has left a lasting legacy for the world

The Scottish Mail on Sunday 26 Apr 2020 By Patricia Kane



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THE words on their adoption application form read: 'Happy to accept a hard-to-place child.' In 1960s Scotland, little did William and Morag Marsh realise that description could ever be applied to a 13-month-old black infant, called Frankie. Abandoned at birth by his Ugandan mother, social services had struggled to find a family to adopt him.

But for the Marshes - he a Church of Scotland minister who had been adopted himself, and his wife, a nurse - there was not a second's hesitation when they were asked if they would take on the unwanted child.

Loved and cherished, Frankie fast became part of the family. Only weeks younger than the Marshes' daughter, Michaela, both children would grow up saying they were 'twins'.

Michaela and Frankie became a familiar, if unlikely, sight as Mrs Marsh pushed them in a double buggy, one with pale skin and red hair and the other black. The children started school on the same day, shared classes and later went clubbing together in their late teens.

Tragically, at the age of 27, Frankie lost his life in a blaze at his home. He had never shown any curiosity about his background but, following his death, devastated Michaela decided to make it her mission to find out the truth.

Last night, Michaela, 53, a musician and singer from Glasgow, who has performed for The Queen, said: 'We were inseparable from the minute we met and part of me died when Frankie died. I will always be grateful to my parents for bringing Frankie into our lives and my biggest regret is he never learned about his biological family, or the things I've been able to find out about him.'

The twins' remarkable journey began after Frankie, born in September 1966, spent the first 13 months of his life in a children's home in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, while social services tried to find a family to adopt him.

It was an answer to everyone's prayers when, in late 1967, an application for adoption was received from a couple declaring themselves happy to accept a 'difficult to place' child.

Michaela, born a month before Frankie, said: 'My mum and dad later told me they'd written those words thinking they could help a disabled child. Social services offered them Frankie. They didn't care about skin colour and loved him instantly.'

'Growing up it seemed perfectly normal for me to have a black baby brother but I suppose we did stand out because we looked so different.'

'People would see my mum pushing the double buggy with us both side by side and would stop her and comment on the fact we were black and white. By and large, we didn't hear any racial abuse, although there was the odd idiot as we got older who would mutter obscenities. Given the times, with all the civil liberties protests going on, particularly in the US, it's surprising we didn't experience more of it.'

She added: 'At school, we announced on our first day that we were twins and everyone just accepted it, whether we looked like it or not. We could fight like any brother or sister but we always had each other's backs.'

'It didn't ever occur to me we were different until one day when we were having a bath together, aged five, Frankie asked if he "scrubbed himself really hard" would he become "white like Michaela".'

'As he grew older, he became defensive when people asked where he was from. He'd tell them he was Scottish.'

Tragically, Frankie perished in a fire at his flat in Glasgow in February 1994, only months after returning from London, where he had worked for a large insurance services company.

A heater, which had switched off in a power cut earlier that day, was accidentally left too close to a sofa and when the electricity returned during the night as Frankie slept, it started a fire. He died from smoke inhalation.

The only clues to his background lay sealed for nearly four decades in a manila envelope, given to Mrs Marsh after the adoption and kept for a day when he might want to know more.

Sadly, that day would never come during his lifetime – or her own. It was left to Michaela after her mother died in 2005 to read the contents, which revealed Frankie's mother had been called Janet Wivugira. With such a rare name, she managed to trace a copy of her brother's original birth certificate and learned Janet had been a Ugandan student who studied in Belfast in 1965.

A trip to Northern Ireland to seek information about her at universities there proved fruitless. The trail went cold until 2009, when Michaela met a church missionary in Lincolnshire, through a mutual friend, who had preached in Uganda.

She in turn introduced her to another female missionary, who was the head teacher at Gayaza High School for girls in Uganda, and who asked to see Frankie's adoption papers. Incredibly, she recognised the surname, Wivugira, on the certificate, and revealed Frankie's grandfather, Janet's father, was the pastor of the school from 1950 to 1960.

Michaela said: 'Frankie's death was absolutely devastating and, for me, taking on the challenge of tracing his roots was a way of helping me channel my grief into something positive.'

'I didn't expect to ever find his family in a country of 40 million people but thanks to a series of astonishing coincidences, that's exactly what happened.'

She travelled to Uganda in 2012 with her long-term partner, Scottish actor Rony Bridges, and visited Gayaza High School. She was given a photograph of Janet, who had been a pupil there before going to Belfast. Janet's studies had been funded by the Ugandan gov

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ernment who, at that time, paid for its brightest students to attend UK universities on the understanding they would return to work in their own country after graduation.

Michaela learned that Janet did go back to Uganda, where she became a teacher, married and raised a new family – all without anyone knowing she had given birth to a boy at Thornhill Hospital, in Paisley.

She had told hospital authorities Frankie's father was a medical student who had refused to marry her.

Michaela said: 'Within two hours of visiting the high school, I found myself being introduced to Frankie's blood brother, who not only looked like him but had the same name, Frank. He didn't know about his brother in Scotland. It was an overwhelmingly emotional experience for us both.'

'I then met another brother, David, a science teacher and deputy school head, and they put me in touch with their brother, Paul, in the US.'

'It's been incredible to find them. Sadly, Janet died a few months before Frankie, so she never knew what had become of him.'

Michaela admits it would have been lovely to tell her how much her baby son had been cherished by his adopted family.

Returning from Uganda in 2012, she felt 'overwhelmed' by the experience of meeting his relatives, as well as by the poverty she had witnessed, and decided to set up a charity in honour of Frankie, called Starchild. Initially, the aim was to establish a school in the village of Vvumba, near Kampala, where Frankie's grandmother still lives. Instead, following a conversation with a Ugandan teacher, a centre for the creative arts was established on the local school campus.

Michaela said: 'I remember while I was there seeing a child being pushed aside. I asked the teacher why and she said he was "stupid". It was shocking. I said, "But how do you know if you put a paintbrush in his hand he won't turn out to be a Picasso?". She replied, "We don't have enough money for pencils, let alone paintbrushes and I'm not going to get his hopes up".

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'Our hub for primary age kids now offers classes in art, music, crafts and we're hoping to include woodwork. It's had a snowball effect, with other schools trying to offer something similar.'

Away from her charity work, she has established a successful career as a singer-songwriter. Her music has featured in TV and film scores.

In August 2018, she was invited to take part in a private concert for The Queen in the grounds of Balmoral Castle.

Michaela said: 'A friend of mine who is a champion piper had been asked to play and she wanted me to accompany her. I've never been so nervous. I was introduced to Her Majesty and she was lovely.'

With her on that special occasion was Rony who, despite being diagnosed with lung cancer three years earlier, had been told he was in remission. Sadly the actor – who appeared in Star Wars, Still Game and Outlander – died from the illness in July last year.

'He was the love of my life, my soul mate and I'm still struggling to come to terms with the loss,' said Michaela, who is now planning to expand her charity's operations in Uganda to include a holistic centre – in Rony's memory – for families affected by autism and disabilities.

She has already received a UK Prime Minister's Award for her charity work.

Michaela, who has written a book about her remarkable journey, added: 'I've found the best way to respond to grief is to focus on something positive. And, in a strange way, I do believe Frankie knows what we've been doing in his name.

'One day we were in an orphanage and they told us they needed fire extinguishers. I remember thinking, "Come on, Frankie, give me a sign", when suddenly the radio started playing Frankie by Sister Sledge. I don't care what anyone thinks, I definitely took it as a sign!

'There's no doubt in my mind Frankie would be overwhelmed by the way his legacy is changing lives for the better.' I met his blood brother, it was overwhelmingly emotional for us

Starchild: A Memoir of Adoption, Race and Family is published on May 19. Available on ebook now.