

KAFFIR BOY

**The True Story of a Black Youth's
Coming of Age in
Apartheid South Africa**

MARK MATHABANE



A PLUME BOOK

PLUME

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PREFACE

I am always asked to explain what it felt like to grow up black under South Africa's system of legalized racism known as apartheid, and how I escaped from it and ended up in America. This book is the most thorough answer I have heretofore given.

The last thing I ever dreamed of when I was daily battling for survival and for an identity other than that of inferiority and fourth-class citizen, which apartheid foisted on me, was that someday I would attend an American college, edit its newspaper, graduate with honors, practise journalism and write a book.

How could I have dreamed of all this when I was born of illiterate parents who could not afford to pay my way through school, let alone pay the rent for our shack and put enough food on the table; when black people in Alexandra lived under constant police terror and the threat of deportation to impoverished tribal reserves; when at ten I contemplated suicide because I found the burden of living in a ghetto, poverty-stricken and without hope, too heavy to shoulder; when in 1976 I got deeply involved in the Soweto protests, in which hundreds of black students were killed by the police, and thousands fled the country to escape imprisonment and torture?

In *Kaffir Boy* I have re-created, as best as I can remember, all these experiences. I have sought to paint a portrait of my childhood and youth in Alexandra, a black ghetto of Johannesburg, where I was born and lived for eighteen years, with the hope that the rest of the world will finally understand why apartheid cannot be reformed: it has to be abolished.

Much has been written and spoken about the politics of apartheid: the forced removals of black communities from their ancestral lands, the Influx Control and Pass laws that mandate where blacks can live, work, raise families, be buried; the migrant labour system that forces black men to live away from their families eleven months out of a year; the breaking up of black families in the ghettos as the authorities seek to create a so-called white South Africa; the brutal suppression of the black majority as it agitates for equal rights. But what does it all mean in human terms?

When I was growing up in Alexandra it meant hate, bitterness, hunger, pain, terror, violence, fear, dashed hopes and dreams. Today it still means the same for millions of black children who are trapped in the ghettos of South Africa, in a lingering nightmare of a racial system that in many respects resembles Nazism. In the ghettos black children fight for survival from the moment they are born. They take to hating and fearing the police, soldiers and authorities as a baby takes to its mother's breast.

In my childhood these enforcers of white prerogatives and whims represented a sinister force capable of crushing me at will; of making my parents flee in the dead of night to escape arrest under the Pass laws; of marching them naked out of bed because they did not have the permit allowing them to live as husband and wife under the same roof. They turned my father—by repeatedly arresting him and denying him the right to earn a living in a way that gave him dignity—into such a bitter man that, as he fiercely but in vain resisted the emasculation, he hurt those he loved the most.

The movies, with their lurid descriptions of white violence, reinforced this image of white terror and power. Often the products of abject poverty and broken homes, many black children, for whom education is inferior and not compulsory, have been derailed by movies into the dead-end life of crime and violence. It is no wonder that black ghettos have one of the highest murder rates in the world, and South African prisons are among the most packed. It was purely by accident that I did not end up a *tsotsi* (thug, mugger, gangster). It was no coincidence that, until the age of ten, I refused to set foot in the white world.

The turning point came when one day in my eleventh year I accompanied my grandmother to her gardening job and met a white family that did not fit the stereotypes I had grown up with. Most blacks, exposed daily to virulent racism and dehumanized and embittered

tered by it, do not believe that such whites exist. From this family I started receiving "illegal books" like *Treasure Island* and *David Copperfield*, which revealed a different reality and marked the beginning of my revolt against Bantu education's attempts to proscribe the limits of my aspirations and determine my place in South African life.

At thirteen I stumbled across tennis, a sport so "white" most blacks thought I was mad for thinking I could excel in it; others mistook me for an Uncle Tom. Through tennis I learned the important lesson that South Africa's 4.5 million whites are not all racists. As I grew older, and got to understand them more—their fears, longings, hopes, ignorance and mistaken beliefs, and they mine—this lesson became the conviction that whites are in some ways victims of apartheid, too, and that it is the system, not they, that has to be destroyed; just as it was Hitler's regime that had to be extirpated, not the German people. Such an attitude helped me survive the nightmare into which my life was plunged by the Soweto protests of 1976. A tennis scholarship to an American college, arranged by the professional tennis player Stan Smith, in 1978, became my passport to freedom.

Kaffir Boy is also about how, in order to escape from the clutches of apartheid, I had to reject the tribal traditions of my ancestors. It was a hard thing to do, for there were many good things in my African heritage, which, had it been left to me to choose freely, I would have preserved and venerated. I, too, had the burning need like human beings everywhere to know where I came from, in order to better understand who I was and where I was going in this world. But apartheid had long adulterated my heritage and traditions, twisted them into tools of oppression and indoctrination. I saw at a young age that apartheid was using tribalism to deny me equal rights, to separate me from my black brothers and sisters, to justify segregation and perpetuate white power and privilege, to render me subservient, docile and, therefore, exploitable. I instinctively understood that in order to forge my own identity, to achieve according to my aspirations and dreams, to see myself the equal of any man, black or white, I had to reject this brand of tribalism, and that in the rejection I ran the risk of losing my heritage. I took the plunge.

Being in America has afforded me the rare opportunity of gaining a proper perspective on my African heritage, of looking at South Africa critically, of understanding what it means to be regarded as a human being, of learning about the nitty-gritty of a democracy and,

most important, of using the pen to fight against injustice and racism in my native land.

My family is still in Alexandra, undergoing the same hardships I describe in this book. The youths of my generation have become more militant, the tools of repression have become more numerous and sophisticated and black schools and ghettos have become centers of social protest and bloody conflict with the police and soldiers. South Africa has entered its darkest hour, and all its sons and daughters have a responsibility, a duty, to see to it that truth and justice triumph. I hope to do my part.

I would like to thank Edward T. Chase and Dominick Anfuso, my editors at Macmillan, and Fifi Osgard and Kevin McShane, my agents, for their support and encouragement throughout the writing of this book. I would also like to thank Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and Hajima Ota, whose photographs have been invaluable.

New York, 1986

The word *Kaffir* is of Arabic origin. It means "infidel." In South Africa it is used disparagingly by most whites to refer to blacks. It is the equivalent of the term *nigger*. I was called a "Kaffir" many times.

Except those of my family, Stan and Marjory Smith, Arthur Ashe, Wilfred Horn, Owen and Jennifer Williams, Ray Moore and Agnes and Bremer Hofmeyer, all the names in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to living persons is coincidental.

I, as a Christian, have always felt that there is one thing above all about "apartheid" or "separate development" that is unforgivable. It seems utterly indifferent to the suffering of individual persons, who lose their land, their homes, their jobs, in pursuit of what surely is the most terrible dream in the world.

—Albert Luthuli, 1960 Nobel Peace Prize winner

"Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number—
Shake your chains to earth like
dew

Which in sleep had fallen on you—
Ye are many—they are few."

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Mask of Anarchy*

The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

—Frederick Douglass

Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.

—John Milton

PART ONE

**THE ROAD TO
ALEXANDRA**

1**WARNING**

THIS ROAD PASSES THROUGH PROCLAIMED BANTU LOCATIONS, ANY PERSON WHO ENTERS THE LOCATIONS WITHOUT A PERMIT RENDERS HIMSELF LIABLE FOR PROSECUTION FOR CONTRA-VENING THE BANTU (URBAN AREAS) CONSOLIDATION ACT 1945, AND THE LOCATION REGULATION ACT OF THE CITY OF JOHANNESBURG.

The above message can be found written on larger-than-life signs staked on every road leading into Alexandra, where I was born and raised, or for that matter, into any other black ghetto of South Africa. It is meant to dissuade white people from entering the black world. As a result, more than 90 percent of white South Africans go through a lifetime without seeing firsthand the inhuman conditions under which blacks have to survive.

Yet the white man of South Africa claims to the rest of the world that he knows what is good for black people and what it takes for a black child to grow up to adulthood. He vaunts aloud that "his blacks" in South Africa are well fed and materially better off under the chains of apartheid than their liberated brothers and sisters in the rest of Africa. But, in truth, these claims and boasts are hollow.

The white man of South Africa certainly does not know me. He certainly does not know the conditions under which I was born and had to live for eighteen years. So my story is intended to show him with words a world he would otherwise not see because of a sign and a conscience racked with guilt and to make him feel what I felt when he contemptuously called me a "Kaffir boy."

At the writing of this book the ghetto of Alexandra had just been saved from extinction by Bishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize, and a group of clergymen. When the reprieve came over half of Alexandra had already been destroyed, for the ghetto had been on death row since 1962 when the South African

government first decreed that it had to go because it occupied land onto which whites wished to expand.

The remains of Alexandra can be found about ten miles north of Johannesburg. You will not mistake those remains for anything else. They occupy a one-square-mile pit constantly shrouded by a heavy blanket of smog. It is the only such pit in an enclave of spacious, fresh-aired, verdant white suburbs sporting such melodious names as Northcliff, Rosebank, Lower Houghton, Bramley, Killarney and Edenvale.

The Alexandra of my childhood and youth was a shantytown of mostly shacks, a few decent houses, lots of gutters and lots of unpaved, potholed streets with numbers from First to Twenty-third. First Avenue was where Indians—the cream of Alexandra's quarantined society—lived, behind their sell-everything stores and produce stalls, which were the ghetto's main shopping centre. Indians first came to South Africa in 1860, as indentured servants, to work the sugarcane fields of Natal.

Second, Third and Fourth avenues were inhabited mostly by Coloureds, the mulatto race which came into being nine months after white settlers arrived in South Africa in 1652—without women. The rest of Alexandra's streets were filled by black faces, many of them as black as coal, full-blooded Africans. Many of these blacks were as poor as church mice. In South Africa there's a saying that to be black is to be at the end of the line when anything of significance is to be had. So these people were considered and treated as the dregs of society, aliens in the land of their birth. Such labelling and treatment made them an angry and embittered lot.

The Alexandra of my childhood and youth was one of the oldest shantytowns in the Witwatersrand—the area where black miners toil night and day to tear gold from the bowels of the earth so that the white man of South Africa can enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world. Many of Alexandra's first settlers came from the tribal reserves, where they could no longer eke out a living, to seek work in the city of gold. Work was plentiful in those days: in mines, factories and white people's homes. As a result these black pioneers stayed, some bought plots of land, established families and called Alexandra home, sweet home. Many shed their tribal cloth and embraced Western culture, a way of life over 350 years of white oppression had deluded them into believing was better than their own. And so it was that in the mid-1950s Alexandra boasted a population of over

one hundred thousand blacks, Coloureds and Indians—all squeezed into a space of one square mile.

My parents; a generation or so removed from these earliest settlers of Alexandra, had, too, come from the tribal reserves. My father came from what is now the so-called independent homeland of the Vendas in the northwestern corner of the Transvaal. Venda's specious independence (no other country but South Africa recognizes it) was imposed by the Pretoria regime in 1979, thus at the time making three (Transkei and Bophuthatswana were the other two) the number of these archipelagos of poverty, suffering and corruption, where blacks are supposed to exercise their political rights. Since "independence" the Venda people have been under the clutches of the Pretoria-anointed dictator, Patrick Mphephu, who, despite the loss of two elections, continues clinging to power through untempered repression and brutality.

My mother came from Gazankulu, the tribal reserve for the Tsongas in the Northeastern Transvaal. Gazankulu is also being pressured into "independence." My parents met and married in Alexandra. Immediately following marriage they rented a shack in one of the squalid yards of the ghetto. And in that shack I was born, a few months before sixty-nine unarmed black protesters were massacred—many shot in the back as they fled for safety—by South African policemen during a peaceful demonstration against the pass laws in Sharpeville on March 21, 1960. Pass laws regulate the movement of blacks in so-called white South Africa. And it was the pass laws that, in those not so long ago days of my childhood and youth, first awakened me to the realities of life as a Kaffir boy in South Africa. . . .

2 It was early morning of a bitterly cold winter day in 1965. I was lying on a bed of cardboard, under a kitchen table, peering through a large hole in the blanket at the spooky darkness around me. I was wide awake and terrified. All night long I had been having nightmares in which throngs of black people sprawled dead in pools of red blood, surrounded by all sorts of slimy, creeping creatures. These nightmares had plagued me since I turned five two weeks ago. I thought of waking my mother in the next room, but my father's words of warning not to wake her on account of bad dreams stopped me. All was quiet, save for the snores of my sister

Florah—three years old—huddled alongside me, under the same blanket, and the squeaks of rats in the cupboard. From time to time the moon shone eerily through the window. Afraid to go back to sleep lest I have another nightmare, I stayed awake, peering at the quivering blackness through the hole. The darkness seemed alive.

My father woke up and began arguing sharply with my mother in the bedroom. It was five o'clock by the *kikilihoo* (cock's crow), time for him to go to work. He always went to work at this time—and he was angry at my mother for forgetting to prepare his *scufftin* (food for work). Soon he emerged, holding a flickering tallow candle in one hand, and a worn-out Stetson hat in the other. He silently went about preparing his *scufftin* from what was left of yesterday's *pap 'n vleis* (porridge and meat). He wrapped the *scufftin* in sheets of old newspapers, took the family's *waslap* (facecloth) from the window, dampened it with water from a mug and wiped his face. He drank what was left of the water in the mug. Minutes later he was out through the door, on his way to work, but not before I had said to him: "Don't forget our fish and chips, Papa."

"Fish and chips is tomorrow, son. Today is Thursday. Payday is tomorrow."

"'Bye, 'bye, Papa."

"Go back to sleep."

As soon as he was out through the door my mother, clad only in her skimpy underwear, came into the kitchen, chamber pot in hand. The chamber pot dripped and had a bad smell, like the one which always pervaded the yard whenever our neighbours hung urine-soaked blankets and cardboard on fences to dry under the blazing African sun.

"Where are you going, Mama?"

"To the outhouse."

"Those bad dreams came back, Mama."

"I'll be back soon."

Before she left, she blew out the candle to save it from burning out and took with her a book of matches. I lingered between sleep and wakefulness, anticipating my mother's speedy return. Twenty minutes passed without any sign of her. I grew more afraid of the darkness; I shut my eyes, pulled the blanket over my head and minutes later I was in dreamland. I had been asleep but a short while when my mother came bursting through the door, yelling, in a winded voice, "Get up, Johannes! Get up quickly!" And as she yelled she reached under the table and shook me vigorously.

"Hunh?" I mumbled sleepily, stirring but not waking up, thinking it a dream.

"Get up! Get up!" she yelled again, yanking the torn blanket covering Florah and me, and almost instantly I awoke and heard a door shut with a resounding slam. From then on things became rather entangled for me. Unaware that I was still under the table I jerked upward, and my head banged against the top of the table. I winced but didn't cry; my father had warned me that men and boys never cry, ever. Still only half awake, I began crawling upon my hands and knees from under the table, but the darkness was all around me, and I couldn't see where I was going.

As I was crawling blindly my face rammed into one of the concrete slabs propping one of the table's legs. I let out a scream and drew back momentarily, dazed and smarting. At this point half my mind still told me that I was in a dream, but the hot pain all over my face convinced me otherwise. I resumed groping for a way from under the table, to find out where my mother had suddenly gone, and why she had awakened me. Finally I was out. I leaned myself for a while against the side of the table and waited for the throbbing pain in my head to cease.

Suddenly, as I stood leaning against the table, from outside came a series of dreadful noises. Sirens blared, voices screamed and shouted, wood cracked and windows shattered, children bawled, dogs barked and footsteps pounded. I was bewildered; I had never heard such a racket before. I was instantly seized by a feeling of terror.

"Mama! Where are you?" I screamed, groping about with one hand, the other clutching the table. I did not know whether my mother had gone back out, or was still in the house.

"Over here," a voice suddenly whispered from somewhere behind me. It was my mother's voice, but it sounded so faint I could barely hear it. I turned my head and strained to see where it was coming from and saw nothing but darkness. Where was my mother? Why was it so dark? Why the dreadful noises outside? My imagination ran wild. The pitch-black room seemed alive with the voodoo spirits of my mother's tales, ready to pounce upon me if I as much as took a step from where I was standing.

"Mama! Where are you?" I screamed again, fear mounting inside me.

"I'm over here," the disembodied voice of my mother said from somewhere in the dark.

I swung around and saw a candle coming out of the bedroom. It

stopped briefly by the door. It was my mother. In the dim candlelight, her body, crouched like that of an animal cowering in fear, cast an oblong, eerie shadow on the flaking whitewashed wall. She stole over to where I stood transfixed, handed me the flickering candle and told me to keep it down and away from the window.

"What's the matter, Mama?"

"Not so loud," she cautioned, a finger on her lips. Still clad only in her underwear, she hurriedly draped a tattered black shawl, which had been lying on a tin chair nearby, over her shoulders, but the shawl didn't cover much. She reached under the kitchen table and grabbed the torn blanket and draped it in place of the shawl and took the shawl and spread it over the newspapers and cardboard covering Florah.

"What's the matter, Mama?"

"Peri-Urban is here."

"Peri-Urban!" I gasped and stiffened at the name of the dreaded Alexandra Police Squad. To me nothing, short of a white man, was more terrifying; not even a bogeyman. Memories of previous encounters with the police began haunting me. Will the two fat black policemen with *sjamboks** and truncheons burst open the door again? And will the one with the twirled mustache and big hands grit his teeth at me while threatening, "Speak up, boy! or I'll let you taste my *sjambok!*" and thereafter spit in my face and hit me on the head with a truncheon for refusing to tell where my mother and father were hiding? And will the tall, carrot-haired white man in fatigues stand by the doorjamb again, whistling a strange tune and staring fear into Florah and me?

"W-where a-are t-they?" I stammered.

"Outside. Don't be afraid now. They're still in the next neighbourhood. I was in the outhouse when the alarm came." "When the alarm came" meant people leaping over fences in a mad dash to escape the police.

I nodded sheepishly, the sleep now completely gone from my eyes. I was now standing—naked, cold and trembling—in the middle of the room. My mother took the candle from my hand and told me to dress. I reached under the kitchen table for my patched khaki shorts and dressed hurriedly. Meanwhile the pandemonium outside was intensifying with each minute; the raid, it seemed, was gathering

* An animal-hide whip used to enforce apartheid.

momentum. Suddenly a gust of wind puffed through the sackcloth covering a hole in the window; the candle flickered but did not go out. I felt something warm soak my groin and trickle down my legs. I tried to stem the flow of urine by pressing my thighs together, but I was too late; a puddle had formed about my feet, and I scattered it with my toes. My mother handed me the candle and headed toward the table in the corner. As she went along she said, without turning to face me, "Take good care of your brother and sister while I'm gone, you hear?"

"Yes, Mama." I knew she had to leave, she had to flee from the police and leave us children alone as she had done so many times before. By now my mother had reached the table, and her big brown eyes darted about its top, searching for something.

"Where's my passbook?" she asked in a frantic voice, her tense body bent low over the table. "Bring the candle over here. Keep it down! Away from the window!" As I hurried the candle, which had now burnt to a stub, over to her, a loud scream leaped out from the dark outside. Alarmed, I stumbled and fell headlong into my mother's arms. As she steadied me she continued asking, "Where's my passbook? Where is it?" I did not know; I could not answer; I could not think; my mind had suddenly gone blank. She grabbed me by the shoulder and shook me, yelling frantically, "Where is it! Where is it! Oh, God. Where is it, child? Where is the book? Hurry, or they'll find me!"

"What book?" I said blankly.

"The little book I showed you and your sister last night, remember," she stared at me anxiously, but my eyes merely widened in confusion. No matter how hard I tried it seemed I could not rid my mind of the sinister force that had suddenly blotted out all memory.

"Remember the little black book with my picture in it. Where is it?" my mother said, again grabbing me and shaking me, begging me to remember. I could not snap out of my amnesia.

The noise outside had risen to a dreadful crescendo. Suddenly several gunshots rang out in quick succession. Shouts of "Follow that Kaffir! He can't get far! He's wounded!" followed the shots. Somehow it all jolted me back to consciousness, and I remembered where my mother's little black book was: under the pallet of cardboard where I had tucked it the night before, hoping to sneak it out the next day and show it to my friends at play—who had already shown me their mothers'—to see whose mother's picture was the most beautiful.

"It's under the table, Mama!" I cried out.

My mother thanked her ancestors. Hurriedly, she circled the table, reached under it, rolled Florah away from the damp cardboard, lifted them up, and underneath, on the earthen floor, she found her little black book. I heaved a great sigh of relief as I watched her tuck it into her bosom.

My sister's naked, frail body, now on the bare floor, shook from the icy cold seeping through a hole under the door. She coughed, then moaned—a prolonged rasping sound; but she did not wake up. My mother quickly straightened out the cardboard and rolled Florah back to sleep and covered her with more newspapers and cardboard. More screams came from outside as more doors and windows were being busted by the police; the vicious barking of dogs escalated, as did the thudding of running feet. Shouts of "*Mbambe! Mbambe!* (Grab him! Catch him!)" followed the screams of police whistles.

My mother was headed for the bedroom door when a shaft of very bright light flashed through the uncurtained window and fell upon her. Instantly she leaped behind the door and remained hidden behind it. Alarmed, I dropped the candle, spilling the molten wax on my feet; the room was plunged into utter darkness, for the bright light disappeared barely seconds after it had flashed. As I groped about for the candle, the bright light again flashed through the window and flooded the kitchen. This time it stayed. It seemed daylight.

My mother crept from behind the bedroom door and started toward the kitchen door, on tiptoe. As she neared it, my year-old brother, George, who slept with my mother and father on the only bed in the house, started screaming, piercing the tenuous stillness of the house. His screams stopped my mother dead in her tracks; she spun around and said to me, in a whisper, "Go quiet your brother."

"Yes, Mama," I said, but I did not go. I could not go. I seemed rooted to the spot by a terrifying fear of the unknown.

"I'll be gone a short while," my mother, now by the door, whispered. She stealthily opened it a crack, her blanketed body still in a crouch, her head almost touching the floor. She hesitated a moment or two before peering through the opening. The storm of screams that came through the door made me think that the world was somehow coming to an end. Through the opening I saw policemen, with flashlights and what looked like raised cavemen's clubs, move searchingly about several shacks across the street.

"Don't forget to lock the door securely behind me," my mother

said as she ran her eyes up and down the street. More gunshots rang out; more screams and more shouts came from somewhere deep in the neighbourhood.

"Don't go, Mama!" I cried. "Please don't go! Don't leave us, please!"

She did not answer, but continued opening the door a little wider and inching her blanketed body, still bent low, slowly forward until she was halfway in and halfway out. Meantime in the bedroom George continued bawling. I hated it when he cried like that, for it heightened, and made more real, my feelings of confusion, terror and helplessness.

"Let him suck thumb," my mother said, now almost out of the house. She was still bent low. She spat on the doorknob twice, a ritual that, she once told me, protected the innocent and kept all evil spirits away, including the police. I felt vaguely reassured seeing her perform the ritual.

"And don't forget now," she said, "don't ever be afraid. I'll be back soon." Those were her last words; and as I watched her disappear behind the shacks, swallowed up by the ominous darkness and ominous sounds, her figure like that of a black-cloaked ghost, she seemed less of the mother I knew and loved, and more of a desperate fugitive fleeing off to her secret lair somewhere in the inky blackness.

I immediately slammed the door shut, bolted it in three places, blew out the candle and then scampered to the bedroom, where my brother was still crying. But as I flung open the bedroom door a new and more dreadful fear gripped me and made me turn and run back to the front door. I suddenly remembered how the police had smashed open the door during a raid one morning even though it had been bolted. I must barricade the door this time, I told myself; that will stop them. I started dragging things from all over the kitchen and piling them up against the door—a barrel half-filled with drinking water, a scuttle half-filled with coal and several tin chairs. Satisfied that the door was now impregnable I then scuttled back to the bedroom and there leaped onto the bed by the latticed window.

"Shut up, you fool!" I yelled at my brother, but he did not quiet. I then uttered the phrase, "There's a white man outside," which to small black children had the same effect as "There's a bogeyman outside," but still he would not stop. I then stuck my thumb into his wide-open mouth, as my mother had told me. But George had other

plans for my thumb; he sunk his teeth into it. Howling with pain, I grabbed him by the feet and tossed him over and spanked him on the buttocks.

"Don't ever do that!"

He became hysterical and went into a seizure of screams. His body writhed and his mouth frothed. Again I grabbed his tiny feet and shook him violently, begged him to stop screaming, but still he would not quiet. I screamed at him some more; that made him worse. In desperation I wrenched his ears, pinched him black and blue, but still he continued hollering. In despair I gave up, for the time being, attempts to quiet him. My head spun and did not know what to do.

I glanced at the window; it was getting light outside. I saw two black policemen breaking down a door at the far end of the yard. A half-naked, near-hysterical, jet-black woman was being led out of an outhouse by a fat laughing black policeman who, from time to time, prodded her private parts with a truncheon. The storm of noises had now subsided somewhat, but I could still hear doors and windows being smashed, and dogs barking and children screaming. I jerked George and pinned him against the window, hoping that he would somehow understand why I needed him to shut up; but that did not help, for his eyes were shut, and he continued to scream and writhe. My eyes roved frantically about the semidark room and came to rest on a heavy black blanket hanging limply from the side of the bed. Aha! I quickly grabbed it and pulled it over George's head to muffle his screams. I pinned it tightly with both hands over his small head as he lay writhing. It worked! For though he continued screaming, I could hardly hear him. He struggled and struggled and I pinned the blanket tighter and tighter. It never crossed my mind that my brother might suffocate. As he no longer screamed, I waited, from time to time glancing nervously at the window.

Suddenly I heard the bedroom door open and shut. Startled, I let go of my hold on the blanket and turned by head toward the door only to see Florah, her eyes wild with fear, come rushing in, screaming, her hands over her head. She came over to the bedside and began tugging frantically at the blanket.

"Where's Mama! I want Mama! Where's Mama!"

"Shut up!" I raged. "Go back to sleep before I hit you!"

She did not leave.

"I'm scared," she whimpered. "I want Mama."

"Shut up, you fool!" I screamed at her again. "The white man is

outside, and he's going to get you and eat you!" I should not have said that; my sister became hysterical. She flung herself at the bed and tried to claw her way up. Enraged, I slapped her hard across the mouth; she staggered but did not fall. She promptly returned to the bedside and resumed her tugging of the blanket more determinedly. My brother too was now screaming. My head felt hot with confusion and desperation; I did not know what to do; I wished my mother were present; I wished the police were blotted off the surface of the earth.

I could still hear footsteps pounding, children screaming and dogs barking, so I quickly hauled my sister onto the bed, seeing that she was resolved not to return to the kitchen. We coiled together on the narrow bed, the three of us, but because of all the awkward movements everyone was making, the bricks propping the legs of the bed shifted, and it wobbled as if about to collapse. I held my breath, and the bed did not fall. I carefully pulled the blanket tautly over the three of us. Under the blanket I saw nothing but darkness.

But the din outside after a temporary lull surged and made its way through the bolted door, through the barricade, through the kitchen, through the blanket, through the blackness and into my finger-plugged ears, as if the bed were perched in the midst of all the pandemonium. My mind blazed with questions. What was really going on outside? Were the barking dogs police dogs? Who was shooting whom? Were the *Msomis** gangs involved? I had often been told that police dogs ate black people when given the order by white people—were they eating people this time? Suppose my mother had been apprehended, would the police dogs eat her up too? What was happening to my friends?

I ached with curiosity and fear. Should I go to the kitchen window and see what was going on in the streets? My sister had wet the bed, and it felt damp and cold. Childish curiosity finally overcame the fear, and I hopped out of bed and tiptoed to the kitchen window. I had barely reached the bedroom door when I heard my sister whimper.

"Where are you going? I'm scared." I looked over my shoulder and saw Florah on the edge of the bed, her legs dangling over the side, poised to follow.

"Shut up and go back to sleep!"

"I'm coming with you." She dropped her tiny feet to the floor.

"Dare and I'll whip you!"

*Legendary black gangsters of the fifties and early sixties in the mode of the Mafia.

She whined and retracted her body frame under the blanket. I slowly opened the bedroom door, taking care to keep low and away from the shaft of light still streaming through the uncurtained window. I reached the window. What next? A piece of sackcloth covered the bottom half of the window where several panes were missing, the result of a rock hurled from the street one night long ago. My father hadn't replaced the window but used the flap as a watchpost whenever police raided the neighbourhood.

With mounting excitement I raised myself toward the window and reached for the flap. I carefully pushed it to one side as I had seen my father do and then poked my head through; all the time my eyes were on the prowl for danger. My head was halfway in and halfway out when my eyes fell upon two tall black policemen emerging from a shack across the street. They joined two others standing alongside a white man by the entrance gate to one of the yards. The white man had a holstered gun slung low about his waist, as in the movies, and was pacing briskly about, shouting orders and pointing in all different directions. Further on in the yard, another white man, also with a gun, was supervising a group of about ten black policemen as they rounded up half-naked black men and women from the shacks. Children's screams issued from some of the shacks.

The sight had me spellbound. Suddenly the white man by the entrance gate pointed in the direction of our house. Two black policemen jumped and started across the street toward me. They were quickly joined by a third. I gasped with fear. A new terror gripped me and froze me by the window, my head still sticking halfway out. My mind went blank; I shut my eyes; my heart thumped somewhere in my throat. I overheard the three black policemen, as they came across the street, say to each other.

"That's number thirty-seven."

"Yes. But I don't think we'll find any of the *Msoni* gang in there."

"*Umlungu* [the white man] thinks there may be a few hiding in there. If we don't find them, we can still make easy money. The yard is a haven for people without passbooks."

"But I think everybody has fled. Look at those busted doors."

"There's a few over there still shut."

"All right, then, let's go in."

Suddenly there was a tremendous thud, as of something heavy crashing against the floor, and I heard George's screams of pain pierce the air. I opened my eyes momentarily and saw the three black police-

men, only a few steps from the door, stop and look at one another. I quickly retracted my head but remained crouched under the window, afraid of going anywhere lest I be seen. I heard the three policemen say to one another:

“You heard that?”

“Yes. It’s an infant crying.”

“I bet you they left that one alone too.”

Suddenly my sister came screaming out of the bedroom, her hands over her head.

“Yowee! Yowee!” she bawled. “Johannes! Come an’ see! Come an’ see!”

I stared at her, unable to move, not wanting to move.

“It’s G-george,” she stammered with horror; “B-blood, d-dead, b-blood, d-dead!” her voice trailed into sobs. She rushed over to where I stood and began pulling my hand, imploring me to go see my brother who, she said dramatically, was bleeding to death. My mouth contorted into frantic, inaudible “Go aways” and “shut ups” but she did not leave. I heard someone pounding at the door. In the confusion that followed angry voices said:

“There’s no point in going in. I’ve had enough of hollering infants.”

“Me too.”

“I bet you there’s no one in there but the bloody children.”

“You just took the words right out of my mouth.”

“Then let’s get back to the vans. We still have more streets to comb. This neighbourhood is about dry anyway.”

They left. It turned out that George had accidently fallen off the bed and smashed his head against a pile of bricks at the foot of the bed, sustaining a deep cut across the forehead. The gash swelled and bled badly, stopping only after I had swathed his forehead with pieces of rags. The three of us cowered together in silence another three hours until my mother returned from the ditch where she had been hiding.

3

That evening the neighbourhood was gripped by rumors that the Peri-Urban police were going to launch another raid soon, to “clean up” the neighbourhood, so to speak, because the one that morning had been—by police standards—unsuccessful. The back-to-back raids, the rumors went, marked the

beginning of the annual "Operation Clean-up Month," a month during which hundreds of black policemen, led by white officers, combed the entire Alexandra ghetto—street by street and yard by yard—searching for people whose passbooks were not in order, gangsters, prostitutes, black families living illegally in the township, shebeen owners and those persons deemed "undesirables" under the Influx Control Law. I did not understand what many of these names meant, though I was told that we and most of our neighbours were counted under them.

That night we went to sleep with the rumors of an imminent police raid hanging over the neighbourhood like a dark cloud.

"We will have to leave before daybreak," I heard my mother say to my father as we prepared to go to sleep. "That way when the raid comes we won't be here." Upon hearing that Florah and I tensed and grew frightened. My mother calmed us.

"Don't believe the rumors, woman," my father said with an air of authority. "There won't be any raid. Weren't the police here just today? People are just scared. They are always scared. They always will be scared."

"But everybody says they're coming," my mother insisted. "It's the start of Operation Clean-up Month, remember?"

"Woman," my father said sternly, "I tell you there won't be any raid. It's just another false rumor."

But a raid was coming. A little after midnight, while everybody was sound asleep and snoring and dreaming, the police invaded the neighbourhood.

"OPEN UP!" Fists banged at the kitchen door. "IT'S PERI-URBAN!"

For a minute I thought I was dreaming because from outside there suddenly erupted the same volcano of noise of a day ago. Dogs barked. People shrieked and shouted and ran. Sirens screamed. Children screamed. Doors and windows smashed. Feet clumped. I tossed and turned as if in a nightmare, but the persistent pounding and kicking at the door, and the muffled voices coming from the bedroom convinced me otherwise.

"OPEN UP OR WE'LL BREAK IT DOWN!" demanded the police more loudly.

I slowly crept out from under the blanket; the sheets of newspaper rustled; I felt a tightening in the pit of my stomach, as if a block of ice were embedded there and were now freezing my guts. My sister

stirred and whimpered; I reached under the blanket and told her to hush.

"OPEN UP!"

I lost control of my bladder and quickly soaked the cardboard, the newspapers and the blanket. My sleepy eyes strained to make out objects in the dark, but the darkness was impregnable, ominous; the more I stared into it, the blacker and blacker it became. I felt dizzy. I wanted to scream but my voice was paralyzed. Suddenly flashlights flared through the uncurtained window. Glass shattered somewhere nearby. I yearned to become invisible, to have the ground beneath me open and swallow me until it was all over.

"OPEN UP!" a voice bellowed by the window. **"WE KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE!"**

I succeeded in reaching the bedroom door, fear all over me. I pasted my ear to the door and heard my mother and father whispering to each other in frantic tones. So they were both still in there. How were they going to escape?

"Mama," I whispered frantically, tapping lightly on the door, **"the police are here."**

"Johannes, is that you?" my mother whispered back.

"They're here, Mama. What should I do?"

"Don't let them in yet."

"But they're breaking the door down, Mama."

"Don't open yet."

"They're breaking it down, Mama."

Silence.

Should I open the door? The police were smashing it, and if I didn't open it their anger would know no bounds once they got in; I remembered well how they beat me up the last time. But my mother and father were attempting to hide, and if I opened too soon they would be taken away; I remembered well how they were taken away the last time. What should I do?

The pounding and kicking at the door awakened my sister, and she started screaming from under the table. After what seemed like an eternity I unlatched the door. As it swung wide open, with tremendous force, two tall black policemen in stiff brown uniforms rushed in and immediately blinded me with the glare from their flashlights. Before I knew what was happening one of them had kicked me savagely on the side, sending me crashing into a crate in the far corner. I hit the crate with such force that I nearly passed out. With stars in

my eyes I grabbed the edges of the crate and tried to rise, but I couldn't; my knees had turned to Jell-O, my eyes were cloudy and my head pounded as if it were being split with an axe. As I tried to gather my senses, another kick sent me back to the floor, flat on my face. As I went down, my jaw struck the blunt side of the blade of an axe jutting from the side of the crate. My head burned with pain. Blood began oozing from my nostrils and lips. Several of my teeth were loose. I started screaming, forgetting all about my father's rule, begging for forgiveness from my assailant for whatever wrong I had done. My bloodied hands reached out and clung to his legs, but he shoved me away. I again lost control of my bladder. My muscles tightened and beads of sweat mingled with blood covered my body. My foggy eyes tried to see where my assailant was and what he was going to do to me next, but I could only make out indistinct shapes and shadows floating like ghosts about the room. Suddenly a crushing, viselike grip clutched my left armpit and jerked me up. I screamed: "Mama!"

"SHUT UP!" the policeman hissed, a hazy shadow of terror towering in front of me. He shook me violently, the glare of his flashlight trained into my eyes, searing them. He jammed me against the brick wall by the ribs, warning me to shut up or else. . . .

"WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG TO OPEN THE BLOODY DOOR?" he hissed.

"He's had enough, Solly," a deep, surly voice said from somewhere in the room. "He's had enough, let him go."

"DON'T DO IT AGAIN, UNDERSTAND?" my assailant snarled, bringing the flashlight so close to my eyes they seemed to cook. I blinked repeatedly.

"I w-won't d-do i-it a-again." I said with bated breath.

"Where are your parents?" my assailant hissed.

"I d-don't k-know." I felt I had to protect my parents, no matter what.

"You're lying to me, boy!"

"We'll find them, Solly. Let him go. We'll find them."

My assailant let go of me, and I slumped to the floor, spent with fear. I felt the side of my head; it was bruised and swollen, and something pounded like tribal drums inside my ears. My head no longer felt like my head but like a dead weight on my torso. I coughed and spit, and the spittle was all red with blood. My body was wet and slippery with sweat, urine and blood, as if I had been soaked in grease.

Feeling dizzy, I leaned against the crate, disbelieving all that was happening, thinking it all a dream—a bad dream—a nightmare, expecting to awaken any time and find that I was unscathed, that nothing had happened.

The lightheadedness dissolved, and I was able to lift my head up again. I saw the two policemen searching the kitchen, kicking chairs, crates, boxes, tins, pots, dishes, rags, cardboard; searching under the table, behind the cupboard, behind the door, in the corners, everywhere; cursing how shabby the place looked, and how everything was hindering their search. Finding no one in the kitchen they went for the bedroom door, where my sister cowered in screams. My heart fluttered, my skin prickled and the tightness in my throat returned. I felt a thick lump of fear force its way down my tight throat, into my tight stomach, where it settled.

One of the policemen grabbed my sister and shoved her away from the door. My sister screamed hysterically and flailed her arms as her owlish eyes searched wildly about the kitchen. She saw me and rushed toward me, urine streaming down her legs. The policeman who had shoved her away now barred her way with his long arms outspread like the wings of some prehistoric bird. He gritted his gleaming teeth at her.

“Where do you think you’re going, you little bastard!”

My sister whirled and dove under the table and curled into a tight knot of screaming, helpless, naked fear; there was nothing I could do to protect her or myself. The policeman went over to the table and shook a truncheon in her face, warning her to shut up or else. But my sister was beside herself with fear and did not let up screaming. The policeman left her and strode across the room to the broken window to glance outside. The second policeman meanwhile was struggling to open the bedroom door; apparently my parents had bolted it from within.

“Open up!” he rapped on the door. “Open up or we’ll break it down! We know you’re in there!” He then paused, expecting his order to be carried out by whomever he thought was inside. It was not. He again seized the doorknob and twisted it violently, but still it would not open. He started pounding the door with his fist and kicking it with his steel-rimmed boots.

“Hey, you bastard,” the policeman peering through the window turned to me and demanded to know who was in the bedroom.

“My brother,” I said softly.

"Speak up! And who else?"

"I don't know."

"You're lying to me again, boy," he hissed and started toward me with a raised truncheon. "You're parents are in there, aren't they? No use protecting them, boy, for we'll find them. And when we do," he smiled fiendishly, "you'll get it."

I remained silent, resigning myself to the worst.

"Now will you stop lying to me, boy," he shook the truncheon in my face.

I tried to say something, to trump up an excuse; my mouth opened wide but no words came out. The policeman lifted his truncheon, and I closed my eyes, expecting a blow; it didn't come. The policeman instead told his comrade to "smash the bloody thing." The other policeman was about to do that anyway, for he had taken several steps away from the door. He flung himself at the door, bursting it at the butt-hinges. Streams of perspiration poured down my face. I could scarcely breathe. The policemen had been so thorough in rummaging the kitchen that I had no doubt they would find my parents. There was no way they could possibly have escaped. The window was latticed with iron bars, and there was only the one door.

"There's someone under the bed!" the policeman in the bedroom shouted triumphantly.

"Haul him out!" the policeman by the kitchen window shouted back as he left his station for the bedroom.

"Come out of there, old man! Out, out!"

As he passed me, the policeman who had been standing by the window gave me a wicked look and grinned.

"Hurry up, old man! Come out of there!" the policeman in the bedroom said impatiently "Hurry, hurry, we haven't got all day!"

"I'm coming, *nkosi* [lord]," my father whimpered. They had found him. My mother was sure to be next. What would happen to us children if they took both my mother and father away?

"Who's in there with him?"

"Where's your wife, old man?"

I inched slowly toward the bedroom door, taking care not to attract the attention of the policemen.

"I said, where's your bloody wife, old man?" the question was repeated.

"She's at work, *nkosi*," my father said plaintively. He was standing, naked and head bowed, in the middle of the bedroom. To his

right was an old, worn-out wardrobe; to his left a trundle bed with a straw twin-size mattress, upon which George lay, bawling; in front of the bed was an old, flecked brown table, against which my father's interrogator leaned, as he flashed his light all over my father, keeping him blinking all the time.

"At this time of the night?" the question came slowly, ringing with incredulity.

"Yes, *nkosi*."

"What job does she do at two o'clock in the morning?"

"She's a kitchen girl, *nkosi*. She sleeps in. She's a maid in Edenvale."

The interrogator muttered something to himself then said, "Come, let's see your pass."

My father reached for his tattered overalls at the foot of the bed and from the back pocket he removed a small, square, bulky black book and handed it over to the policeman, who hurriedly flipped through it. Stonily, running his eyes up and down my father, he said, "The bloody thing is not in order, you know?"

"Yes, *nkosi*, I know that very much. I didn't pay my poll-tax. I was meaning to do so."

"It's not only your poll-tax, damn it, old man. Many other things are wrong with it. You know that?"

"Yes, *nkosi*," my father whimpered. "I know that very much. I was meaning to fix them too."

"And I see here that you haven't paid your tribal tax too. Were you meaning to fix that too?" the policeman said sarcastically.

"Yes, *nkosi*." My father's brow started to sweat.

"And the stamp on page fifteen says you're supposed to have a wife here in the city," the policeman said triumphantly, looking at us children, all the time brandishing the bulky black book in my father's face, "What have you to say to that, heh? How are you going to fix that, heh?"

My father became speechless. He parted his parched lips and tried to say something, but no sound came. He lowered his bony head and buried it in the palms of his gnarled hands; and at that moment he seemed to age a thousand years, a pitiful sight. The policeman playfully prodded my father's penis with a truncheon. I gasped with horror.

"Old man," the policeman said floutingly, throwing his head backward, "you're an old man, aren't you?" My father, only in his

mid-thirties, nodded. "You're as ancient as my father, yet your irresponsibility makes me ashamed of saying that. Why isn't your pass in order? Mine is. Anyway, look here, as an old man you ought to be back in the Bantustan. My father is back there and living in peace. What are you still doing in the city but asking for trouble?"

The policeman confirmed my suspicions of his being fresh from a tribal reserve. The authorities preferred his kind as policemen because of their ferociousness and blind obedience to white authority. They harboured a twisted fear and hatred of urban blacks; they knew nothing of black solidarity, relishing only the sense of raw power being a policeman gave them over their own kind.

"I'm working, *nkosi*," my father said. "There are no jobs in the Bantustan."

"No jobs in the Bantustan?" the policeman laughed. "What about raising cattle? Or have you forgotten how to do that since coming to the city?"

My father did not answer; he continued gazing at the floor.

"A lot of things are wrong with your pass, and you can be endorsed* out at any time, you know that?"

"Yes, *nkosi*, I know that very much."

"Then what do you think we should do with you?"

My father forced a fake smile. It was not a spontaneous smile—my father never smiled. It was a begging smile, a passive acceptance of the policeman's authority. After smiling my father again dropped his eyes to the floor. He seemed uncharacteristically powerless and contrite, a far cry from the tough, resolute and absolute ruler of the house I knew him to be, the father whose words were law. I felt sorry for him. The policeman, still brandishing the bulky black book, leaned into my father's ear and whispered something.

The other policeman meantime was still at the doorjamb, revelling at the sight of my father being humiliated. The emotional and physical nakedness of my father somehow made me see him in a different light—he seemed a stranger, a total alien. Watching him made tears surge to my eyes, but I fought desperately to keep them from flowing. I cannot cry, I told myself, I would not cry, I should not cry in front of these black beasts. For the first time in my life I felt hate and anger rage with furious intensity inside me. What I felt was no ordinary hate or anger; it was something much deeper, much darker, frighten-

* Deported to tribal reserve.

ing, something even I couldn't understand. As I stood there watching, I could feel that hate and anger being branded into my five-year-old mind, branded to remain until I die.

"Hurry up, old man!" the interrogator said, as my father fidgeted with his overalls, "we haven't got all day. Do you have it or don't you?" he said, trying to wring a bribe out of my father.

"*Nkosi*, I beg you," my father whimpered, drooping his bony shoulders and letting the overalls dangle limply at his side. "I have no money," he sighed.

"Nothing," the policeman cried, astonished; the black policemen were used to getting bribes.

"Nothing, *nkosi*," my father said, slowly running his right hand through his kinky hair. "Not a cent. I have no job. I just applied for a permit to look for a job yesterday."

"Well," frowned the policeman, closing the bulky book in my father's face, "I gave you your chance. You refused it. Now hurry up and put on your clothes and come with us. It's 'Number Four' for you, old man."

"But the little ones—"

"That's none of my bloody business," the policeman cut in sharply. "Tell that to the magistrate. Now hurry up and get dressed!"

My father jumped into his overalls. He was handcuffed.

"Go quiet your brother," he said as he saw me staring at him. I did not go. I watched impassively as they led him through the front door, his head bowed, his hands manacled, his self-esteem drained, his manhood sapped. I wondered where they were taking him, what grievous wrong had he committed deserving of being shackled, what type of fiends the two policemen were. They weren't humans to me, neither were they black. Though I feared them as one would fear monsters, I didn't let fear panic me, for I hated them more than I feared them.

Curious to find out where they were taking my father, and what was going on outside, I followed them, forgetting all about my mother. I ordered my sister, who was crying, "Papa, Papa!" by the door, back into the house. I stepped outside in time to see the two policemen, flanking my father, go up a rocky slope leading out of the yard. I saw more black policemen leading black men and women out of shacks. Some of the prisoners were half-naked, others dressed as they went. Several children, two and three years old, stood in tears outside smashed doors, imploring their mothers and fathers to come

back. In the middle of the yard an old man was being shoved by a black policeman for being slow; a woman was being kicked by another black policeman for being stubborn; another woman was being ordered to leave a bawling infant behind. Several red-necked white men in safari suits and fatigues, guns drawn, paced briskly about the entrance gate, shouting orders and supervising the roundup. I avoided them by going around the shacks. I passed on my way to the gate shacks whose windows had been shattered, whose doors had been busted. The interior of some of the shacks were a mess, as if a tornado had hit. I arrived at the gate and found a group of boys in a half-circle on a stoep overlooking the street.

Dawn was starting to break but stars still twinkled faintly in the distant, pale eastern sky. PUTCO buses droned in the distance, carrying loads of black humanity to the white world to work. I joined the group of boys. My eyes wandered up, then down the street. I gasped at what I saw down the street. A huge throng of handcuffed black men and women, numbering in the hundreds, filled the narrow street from side to side. The multitude, murmuring like herds of restless cattle, was being marched by scores of black policemen and a dozen or so white ones, some of whom had fierce police dogs on leashes, toward a row of about ten police vans and trucks parked farther down the street. More handcuffed men and women were still filing out of the yards on either side, swelling the ranks of those already choking the streets. It seemed as if the entire population of Alexandra had been arrested.

As I stood there, openmouthed with fearful anticipation, watching the handcuffed men and women being shoved, jostled, kicked and thrown like bundles into the trucks and vans, along with the dogs, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a short, pot-bellied black policeman leading a naked black man with bony, stiltlike legs, out of an outhouse in a yard across the street. The naked man pleaded that he be allowed to go and dress, but the fat policeman simply roared with laughter and prodded the naked man in the back with a truncheon, telling him that it was not his fault that he had caught him naked.

"Next time hide with your clothes on, brother," the policeman jeered.

The boys around me giggled at the sight of the naked man being marched down the street, toward the throng of handcuffed men and women, his gnarled hands cupped between his bony legs. I remained

silent. A tall black man standing by the gate to one of the yards overlooking the street—one of the few adults left behind, presumably because his papers were in order—saw the naked man and instantly dashed into his house and came out waving a pair of tattered overalls. He hurled them across the *donga*, and they landed in the middle of the street, a few paces from the approaching policeman and his naked captive. Grudgingly, amid shouts of "Hurry up, we haven't got all day," intended to please the group of women prisoners gaping at the scene from a short distance, the policeman allowed the naked man to pick up the overalls. He dressed in the middle of the street.

Meanwhile the truck and vans, now jam-packed with handcuffed men and women and dogs and black policemen, hummed engines and prepared to leave. More handcuffed men and women and policemen and dogs still remained in the streets. Within minutes more vans and trucks came, and the loading was finally completed. The convoy of vans and trucks sped away in a huge cloud of dust, with several of the black policemen dangling from the side and rear doors like rags on a line.

As the group dispersed, some of the boys started talking in soft, subdued tones.

"They've taken my father away."

"They've taken my mother and father."

"They've taken my brother."

"They've taken my sister."

"They've taken my whole family."

"They've taken my aunt and uncle."

"They've taken my mother and left my father after he had given them some money."

Mother! Where was my mother? All along I had been oblivious of her. Remembering that the police did not find her when they searched the house, I ran back home as fast as I could to try and find her. I found my brother and sister still crying, but I ignored them.

"Mama! Where are you?" I shouted, standing in the middle of the bedroom. "They're gone."

No reply.

I repeated the shout. The wardrobe creaked and a voice inside softly asked, "Are they gone?"

Instantly I leaped back; my eyes popped out in fearful astonishment.

"Mama, is that you?" I warily approached the wardrobe.

"Yes, let me out!"

"Mama, are you in there?" I said, to make sure that I had indeed heard her voice. I could not believe she had hidden herself in so small a wardrobe. My sister and I often had trouble fitting in there whenever we played hide-and-seek.

"Yes, let me out!"

"It's locked, Mama. Where's the key?"

My mother told me that my father had it. I told her he was gone. She remained silent for a moment or two and then told me to look for it on the table. I looked; no key. I told her so. She told me to look where my father had been hiding. Flickering candle in hand, I crawled under the bed to the far corner where my father had been hiding but I found no key on the earthen floor. Where was the key? Had my father unwittingly taken it with him? How would I get my mother out? "There's no key where he was, Mama!" I shouted from under the bed.

"Look again!"—pause—"and thoroughly this time!"

Before resuming the search I spat twice on my right palm and parted the spittle with my left forefinger, watching to see where the most spit went. It went to the right. I then uttered the supplication my mother had taught me. "Ancestors! Ancestors! Guide me to whatever I'm looking for, wherever it may lie!" I concentrated my search on the right side of the bed. Still no key. I became frantic.

"There's no key, Mama."

She told me to look everywhere. I began ransacking the house and while overturning the torn straw mattress I found a pair of old, rusted keys in one of the holes. I tried them on the wardrobe lock; they wouldn't even fit. Finally, in exasperation, I went to the kitchen, grabbed a heavy wood axe and went back to the bedroom, determined to chop the wardrobe down and get my mother out.

"Mama, should I chop the door down and let you out?" I said fervently. Florah, standing nearby, shrieked with horror as I lifted the axe.

"NO!" my mother shrieked from inside the wardrobe.

"What should I do then?"

"LOOK AGAIN!"

"Look where? I've looked everywhere."

"LOOK AGAIN UNDER THE BED!"

"I've looked there twice already. There's nothing there."

"LOOK AGAIN CAREFULLY!"

"Please look again, Johannes," my sister begged. "I'll help you look."

"Shut up, you!"

Reluctantly, I leaned the axe against the wardrobe door and crawled back under the bed. "For ancestors' sake," I cried, "where's the key!" I was now convinced that my father had unwittingly taken it with him. If he had, what then? My mother would just have to let me chop down the door. Didn't my father always say I chopped wood like a man?

I don't know what made me look between the bricks propping up one leg of the bed, but in one of the crevices I found a long, glistening key, along with several farthings, which I pocketed. The key slid easily into the lock. I turned it twice to the right, and then the knob; they both turned easily. The door swung open. My mother, clad only in her underwear, wriggled out from the tiny compartment where clothes would have been hanging, had we had any worth hanging. She stretched her numb legs and cracked her neck and back. She then dressed and quieted my brother by letting him suckle. Afterward she went about the task of restoring a semblance of order to the mess the police had created.

My father spent two months doing hard labour on a white man's potato farm for his pass crimes.

4

Following that brutal encounter I had with them, the Peri-Urban police became a tormenting presence in my life. Whereas in the past I had been more or less conscious of their presence in black life—as they stopped people in the streets and demanded passes, as they chased after *isotsis* and other hoodlums, as they raided shebeens in search of illicit liquor, and as they launched an occasional pass raid into the neighbourhood—they now moved permanently into my consciousness. Scarcely a week passed without the neighbourhood being invaded by waves of black and white policemen.

They always came unannounced, at any time of day or night, and gradually I came to accept, and to dread, their presence as a way of life. They haunted me in real life and in my dreams, to the extent that I would often wake up screaming in the middle of the night, claiming

that the police were after me with dogs and flashlights, trying to shoot me down. Word had it that our neighbourhood, because of the increasing presence of people whose papers were not in order, had been designated a "hot spot," which meant that it had to be raided constantly. So, barely six years old, I was called upon to deal with constant terror. The year was 1966.

By witnessing raid after raid, week in and week out, month after month, I began learning from my parents ways of recognizing and interpreting specific cues about the movement of police once they had invaded the neighbourhood, so I could react swiftly and warn my parents, or fabricate ingenious lies to prevent them from searching the house. Other children—three, four, five and six years old—were being taught the same lessons by their parents. Whenever we were out at play we were expected to act as sentries. Whenever the police came other children would scamper homeward shouting, "Mama, Papa, the police are coming! The police are coming!"

But I failed to do the same. That brutal encounter with the police had left indelible scars. The mere sight of police vans now had the power of blanking my mind, making me forget all I had learned, making me rely on my instincts, which invariably told me to flee, to cower, lest I end up face-to-face with a policeman and get flogged. I became a useless sentry. But it did not matter, for the raids now launched incessantly into our neighbourhood had an uncanny element of surprise. That the police would come was as certain a fact as the sun rising in the morning; what black people didn't know, and would have given everything in the world to know, was when and with how strong a force.

Each time the police launched a raid into the neighbourhood my mother by some miracle would manage to escape in the nick of time. She seemed to always have premonitions of their coming and would forewarn my father.

"You know," my mother would say, "I have a feeling Peri-Urban will visit us this week."

"There you go again," my father would retort. "Would you stop being paranoiac, woman? They were here just last week; how can they come again this week? Need I remind you that we're not the only people living in Alexandra?"

"Suit yourself," my mother would say. "Don't say I didn't warn you. You said the same last time, and didn't they nearly pick you up? If you hadn't left for work before they came, they would have. Any-

ways, I'm not the only one who has these dreams of their coming. Many other women do, and they tell their husbands."

My father would then say, "Have you women stopped and told yourselves that maybe the police keep on coming because you women think about them so often?"

My mother would then reply, "What else is there to think about?"

My father's response was more or less typical of that of other men in the yard. So when my mother and other women in the yard sought ways of escaping from the police—at times hiding in ditches, at times in outhouses, at times in trees, at times on rooftops, at times in secret underground hollows and at times waking in the middle of the night and leaving home to drift along some faraway street until the police were gone—he and other men would frown, and, with affectations of bravery, continue with business as usual. For a long time I did not understand why my father and other men acted this way, until one day I heard talk among the womenfolk that the real reason why their husbands refused to run away was that they considered it cowardly and unmanly to run away from other men.

The police, whenever my mother forebode, would indeed come, and many of the men of the yard would be caught napping, surrendering themselves with lamblike submission. Some of the men, my father occasionally among them, would pay hefty bribes to the policemen and would be let go. (Sometimes my father would escape arrest because, since his last arrest, he now left for work at three o'clock in the morning, and would not return until eight or nine at night, when most of the raids had already taken place.)

But other men were not so lucky. They had no money, having paid it all out in bribes over the course of many arrests. They would be carted in vans and trucks to Number Four, a notorious prison for black people in Johannesburg. Repeat offenders and those whose passbook crimes were considered more serious would be processed to a maximum-security penitentiary called Modderbee, on the outskirts of Kempton Park. I would often hear the womenfolk say that Modderbee was a "hell which changed black men into brutes, no matter how tough and stubborn they may be." Almost every night, before we went to bed, whenever my mother happened to have one of her premonitions, she would pray in earnest to our ancestral spirits that the day never come when my father would be sent to Modderbee.

"Will prayers stop the police from coming, Mama?" I asked one evening. Somehow I had the vague feeling that all my mother's

prayers were useless, that no amount of prayer could stop the police from violating our lives at will.

"No," my mother replied.

"Then why do you pray?"

"I don't know."

Despite the terror of Peri-Urban, the lives of my family, neighbours and community continued to ebb and flow along a predictable, monotonous course.

On Mondays the blacks of Alexandra (my parents included) continued having *babalazi*—blue Monday hangover—after a weekend of feasting on Bantu beer and Western liquor in the shebeens. Much of this sottish drinking was meant to drown sorrows, and forget the troubles and hardships of black life.

On Tuesdays itinerant butchers continued coming by with their donkey- or pushcarts, peddling heavy bones with scraps of meat on them, *muhodu* (cattle's lungs), pig's knuckles, giblets and chitlings. And black women in tribal garb continued erecting their stalls by the dusty street corners, selling cooked or roasted maize cobs, cooked yams and spinach and chicken feet, mostly to migrant labourers from the tribal reserves, who had no wives to cook for them.

On Wednesday the Chinaman continued coming, in his flashy American-made car, to the runners' homes to pick up bets and announce winners in the numbers game of fah-fee.

On Thursdays kitchen girls and garden boys, dressed in their Sunday best, continued coming to the townships to spend their day off with their families and friends.

On Fridays black people continued to be paid for their toil in the white world, and *tsotsis* and other muggers continued robbing them of their hard-earned pittance, often hacking and stabbing them to death.

And on weekends black people continued to feast and drink heavily in an effort to unwind and prepare for another week of hard labour in the white world.

5 One night our dingy shack, which had been leaning precipitously on the edge of a *donga*, collapsed. Luckily no one was hurt, but we were forced to move to another one, similarly built. This new shack, like the old one, had two rooms and measured something like fifteen by fifteen feet, and overlooked the

same unlit, unpaved, potholed street. It had an interior flaked with old whitewash, a leaky ceiling of rusted zinc propped up by a thin wall of crumbling adobe bricks, two tiny windows made of cardboard and pieces of glass, a creaky, termite-eaten door too low for a person of average height to pass through without bending double, and a floor made of patches of cement and earth. It was similar to the dozen or so shacks strewn irregularly, like lumps on a leper, upon the cracked greenless piece of ground named yard number thirty-five.

In this new shack my brother, George, was weaned. It was amusing to witness my mother do it. The first day she began the process she secretly smeared her breasts with red pepper and then invited my brother to suckle. Unsuspecting, George energetically attacked my mother's breast only to let go of it instantly and start hollering because of the hot pepper. This continued throughout the day whenever he wanted to suckle. Finally, after a few days, he began to dread the sight of my mother's breast, and each time she teased him with it he would turn his face. He was now weaned. My father bought a small white chicken, my mother brewed beer, a few relatives were invited, and a small celebration was held to mark George's passage from infancy to childhood. He was almost two years old. He now had to sleep with Florah and me in the kitchen.

Soon after George was weaned my father began teaching him, as he had been teaching me, tribal ways of life. My father belonged to a loosely knit group of black families in the neighbourhood to whom tribal traditions were a way of life, and who sought to bring up their offspring according to its laws. He believed that feeding us a steady diet of tribal beliefs, values and rituals was one way of ensuring our normal growth, so that in the event of our returning to the tribal reserve, something he insistently believed would happen soon, we would blend in perfectly. This diet he administered religiously, seemingly bent on moulding George and me in his image. At first I had tried to resist the diet, but my father's severe looks frightened me.

A short, gaunt figure, with a smooth, tight, black-as-coal skin, large prominent jaws, thin, uneven lips whose sole function seemed to be the production of sneers, a broad nose with slightly flaring nostrils, small, bloodshot eyes which never cried, small, close-set ears, and a wide, prominent forehead—such were my father's fearsome features.

Born and bred in a tribal reserve and nearly twice my mother's age, my father existed under the illusion, formed as much by a strange innate pride as by a blindness to everything but his own will, that

someday all white people would disappear from South Africa, and black people would revert to their old ways of living. To prepare for this eventuality, he ruled the house strictly according to tribal law, tolerating no deviance, particularly from his children. At the same time that he was force-feeding us tribalism we were learning other ways of life, modern ways, from mingling with children whose parents had shed their tribal cloth and embraced Western culture.

My father's tribal rule had as its fulcrum the constant performing of rituals spanning the range of day-to-day living. There were rituals to protect the house from evildoers, to ward off starvation, to prevent us from becoming sick, to safeguard his job, to keep the police away, to bring us good luck, to make him earn more money and many others which my young mind could not understand. Somehow they did not make sense to me; they simply awed, confused and embarrassed me, and the only reason I participated in them night after night was because my father made certain that I did, by using, among other things, the whip, and the threat of the retributive powers of my ancestral spirits, whose favour the rituals were designed to curry. Along with the rituals, there were also tribal laws governing manners.

One day I intentionally broke one of these laws: I talked while eating.

"That's never done in my house," my father screamed at me as he rose from the table where he had been sitting alone, presiding over our meal. I was eating *pap 'n vleis* out of the same bowl with George and Florah. We were sitting on the floor, about the brazier, and my mother was in the bedroom doing something.

"You don't have two mouths to afford you such luxury!" he fumed, advancing threateningly toward me, a cold sneer on his thin-lipped, cankerous mouth. He seemed ten feet tall.

Terrified, I deserted the *pap 'n vleis* and fled to Mother.

"Bring him back here, woman!" my father called through the door as he unbuckled his rawhide belt. "He needs to be taught how to eat properly."

I began bawling, sensing I was about to be whipped.

My mother led me into the kitchen and pleaded for me. "He won't do it again. He's only a child, and you know how forgetful children are." At this point George and Florah stopped eating and watched with petrified eyes. "Don't give me that," snarled my father. "He's old enough to remember how to eat properly." He tore me away from my mother and lashed me. She tried to intervene; but my

father shoved her aside and promised her the same. I never finished my meal; sobbing, I slunk off to bed, my limbs afire with pain where the rawhide had raised welts. The next day, as I nursed my wounds, while my father was at work, I told my mother that I hated him and promised her I would kill him when I grew up.

“Don’t say that!” my mother reprimanded me.

“I will,” I said stoutly, “if he won’t leave me alone.”

“He’s your father, you know.”

“He’s not my father.”

“Shut that bad mouth of yours!” My mother threatened to smack me.

“Why does he beat me, then?” I protested. “Other fathers don’t beat their children.” My friends always boasted that their fathers never laid a hand on them.

“He’s trying to discipline you. He wants you to grow up to be like him.”

“What! Me! Never!” I shook with indignation. “I’m never going to be like him! Why should I?”

“Well, in the tribes sons grow up to be like their fathers.”

“But we’re not living in the tribes.”

“But we’re still of the tribes.”

“I’m not,” I said. Trying to focus the conversation on rituals, my nemesis, I said, after a thoughtful pause, “Is that why Papa insists that we do rituals?”

“Yes.”

“But other people don’t.”

“Everybody does rituals, Mr. Mathabane,” my mother said. “You just don’t notice it because they do theirs differently. Even white people do rituals.”

“Why do people do rituals, Mama?”

“People do rituals because they were born in the tribes. And in the tribes rituals are done every day. They are a way of life.”

“But we don’t live in the tribes,” I countered. “Papa should stop doing rituals.”

My mother laughed. “Well, it’s not as simple as that. Your father grew up in the tribes, as you know. He didn’t come to the city until he was quite old. It’s hard to stop doing things when you’re old. I, too, do rituals because I was raised in the tribes. Their meaning, child, will become clear as you grow up. Have patience.”

But I had no patience with rituals, and I continued hating them.

Participation in my father's rituals sometimes led to the most appalling scenes, which invariably made me the laughingstock of my friends, who thought that my father, in his ritual garb, was the most hilarious thing they had ever seen since natives in Tarzan movies. Whenever they laughed at me I would feel embarrassed and would cry. I began seeking ways of distancing myself from my father's rituals. I found one: I decided I would no longer, in the presence of my friends, speak Venda, my father's tribal language. I began speaking Zulu, Sotho and Tsonga, the languages of my friends. It worked. I was no longer an object of mockery. My masquerade continued until my father got wind of it.

"My boy," he began. "Who is ruler of this house?"

"You are, Papa," I said with a trembling voice.

"Whose son are you?"

"Yours and Mama's."

"Whose?"

"Yours."

"That's better. Now tell me, which language do I speak?"

"Venda."

"Which does your mama speak?"

"Venda."

"Which should you speak?"

"Venda."

"Then why do I hear you're speaking other tongues; are you a prophet?" Before I could reply he grabbed me and lashed me thoroughly. Afterward he threatened to cut out my tongue if he ever again heard I wasn't speaking Venda. As further punishment, he increased the number of rituals I had to participate in. I hated him more for it.

6

Toward the end of 1966 my father was temporarily laid off his job as a menial labourer for a white firm in Germiston, a white city an hour's bus ride southeast of Johannesburg. He had been told by his *baas* (boss) that he would be recalled as soon as the reorganization of the firm was complete: it was coming under new ownership. The first few weeks my father stayed at home awaiting the recall. It never came. As weeks slid past, he began making plans to seek another job, thinking that he had been permanently laid

off. But first he had to go to BAD (Bantu Affairs Department)* to obtain a permit to do so.

I was out in the streets playing soccer one weekday afternoon when Florah came running up to me, crying. She told me that something terrible had happened at home and I was wanted immediately. When I reached home I found my mother pacing mechanically about the shack, murmuring helplessly, desperately, uncontrollably, clasp- ing and unclasping her hands.

"It cannot be! No it cannot be! Not my husband! Not my husband!" She was saying to herself.

"What happened to Papa, Mama?" I said with fright as I flung myself at her. I thought that maybe he had been killed. For a while my mother did not answer; but finally she controlled her emotions and between sobs told me what had happened. My father had been arrested that morning at the bus stop—for being unemployed. A man who had been with him as they waited for the bus to Johannesburg to apply for permits had brought my mother the grim news. The man's story was as follows: as he and my father waited for the bus several police vans suddenly swooped upon the bus stop. People fled in all directions. My father was nabbed as he tried to leap a fence. His pass was scanned and found to contain an out-of-work stamp; he was taken in. His crime, unemployment, was one of the worst a black man could commit.

My mother sent me to fetch my father's relatives, with the hope that they might find some way to secure his release. The relatives came but couldn't help; neither could our neighbours. "What would happen to him now?" I asked my mother. She told me not to worry, that my father would come back home after serving the customary four weeks' sentence for being unemployed. Four weeks went by and still he had not come back. We began to worry. My mother wept every night. We children cried along with her. No word of his whereabouts came for yet another week. Suspecting the worst—that my father had been sent to Modderbee—my mother lost faith in herself and began to despair of our future.

"Things will be very different without your father, children."

We did not understand, and we simply cried and grew frightened.

Pangs of hunger melted my resentment of my father away, and

* Now renamed Department of Cooperation and Development.

now that he was gone I longed night and day for his return. I didn't even mind his coming back and shouting restrictions at me and making me perform rituals. I simply wanted him back. And as days slid by without him, as I saw other children in the company of their fathers, I would cry. His absence showed me how much I loved him. I never stopped asking questions about when he would be coming back.

One afternoon after it had been two months since I last saw my father, and we were now on rations, I asked my mother, "When will Papa be back?"

"I don't know," my mother said sadly. "He may be gone for a long, long time."

"Why does he get arrested so much?"

"Because his pass is not in order."

"Why doesn't he get it fixed?"

"He can't."

"Why?"

"You're too young to know."

"What's a pass, Mama?" I knew vaguely what a pass was, but not its reality.

"It's an important book that we black people must have in order always, and carry with us at all times." She took out hers and showed it to me. I remembered seeing the book; in fact, I remembered seeing it many times; and yet, each time I saw it, it appeared dreadfully new. There was something about it which made me fearful, helpless. But I could not figure out what about it made me feel that way. It seemed a mere book. Yet it was, I was to later find out, the black man's passport to existence.

Naively I told my mother that I did not have a pass, suggesting that the police would not take me away.

"You'll have to get one when you turn sixteen."

"Will they take me away too, Mama? Like they do Papa?"

"Hush. You're asking too many questions for your own good."

My father's latest arrest, true to my mother's predictions, changed our life-style drastically. Lunch was now out of the question, so was breakfast; and having *pap 'n vleis* became a sporadic, chancy luxury. My mother, who for some reason could not get a permit to work in Johannesburg, could not even afford to buy tea and brown bread. There came many days when we ate nothing at all, spending the long evening hours simply staring at one another, at the empty pots, and

at the sun going down. George, Florah and I resorted to eating our own mucus.

Each day we spent without food drove us closer and closer to starvation. Then terror struck. I began having fainting spells. I would be out playing when suddenly my head would feel light, my knees would wobble, my vision would dim and blur and down I would come like a log. My playmate would then run away in shock (I would be told when I woke up), screaming that I was dead. My mother would then come and revive me, usually by pouring cold water over me, or slapping me on the cheeks, or both.

But there was sometimes a good part to my blackouts. Whenever I fainted near a store, I would get a piece of candy or fruit from the storekeeper upon reviving. Naturally, I loved fainting near stores. But my storefront fainting spells became so frequent that storekeepers—for fear of going broke, I suppose—no longer gave me anything.

One day I asked my mother if we had any savings, and she replied that we did not have a cent, that we were a hand-to-mouth household, that when my father had been around he had spent all his money on food, on paying rent, on busfare and on police bribes. I suggested that she borrow money from other people. Who? she asked. Our neighbours, I answered. She broke into a laugh, like that of a person being driven mad by hunger, and said, "Show me a black man with a penny to spare, and I'll bring your father back."

My father's long imprisonment began to wreak daily nightmares on everybody in the house. Without income we could no longer afford the rent for our dingy shack. One afternoon the landlord, a fat, grey-haired, no-nonsense *Mosotho* man came and told us that we would have to pack and leave at the end of the week, unless we came up with his money. He said that he had the longest list of people waiting to grab the shack at any price. And he wasn't lying: since word got around that we could not afford to pay rent, there had been a steady stream of shack-seekers at the custodian's door. My mother begged him to give us at least a month's extension, pointing out that eviction would automatically result in the family being endorsed out of Alexandra back to a tribal reserve.

"We have nowhere to go back there," my mother implored. "This is our only home. Please let us stay. We'll get you the money somehow."

The landlord relented and gave us until the end of the month to come up with the three months' rent we owed him. One weekday

afternoon while my mother was out hunting for food and money to pay rent, and Florah, George and I were left alone in the house, two tall, powerful, belligerent Zulu men, armed with spears and *pangas* (machetes), burst into the house and demanded to see my father.

"He isn't home," I said with bated breath. George and Florah burst out crying.

"Your Mother?"

"She too."

They looked about the kitchen for a couple moments, and then stepped into the bedroom. They came back to the kitchen, wielding the *pangas* and spears. George, Florah and me clung to each other in terror.

"When they get back, tell them we've been here!"

I nodded vigorously. Without saying another word, they proceeded to strip the house of furniture, seizing the wardrobe, chairs and table, saying that the goods were payment for a mysterious debt of honor my father owed them. My mother came back, and I told her what had happened. There was nothing she could do to retrieve the furniture, she said. She could not even report the matter to the police, she added, for it would mean producing her passbook, which was not in order. As she sat figuring what to do, tears streaming down her cheeks, she said: "This is just the beginning."

A few weeks later George and Florah came down with a mysterious illness, which left them emaciated and lethargic, their stomachs so distended that I thought they would burst. Their bodies were covered with sores, which punctured and oozed pus, and their hair turned to a strange orange colour. There were times when, while fanning off blowflies with a piece of cardboard from their filmy, half-closed eyes, mucus-covered noses and bruised mouths, while they lay writhing with pain on the damp cement floor, I thought I could see their tiny, empty intestines. Seeing them like that made me cry. Occasionally, they excreted live worms with their bloody stools. Their tearing coughs kept everyone awake at night. Each time my mother gave them a morsel of food, whenever she could get it, they vomited. Their suffering made the days and nights unbearably long and gloomy.

My mother did not have the one hundred cents to take them to the clinic, and no witch doctor, our last resort, was willing to treat them on credit. But with determination, courage and love, she tried her best to nurse them back to health using some herbs Granny gave

her. My brother and sister fought with the tenacity typical of African children to stay alive, but I wondered for how long. The strangest thing was that, except for a minor cough, I felt fine.

My father's arrest had come in September, and when Christmas was but two days away, my mother dropped a bombshell.

"There won't be any Christmas celebration this year," she said.

"What!" I cried, reacting as if I were a convict and my mother a judge condemning me to death for a crime I didn't commit.

Each Christmas, black families would celebrate by taking children of all ages to the Indian place on First Avenue to be outfitted with cheap garments, and some, the extremely lucky ones, with sneakers or shoes. The clothes were worn on Christmas and New Year's when families paraded their children on the streets in a pageantry designed to imply nonexistent wealth. Chickens, goats, sheep, pigs or cattle would be slaughtered by the various households, depending on each's level of affluence and religious beliefs, and, commensurately, big or small feasts would be held, to which relatives from near and far came to partake in the festivities. Scones would be baked and gallons of Kool-Aid or cider made to give to children on New Year's, while the adults went about each other's homesteads, drinking free liquor. And, for the families who could afford it, their houses would be elaborately decorated with trinketry, and the very affluent would have Christmas trees in their homes and exchange small gifts.

"How come we won't be celebrating Christmas, Mama?"

"Your father isn't here," my mother said.

"But Christmas is here," I said.

"Yes, I know," my mother said sadly. "But we don't have the money to celebrate it with."

"But we've always celebrated Christmas," I said.

"That's because your father had been around and working," my mother said.

"When will he be back?" I said, tears filling my eyes.

"I don't know," my mother said.

When Christmas came my mother locked my ailing brother and sister and me inside the house, while she went about the township begging for cookies, Kool-Aid and other foods to keep us alive. We children sat staring vacantly and longingly through the window at the bright streets teeming with children dressed in gaudy new outfits, sucking candy bars, munching cookies, laughing, playing and romping around, all the time singing Christmas carols. Florah couldn't

bear the agony of seeing her friends all dressed up, playing and eating, and she burst into tears. As I closed the curtains to ease her agony, while trying hard to mask my own sadness, I consoled her, "Don't worry, Sis, Christmas is but for one day. It'll be over before you know it, and next year you'll be out there too, just like everybody else." Little was I aware that that first bleak Christmas was a portent for many similar ones to come.

January, February and March of the new year went by, still without any sign of, nor word from, my father. We could not visit him, for we had no money, and even if we had had the money, we did not know to which prison he had been taken. My mother told me that the relatives of black prisoners were seldom notified about the whereabouts of their loved ones. Gradually, my father's absence began to change my mother's personality.

She grew irritable and short-tempered, and any slight provocation made her explode in anger. She spent many an afternoon staring blankly through the window while singing songs of sorrow to herself, as though she were going mad or something.

She began to drink heavily. And whenever she was drunk, her hot temper got her involved in nasty fights with several women in the yards over such things as whose child had been shitting all over the place, or who had the right to draw water first from the communal tap in the middle of the yard. We had one tap for about one hundred people. Inside the house, much of her anger was, fortunately, verbal rather than physical, but its presence nonetheless created a tense atmosphere, making me always self-conscious of what I said, how I said it and when I said it. Her changed personality gradually began changing mine too.

I became cranky. Many days I could not sit still in the house; violent impulses would seize me whenever I was at play so that I would, for no reason at all, pick fights with other children. I abused my brother and sister. To quiet my hunger, I embarked upon a career of stealing beer and soda bottles from shebeens, and frequently ended up in trouble. Fat shebeen queens would engage in shouting matches with my mother, calling her all sorts of filthy names, and me, a bastard, promising to work the voodoo on me. In an attempt to keep me off the streets and out of trouble, my mother said one day: "No more streets for you until you behave." She then told me that from now on I had to help her with household chores. She did much of the work, and I was required to lug water from the communal tap, run errands and baby-sit my brother and sister.

One morning as I was baby-sitting, and watching my mother go about cleaning the house, my suspicions about something that was happening to her reached a peak. For some months I had been keeping a close eye on her stomach, and it kept on getting bigger and bigger by the day; while George, Florah and I were getting thinner and thinner. I took her oversized stomach to mean she was getting fat, perhaps from stuffing herself secretly with all sorts of food in the middle of the night when we children were asleep. I had heard of mothers who did that.

I began watching her like a hawk, expecting to catch her eating things alone. I followed her everywhere at all times of the day, including to the lavatory, where I would stand outside the door until she reemerged. Because my father was gone, George, Florah and I now slept in the bedroom, on the floor next to the bed. I would stay awake at night, even after the candle was snuffed, listening for any strange sounds that might suggest eating.

Though I followed my mother around all day, kept a nightlong vigil on her, there was nothing suspicious about her behavior. The crumbs of food she begged from people she shared with us. Yet her stomach kept on getting bigger and bigger, and we children were like scarecrows. How could that be? Finally, in desperation, I decided to confront her. It was early evening, and we were sitting about the smouldering embers of a brazier fire. My mother was busy patching our rags.

"Mama," I said hesitantly, hiding my face behind my hands to conceal embarrassment over what I was about to say, for I was still unconvinced that my mother, my own mother, the mother I loved, would dare eat food, without sharing it with us.

"Yes?" my mother said, lifting her eyes from her work to look at me.

I coughed once or twice, then asked, in a trembling voice, "Why are you getting fat?"

"Am I fat, child?" she laughed. Immediately I took that as an attempt to hide her guilt.

"Yes, Mama," I said nervously.

"I don't think I'm fat," she said. "Come over here. Take a look at my arm." She rolled up the sleeve of her gingham dress, all the way to the shoulder joint, revealing a bony arm with stringy muscles. "Is this fat?" she asked.

I shook my head embarrassedly. Her arm was a matchstick.

"Then what makes you think I'm fat?"

I eyed her carefully, suspiciously. Should I tell her? What would she think of me? I thought back to the many days I spent staring at empty pots and plates; how each such day shoved me closer and closer to the brink of starvation.

"It's your stomach, Mama," the words spilled out of my mouth before I could stop them, "why does it keep on getting bigger and bigger?"

She roared with laughter. My suspicions grew, I don't know why.

"Oh! this!" she exclaimed, pointing at the massive bulge. "That's not fat, silly."

"What is it then?" I asked, confused.

She paused pensively for a few moments, then said, softly, "It's a bloated stomach."

I looked at her, uncomprehending; finally, I said, bravely, "You haven't been eating too much, have you, Mama?"

She fixed a searching stare at me, and the smile vanished from her face. My question had shocked her. For a long while she said nothing, simply staring at me with silent amazement. I became tense. Had I said something wrong? What was she thinking? Was I right in confronting her so bluntly? I took the solemn expression on her face to mean that she understood my need to know why her stomach was so big. She hemmed several times, as if mulling over how to tell me whatever it was she was about to tell me.

A few minutes passed in deep silence, during which I averted my eyes from her gaze. With a calmness of manner which somewhat but not quite concealed her astonishment of a moment ago, she finally spoke. Her "bloated stomach," she explained, was of a different, strange, but harmless nature. It was not the result of eating too much food, she said emphatically. She asked me if I had not seen her with a "bloated stomach" before. I said no. She told me that she had had three of them already, one when I was born (which, she said, I could not have seen because I was still at the clinic awaiting delivery), the second when my sister was born, and the third when my brother was born. The current one, she said, would disappear as soon as she had received another baby from the clinic. I did not ask her what was in her stomach, content with puzzling over why she would want another mouth to feed when there was not enough food to feed the mouths already here. Later when I was older, my mother was to tell me all about the birds and the bees, and I reminded her of the "bloated stomach" episode, and we both laughed.