TELL FREEDOM

by

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delete

Autobiography

interrogative

Africa

BOOK ONE.

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1

~~O N E~~
[1]

I pushed my nose and lips against the pane and tried to lick a raindrop sliding down on the other side. As it slid past my eyes, I saw the many colours in the raindrop... It must be warm in there. Warm and dry. And perhaps the sun would be shining in there. The green must be the trees and the grass; and the brightness, the sun... I was inside the raindrop, away from the misery of the cold damp room. I was in a place of warmth and sunshine, inside my raindrop world.

"Lee."

The sound jerked me out of my raindrop world. I was at the window, looking out, feeling damp.

"Lee."

I sensed that that was the sound by which I was identified. I turned and looked at the man who had made the sound. He was tall, thin and dark. He had a big head, wide forehead, and long face that tapered down to a narrow chin. His eyes were big, round, and hooded. There was a softness in them. He leaned back in a chair, his legs stretched in front of him, the right crossed over the left. He held his right

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hand out to the fire in the centre of the room. With his left ~~hand~~ he played with the hair of a girl who sat on the floor beside his chair.

I knew that man. Although I seemed to be seeing him for the first time, he was no stranger to me. He belonged most naturally and intimately to me and my world.

The man said:

"Come Lee. Tell us what you see and we'll make it into a story."

The way he looked at me disturbed me. I felt tense and desperate suddenly. I was unsure of this man, unsure of what he wanted from me. I turned my eyes from his face. It was then that I saw the woman on the other side of the fire. The word 'Mother' leaped to my mind. I burst out crying and ran to her. I knew her. She was mother. She belonged to me. With her I had no doubts, no uncertainties. With her, everything was always alright. She folded her arms about me and held me tight. She whispered words of comfort till I stopped crying.

Leaning on her knees, I turned to the man again. And then I knew that he was my father. He was almost as safe as she was... Mother and father go together... I knew that instinctively. It was silly to have cried.

I looked at the children on the floor. There

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was a biy and two girls. ~~The boy was the biggest.~~ These were my brother and sisters. These were my people and I was seeing them for the first time in a way that I could remember for the rest of my life. What went before I know only from hearsay. A little of what came after has slipped back into the shadows.

I can build what went before out of hearsay and after-knowledge.

My mother was a member of the Cape Coloured community. Coloured is the South African word for the half-caste community that was a by-product of the early contact between black and white. The first children of Europe who reached the Cape of Storms were men without women. They set up a half-way house to the East there. There was intercourse between white men and black women. The results were neither white nor black. So, the Cape Coloureds began. Later, when white women came to the Cape, the white men were more discreet in their taking. But the coloured community continued to grow. During the days of slavery political prisoners ~~and classes~~ from the Dutch East Indies were brought into the country. They too, went into the racial melting-pot.

In time the coloureds emerged as a distinctive community.

~~My mother was a product of this community.~~

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My father came from Ethiopia. He was the son of landowners and slave-owners. He had seen much of Europe before he came to South Africa. In after years, when my mother talked about him, she told wonderful stories of his adventures in strange parts of the world. I often wondered how much of this was true and how much make-believe. My father was nicknamed 'Vienna'. I have never been able to discover the reason for it. My mother loved the name. It conjured up a world of fabulous glory and magic for her. And she was deeply proud of my father's lineage. I recall a time when she made me recite, like a catechism, my father's family tree. It went something like this: "I am Peter Henry Abrahams Deras, son of James Henry Abrahams Deras whose name at home was Karim Abdul, son of Ingedi(e) of Addis who was the son of somebody-else who fought in some battle who was the son of somebody-else, who was the son of somebody-else who was with Menelik when he defeated the Italians..." It went on for a very long time. And the 'Deras' or 'de Ras' was the family title.

I have heard three stories to explain why my father left Ethiopia and came to South Africa. Once, in a mood of great gaiety, my mother insisted that the family had wanted him to marry a 'fine lady' and he had left the country to get out of it. Two of his closest

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~~friends told me two different stories. One said it was the result of a personal quarrel between him and his father. The other said it was because he disapproved of the practice of slavery which was then still extensive in Ethiopia.~~

~~Whatever the reason, he left Ethiopia and met my mother in Johannesburg.~~

~~She~~ was the widow of a Cape Malay (a product of the East Indies strain of the Coloured community) who had died the previous year and left her with two children. She was alone except for an elder sister, Margaret. My mother and her two children were living with her sister Margaret when she met the man from Ethiopia. Margaret was the fairer of the two sisters, fair enough to 'pass'. Her husband was a Scot. He worked on the mines. They had a little girl with blonde hair and blue eyes. They lived in 19th Street, Vrededorp. And there, in the street, the ~~two~~ brown children, my brother and sister, played with their cousin, the little white girl with blonde hair and blue eyes.

To this street and this house came the Ethiopian. There, he wooed my mother. There, he won her. They married from that house. They found a house of their own further down the street. They made of it a home of love and laughter. From there they sent their

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boy and girl to the Coloured School above Vrededorp. From there the Ethiopian went to work on the mines each morning. To that house he returned at the end of each day. In that house my sister, the third child in the family, was born. And there, early on the morning of the 19th of March, 1919, I was born.

It was there, in that house, one rainy day, that a voice said:

"Lee."

And I turned from the raindrop world and saw my family; my mother and my father, big brother Harry, big sister Margaret, and not-so-big sister Natalie: that was the beginning of awereness. I do not know exactly how old I was. Three, perhaps; or four; or perhaps a littleolder.

There are sharp, clear-cut flashes of memory...

I found a stray kitten in the street one day. It had hardly any fur on its body which was dotted with sores. Thick yellow matter oozed from its eyes. Its left front paw was cut and bleeding. I picked it up and took it home. Only my mother and Natalie were at home. The other two were at school, my father was at work. I went through the muddy lane to our back door.

"Look, ma!" Natalie cried.

My mother turned from her washing.

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"What have you got, Lee?"

A name for the kitten flashed into my mind.

"It is Moe, ma." He made a sound like that.

"Well, get him out of here at once!"

I stood my ground at the door.

"No. He's mine!"

My mother came nearer and looked at the kitten. She shook her head.

"Where did you find him?"

"The street."

"Well, take him back there."

"No."

"You can't keep him."

"No."

"Go on, put him in the street and come back so that I can wash you. The thing may give you some disease."

"No."

"I said go, Lee!" That was the voice of authority.

I began to whimper. I held the kitten tight. Nobody was going to part me from Moe. He was, quite suddenly, the most important thing in my world. Half-fearful, half-defiant, I screamed:

"I won't! I won't! I won't!"

That was ~~only~~ the beginning of a battle that lasted,

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intermittently, throughout the long day. It flared up again in the afternoon when Harry and Margaret returned from school. It reached new heights when Harry managed to get Moe away from me. I screamed and raved like one gone mad.

In the end it was my father, the law-giver of the family, who solved the problem. He said I could keep Moe provided he was bathed in a strong disinfectant. I wanted to get into the tub with Moe but the family would not allow it. Nor would they permit us to eat out of the same plate. We did, however, have two identical little enamelled plates and ate side by side on the floor. And often, when the others were not looking, we ~~used to eat~~ ate out of each other's plates. The food was much more tasty that way.

I had a cat called Moe
My little brother Moe;
He had a bleeding toe,
Poor sickly little Moe.

I loved my sickly Moe,
I nursed his bleeding toe;
We played all day, you know,
And O, we loved it so!

One day death came to Moe,
No blood dripped from his toe;
I lost my brother Moe,
I grieved and grieved him so.

My brother Harry made a coffin out of an old fruit box; my sister Margaret made a little white dress for Moe. On Sunday morning we took him to the

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Ottoman's Valley above Vrededorp, and buried him. While I prayed with tears streaming down my face, my brother and sisters were in hoots of laughter.

There was a sudden thunderstorm. I had to cut my prayers short, cover Moe quickly, and run for shelter. This ~~seemed to~~ amused the others more. I did not forgive them for a long time...

There are flashes of memory...

I remember the family picnics on Sundays. My mother and father would lie on the grass talking. We children would play about on the grass. The grass always seemed ~~so~~ very green, the sky was always ~~so~~ far away. On Sundays, in the Ottoman's Valley, my mother always had a basket filled with things to eat. And the sun always shone on our picnic Sundays. I remember the cool sweetness of an Orange after I had run myself silly...

I remember going to Sunday school with my sisters, and the special kind of quiet the place had, and the special kind of voices in which people spoke and prayed. And I remember the beautiful coloured cards I was given as I went out of the Sunday School...

I remember the stirring music of the Salvation Army Band...

I remember the marching children in the Band of

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Hope and seeing my brother and sisters marching among them with their broad purple sashes, and crying because I could not wear a sash and march with them...

I remember the peaceful laughter of our house. Everyone in it seemed to be happy...

I remember my first experience of crime and punishment. Fresh milk was unknown in Vrededorp. Those who could afford it, used tins of sweetened condensed milk. Two holes were made in the top of the tin and the milk was poured out. The first time, the tin of milk was left within my reach on the table. There was no one in the room so I tasted it. It was good. After that, I bided my time and stole milk whenever I could. The safest thing was to take the tin under the bed. I could not be surprised there. I was caught by my mother one morning. She pulled me from under the bed and beat me till I could not sit on my seat. And while she beat me she wept. It made the beating all the more painful...

I remember my mother and father merging into each other in my mind. Together, they were my symbol of peace and laughter and security...

Then my father died.

I remember the shadow that was over our house: the solemn faces of my brother and sisters; the new

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strangeness of my mother. It surprised me to see her crying...

I remember the many people who suddenly invaded the house, making me feel a stranger in my own home. My mother's sister, Aunt Margaret, became a real person for me then. It was she who did the things my mother had always done. She fed and clothed me, and when I wanted a piece of bread I asked her, not my mother...

I remember someone lifted me up and I looked into the coffin where my father lay. Because he did not smile at me, and because my mother cried, I cried too...

Then they took him away. And I never saw him again.

With his going, the order and stability that had been in my life, dissolved. There was no breadwinner so we had to leave the place that had been our home. ~~One day, I was dressed, and my clothes were put into a little woven basket. I took leave of my family. Then I picked up the little basket. A strange woman took my right hand and led me out into the big world. The last of the shadows disappeared. Sharply, intensely, painfully, I became consciously aware of the strange big world in which I lived.~~

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2.

I walked down Nineteenth Street with the strange woman. And as we went, I became aware of a noise. I tried to place it, but it was everywhere. A continuous deep rumble pervaded the world. It seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, to reach down from the spaces of the heavens. What was it? Where did it come from? Why?

"Hear the noise?" I said to the woman.

"What noise?" She was not interested.

I felt homesick suddenly and looked back. I looked for it but could not identify our house. Each house looked like the next, all strange ~~to me~~. And the people about me were all strangers. I panicked. I tried to pull free of the woman's grip.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To the station." Her voice was more kindly.

"Why?"

"We are going to Elseburg."

I began to whimper.

"I want to go home. I want my mother."

The woman spoke soothingly and quieted me down. About me was the big world. There was so much of it ~~to see~~. Motors flashed by. Trams rumbled along. Large

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horses dragging huge carts pranced up and down the wide Delarey Street. Shop windows were filled with new and interesting things. My head jerked ~~about~~ from left to right. I forgot my home and my mother. All this was new, excitingly new.

At Fordsburg station our train was on the point of departure. We scrambled on. The train moved off. The engine puffed and screamed a shrill warning. We found a place near the window. The woman sat on the hard wooden seat. I stood with my nose pressed against the dirty window pane, watching the world go by.

The engine puffed and snorted. Every now and then, when the train curved round a bend, it screamed its shrill warning. And the wheels, under me, whispered:

"O-n a-w-a-y. O-n a-w-a-y. O-n a-w-a-y."

Then they said: "On away. On away. On away." Then they said: "On away, on away, on away." And after that, for nearly all the time, they said:

"Onawayonawayonawayonawayonawayonawayonaway."

Soon the houses and buildings were far behind. The land came rushing up, only to rush away again: vast stretches of green land, and brown land; land rising and falling. Sometimes hills and mountains flashed by. Sometimes we went through a mountain and were in darkness. And the engine would scream its warning and we would come

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out of the mountain. ~~I watched the~~ Tall telegraph poles come up to meet us, then rush away. ~~They did this~~ with clocklike regularity. And all the time the wheels said, "Onawayonawayonawayonawayonawayonawayonaway-onawayonaway," till I was drunk with it all.

I was hazy and sleepy and very tired when we stepped off the train at the little gravel Siding at Elseburg. The sun had gone down. There was a softness over the land. It made everything more beautiful than it really was.

The woman took my hand and we set off on our four-mile walk through the beautiful land. When we got to her house at the Location, I was asleep on my feet. Vrededorp was far away and I was happy and tired, so I tumbled into a strange bed and slept deeply.

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3.

I woke in a ~~strange bed, in a~~ strange place. Fear took hold of me ~~again.~~ I longed for the familiar, for my mother and for the home I knew. For days, till I grew used to the people with whom I lived and familiar with the place, I was miserable and painfully homesick. In time the woman ~~who had brought me here~~ became Aunt Liza to me, a person with a name. And there was comfort in her having a name. Her husband, whom I had hardly noticed the night before, was Uncle Sam.

When I got up Uncle Sam had already gone to his work. In common with all themen, as well as some woman, of Elsburg Location, he worked on one of the nearby white farms.

The routine of my days at Flakes ~~there~~ began that morning. I made my bed. Then I went outside to the sunny side of the house with a small bowl of cold water and a piece of home-made soap. There I washed. Then I went in to breakfast. This was a plate of mielie pap. Maize is crushed to a powder slightly coarser than flour. A saucepan of salted water is brought to the boil, then the required amount of maize is added and stirred continuously. It is cooked in about fifteen minutes. The result is mielie pap. For breakfast, it is thinned

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down to a runny liquid. A plate full of that and a mug of black coffee was my breakfast. I had the choice of having two teaspoons of sugar in either my coffee or over my pap. I elected to have one over the pap and one in the coffee. The coffee remained bitter and I could hardly taste the sugar over the pap.

After breakfast I had five minutes to myself. ~~on the sunny side of the house. It was the beginning of winter so~~ I sat in the warmest and most protected spot I could find. I took stock of ~~looked at~~ the place that was now my home.

The houses were built in two lines, as they would be on either side of a wide road, each line facing the road. Only, there was no road. What could have been the road was ~~just~~ a strip of land, dotted with mounds and potted with holes. Here and there footpaths had worn the grass away; here and there, children had, by constant playing on the same spot, created patches of dusty sand. The Location stood on a rising between a valley on the one side and a river on the other. To the east and west, the land sloped away gently.

On windy days the sand patches were stirred to life and everything, all in all the houses, was coated with the fine, gritty sand that hung like a thick mist over the place. In the rainy season, the potholes in what might have been the wide street, were filled and

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became stagnant pools. When the rainy season passed the children fished for tadpoles in those pools. If the wet spell had been long, we often found frogs in the mud after the water had seeped away.

The houses were usually two-roomed. Here and there a person had added a smaller room to the back. But where that had been done there was not the bit of land left on which to grow a few green vegetables, for each house stood in a small piece of fenced-off land. And the land belonged to the farmers for whom the people of the Location worked. And behind the fenced-off little plots, spreading in all directions, were vast stretches of rolling land.

The houses were made by those who lived in them. And ~~it may be~~ because they had not security of tenure ~~that~~ few took pride in what they ~~have~~ put up. The walls were of unbaked mud bricks held together by straw. The roofs were sheets of corrugated iron nailed or screwed together over rafters. And the holes and open spaces were stopped up with sacking and pieces of canvas. Neither cold nor wet was ever effectively kept out.

The place, itself, seemed to fit into the bleak austerity of the land about it. There was not a tree in the valley below. To the east and west there was just the harshness of the sloping land under the

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curving sky. Even the sky seemed cold and remote and very far away. Only the river promised a touch of softness in this hard place. A line of willows marked the course it took. They were the only trees in all the land about. I would go there, I promised myself. I would go down to the river and look at the trees.

Aunt Liza came out of the house. My five minutes were up. She gave me two pails.

"The well is up the street," ~~she said.~~

I took the pails and marched out of the ~~little~~ gate. ~~The well was at the top of what might have been the wide street.~~ Women and children were already there. I was the stranger and everyone turned to look at me. I look steadily at the ground. A little boy, no bigger than myself, arrived after me.

At last, all the others had there water and went and only the boy and I were left. It was my turn but I did not know how to work the well. I looked at the boy.

"You go first," I said.

He started toward the handle then changed his mind.

"No. It is your turn."

I had hoped to watch and learn from him. ~~I stepped forward.~~

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The bucket stood on the edge of ~~the mouth of~~ the well. It was weighted with an iron bar. I took hold of the handle and began to unwind the rope.

"The bucket," the boy said.

It was still on the mouth of the well. A long strand of the rope dangled down into the darkness of the well. I let go of the handle, leaned forward, and pushed the bucket in. As I straighened up, the rope jerked taut, the handle swung in a downward arc. It struck me flush on the mouth, then on the upper part of the chest. I fell flat on my back. My jaw was paralysed. I swallowed blood. Above me the handle whirled dangerously. As suddenly as it started, the handle stopped. I got up slowly. My chest and jaw were beginning to hurt.

The boy was holding his sides, laughing. Then he saw the blood dripping from my mouth. He looked frightened suddenly. His eyes opened wide.

"Are you going to die?" he whispered.

Aunt Liza stalked up to the well, raging at the top of her voice.

"The first damn thing you'll learn here is that time's not to be wasted! I'll take the skin off your damn back if you play around when I send you for something! When'll I finish all that damn washing! You'll have to learn or I'll damn kill you!"

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Neighbours pushed their heads out of doors ~~Those living near the well came out~~ to see what the storm was about. When Aunt Liza saw my face, concern replaced her rage.

"What happened?"

I tried to speak but could not. I was too hurt to cry. ~~I could only stand there trembling, blood oozing from my mouth.~~ In her anxiety, she ~~took my shoulders and~~ shook me.

"What happened?"

The frightened boy whispered: "Is he going to die, Auntie?"

Aunt Liza turned to him. And he told her what had happened. He ended with his big question.

"Is he going to die, Auntie?"

"Of course not, Andries!" Aunt Liza snapped.

"But I saw a dog bleeding and he died," Andries said anxiously.

"Of course you did ~~not~~ know," Aunt Liza said to me. "Why didn't I think of that?" Her brow creased in a worried frown.

Andries' mother, our next door neighbour, came cursing to the well, promising hell and damnation to Andries for ~~having~~ being so long about the water. She, too, was silenced by my bleeding mouth.

Aunt Liza put her arm about my shoulders and

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hurried me down to the house. From across the way someone called:

"Wash his mouth with salt! That'll do it!"

When you have a cut, it is bathed with salt water. They say the sting of it is good. They say it kills the pain. When your nose bleeds, you inhale salt water up the nostrils. They say it will stop the bleeding. When you have earache you bathe your ear with warm salt water. When you have a sore throat, you gargle with salt water. If your eye is inflamed and sore, salt water eases it. When you have toothache you fill your mouth with hot salt water and get it to soak into the aching tooth. If you have stomach ache, a large mug of warm salt water is the best cure. It either drives the sickness down or brings it up... Salt was the greatest cure-all of my childhood days. And, it nearly always worked!

I washed my mouth repeatedly with salt water till the bleeding stopped. The intense pain soon passed. The inside of my mouth was sore, one of my teeth was loose, my lips were badly swollen, but no real damage had been done. And I was soon fit to go back to the well.

With the help of Andries who became my friend once he was sure I was not going to die, I learned how

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to handle the well. Together, we carried a relay of pails, first for Aunt Liza, then for his mother.

It was washing day for Aunt Liza. I was to discover that every day was washing day for Aunt Liza. And nearly all afternoons and nights were given up to ironing. Uncle Sam brought home a huge bundle of dirty laundry each night, and took away a neat bundle each morning. For a long time this was a mystery to me. Then I discovered it was the laundry of the white people for whom Uncle Sam worked.

Aunt Liza had two tubs out in the yard. A string of drying lines criss-crossed so that ~~there was not an~~ every inch of space ~~left for anything else to be hung~~ was taken used when the lines were full. One of the tubs stood on stones over an open fire built in a scooped out hollow of the ground. Near it was a huge pile of pieces of dried cow dung. She fed the fire with ~~this~~ them.

When we had brought enough water for her washing needs, we filled the rusty rainwater tank ~~which was dry~~. Then two pails filled the drinking bowl inside the house. The water I poured into the drinking bowl was yellow, almost opaque. I watched the sediment settle. When it was clear, I saw a black water spider moving slowly over the sediment. Other signs of tiny life wriggled about as well. I told Aunt Liza. She laughed

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"You'll get used to it. They haven't killed me. Just don't drink the water at the bottom. They stay there. Now go with Andries and find some manure, and be quick because ~~I need a lot~~ I'm short. You'll find the sacks in the corner. There's a piece of bread in the bin."

I found the sacks, and a hard crust in the bin. I hurried out to Andries.

"Come!" he chanted.

He dashed away. I followed. We streaked across the virgin fields, veering slightly to the east so that we would, if we kept that course, reach the river a long, long way further on. He was getting further away from me so I called:

"Hey, Andries!"

He eased up a little. With a burst of speed I caught up with him.

"Don't run so fast."

"We must."

"Why?"

"Others will get all the dung."

"Where are they?"

"Must be nearly there."

"Where?"

"Where we get the dung, silly!"

"Where is that?"

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"Shut up and come on. You'll see."

"I'm tired."

"Come on!"

"Let's walk a little."

"Want Auntie Liza to lick you?"

"Why?"

"If you walk now there'll be nothing when you get there. You'll go home with empty sacks. And man, will she lick you! Seem how thick her arms are? My mother's thin but she licks like hell. Auntie Liza with her thick arms will kill. Come on!"

"But I'm tired."

He shot away again. I had not noticed Aunt Liza's arms, but thinking of them, they became huge clubs swinging at me. I shot across the veld after Andries, forgetful of my tiredness. The space between us narrowed gradually. By the time we topped the rising of the land we were running side by side.

"There!" Andries cried.

Far ahead, a cluster of children walked across the veld, playing as they went. We eased the pace a little and trotted steadily across the wide green valley. Some way ahead, beyond the children, a herd of cows grazed under the gentle sun. ~~That was our destination.~~

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We caught up with the others. Andries was soon drawn into the play and banter. I was left on the outside. I was the new boy, the stranger. I had still to earn the right to be one of them.

Where we walked the grass was lush and taut. I could feel its sharpness on my feet where my canvas shoes had split. A little below us, to the left, in the direction of the river, were willow trees. They were stunted and their leaves were pale and transparent. They grew in two lines that were more or less straight. For them to be there suggested that where we walked had been the bed of a wide shallow river in times long gone. The morning sun was getting warmer. The land seemed vast, unending and very quiet. And we, the children and the cattle, were the only living creatures on the earth, owned it and the sky, belonged to earth and sky. The light breeze that was about us carried the voices of the children to the cows. The cows turned their heads ponderously. One or two opened their mouths and hailed us with a placid "Moooooo..."

A cross-eyed boy who seemed to command universal respect raised his hand. We all stopped. Andries ran to me and said:

"When he says go you go looking for dung. Quickly."

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I thought of Aunt Liza's arms. I did not want the weight of those arms on my body. But I was worried about the cows. Did they bite?

"Do they bite?"

"Who?"

"Those things." I pointed.

Andries doubled up with laughter. He turned to the others.

"Hey! He wants to know if cows bite!"

They joined in the laughter.

"He's just a dumb towny," someone called out.

"Shut your trap!" the cross-eyed boy called. "Go!"

They forgot my ignorance. We streaked off in all directions searching for the precious dung... Dung makes the fire that cooks the food. Dung is the fire that fights off the cold. Dung boils the washing that brings the money that pays for our bread...

We darted here and there, grabbing the dried flat cakes and shoving them into our sacks. We were not children at play. This was serious. Life depended on this. To the left of me, two boys argued over a piece of dung both had spotted at the same time. They soon came to blows. The rest were too concerned with finding dung to stop and look. I lost my nervousness of the cows and darted among them grabbing pieces of dung. I saw a

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huge piece and dashed for it. Another boy had seen it at the same time. We glared at each other. Two savage dogs over a bone. I remembered I was the stranger. I had to instal myself before I could expect to fight on terms of equality. I veered away and left the precious piece to him.

I filled one sack and started on the next. But now the dung became more rare. Competition became fierce. There were more dog-fights. I passed a boy on his knees, blood dripping from his nose. Two little girls were pulling each other's hair. I bumped into a boy. He pushed me over. I jumped up. He waited, his fists bunched, ready for the fight. I looked into his eyes and it seemed he was as frightened as I was. Somehow, seeing fear in his eyes, made me feel less of an outsider. I turned my back on him. I heaved the full sack onto my back and trotted away scanning the grass. I was beginning to recognise the cakes at quite a distance. The boy cursed me, a frustrated desperation in his voice.

All about me, each with sacks on his or her back, children ran; they darted first this way, then that: they stooped, grabbed, shoved dung into their sacks and were off again. The area of search widened till we ceased to be a group, till we lost

UWI Library

contact with each other.

When I had filled both my sacks the sun was high and I was alone in a hollow strip of land. I flopped down on the ground and leaned against the sacks. I was utterly wearied. It was not just tiredness. There had been a tight desperation in the search, a nervous tension. Now that it was over I felt listless. After a while I got up. I now had to find my way home. There was not a person in sight. If I faced about the river would be on my right. If I kept walking with the river on my right, and if I veered slightly to the left, I would be going in the general direction of home. ~~Of that much I was certain.~~ I heaved the sacks on to my back and climbed out of the hollow strip. I walked steadily, anxiously, yet wearily, till I topped a slight rising. The cows grazed in the valley below. I was right. That was the way home. And down there, among the cows, were some of the children. To the left, some way behind me, were others. Yet others were far ahead, on their way home. I trudged down into the valley. I met up with some of the children and we walked in silence, each bent under the weight of dung. Ahead of us, children walked in two's and three's. Others came behind us. Hardly a word was spoken on the journey back. The listlessness that was on me seemed on everyone else

UWI Library

as well.

We soon left the valley of the cows and walked where everything was sombre and hard, where even the grass was stunted. We crossed deep dongas of eroded and eroding soil. We passed barren patches where not ~~even~~ a blade of grass grew and the earth had turned to a fine, dusty sand. The way seemed infinitely longer, returning, than it had been going. And the sacks on my back grew heavier with each step I took.

I reached home near sunset. Aunt Liza was still at her wash-tub. She straightened her back painfully. I dumped the sacks near the fire. Though the day was not hot, sweat dripped from her face. Her eyes were bloodshot. The top of her dress clung damply to her body and was ~~completely~~ wet under her arms. I noticed the thickness of her arms, and her big hands that were pitted with being in water the whole day, white as a sheet and swollen to twice their size. A tired smile softened her face.

"Tired?"

I nodded.

"First time's always the worst," she said.

She put an arm about my shoulders and pressed me against her body. I felt strangely comforted and rewarded. The dull ache seemed to go from my back.

UWI Library

"Let's have some coffee," she said.

She warmed up the remains of the breakfast coffee.

"When do we eat, Aunt Liza?"

"When Uncle Sam comes home."

We drank our coffee. Aunt Liza went back to her tub. I found the warmest corner of the house and squatted. ~~sat down.~~ The coffee rumbled in my stomach. I felt warm inside and out. I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes...

Journeying from a great distance, I became aware of Aunt Liza. She shook me ~~by the~~ shoulder.

"Wake up!"

I opened my eyes.

"Come on," Aunt Liza said.

She moved slowly, heavily; only the strength of her will seemed to hold her big body together.

The huge bundle of washing was done. The little yard was filled with clothes drying on the lines. The whites gleamed cleanly. And in thetub was a huge pile waiting to go on the lines.

I shivered and got up. I followed her out of the gate, up the wide strip of field that might have been a road, past the well, across the veld. We walked till the Location was out of sight. We made for a cluster of

UWC Library

hillocks on the other side of a valley. She stooped and picked some broad leaves that grew among the grass. She gave them to me.

"It is called Moeroga. Look at them carefully. You'll come by yourself tomorrow. They grow among nettles."

I studied the leaves of wild spinach. Aunt Liza made a carrier of her apron, ~~by holding up the two lower corners~~. Deftly, quickly, she plucked the leaves. ~~Her fingers moved with amazing speed.~~ The nettles did not bother her. I worked more slowly, more clumsily. I tried to avoid the nettles but my hands were soon purple and stung as though on fire.

At last, the hollow of her apron filled. We turned back. Night was nearly on us. A fine mist hung over the weld. It grew cold. Night had fallen when we reached home.

"Build up the fire," Aunt Liza said.

I squatted close to the fire and piled it high with dung. As the dung caught light, bluish smoke with a fragrant sweetness about it spiralled up to the misty sky. Aunt Liza came and squatted beside me. Catching some of the warmth of the fire, she prepared the Moeroga. I watched her work, and became aware of my gnawing hunger.

UWI Library

"Aunt Liza..."

"Heh?"

"When does Uncle Sam come home?"

"Very hungry?"

"Yes."

~~"It'll be better tomorrow. I'll bake tonight."~~

~~"Cakes?"~~

~~"Bread."~~

~~"I like cakes... Cakes and ginger beer."~~

~~"That what you had at home?"~~

~~"Yes... sometimes."~~

~~"We'll see."~~

~~"And Uncle Sam?"~~

"Soon now."

My front was warming; my back was freezing. ~~It was an odd sensation being both warm and cold at the same time.~~ I thought about Uncle Sam. I had not really seen him the night before. I had been too tired and worked up. What was he like? Aunt Liza had become a person to me. When I thought of her my mind said: Two huge arms that terrified Andries; a gruff but gentle voice; two bloodshot eyes in a coarse reddish brown face; a broken left front upper tooth when she smiled; great tiredness; the comfort of her rough embrace. ~~She was A~~ person. And Uncle Sam? I

UWI Library

tried to build an image from what I had seen last night. Nothing came. Just a name: Uncle Sam.

Well, he would soon be home now. I would eat. And I would see him.

Aunt Liza crammed the Moeroga into a huge pot and put a stone on the lid to keep it down. I moved back from the fire. The heat was burning my face. My behind was numbing with cold. The fire gave off less smoke now. The dung glowed more brightly. And about me, in the darkness, was the noise of the cricket, the croak of the frog, and a thousand other noises I could not name. When had these begun? One moment the world had been silent, the next I was aware of all these noises. I looked into the darkness and saw the flickering lights of glow-worms go on and off continuously.

When the fire glowed at its brightest and gave off no smoke, we carried it into the kitchen and shut out the cold, the night, and the noises of the veld. I made myself comfortable on a sack in a corner on the floor and watched Aunt Liza prepare the evening meal.

She cooked mielie pap. ~~This was a thick, lumpy, pap, unlike~~ a thick, lumpy?

continued on p 26

UWI Library

~~the morning's which had been thin and runny.~~ When it was nearly done, she added a blob of fat. ~~Then she poured the boeroga~~ She put two iron bars across the fire, moved the pap to the very edge, and put on the boeroga.

Uncle Sam arrived. He flung open the kitchen door and brought in a gust of cold night air. ~~I shook off the drowsy haze and looked up.~~ He was very tall, his head was up among the rafters near the roof. But this was an illusion. I was seeing him from ground level and he only seemed tall. In reality he was no taller than Aunt Liza. He was very thin. His face showed up the rise and fall of every bone of his skull: like skin drawn tight over a skeleton head. His eyes, small, were set deep in their sockets. They were stern, forbidding eyes. And the curve of his mouth made him the most forbidding man I had ever seen. He carried a sack slung over his shoulder.

"Hello Sam," Aunt Liza said.

"Liz...." His voice was harsh.

He put the sack on the table, shut the door, hung his hat on the nail behind it, and looked at me. I lowered my eyes quickly.

"How's he?"

"Near killed himself at the well," Aunt Liza said. "But he picks up fast."

"Done anything?"

"A good bit. Get the things?"

"Yes. Our debt's up to a pound." His voice was bitter.

"Brought the washing?" ~~Aunt Liza asked~~

"It's outside." To me, he said: "Bring it in."

"Let it be," Aunt Liza said. "I'm fed up with their dirt."

I settled back in my corner. Uncle Sam sat on the bench near the

UWI Library

fire and stared moodily into it. Aunt Liza took the moeroga off. ~~the fire.~~ From the cupboard she got three pieces of crackling. When a pig is killed, it is skinned. The thick skin is fried to a crisp brown. This is cut into square pieces and sold as crackling. There was a pig farm near Elsburg Siding where the people of the Location bought their crackling. Aunt Liza warmed up the three pieces. The meal was ready. She dished it into three tin plates. A dollop of pap, a spoonful of moeroga, and a piece of crackling. She sat on the bench beside Uncle Sam. He said grace:

"Thank you for the food we are now going to eat, God. Amen."

We ate.

While we ate, four irons ~~were~~ warmed on the fire. I marvelled at how the moeroga had shrunk: so much had gone into the pot, so little came out. And it was the most tasteful part of the meal. ~~I thought: I'll bring back a sackful tomorrow then I can have more.~~ When I finished, Aunt Liza said:

"You can scrape the pot."

With ~~the help of~~ a knife I scraped the brown crust from the bottom of the pap pot. I discovered a delicacy, crisp and crunchy, and the tastiest part of the pap.

My last chore of the day was washing up. While I did it, Aunt Liza prepared my bed in the corner on the floor. Uncle Sam sat staring into the fire, picking his teeth with a used match-stick. On the fire, beside the irons, the coffee-pot brewed Uncle Sam's goodnight cup. I put the dry crocks away and went back to my corner.

I took off my canvas shoes. They would last another day at most then I would have to get used to going about barefooted. Next, I took off my khaki shorts. Draughts suddenly stung my bare bottom

UWI Library

and thighs. I hurried under the protection of the blankets. The flame from the thick homemade tallow candle fluttered. Aunt Liza ~~got up and~~ poured Uncle Sam's goodnight coffee. Then she cleared the table and began to iron.

I glanced furtively at Uncle Sam. The last sound he had made was to say grace. He sat, the mug of coffee in his hands, his face expressionless, his eyes fixed on one spot of the fading fire. I closed my eyes. I still had no picture of Uncle Sam. He was still not a person, ~~to me~~. He was just a name, a being, and silence. I felt afraid of him because I did not understand anything about him.

I dozed off ~~and~~ then woke. Aunt Liza was still ironing. Uncle Sam still sat staring fixedly at the fading fire. I dozed and woke again. Uncle Sam had gone. Aunt Liza was still ironing. The candle was nearly burnt out. The saucer on which it stood was gutted with molten tallow.

"In a minute, Sam," Aunt Liza called.

I fell asleep.

The pattern of my days was set. Each day I would perform the tasks I had performed this day; eat the meals I had eaten this day. With skill and speed, I would perform my chores more quickly and earn time, later, for a daily visit to the river. On Sundays there would be a small piece of meat to vary the diet. Often, there was a piece of bread at midday to take the edge off my hunger. Each day Aunt Liza washed; each night I fell asleep while she ironed. In time I lost my fear of Uncle Sam's silence. There was, of course, variety. But the basic pattern of my days was as this first day had been.

UWI Library

~~THREE~~ 4.

Wednesday was crackling day. On that day the children of the Location made the long trek to Elsberg Siding for the squares of pig's ~~skin~~ lined that passed for our daily meat. We collected a double lot of cow dung the day before; a double lot of moeroga.

I finished my breakfast and washed up ~~quickly~~. Aunt Liza was at her washtub in the yard. A misty, sickly sun was just showing ~~itself~~. And on the open veld ~~XXXXX~~ ~~fat dewdrops bent the grass with their weight~~ the frost lay thick & white on the grass.

"Ready?" Aunt Liza called.

I went out to her. She shook the soapsuds off her swollen hands and wiped them on her apron. She lifted the apron and put her hand through the slits of the many thin cotton dresses she wore. The dress nearest the skin was the one with the pocket. From this she pulled ~~out~~ a sixpenny piece. She tied it in a knot in the corner of a bit ~~square~~ coloured cloth.

"Take care of that....Take the smaller piece of bread in the bin but don't eat it till you start back. You can have a small piece of crackling with it. Only a small piece, understand?"

"Yes, Aunt Liza."

"All right."

I got the bread and tucked it into the little canvas bag in which I would carry the crackling.

"'Bye Aunt Liza." I trotted off, one hand in my pocket, feeling the cloth where the money was. I paused at Andries' home.

"Andries!" I danced up and down while I waited. The cold was not so terrible on bare feet if one did not keep still.

UWI Library

Andries came trotting out of their yard. His mother's voice followed; desperate and plaintive:

"I'll skin you if you lose the money!"

"Women!" Andries said bitterly. ~~under his breath.~~

I glimpsed the dark, skinny, woman at her washtub as we trotted across the veld. Behind, and in front of us, other children trotted in twos and threes.

There was a sharp bite to the morning air I sucked in; it stung my nose so that tears came to my eyes; it went down my throat like an icy draught; my nose ran. I tried breathing through my mouth but this was worse. The cold went through my shirt and shorts; my skin went pimply and chilled; my fingers went numb and began to ache; my feet felt ~~as though~~ like frozen lumps that did not belong to me, yet jarred and hurt each time I put them down. I began to feel sick and desperate.

"Jesus God in heaven!" Andries cried suddenly.

I looked at him. His eyes were rimmed in red. Tears ran down his cheeks. His face was drawn and purple, a sick look on it.

"Faster," I said.

"Think it'll help?"

I nodded. We went faster. We passed two children, sobbing and moaning as they ran. We were all in the same desperate situation. We were creatures haunted and hounded by the cold. It was a cruel enemy who gave no quarters. And our means of fighting ~~him~~ it were pitifully inadequate. In all the mornings and evenings of the winter months, young and old, big and small, were helpless victims of the bitter cold. Only towards noon and the early afternoon, when the sun sat high in the sky, was there a brief respite. For us, the children,

UWI Library

the cold, especially the morning cold, assumed an awful and malevolent peronality. We talked of 'It'. 'It' was a half human monster with evil thoughts, evil intentions, bent on destroying us. 'It' was happiest when we were most miserable. Andries had told me how 'It' had, last winter, caught and killed a boy.

Hunger was an enemy too, but one with whom we could come to terms, who had many virtues and values. Hunger gave our pap, moeroga, and crackling, a feast-like quality ~~of an evening~~. We could, when it was not with us, think and talk kindly about it. Its memory could even give moments of laughter. But the cold of winter was with us all the time. 'It' never really eased up. There were only more bearable degrees of 'It' at high noon and on mild days. 'It' was the real enemy. And on this Wednesday morning, as we ran across the veld, winter was more bitterly, bitingly, freezingly, real than ever.

The sun climbed. The frozen earth thawed, leaving the short grass looking wet and weary. Painfully, our feet and legs came alive. The aching numbness slowly left our fingers. We ran more slowly in the more bearable cold.

In climbing, the sun lost some of its damp look and seemed a real, if cold, sun. When it was right overhead, we struck the sandy road which meant we were nearing the Siding. None of the others were in sight. Andries and I were alone on the sandy road on the open veld. We slowed down to a brisk walk. We were sufficiently thawed to want to talk.

"How far?" I said.

"A few minutes," he said.

"I've got a piece of bread," I said.

"Me too," he said. "Let's eat it now."

UWI Library

"On the way back," I said. "With a bit of crackling."

"Good idea....Race to the fork."

"All right."

"Go!" he said.

We shot off together, legs working like pistons. He soon pulled away from me. He reached the fork in the road some fifty yards ahead.

"I win!" he shouted gleefully, though his teeth still chattered.

~~To the right, the road led down to the Siding which we could see from the fork. And down there, leaning against the barrier that was down, we saw some of the children who had been ahead of us. They were waiting to see a train pass. From a long way off, to the right, came the shrill whistle of the train.~~

~~"Train coming," Andries shouted.~~

~~"Let's go'n see," I said.~~

~~"Better not," he said. "We'd be late and it'll be cold."~~

~~We took the fork to the left.~~

~~"Let's throw," Andries said~~

We ~~picked up stones and~~ pitched stones down the road, ~~each~~ trying to pitch further than the other. I won ~~at this~~ and wanted to go on doing it. But Andries soon grew weary with pitching. We race again. Again he won. He wanted another race but I refused. I wanted pitching, but he refused. So, sulking with each other, we reached the pig-farm.

We followed a fenced-off pathway round sprawling white buildings. Everywhere about us was the grunt of pigs. As we passed an open doorway, a huge dog came bounding out, snarling and barking at us. In our terror, we forgot it was fenced in and streaked away. ~~as hard as our feet could carry us.~~ Surprised, I found myself a good distance ahead of Andries. We looked back and saw a young white woman call the dog

UWI Library

to heel.

"Damn Boer dog," Andries said.

"~~What's the~~ Matter with it?" I asked.

"They teach them to go for us. Never get caught by one. My old man's got a hole in his bottom where a Boer dog got him."

I remembered I had outstripped him.

"I won!" I said.

"Only because you were frightened," he said.

"I still won."

"Scare arse," he jeered.

"Scare arse, yourself!"

"I'll knock you!"

"I'll knock you back!"

~~We saw~~ A couple of white men ~~coming~~ down the path, and ~~That~~ ended our possible fight. We hurried past them to the distant shed where a queue had already formed. ~~People were~~ There were grown-ups ~~as well as~~ and children. All the grown-ups, and some of the children, were from places other than our Location.

The line moved slowly. The young white man who served us did it in leisurely fashion, with long pauses for a smoke. Occasionally he turned his back ~~on us for long spells~~.

At last, after what seemed hours, my turn came. Andries was behind me. I ~~untied the knot and~~ took the sixpenny piece from the square of ~~coloured~~ cloth, and offered it to the man.

"Well?" he said.

"Sixpence crackling please."

Andries nudged me in the back. The man's stare suddenly became cold and hard. Andries whispered ~~something~~ into my ear.

UWI Library

"Well?" the man repeated coldly.

"Please baas," I said.

"What d'you want?"

"Sixpence crackling please."

"What?"

Andries dug me in the ribs.

"Sixpence crackling please baas."

"What?"

"Sixpence crackling, please baas."

"You new here?"

"Yes, baas." I looked at his feet while he stared at me.

At last he took the sixpenny piece from me. I held my bag open while he filled it with crackling from a huge pile on a large canvas sheet on the ground. Turning away, I stole a fleeting glance at his face. His eyes met mine, and there was amused, challenging mockery in them. I waited for Andries at the back of the queue, out of the reach of the white man's mocking eyes.

The cold day was at its mildest as we walked home along the sandy road. I took out my piece of bread and, with a small piece of greasy crackling, still warm, on it, I munched as we went along. We had not yet made our peace so Andries munched his bread and crackling on the other side of the road.

"Dumb fool!" ~~he flung at me.~~

He was mocking ed at me for not knowing how to address the white man. ~~I did not know how to reply to it. I had been a dumb fool."~~

"Scare arse!" I shouted back.

Thus, hurling ~~whatever~~ curses ~~we could~~ at each other, we reached the fork. Andries saw them first and moved over to my side of the road.

UWI Library

"White boys," he said.

There were three of them. Two of about our own size and one slightly bigger. They had school bags and were coming toward us up the road from the Siding.

"Better run for it," Andries said.

"Why?"

"No, that'll draw them. Let's just walk along, but quickly."

"Why?" I repeated.

"Shut up," he said.

Some of his anxiety touched me. Our own scrap was forgotten. We marched side by side as fast as we could. The white boys saw us and hurried up the road. We passed the fork. Perhaps they would take the turning away from us. We dared not look back.

"Hear them?" Andries asked.

"No."

I looked over my shoulder. ~~They were hurrying after us.~~

"They're coming," I said.

"Walk faster," Andries said. "If they come closer, run."

"Hey, klipkop!"

"Don't look back," Andries said.

"Hottentot!"

We walked as fast as we could.

"Bloody kaffir!"

Ahead was a bend in the road. Behind the bend were bushes. Once there, we could run without them knowing it till it was too late.

"Faster," Andries said.

They began pelting us with stones.

"Run when we get to the bushes," Andries said.

UWI Library

The bend and the bushes were near. We would soon be there.

A clear young voice carried to us:

"Your fathers are dirty black bastards of baboons!"

"Run!" Andries called.

A violent, unreasoning anger suddenly possessed me. I stopped and turned.

"You're a liar!" I screamed it.

The foremost boy pointed at me:

"An ugly black baboon!"

In a fog of rage I went towards him.

"Liar!" I shouted. "My father was better than your father!"

I neared them. The bigger boy stepped between me and the one I was after.

"My father was better than your father! Liar!"

The big boy struck me a mighty clout on the side of the face. I staggered, righted myself, and leapt at the boy who had insulted my father. I struck him on the face, hard. A heavy blow on the back of my head nearly stunned me. I grabbed at the boy in front of me. We went down together.

"Liar!" I said through clenched teeth, hitting him with all my my might.

Blows rained on me, on my head, my neck, the side of my face, my mouth, but my enemy was under me and I pounded him fiercely, all the time repeating:

"Liar! Liar! Liar!"

Suddenly, stars exploded in ~~the back of~~ my head. Then there was darkness.

I emerged from the darkness to find Andries kneeling beside me.

"God man! I thought they'd killed you."

UWI Library

I sat up and took stock of the damage. The white boys were nowhere to be seen. Like Andries, they'd probably thought me dead and run off in a panic. The inside of my mouth felt sore and swollen. My nose was tender to the touch. The back of my head ached. A trickle of blood dripped from my nose. I stemmed it with the square of coloured cloth. The greatest damage was to my shirt. It was ripped in many places. I remembered the crackling. I looked anxiously about. It was safe, a little off the road on the grass. I relaxed. I got up and brushed my clothes. I picked up the crackling.

"God, you're dumb!" Andries said. "You're going to get it! Dumb arse!"

I was too depressed to retort. Besides, I knew he was right. I was dumb. I should have run when he told me to.

"Come on," I said.

One of many small groups of children, each child carrying his little bag of crackling, we trod the long road home in the cold winter afternoon.

There was tension in the house that night. When I got back Aunt Liza had listened to the story in silence. The beating or scolding I expected did not come. But Aunt Liza changed while she listened, became remote and withdrawn. When Uncle Sam came home she told him what had happened. He, too, just looked at me and became ~~remote~~ more remote and withdrawn than usual. They were waiting for something; their tension reached out to me, and I waited with them, anxious, apprehensive.

The thing we waited for came while we were having our supper. We heard a trap pull up outside.

UWI Library

"Here it is," Uncle Sam said and got up.

Aunt Liza leaned back from the table and put her hands in her lap, fingers intertwined, a cold, unseeing look in her eyes.

Before Uncle Sam reached it, the door burst open. A tall, broad, white man strode in. Behind him came the three boys. The one I had attacked had swollen lips and a puffy left eye.

"Evening baas," Uncle Sam murmured.

"That's him," the bigger boy said, pointing at me.

The white man stared ~~at me~~ till I lowered my eyes.

"Well?" he said.

"He's sorry, baas," Uncle Sam said quickly. "I've given him a hiding he won't forget soon....You know how it is, baas. He's new here, the child of a relative in Johannesburg and they don't all know how to behave there. You know how it is in the big towns, baas." The plea in Uncle Sam's voice had grown more pronounced as he went on. He turned to me. "Tell the baas and young basies how sorry you are, Lee."

I looked at Aunt Liza and something in her lifelessness made me stubborn in spite of my fear. ~~Blind resistance welled up in me.~~

"He insulted my father," I said.

The white man smiled ~~for the first time.~~

"See Sam, your hiding couldn't have been good."

There was a flicker of life in Aunt Liza's eyes. For a brief moment she saw me, looked at me, warmly, lovingly, then her eyes went dead again.

"He's only a child, baas," Uncle Sam murmured.

"You stubborn too, Sam?"

"No, baas"

"Good....Then teach him, Sam. If you and he are to live here, you must teach him. Well....?"

UWI Library

"Yes, baas."

Uncle Sam went into the other room and returned with a thick leather thong. He wound it once round his hand and advanced on me. The man and boys leaned against the door, watching. I looked at Aunt Liza's face. Though there was no ~~sign~~ sign of life or feeling on it, I knew suddenly, instinctively, that she wanted me not to cry. ~~I felt it.~~

Bitterly, Uncle Sam said:

"You must never lift your hand to a white person. No matter what happens, you must never lift your hand to a white person...."

He lifted the strap and brought it down on my back. I clenched my teeth and stared at Aunt Liza. I did not cry with the first three strokes. Then, suddenly, Aunt Liza went limp. Tears showed in her eyes. The thong came down on my back, again and again. I screamed and begged for mercy. I grovelled at Uncle Sam's feet, begging him to stop, promising never to lift my hand to any white person.....

At last, the white man's voice said:

"All right, Sam."

Uncle Sam stopped. I lay whimpering on the floor, ~~too spent to move.~~ Aunt Liza sat like one in a trance.

"Is he still stubborn, Sam?"

"Tell the baas and basies you are sorry."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Bet his father is one of those who believe in equality."

"His father is dead," Aunt Liza ~~had spoken at last.~~ said.

"Goodnight, Sam."

"Goodnight, baas. Sorry about this."

"All right, Sam." He opened the door. The boys went out first, then he followed. "Goodnight, Liza."

UWI Library

Aunt Liza did not answer. The door shut behind the white folk, and, soon, we heard their trap moving away. Uncle Sam flung the thing viciously against the door, slumped down on the bench, folded his arms on the table, and buried his head in his arms. Aunt Liza moved away from him, came on the floor beside me and lifted me into her large lap. She sat rocking my body. Uncle Sam began to sob softly. After some time, he raised his head and looked at us.

"Explain to the child, Liza," he said.

"You explain," Aunt Liza said bitterly. "You are the man. You did the beating. You are the head of the family. This is a man's world. You do the explaining."

"Please, Liza...."

"You should be happy. The whites are satisfied. We can go on now."

With me in her arms, Aunt Liza got up. She carried me into the other room. The food on the table remained half-eaten. She laid me on the bed on my stomach, smeared fat on my back, then covered me with the blankets. She undressed and got into bed beside me. She cuddled me close, warmed me with her own body. With her big hand on my cheek, she rocked me, first to silence, then to sleep.

For the only time of my stay there, I slept on a bed in Elsburg.

When I woke next morning Uncle Sam had gone. Aunt Liza only once referred to the beating he had given me. It was in the late afternoon, when I returned with the day's cow-dung.

"It hurt him," she said. "You'll understand one day."

That night, Uncle Sam brought me an orange, a bag of boiled sweets, and a dirty old picture book. He smiled as he gave them to me, rather anxiously. When I smiled back at him, he seemed to relax. He put his hand on my head, started to say something, then changed his mind and took his seat by the fire.

UWI Library

Aunt Liza looked up from the floor where she dished out the food.

"It's all right, old man," she murmured.

"One day....." Uncle Sam said.

"It's all right," Aunt Liza repeated insistently.

The long winter passed. Slowly, day by day, the world of Elsberg became a warmer place. The cracks in my feet began to heal. The spells of bearable, noonday cold gave way to warmth. The noise of the veld at night became a din. The freezing nights changed, became bearable; changed again, became warm. Warm nights and hot days!

Summer had come, and with its coming, the world became a softer, kindlier, more beautiful place. Sunflowers began blooming in people's yards. And people themselves began to relax and laugh. When, one evening, as I came in with some washing from the line, I heard Uncle Sam's voice raised in laughter, and saw him and Aunt Liza playing, I knew that summer had really come. Later that same evening, he went into the other room and returned with a guitar. Aunt Liza beamed.

"Open the door?"

Uncle Sam nodded. He played. Soon, people from the other houses came, in ones and twos, till our little room was crowded. Someone sang with his arms on his wife's shoulders, a love song:

I'll be your sweetheart,

If you will be mine....

Summer had come indeed.

In the long summer afternoons, after my day's work, I went down to the river. Sometimes Andries and some of the other children went with me. Often I went alone.

UWI Library

Often, with others, or alone, I climbed the short willows with their long drooping branches. The touch of a willow leaf on the cheek gives a feeling of cool wonder. Often, I jumped from stone to stone on the broad bed of the shallow, clear, fast-flowing river. Sometimes I found little pools of idle water, walled off by stones from the flow. I tickled long-tailed tadpoles in these. The sun on the water touched their bodies with a myriad colours. Sometimes I watched the springhaas - the wild rabbit of the veld - go leaping across the land, almost faster than my eye could follow. And sometime I lay on my back, on the green grass, on the bank of the river, and looked up at the distant sky, watching the thin fleecy white clouds form and reform and trying to associate the shapes with people and things I knew. I loved being alone by the river. It became my special world.

Each day I explored a little more of the river, going further up or down stream, extending the frontiers of my world. One day, going further downstream than I had been before, I came upon a boy. He was on the bank on the other side from me. We saw each other at the same time and stared.

~~The thing that struck me about him was that~~ He was completely naked. He carried two finely carved ~~thick~~ sticks of equal size and shape, both about his own height. He was not brown, like the other children of our Location, but light-dark-brown, almost black. I moved the edge of the river. He called out ////////// in a strange language.

"Hello!" I shouted.

He called out again, and again I could not understand. I searched for a place with stones, then bounded across. I approached him slowly. As I drew near, he gripped his sticks more firmly. I stopped.

UWI Library

He spoke harshly, flung one stick on the ground at my feet, and held the other ready as though to fight.

"Don't want to fight," I said.

I reached down to pick up the stick and return it to him. He took a step forward and raised the one in his hand. I moved back quickly. He stepped back and pointed at the stick on the ground. I shook my head.

"Don't want to fight."

I pushed the stick toward him with my foot, ready to run at the first sign of attack. I showed my new, stubby teeth in a tentative smile. He said something that sounded less aggressive. I nodded, smiling more broadly. He relaxed, picked up the stick, and transferred both to his left hand. He smacked his chest.

"Joseph! Zulu!"

I smacked my own chest.

"Lee...." But I didn't know what I was apart from that.

He held out his hand. We shook. His face lit up in a sunny smile. He said something and pointed downstream. Then he took my arm and led me down.

Far downstream, where the river skirted a hillside, hidden by a cluster of willows, we came on a large clear pool. Joseph flung his sticks on the ground and dived in. He shot through the water like a tadpole. He went down and came up. He shouted and beckoned me to come in. I undressed and went in more tentatively. Laughing, he pulled me under. I came up gasping and spluttering, my belly filled with water. He smacked me on the back and the water shot out of my mouth in a rush. When he realised I could not swim he became more careful. We spent the afternoon with Jospeh teaching me ~~how~~ to swim.

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At home, that evening, I stood beside Aunt Liza's washtub.

"Aunt Liza...."

"Yes?"

"What am I?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I met a boy at the river. He said he was Zulu."

She laughed.

"You are Coloured. There are three kinds of people: white people, Coloured people, and black people. The white people come first, then the Coloured people, then the black people."

"Why?"

"Because it is so." ~~Men rule the world and they say it is so."~~

~~"And women?"~~

~~"Women would have more sense."~~

~~"Why?"~~

~~"Because they would....Now go'n build the fire instead of talking so much."~~

Next day, when I met Joseph, I smacked my chest and said:

"Lee! Coloured!"

He clapped his hands and laughed.

Joseph and I spent most of the long summer afternoons together. He learnt some Afrikaans from me; I learnt some Zulu from him. Our days were full.

There was the river to explore.

There were my swimming lessons, and others.

I learnt to fight with sticks; to weave a green hat of young willow wands and leaves; to catch frogs and tadpoles with my hands; to set a trap for the springhaas; to make the sounds of the river birds.

UWI Library

There was the hot sun to comfort us....

There was the green grass to dry our bodies....

There was the soft clay with which to build....

There was the fine sand with which to fight....

There were our giant grasshoppers to race....

There were the locust swarms when the skies turned black and we caught them by the hundreds....

There was the rare taste of crisp, brown baked, salted locusts...

There was the voice of the wind in the willows....

There was the voice of the heaven in thunderstorms....

There were the voices of two children in laughter, ours....

There were Jospeh's tales of black kings who lived in days before the white man....

At home, I said:

"Aunt Liza...."

"Yes?"

"Did we have Coloured kings before the white man?"

"No."

"Then where did we come from? Joseph and his mother come from the black kings who were before the white man."

And laughing, and ruffling my head, she said:

"You talk too much....Go'n wash up."

And to Joseph, next day, I said:

"We didn't have Coloured kings before the white man."

And he comforted me and said:

"It is of no moment. You are my brother. Now my kings will be your kings. Come: I have promised the mother to bring you home. She awaits you. I will race you to the hill."

UWI Library

From the top of the hill I looked into a long valley where cattle grazed. To the right, on the sloping land, nestled a cluster of mud huts. Round each hut was a wall built of mud.

"That is my home." Joseph pointed.

We veered right and went down to it. From a distance, we saw a woman at the gate of one of the huts.

"There is the mother!" He walked faster.

She was barefooted. She wore a slight skirt that came above her knees. A child was strapped to her back. The upper part of her body was naked except for the cloth across her chest that supported the child. Round her neck, arms, and legs, were strings of white beads. As we drew near, I saw that she was young. And her broad, round face was beautiful. Her black eyes were liquid soft. She called out a greeting and smiled. Joseph pushed me forward.

"This is my brother Lee of the Coloureds, little mother."

"Greetings, mother," I said.

"I greet you, my son," she said softly, a twinkle in her eyes. "As the man of my house has told you, food awaits. Come."

"See!" Joseph puffed out his chest. To his mother he said, "He would not believe when I told him I was the man in our house."

"He is indeed," she said.

Circling the hut was a raised platform. We sat on this while she brought us the food; salted fried locusts and corn on the cob. She sat nearby and watched us eating.

"Show the mother," Joseph said and took another bite at the mielies. "Show the mother you are not circumcised yet."

I showed her.

"This is strange," she said. "Have you no initiation schools?"

UWI Library

"No!" Joseph said.

"Then when do you enter manhood?"

"He does not know."

"Is it true?" She looked at me.

I nodded.

"He's still a child!" Joseph cried. "So big and a child!"

"And it is wrong to mock," she said. "Maybe their ways are different."

"But he's my brother," Joseph protested.

"You only mock a brother in order to fight," she said.

"Then I will fight," I said.

"I will not fight my brother," he said. "Still, I think the ways of your people, the Coloureds, are strange. They had no kings before the white man, and they have no initiation schools."

"The ways of all people are not the same," the little mother said.

"I will ask my father," Joseph said. "He knows everything. He will tell me of the ways of your Coloureds."

"Where is he?" I asked.

"He's far away," Joseph said.

"On the mines," his mother said.

"But he will come back," Joseph said.

"And your father?" she asked.

"He's dead," I said.

She put an arm about me.

"And your mother is with you here?"

"No. I live with Aunt Liza and Uncle Sam. Aunt Liza brought me here when my father died."

UWI Library

"He's without a father, Joseph. We must share our father with him."

"I will tell him when he comes," Joseph said.

The sun was sinking.

"I must go," I said.

"You must come again for you are now my son too," the little mother said. "And it is good for a mother to see her son often."

"I will," I said.

"I will bring him tomorrow and we will eat," Joseph said.

"It is the wish of the man of the house," she said.

I got up and walked away from the house.

"Go well," the little mother called.

"Remember your rabbit," Joseph called. "We meet near the traps tomorrow."

"Yes," I shouted.

People from the other huts looked at me then carried on with what they were doing. I climbed to the crest of the hill then stopped and looked back. They waved. I waved back. Then I went over the hill.

I picked up my first rabbit, hidden near our traps, and went home.

We had a rabbit feast that night. After the meal, Uncle Sam said:

"The little kaffir's teaching him useful things."

I said:

"Uncle Sam...."

"Yes?"

"Why can't we have initiation schools like the one where Joseph learned everything and became a man?"

UWI Library

"Because we aren't kaffirs."

"But Joseph is not a kaffir. He's Zulu."

"Same thing. All blacks are kaffirs."

"What's a kaffir?"

"Just told you. All blacks are kaffirs."

"Then I'd like to be a kaffir."

"Don't be silly."

Aunt Liza looked up from the sheets of paper she had been studying.

"News from your family," she said. "Your sister, Natalie has passed away. Your mother is in hospital. Your brother and sister are living with your Aunt Margaret. They say they may come to see you."

"What's a hospital?"

"A place where sick people go."

"Will she die?"

"No."

Next day when I saw the little mother, I said:

"Why does Uncle Sam say all black people are kaffirs?"

"You asked him?"

"Yes."

"What did he say."

"Because they are black."

She smiled.

"There are those who think to be black is not to be like other people. I thought it was only among the whites but it seems it is among the brown too. To say a person is a kaffir is to say he is bad."

"But he said I was learning good things from Joseph."

UWI Library

"Maybe that is why he lets you play with Joseph."

"I told him I would like to be a kaffir."

She sighed, smiled, and shook her head.

"Maybe now, my son," she said. "But not later."

I sensed that I had, in some strange way, made her sad.

But these were small blemishes that did not long mar that bright summer.

Christmas came and it was a feast of eating and laughter. I spent half my time at home with Aunt Liza and Uncle Sam and the other half with Joseph and the little mother.

My sixth birthday came. Joseph and the little mother and I celebrated it by the river.

Then, early one morning, just as the first cold touches crept into the morning air, Joseph came to our Location.

I was washing up when I heard young voices shouting:

"Look at the naked kaffir! Lee's kaffir!"

I rushed out. Joseph came gravely to me.

"I come to take leave, my brother. My father has died in the mines so we go back to our land."

He stood straight and stern, not heeding the shouts of the children about. He was a man. This was the burden of his manhood. I had learned much from him, so I said equally coldly:

"I must take leave of the little mother."

"She is a woman. She weeps."

We ran all the way there....

When the little cart had taken them away, I climbed the hill and went down to the river. I carried Joseph's two sticks with me.

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These were his parting gift to his brother.

"Defend yourself," he had said. "I will make others."

~~And all the while the little mother had wept silently.~~

~~A man had brought the news last night. Now they were gone.~~

~~He had said:~~

~~"We will meet again, my brother."~~

~~And I had said:~~

~~"Yes."~~

I walked along the river that had been our kingdom. Now, it was a desolate place. Joseph had been here with me: now Joseph had gone. Before I realised it, my tears flowed fast.

~~There had been so much between us. Now it was ended. I would never hear his voice echoing in these familiar places again.~~

~~I lay on the grass and tried to work it out. As if he stood over me, mocking, I heard or thought I heard, or remembered Joseph's voice when he was grave and grown-up.~~

~~"To be a man you must be strong."~~

~~I got up and brushed the tears from my eyes. I will be the kind of man he had taught me to be. I left the river and hurried home to the tasks of my day.~~

~~In the days that followed, I grieved them long.~~

So the summer passed. The autumn came. The leaves went brown on the willows by the river. The ~~leaves~~ fluttered to the ground and turned to mould. The long days shortened suddenly. The cold came. Winter had come to torture us again.....

In the spring, I was suddenly uprooted from the familiar world of Elsberg and taken to Vrededorp where I was born.

UWI Library

~~FOUR~~ ~~TWO~~ 5

It was late afternoon. The days were ~~getting~~ warm again. ~~Some of~~ the thick buds on the old trees had turned into small leaves of a light, transparent green. Soft, downy, new grass grew on the banks of the river. And the river itself was ~~quite~~ swollen high. ~~from the spring floods of that year~~. I lay on the bank ~~of the river~~, lost in the green dream-world of childhood. Joseph did not seem far away. I expected, at any moment, to hear his strong voice hail me and dare me to a swim in our secret bathing place. The water there would be icy cold now.

I heard footsteps.

A voice said:

"There he is!"

I turned and saw ~~two people~~, a young man and woman ~~coming to me~~. I jumped up. They were well-dressed, ~~strangers~~, coloured like me, but strangers. ~~As~~ They drew near, ~~I saw~~ the young woman was attractive. Her deep brown olive face was round and smooth. She smiled and dimples showed on both cheeks and chin. She had jet black wavy hair that fell to her shoulders. She was short and plump. The young man was a head taller, a shade lighter in colour. His hair, too, was wavy, but short and with a tinge of reddish brown about it. His face was pitted with pockmarks; and there was a touch of devilment about it.

A few yards from me, she put a hand on his arm and stopped him. ~~coming nearer. They looked at me for a long time~~. He said something to her in English. She replied in the same language. Then she took a step toward me.

"Hello, Lee."

I watched them silently. How did they know my name? Who were they?

UWI Library

"Don't you remember us?" This time it was the young man.

The young ~~man~~ WOMAN held out her arms to me. ~~I hung back.~~

"I'm Margaret," she said. "Your sister."

"I'm your brother, Harry," he said.

Some faraway corner of my brain stirred and responded.

"Your sister," she repeated, and though she smiled tears showed in her eyes.

"You from my mother?"

"Yes!" she said. "We're from your mother! Your mother is our mother too! We're your brother and sister!"

"What's your name?"

"Margaret."

I looked at my brother.

"Harry."

I said their names carefully to myself.

"Margaret....Harry...." I remembered something Aunt Liza had told me. "Is my mother still where sick people go?"

"No," Harry said.

"We've come to take you to her," Margaret said.

I thought of the train and grew excited. Such a long time since I last rode a train. I could hardly remember it.

"When?"

"Tonight," Harry said.

~~"Aunt~~ Liza ~~says you come here every day," Margaret said.~~

~~"Yes."~~

~~"Alone?"~~

~~"Only because Joseph's gone."~~

~~"Who was Joseph?"~~

UWI Library

~~My friend.... My brother. Come, I'll show you."~~

I led them to where I hid my sticks. I got out the sticks.

"He gave them to me."

I showed them my traps.

"He taught me. Want to see where we went swimming?"

"Yes," she said.

I led them down river till we came to our bathing place.

"Want to see me swim?"

"Yes," Harry said quickly then looked at Margaret,"Hey, Maggie?"

"No; it's cold," she said.

But I stripped rapidly and plunged in. It was almost as though Joseph were with me, egging me on. I dived. As I came up, my feet got entangled with coils of long loose grass, half submerged in the water. This had happened often with Joseph and me: we had kicked free and gone on swimming. This time, however, I could not kick free of the long strands. The more I kicked, the more tightly they wrapped themselves round my legs. They cut into my flesh. I fought furiously, desperately. I went down once and came up spluttering.

"He's drowning!" Maggie cried.

Harry flung off his jacket and shoes and plunged in. I went down a second time. Coming up, the weeds suddenly loosened their hold and I kicked free. I swam to my brother, and we went out together. They thought I had been fooling till they saw my legs bleeding. We built a fire of twigs and dry leaves for Harry to dry his clothes. ~~Like his face, his body was pitted with pock marks.~~

"Do you swim here often?" Maggie asked.

"Every day when Joseph was here."

She shut her eyes tight.

~~"Oh my God!"~~

UWI Library

"Where is this Joseph now?" Harry asked.

"He's Gone away. His father died on the mines so he and the little mother went away. Want to see where they lived?"

The sun was going down.

"Far?" Maggie asked.

"No."

Harry put on his dried clothes. I led them across the veld to the crest of the hill.

"There!" I pointed.

"But it's a kaffir kraal!" Harry said.

I remembered the little mother. I felt angry with my brother suddenly.

"Don't say kaffir. It's a bad word."

They stared at me.

"Was Joseph black?" Maggie asked.

"You mustn't call him kaffir," I said.

There was restraint between us as we walked back to the river.

"Like marbles?" Harry said.

He pulled a handful of ~~brightly~~ coloured marbles from his pocket.

"For you," he said.

Took them

I held out my hand for the beautiful things. The restraint passed from us.

Aunt Liza ~~was~~ waited for us with coffee and fat cakes. She seemed worried and upset. ~~She fed us then came and stood near me.~~

"He's happy here....Aren't you, Lee?"

Before I could answer, Maggie said:

"I'm sorry Aunt Liza but mother wants him. He is her baby, you

UWI Library

know."

"But he's so happy here, aren't you, Lee?"

"He can't decide, Aunt Liza."

"We could leave him for a week...." Harry began.

"No," Maggie said firmly. "~~My~~ Mother wants him to come back with us, you know that Harry."

"I thought...." Harry said.

"You heard mother yourself," Maggie said.

"Then why did she let him go in the first place?" Aunt Liza ~~was angrily suddenly~~ said fiercely.

"~~Now~~ That's not fair," Harry said.

~~"You offered to take him till things were straight," Maggie said. "Mother couldn't help Natalie dying and getting burnt and going to hospital."~~

~~"I know," Aunt Liza said wearily. "I'm sorry. It's just that he's is like our own child now.... It will hit Sam."~~

~~"I'm sorry," Maggie said.~~

No more was said. In silence, we waited for Uncle Sam. ~~Harry kept looking at his wrist watch. It was night and I knew Uncle Sam would be home soon, and Aunt Liza had done nothing about the food. I went out and looked at the fire. It was too low to take in. I piled it high with dung. I went back and sat among the silent people, fingering the marbles in my pocket. After what seemed an age of silence, Harry got up and looked at his watch. He was on the point of speaking when~~ the door opened and Uncle Sam entered.

"Oh Sam!" ~~Aunt~~ Liza ~~said~~ cried. "They've come to take him...."

Uncle Sam took in the scene then shook his head.

"I warned you, Liz," ~~Uncle Sam.~~ He went into the next room without greeting my brother ~~or~~ and sister.

UWI Library

"Better be going or we'll miss the train," Harry said.

"Get your things, Lee," Maggie said.

"He hasn't anything," Aunt Liza said.

~~"Not even shoes?"~~

Uncle Sam spoke from the other room:

"We've just paid off our debt at the store. I was taking him in on Saturday morning to get some clothes."

"Come on," Harry said.

~~Maggie got up.~~

"Say goodbye to Uncle," Aunt Liza said.

I went into the other room. Uncle Sam sat on the bed staring at the floor. I stood in front of him, waiting for him to look up. At last I gave it up. ~~I sensed that he did not want to look at me.~~

"Goodbye, Uncle Sam."

"Goodbye, son."

I was reluctant to go. Maggie called. I went to Aunt Liza. She stared at me so intently that I lowered my eyes.

"Goodbye, Aunt Liza."

"You were happy here, weren't you, Lee?"

"Let him go!" Uncle Sam called fiercely from the other room.

"Come on!" Harry said impatiently.

~~Maggie and Harry went to the door. I stood in front of Aunt Liza, eyes downcast, divided against myself, pulled this way and that by strange emotions I could not understand.~~

~~"Come on, Lee," Maggie called from the door.~~

~~I turned and followed them out....~~

~~We caught the last train for Johannesburg after a long walk over the clear, moonlit veld. We settled in a empty compartment. The train~~

UWI Library

TWO

moved, gathered momentum, rushed through the night with the speed and grace of a shooting star curving across the heavens.

I thought of Aunt Liza and Uncle Sam. Their reaction had both surprised and saddened me. But the magic and the thrill of the journey was on me, and I soon forgot their sadness....And, racing through the night, the wheels whispered Vrededorpvrededorpvrededorp till my brain sang with the sound. Maggie drew me into the circle of her arm. On the opposite side, my brother sat watching me with an oddly amused smile on his lips. Maggie's hair was soft against my cheek. I turned my head slightly and looked at it. Lazily, dreamily, I thought: Beautiful hair; nice to feel. And still the train whispered Vrededorpvrededorpvrededorp....

I closed my eyes....

1.

There was a jerk and I woke to the grinding of brakes as the train came to a stop.

"We're home," Maggie said, raising me.

We got off the train and went out of the station, and into the deserted streets. Streets were new. I could not recall having seen any before. Long, empty, silent streets. And there were so many lights, strange lights: everywhere. And from the silent street, and from everywhere about me, a low, deep, rumbling hum came to me. I seemed to remember this incessant noise from other times: I had heard it before. In the silent, yet noisy night, I walked up one empty street and down another with my brother holding my one hand and my sister the other. Once, a white man in uniform stepped from a shadowy corner and shone a torch over us.

"Evening, baas," Harry said.

"Where're you going so late?"

UWI Library

"Home," Harry said. "We've been to fetch my little brother from the country."

"Prove it?"

"I'm Coloured; I don't carry a Pass."

For a long time he shone the torch on Harry's face.

"Try to be smart, heh."

"No, baas. Just stating a fact."

He swung the torch down to my face. I blinked and closed my eyes.

"He looks like a kaffir."

"Don't you call my brother a kaffir!" Maggie snapped.

He swung the beam up to her face, then turned it out.

"All right...."

He faded into the shadows from which he had come. We set off again, walking more briskly than before.

~~"Hope we don't meet another Japie," Harry said bitterly.~~

~~We crossed a wide road with tram lines running down its centre.~~

~~"We're home now," Maggie said.~~

We turned up a long, narrow street and walked nearly its whole length. Then we turned into a dark passage and climbed ~~some~~ stairs. Harry knocked on the only door at the top of the dark stairs. There was no answer. ~~The light from~~ He pushed and the door opened ~~inward~~. We entered. The candle on the saucer in the centre of the small round table danced crazily in the draught we had brought.

"Shut the door"Harry said.

An iron bedstead stood against the wall facing the door. Near it was the round table. In a corner, at the foot of the bed, stood a life-size tailor's dummy. An old, unpainted wooden chair ~~was~~ stood

UWI Library

near the table. Two ~~iron~~ Tin trunks and a small cupboard in a corner made up the rest of the furniture. There was no ordinary window to the room, but in the sloping ceiling, in the corner directly over the bed, was a ~~fan~~ small fanlight.

The blankets on the bed were thrown back as though someone had been to bed then got up again.

"Wonder where she is," Harry said.

"May be in the lavatory." Maggie went to the stairs and called: "Mother! Mother! Lee's home!" ~~She waited at the door.~~

"Not there," Harry said after a while.

Maggie shut the door.

~~"She shouldn't go out so late in her state."~~

"What now?" Harry said.

I ~~went and~~ sat on one of the trunks. My eyes kept straying to the tailor's dummy in the corner.

~~"I bet it's one of those friends of hers," Maggie said.~~

~~"It's getting late," Harry said.~~

~~"Anna~~ Emily waiting?"

~~"Yes."~~

"You go: I'll stay here," Maggie said.

~~"But who'll see you home?"~~

~~"Go on. I can take care of myself."~~

He touched my head and went out. Maggie came and sat beside me. She put her arm about me and rocked gently. I closed my eyes and fogot the tailor's dummy.

Time passed ~~slowly~~. The candle flickered violently, on the point of going out. Maggie found another ~~piece in the cupboard~~ and lit it ~~before the flickering flames died out~~. Again she put her arms about me. We mocked from side to side in an easy, gentle, rhythmic motion.

UWI Library

After a long, long time, a sudden dull thud sounded somewhere below us, shattered the silence and the peace of the night. We both got up. Maggie went to the door.

"That you, mother?"

"Yes," a gentle voice called up. "Come and give me a hand. Bring the candle."

Maggie took the candle and went out. I waited in the dark, my face turned to where the dummy was. I wanted to see it if it did anything. My sticks! Where were they? I could defend myself with them. Joseph had taught me how to use them. There was, too, a Zulu incantation against evil spirits. I said it softly. But the sticks; where were they?.... I remembered flinging them down on the grass before diving into the water at Elsborg. I must have left them there when I took my brother and sister to see where Joseph and the little mother had lived....Oh my sticks....

The darkness dispersed slowly as an area of light mounted the stairs. Then they came into the room, and the darkness was gone. I turned my eyes from the dummy.

Maggie and my mother, I knew it was my mother, let go of the big, fat, fair, woman they supported. She sank to the floor in a drunken stupor.

I looked at my mother with the clear, sharp, though sleepy, eyes of a nearly-seven-year-old. A small dark woman with a long narrow face and an air of great frailty about her: thin arms, thinner than mine; hands smaller than mine; kinky hair with a touch of brown, like mine, not wavy like that of my brother and sister; big, sombre dark eyes.

She said:

UWI Library

"Lee....My baby!"

She put her arms about me and held me tight.

"Careful, mother!" Maggie said.

Her tears wetted my face....

Maggie got a Primus stove from the cupboard, lit it, and made tea. My mother and I sat side by side on the bed. The drunk woman lay on the floor.

"I suppose you've opened your side again," Maggie said.

"I couldn't leave Betty lying in the gutter."

~~"You said you'd stay in."~~

~~"I was in bed."~~

~~"And someone came and told you."~~

~~"Yes."~~

~~"So you had to go."~~

~~"I couldn't leave her."~~

~~"But you're sick. You must leave these drunken people to look after themselves. What do they do for you?"~~

~~"Betty's a friend."~~

~~"And there are others."~~

~~"They do things for me, too, Maggie. It isn't good to be too hard, my child."~~

"Oh, mother!" Maggie said helplessly. She looked at the woman on the floor. "What about her?"

15 "Leave her there. I'll put a blanket over her."

"And Lee?"

"He can come in with me."

"No.... Your side, remember."

"I'll make his bed on the floor then."

UWI Library

"I'll make it. Blankets?"

"There are some in that trunk."

Maggie got out the blankets and made up a place for me in a corner away from the dummy. My mother poured more tea for us. Maggie finished and flung one blanket over the drunk woman. She drank her tea standing. She put the cup on the table.

"I must go now, Ma."

"Be careful."

"It's you who should be careful."

"I'm all right."

"Better let me see your side."

"It's late, child."

"I want to see if it's bleeding."

"It isn't."

"Come on!"

"I'm your mother!"

"I said come on, Mrs. A!"

Suddenly they laughed at each other. Maggie undid the top of my mother's dress. I saw that her body was bandaged from the waist up to under the arms. There were healed burn marks on the left arm, from elbow to shoulder.

"That looks all right."

"Told you." She smiled. "....How was Liza and Sam?"

"Upset about his leaving."

"I want you to write to them for me tomorrow. You go now."

Maggie kissed mother on the cheek.

"'Night, Ma."

"Goodnight, child."

She hugged me.

UWI Library

"See you tomorrow."

She went out. I heard her footsteps moving hesitantly, ~~slowly, carefully,~~ down the dark stairs. My mother put a hand lightly on my shoulder. I looked up.

"Bit strange, isn't it?"

I nodded. I wanted to tell her I did not like the dummy. But she might do something about it, and ~~she~~ beside might bleed.

"Tomorrow will be better....Hungry?"

"No, mother."

"Want to go to sleep?"

"Yes, mother." I didn't really.

I took off my trousers. She knelt beside me on the floor and tucked me up under the blankets.

"All right?"

"Yes."

She bent down and kissed me, first on the forehead, then on the lips: a kiss light as the touch of a ~~tender~~ feather.

"Goodnight, my baby....Sleep well."

She blew out the candle, ~~and~~. After a while of silence, I heard the creak of the bed as she got in. I closed my eyes and drifted away to the river at Elsberg;....

....And Joseph was there with me. And he was chasing me. And I was laughing. And above my laughter was the sound of his voice. I will catch you, I will catch you. And he drew near. And then it was not Joseph. It was the dummy, come alive: armless and headless. It drew near. I will catch you, I will catch you. I ran fast. It drew nearer. And now I felt it on me, toweringly, ready to crush me. And I cried out....

I woke screaming. My mother stood over me with the lighted

UWI Library

candle.

"Everything's all right. You've been dreaming. Everything's all right. There now."

I stole a quick, furtive looked across the room. It was still there.

"That it?," she said.

I looked at her face and knew, suddenly, that I could trust her in all things. I said:

"I was at Elsberg with Joseph and then Joseph was gone and it chased me."

She got an old coat from under the bed and flung it over the dummy.

"Go to sleep now, and tomorrow you must tell me about Joseph."

She blew out the candle and got back into bed.

"Tell you what, I'll tell you a story, one that your father used to tell. Would you like that?"

"Please...."

"Then listen: Once upon a time, in a faraway land where the tress were blue, there lived a young prince...."

Softly, easily, her gentle voice droned on. It took me to strange adventures inside the biggest snake that ever lived. And then, easily, it carried me off to the land of peaceful sleep.

A deep hissing drew me from the land of sleep. I opened my eyes. I remembered this was not Elsberg, the order of my days here would be different. The hissing was ~~the sound of~~ made by the primus stove. The big woman who had been drunk the night before was cooking over it. I looked across the room. The dummy was not there. I sat up. My mother's bed was ~~not~~ made. The woman turned and smiled.

"Goodmorning." Her voice was rusty and gay.

UWI Library

"Where's my mother?"

She ~~poured and~~ brought me a mug of coffee. ~~It was~~ white, creamy, and very sweet.

"It's polite to answer a greeting, ~~you know.~~" Her eyes laughed at me.

"Goodmorning," I said. "Where's my mother?"

"There you go again! Give us a kiss, big eyes."

It was hard to think of this woman with the rusty voice and gay, laughing eyes as the ~~same~~ person who had lain in a drunken stupor all night. She brought her face down. I pulled mine away. Then, impulsively, I pushed it forward and kissed her.

"Now, was that so bad, darlin'?" She laughed and ruffled my hair. ~~"I saw you pull away."~~ Tell you something. You stick with Aunt Betty and everything will ~~all~~ the right, heh? You be my man and I'll see you right. I'll be yours. Many a man would give his right arm to have me his, but I'll be yours, darlin'. And if you look after me when I need it, I'll be yours forever. Now gi' us another one quickly."

She flung her arms about me and kissed me with wet lips. ~~Now Joseph would have disapproved!~~

"My man?"

I nodded.

She poured me another mug of coffee, ~~with more milk, and sweeter.~~ condensed

Footsteps moved up the stairs.

"Here's your mother," ~~she said.~~

My mother ~~She~~ came in with a big parcel.

"Hello, ma."

"Morning, Lee. Slept well?"

~~I put down the mug, jumped up, and reached~~ ed for my trousers ~~on the bed.~~

UWI Library

"God what a small pee-pee!" Aunt Betty said gaily. "My man won't even tickle me with that!"

"Betty!" my mother said. "Keep your dirty language from the child. Don't let me hear anything like that again!"

Aunt Betty laughed with an edge to her laughter.

"The child's pure, Lina. Let him be. The dirt's in our minds. It'll get to his soon enough, don't force it. Let me stand naked before him in his innocence. It'll help against the little cows who'll try to trap him in a few years' time."

"I still don't want that language, Betty."

"He must learn."

"There's time."

"Here!"

"We'd better eat. Done, Loe."

"See! I'm already fighting for you, my man."

My mother undid her parcel and got out some plates. Aunt Betty dished two sausages on to each plate. My mother sliced a loaf of bread. took a loaf of bread from the parcel and sliced it. I sat beside her on the bed. Aunt Betty sat on the chair. We ate.

"Must do something about clothes," my mother said.

"Hasn't he enough?"

"Only what he's in."

"Must do something then. But don't get any till tomorrow."

"I must find the money first."

I finished eating.

"Where do I wash, ma?"

"Downstairs. There's a door that leads into the yard. Soap and towel in the cupboard."

I started folding my blankets.

UWI Library

~~"It's your woman's work," Aunt Betty said. "Leave it to me. You go'n wash."~~

I got the soap and towel and went down the stairs. The stairs were steep , narrow and short. In places ~~the~~ a stair was broken and had been covered with a thin plank that sagged as my weight came down on it. Once I nearly slipped. I grabbed the bannister. It moved outward, dangerously. At the bottom of the stairs I turned left into a little dark passage. I fumbled in the dark till I found the door. I jerked it open: daylight rushed in.

The yard was tiny: no more than six yards ~~long~~ wide, and just as long. And in it, taking up half the space, was a ~~pile~~ high pile of junk: twisted bicycle wheels; old tyres; a bicycle frame; broken chairs; part of an iron bed, brown with rust; pots and pans and pieces of broken crockery; rags and bones; and much other rubbish beyond recognition. Three short ~~stairs~~ steps led down into the yard, and the tap was near the door. The lavatory was beside the tap. I leaped across the three steps and landed near the tap. I tucked the towel into my shirt collar and washed.

Going back, I bumped into an old Indian in the dark passage. He spoke to me in English. I couldn't understand and fled up the stairs.

~~"I'm just waiting for my man's kiss before I go'n work for him," Aunt Betty said.~~

~~"I must go too," my mother said. "I'm only downstairs; the door facing the street. Come, I'll show you."~~

~~"My kiss first!"~~

~~I kissed Aunt Betty: we trooped downstairs.~~

~~"See you tonight," Aunt Betty left us.~~

~~My mother opened the door facing the street door. We went into a room slightly smaller than ours. It had one large window at the~~

UWI Library

back. There were four tailor's dummies in the room. My mother put her arm about my shoulders and I felt safe from the dummies. Near the window was a large table, and on it, one at each side, were two sewing machines. The old Indian I had bumped into in the passage, sat at one machine. I followed my mother to the other. My mother and the old Indian spoke in English. The Indian beamed at me and took my hand. He spoke to me. My mother answered. Then she said to me:

"I'll be here all day. Come here when you're hungry or if you want me for anything. You can go out now, but be careful of traffic. And don't go far, Lee."

Without looking at the dummies, some with clothes on, some naked, I marched out to meet the world of Vrededorp.

UWI Library

Run on

~~FIVE~~

2.

~~Vrededorp~~ The heart of Johannesburg nestles in the heart of the valley of the Ridge of the White Waters. From there it spreads away, up the sloping land, out of the valley, in all directions. Journeying westward from the tram terminus near the city hall, one goes down to the huge market with its big square. Then, immediately past the market, and the beginning of Fordsburg, the land levels off for a short distance and begins to slope upwards, very gently. To the western end of Fordsburg is a sudden dip. Trams and traffic go through a long, deep subway. Two sets of railway lines lay across it, going south ~~east~~ in a smooth ~~s~~westward curve in one direction, and north with an eastward curve in the other. The tramlines climb steeply out of the subway. To the left of them is Vrededorp, to the right is Braamfontein.

Vrededorp is made up of twenty-four streets, running parallel to each other. They are known by their numbers. First Street is way up near the north-western hills, and twenty-fourth street is down in the south-western valley, backing on the curving railway lines. ~~The tramlines cut through one of the streets up near the hills and run~~ up the side of the cemetery to Newlands on the rim of the valley. The cemetery, itself, backs on the parallel line of street and extends from about Eighth to Eighteenth Street. A long, wide street cuts across the line of numbered streets and forms the upper boundry of Vrededorp. ~~Because the cemetery~~ This street puts a little distance between the houses of Vrededorp and the cemetery. Adjacent to the cemetery, and extending down to Twenty-fourth Street, is the Coloured school, the Eurafrican Training Centre. Behind the school stretches that part of the veld known as the Ottoman's Valley. Beyond that, ~~beyond Mayfair, slightly to the left, rise the white, man-made~~

UWI Library

~~mountains, the mine dumps, clear landmarks of the golden reef.~~

And from the streets and houses of Vrededorp, from the back-yards and muddy alleys, a loud babel of shouting, laughing, cursing, voices ~~rose~~ rise, ~~were~~ are swallowed by the ~~spaceless~~ limitless sky, and ~~rose~~ rise again in unending tumult. And through, and above, and under, all this ~~was~~ is the deep throbbing hum of the city. It ~~was~~ is everywhere at once. Without beginning, without end.

~~All that first morning~~

I did not stray far from the protection of home ~~and my mother~~, that first morning. Twenty-second Street, the street where we lived, was strange and alien. The noise was frightening after the quiet of Elsberg. After a while I grew interested in the dark stream of life about me. ~~I forgot my fears~~ and ventured down to the bottom of the street. ~~I watched the passing life, a continuous dark stream moving in all directions.~~ There were small, well-built Basuto women. They balanced their shopping, baskets, paraffin tins, bundles tied in spotless white sheets, delicately on their heads. They went by with effortless grace: their bodies straight, their dark faces serene. There were the tall, swaying Zulu women, big-boned and strong-muscled, moving with the ease and grace of dancers, essentially feminine for all their bigness. And the women of the Bechuana and the Barolong, their skins a yellowish-brown, were very ~~much~~ like the Coloured women. They, and the Coloured women, did not have the easy grace and dignity of the ~~Suto~~ Basuto and Zulu women. But they had a ~~gay~~ free, swinging gaiety of movement that suggested unending high spirits. They spoke loudest, laughed longest. They were more colourfully dressed than either the Zulu or Basuto women. They wore reds, blues, greens, and purples in bright, shiny materials. The Zulu women wore severe dark colours for the most. The Basuto women went in for a little more colour, but

UWI Library

in quieter tones than the ~~Shuana~~ Bechuana and ~~Rolong~~ Barolong women.

The women paused at the stalls that lined the sidewalk, bought, and moved on. The traders were Indians. They stood by tables piled high with hard-boiled eggs, steaming sweet potatoes, Indian sweetmeats, fruits, vegetables, and all manners of edibles. They ~~intoned~~ called out their wares in high, tinny voices, ~~thin and~~ reedy, and sounding strange against the deep-throated African voices. Darting in and out among the women and stalls were ragged ~~little~~ boys of all shapes, and/of colours ranging from black to a pale, almost white, yellowish fairness.

Common to all the women, African and Coloured, was the doek. This was ~~the~~ a kerchief they wore ~~on~~ over their heads. It was an institution ~~among them,~~ from Sixteenth Street downward. It was usually white, and always spotlessly clean. It was tied so that it covered all the hair, with two slight risings over the horns. The two ends were tucked in, one under each ear. Another, though less important, emblem among the women of lower Vrededorp, was the apron. No woman ever went out without putting on a clean apron, except when going to a burial or to church. ~~At~~ all other times a woman was not properly dressed without an apron.

And among them moved the men, their shirt fronts open, their sleeves rolled up as far as they would go, their caps pulled low over their sullen, downcast eyes. A few men were not like that, but they were a minority. The rest moved close to the walls, not looking at people, like panthers, ~~at bay~~ ever poised for the leap to savage battle.

Boys fell over each other battling for orange peels swimming on the black water of the gutters. Near me, a fat ~~little~~ black boy grabbed a hot sweet potato from a stall and ran ~~for dear life.~~ An old Indian lumbered after him, cursing. People looked on disinterestedly, ~~not helping the one or the other.~~ The Indian gave up and returned

UWI Library

muttering to his stall. By then two other boys had grabbed some eggs and run in the opposite direction. The old man waved his fists and screamed helplessly at them. ~~No one took any notice.~~

And all about surged the dark stream: people laughed and cursed; young women went by swaying their hips; ~~the~~ men with caps pulled down called to them in gruff voices; carts ~~pulled~~ by great horses moved slowly by; children swung behind the carts till the drivers lashed out with their long whips; ~~trams~~ rattled out of and into the subway; trains went screaming by across it; motor horns hooted; children played in the streets till the motors were nearly on them then jumped clear; screams; laughter; shouts; cries; everything but silence. A fight started between two men. A black van came up through the subway. People dispersed, began to run. I turned and ran for home.

My mother met me at our door.

~~"I've been looking for you."~~

~~"I was down the street."~~

~~"I thought you were lost. Come, food's ready."~~

We went up ~~and sat down~~ to a lunch of fish and chips.

"Tell me about Elsberg," ~~my mother said.~~

I told her, mainly about Joseph and the little mother and the good times we had shared. I ended:

"Why do they call them kaffirs, ~~mother~~ ma? Uncle Sam did and Harry ~~did~~ too. And the little mother didn't like it."

"You told her?"

"After Uncle Sam said it."

"You shouldn't have. Your father always said it wasn't good to tell people things that make them unhappy, ~~unless you want to teach them something.~~"

"Did he call them that too?"

UWI Library

"Never."

"The little mother said I would call black people that when I get big."

"Not if you remember the good Lord made us all and there is good and bad among all the people of all colours. If you're a good child and remember that you'll never call any person kaffir."

"Mother...."

"Yes?"

"Why didn't the Coloureds have kings in the days before the white man? The Zulus had."

She laughed and her face looked very young suddenly, younger than my sister's.

"Joseph asked you about Coloured kings?"

"Yes."

"Well, the Coloureds never had kings, but you had. You still have."

"Now? Today?"

"Yes."

"And are they black?"

She thought for a little then nodded slowly.

"Must be. Your father didn't have any white blood in him so he must have been black. Yes, your kings were black."

"And the ones of today?"

"They are black too."

Oh if only Joseph were here now! I would go up to him and push out my chest and say: "I am Lee of the ...." No, not the Coloureds. Of the what, then?

"Ma...."

"Yes?"

"If my kings were black why am I Coloured?"

UWI Library

"Oh Lee," she protested.

"But I want to know."

She thought for a while.

"You're only Coloured on your mother's side, that's my side. On your father's side you're Abyssinian."

"And that is black?"

"Yes."

I would say to Joseph: "I am Lee of the Abyshinins! My kings were before the days of the white man and my kings are still kings today!" How he would envy me! If only her were here.... I would lend my kings to him.

She smiled.

"Now don't be ashamed of your Coloured mother just because you are black."

I felt ~~very~~ generous and loving.

"I will lend you my kings." I thought of something. "Where do my kings live?"

"In Abyssinia....And that is the last question I'm answering. I must get back to work."

"Black kings of Abyshina!" I cried.

My mother went down to work. I wandered up the street and crossed the road that ran past the cemetery. I ~~lay on~~ the soft grass. The sun shone from a clear sky that was faraway. The noise of Vrededorp drifted up as an echo. I plucked a tall blade of sweet grass and chewed it. And I was far, far away, in a merry land called Abyshina. There, black kings strode the earth in all their majesty. And I was a great warrior of Abyshina, serving my kings. I was the strongest, the bravest, the most daring, of all the warriors in that glorious land called Abyshina....

UWI Library

Lo, I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of
Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains
of Solomon....

Hunger, and some big boys starting a game of rugby dangerously near, drove me home at sunset. Half my body and all my mind were still in the merry land of Abyshina when I entered the room. My sister ~~Maggie~~ was there with my mother. Neither looked up as I entered. Maggie was bent over my mother who sat on one of the tin trunks. I went closer. I watched, and, watching, grew tense, felt every twitch of pain on my mother's face as Maggie worked.

In front of Maggie was a bowl of hot water. A pad of cotton wool and rolls of bandages were on the table. Used bandages lay on the floor. Except for the lint that stuck to her raw flesh, my mother was naked from the waist up. With the aid of hot water, Maggie eased the lint from my mother's flesh. It was slow, drawn-out work. ~~She worked with great care and gentleness.~~ Yet, for all Maggie's care, my mother kept gasping with pain. In places, the wound bled a little. Once, my mother moaned aloud.

"Don't hurt her!"

"Quiet, black Lee," my mother said ~~smiling~~ weakly.

"Better go out for a while," Maggie said without looking up.

I was rooted to the spot, hurt, yet unwilling to go out and be free of the hurt.

"I want to stay."

"Then ~~you must~~ be quiet."

Slowly, ~~in fractions of an inch,~~ painfully, Maggie parted the lint from the raw flesh. At last, after an age of pain, the lint came away, bloodstained and with small pieces of my mother's flesh sticking to it. With them, I sighed and relaxed. My participation ~~though only~~

UWI Library

~~emotional~~ had been complete enough to exhaust me.

The wound had originally covered the whole of my mother's left side, back and front, taking in the left breast and going round her back to within an inch of the spinal column; it stretched from her shoulder down to her waist. The breast and the area about it had healed and new skin was growing. The part of the back near the spine had also healed. The wound, now, was raw only in the area directly under the arm. And the upper part of the arm, itself, was ~~also~~ still raw.

~~I was itching to ask questions about it: how it had happened, when and where? But I feared they might send me out, so I held my peace.~~

Maggie unwound a roll of fresh lint and cut a piece big enough to cover the wound.

"Hold the corners."

I held the lint while she smeared a thick paste over it.

"Ready, ma?"

"Yes."

My mother held up her arm. Maggie put the lint over the wound. My mother drew in air through her clenched teeth. ~~It made a hissing sound.~~ Maggie broke the seal of one of the broad rolls of bandages and wound it about my mother's body. Then she took another and another. When that was done, she did the arm. The wound here was less raw.

At last it was all over. My mother moved to the bed. ~~Maggie helped her on and put one blanket over her. She closed her eyes.~~ I realised then what people meant when they said a person was sick. It meant having pain that hurt very much. I thought: Mother is sick, and sickness means hurt.

~~"Get some water, Lee, and I'll make ma a cup of tea."~~

~~I took the bucket and went downstairs. When I returned, Maggie~~

UWI Library

had cleared up, the bandages. I was anxious to help. I poured water into the little tin kettle, lit the primus stove, and put to the water on. I saw the basin of water on the floor, faintly pink, with the piece of used lint that had bits of my mother's flesh on it. in the water.

"I'll take it down," I offered.

"Into the lavatory," Maggie said. "And pull the chain."

When I returned, Maggie had made the tea and was pouring it into the three enamel mugs. She seemed tired and unhappy.

"Ready for your tea, ma?"

My mother opened her eyes.

"Yes....Not so bad this time, was it, Mag?....Getting better all the time."

She raised herself slowly and sat up. Maggie gave her the tea and sat beside her. I took my tea to the trunk which was my favourite seat.

"You go to the hospital tomorrow?" Maggie said.

"Yes." My mother replied.

"You know, ma, when I think of those white people, I shake all over with rage." Maggie said.

"It's nearly a year ago now, child. Forget it."

"What white people?" I asked.

"Mother worked for them," Maggie said. "She was washing and the tin of boiling water fell on her. They made her come home by herself..."

"That black man did help me," my mother said.

"Yes, a black man in the street who didn't know you.... And when I went there they wouldn't give a penny."

"It was the agreement that I only got paid after I'd completed each month. And they were right, you know; it wasn't their fault. I

UWI Library

~~couldn't have picked up that heavy tin."~~

~~"And they had another woman working next day. Didn't even ask how you were. Didn't care whether you lived or died.... Oh it makes me mad!"~~

"Why get all worked up, child? It's all past."

"You worked for nearly a month and then nearly died and what did the woman say? 'I can't help it if she's careless enough to get hurt. She can't ask for a penny from me'."

"What's the matter, my child?" My mother's voice was very soft.

"And the whites are supposed to be civilised!"

"Tell your mother."

Suddenly, Maggie's eyes brimmed with tears.

"Aunt Mattie says I must leave school."

~~Aunt Mattie was the other Margaret in the family, my mother's elder sister.~~

"My poor child," my mother said.

"I did want to become a teacher and make a home for you, ma."

"You must see Mattie's side, my child. She's looked after you and Harry as well as her own Catherine, and it isn't easy for a Woman without a husband to do that."

Maggie wiped her eyes. Her voice was tinged with bitterness:

"Now I must go and work for the whites; clean their ~~house~~ dirt and look after their children just like you and all the others did. ~~And if anything happens to me they'll do the same as they did with you. I didn't want it like this, ma. Now I can't do anything for you."~~

~~My mother thought for a while, then her face cleared. She nodded slowly and smiled.~~

~~"We'll do it, Mag! You can stay at school and become a teacher! Yes, we'll do it!"~~

UWI Library

"How?"

"I'll take a job. You move in here with us. It'll be difficult, of course. Can't do much with three pounds a month. But we'll manage. Won't we, Lee?"

I said.

"Yes, ma."

The hope died out of Maggie's eyes. She shook her head.

"No. I'll go to work."

"But why not this way?"

"You'll kill yourself, ma. You can't see yourself but you're sick and weak, ma. You're not going to work....Tell you what, you're going away." She remembered something and grew excited. "Remember the nice black man we met?"

"Black man?"

"The one who works on the railway."

"Oh....Cousin Petersen. He's not black, child, they're a distant branch of the family."

I could not resist it.

"I am black and my kings are in Abyshina."

They laughed and seemed more cheerful after that.

"Well, anyway, he said his mother had a house and wanted you to go and stay with her. Remember?"

"I always was granny Petersen's favourite," my mother said.

"Well, you're going to Krugersdorp to stay with her. And you're going to stay there till you're better and stronger."

"I'm not."

"You are, Mrs. Abrahams! Please...."

"And what about Lee?"

"I'll look after him. If I'm going to earn money for Aunt Mattie

UWL Library

I'll have a say in the house. I'll tell her tonight that Lee's coming to stay with us when I go to work. And I'll go now and see if I can find our black cousin Petersen."

"My cousin, your uncle and speak of him with respect."

"As long as he gets you away, so that you can get strong."

"He will."

"Then you will go, ma?"

"Yes."

"Thought I'd have to get Harry to come and bully you."

"One gets tired of fighting."

Maggie went to the door.

"It'll do you so much good, ma."

"I know. You take good care of my baby."

"I'm not a baby," I said.

"Look at the big black man from Abyssinia!" Maggie said.

"He loves being black and having kings," my mother said.

They laughed gaily. I suspected it was at my expense, so I pushed out my lower lip and sulked.

"Ever seen a lip that long?" my mother said.

"I'll ride on it," Maggie said. "Well, I must be going now, Mrs. A. Be good."

"Take care of yourself, Miss A.... Oh, just a minute. What is this I hear about you going out with a young man?"

"Nothing serious. Thought I'd told you."

"Perhaps it was you who told me."

"Getting old, Mrs. A."

"Not younger, child."

Maggie came back and ran her hand over my mother's head. The warm affection between them reached me, stirred an affectionate warmth for them in me. I went to them to be a part of their warmth.

UWI Library

~~son, the love of a black man!" Maggie cried. "I'll yet marry one in a blanket."~~

~~"You'll hurt our feelings," my mother said.~~

~~Maggie went out to the door.~~

~~"Come with you!" I called.~~

~~"No. I'm going far."~~

~~"Take him as far as the bottom of the street," my mother said.~~

~~I dashed out after her and clattered down the rickety stairs. The street lights were lit. The night air was warm. The street, as always, was full of people. The Coloureds formed a small minority in a sea of black faces. The noise of people was everywhere. I walked down the street beside my big sister. And it was wonderful having a big sister and walking beside her down a street in the world. We passed a group of girls playing hop-scotch under a street lamp. Under another, five girls, their skirts tucked into their panties, practiced high-jump. Their post was a skipping rope pulled taut and held high by two of their numbers. As we passed, a girl with immense thighs sailed clean over the rope and came down on the macadamised road with a resounding thud, her feet tucked neatly under her body in a sitting position of dainty modesty.~~

~~"How high?" Maggie called.~~

~~"I'm trying for five," the black girl said.~~

~~Further down, under another lamp, a group of little boys pomsed tensely over a pile of paper. One had a box of matches. The others watched while he struck a match and flung it, burning, on the paper. There was smoke, then a tongue of flame leapt out and grew bigger. The boys danced round the fire. A woman came shouting out of a house. The boys scattered in all directions. The woman pulled her her dress up to her knees and stamped on the fire with her bare feet~~

UWI Library

till the flames went out. I decided to try doing the same at the first chance I got.

When we got to the bottom of the street, the pavements were even more crowded than they had been earlier in the day. People overflowed into Delaroy Street, so that there was no room for traffic. Indeed, there was no traffic save for an occasional tram rumbling into or coming out of the subway. The pavements and street belonged to the people. And the people crowded thickly on them.

"Go straight home," Maggie said. "Saturday night is dangerous. There are a lot of mine boys about."

She moved forward a few yards and was lost in the milling crowd. I suddenly remembered how hungry I was. I ran all the way home.

We had just finished our evening meal of bread and pork sausages when Aunt Betty arrived. With her was a bumpy, pale yellow woman. She was pale yellow in complexion. She was no taller than I was, and her behind stuck out like a huge alien bump, seperate from her body though attached to it. Her cheek bones were two bumps that stood out largest in her face. She had hardly any nose, just two holes in an almost flat surface. She was called Hotnot Annie and claimed to be pure Hottentot. Whenever she got excited she spoke the clicking Hottentot language. Her hair, when she took off her kerchief, was a series of tightly curled little balls, each separated from the other by a slight spacing of yellow flesh. She boasted that any comb other that an iron comb would break before going through a dozen of her little balls of hair. In a world where texture of hair was vital socially, Hotnot Annie was proud of her peppercorn hair.

Aunt Betty gave me a big brownpaper parcel.

UWI Library

"This is my man, Annie. I am his and he is mine. We are sworn to each other since last night."

Hotnot Annie pushed her face close to mine, made a series of clicking noises, and burst out laughing.

"Don't be vulgar!" Aunt Betty said.

"Stop it, you two," my mother laughed.

They answered with a series of clicking noises, then roared with laughter. Hotnot Annie bounced her behind up and down as she laughed.

I undid the parcel. There were three pairs of shorts, two of grey flannel and one of khaki; a grey flannel jacket; four shirts and a pair of white tennis shoes.

"All for my man!"

"Say thank you to Aunt Betty, Lee."

"Thank you, Aunt Betty," I said.

"Your white people are kind," my mother said.

Aunt Betty snorted.

"You didn't...." my mother began.

"And why not? I slave for them for next to nothing. And besides, Lina, they'll never miss it. Those brats have more than they need. I took them."

"That's stealing, Betty."

"If that's stealing then they are stealing my sweat every day. Call it what you will. The child will have something on his back. Winter is coming. What would you have done if I didn't bring these?"

"The Lord takes care of his own."

"Well, He has, so be quiet."

"Ag, the Lord will provide an overcoat for winter, and a pair of shoes and some socks," Hotnot Annie said.

UWI Library

"Now don't you start," mother said rather helplessly. "You're just asking to go to jail: and how do you think I'd feel?"

"Ag," Annie laughed. "They're only waiting there for the Lord to come and provide. It will be a sin not to allow the Lord to provide."

19

"Don't mock in front of the child."

"You are mocking," Aunt Betty said. "Wanting to refuse what the Lord provides....I'll see about a fire, heh?"

~~"It's not cold," Mother said.~~

~~"But it's nice to talk round a fire," Aunt Betty said.~~

~~"I'll tell you some Hottentot stories."~~

~~"Hottentot lies," Aunt Betty said, going to the door. "Make some coffee."~~

~~I tried on my new clothes the Lord had provided. I had never had as many, so I spent a long time over them. I looked forward eagerly to the shoes and overcoat and socks. Wonderful. Annie made the coffee. Aunt Betty returned some time later. We drank our coffee.~~ while they talked round the fire, while I sat fondling my new clothes. ~~Then Aunt Betty went down again and returned with a red-hot fire that did not smoke. They moved the table and put the fire in the centre of the floor. Annie swept, then put down blankets. We all sat on the floor around the fire. Then Aunt Betty got up and cut some bread. She toasted the bread and smeared dripping on it.~~

Hotnot Annie began a story.

"Once upon a time....A long, long time ago...."

Her voice was light and caressing, pure now, freed of all its earlier vulgarity. It was the voice of the eternal story-teller, the trader in dreams who nursed the dreams of all the ages and clothed them with words. The words dripped on my consciousness, sank into my

UWI Library

being, and carried me away to the magic long ago of once-upon-a-time.

When Annie ended, my mother told a story. Then, after my mother, Aunt Betty.

~~And so, they spun a fine, invisible web of magic.~~ They took me on strange adventures among strange people. And there were no words between me and the story, only the story, which was the reality. And when I came out of the reality to take a piece of bread, ~~from Aunt Betty~~, the sharp, clear, infinitely simple words were there to guide me back to reality.

That night I entered a world in which the dividing line between reality and dream were so fine as not to exist. And I lived many quiet moments of many years in that strange ~~half-world~~ region that is neither of this world nor out of it. ~~I leaned against Aunt Betty and gave myself up to this new world.~~

At last I could take no more. I fought off sleep till I could fight no more. I sank into Aunt Betty's ample lap. The words receded till I could hear no more, till silence came, till I could feel no more.....

3.

The days passed, and with the passing days I became familiar with Vrededorp. I ranged far and wide, exploring the world in which I lived. I became a part of the flowing dark stream. I found that, ~~the street in which we lived was Twenty-fourth street and that~~ only the poorest Coloured people lived below Nineteenth Street. Above Nineteenth Street lived the more respectable; children who had fathers at work and who wore fine clothes all the time. Those with straight hair and fair skins lived higher up. I longed to steal, as other boys did, from the stalls of the Indian traders. But I always panicked at the last moment. In all other respects I became one of

UWI Library

the citizens of Vrededorp, unafraid of going out at night, even on Saturday. Like all the other citizens, I ran whenever I saw the pick-up van. With other boys, I stood on street corners watching dice 'schools'. Sometimes I kept watch for the players. If I saw a policeman or a pick-up van I shouted a warning and ran ~~for dear life~~. Young boys who were caught while watching for gamblers were sent to a reformatory. My dread, therefore, of the police was as great as that of the gamblers. For reward, the winner usually gave the watcher a few coppers. Whenever I earned a few pence in this way I ~~would~~ rushed off to a grocery shop run by a Chinaman. My favourite buy was a pennyworth of coconut icing and a pennyworth of bread. I usually got a handful of roasted peanuts as bonsella. Without the bonsella, the 'come again' token, no little boy would shop at the same place twice. At ~~other~~ times, if I had earned only a penny, it would go on chips, or on a huge paper-bag ~~full~~ of 'broken biscuits'.

Sometimes I ran into Aunt Betty in the streets. She always had a kiss and a coin for me.

My mother discovered lice in my hair and ~~lice in my~~ clothes. She began a vain battle. Like most of the other children, I sprouted sores at the corners of my mouth. Whenever Maggie saw me, she scrubbed me from head to foot. I avoided her as much as I could. Sometimes I went to the veld above the school and dreamed long dreams on the soft grass.

In the streets, people recognised me and I them. I had been born in Vrededorp. It reclaimed me completely. The Elsberg interlude could ~~so~~ easily ~~be~~ have been a figment of the half-world of my imagination. I never thought of Joseph and the little mother. And there were other, more immediate, things to take the place of the black kings of Abyshina.

UWI Library

The long summer days hung over Vrededorp. And to ease the length of each day, I searched for new forms of adventure. One day, some boys down Twenty-second Street asked me to go coal hunting with them. There were four of us. We each had a little sack.

We climbed over the high, pronged fencing that cut off the railway lines from the streets of Vrededorp.

"Watch out for police," a boy called.

We ran between the lines, picking up pieces of coal. Goods trains trundled along; expresses flashed by. We shouted and waved at them. When they had gone we carried on with our search. The boldest of our numbers, a potbellied, barechested black boy saw a large pile of coal near a stationary wagon.

"Here!"

We followed him. We were shoving coal into our sacks when one boy suddenly shouted:

"Trap! Run!"

I turned. Two men, one black, one white, were nearly on us. I dodged an outstretched arm and shot away, leaving my sack. Heavy feet thundered after me. From somewhere behind I heard a boy scream in pain. The thundering feet were very close. If they caught me I would go to a reformatory and get lashes. I ran as hard as I could. Oh, God! The fence is so far away. Run, Lee, run. They'll lash the skin off your back at the reformatory. I'll never steal coal again, baas. Never again. Those boys made me do it. I streaked over the lines, heart pounding. I sensed a hand reaching out for me. I dodged it. The man behind me over-balanced and went down heavily. I was safe. The fence was near. I would have time to climb it and fling myself to the ground on the safe side. I reached it and shot

UWI Library

up to the top. Then the seat of my pants got caught on one of the prongs. I worked furiously to get it loose. I looked back and saw the man drawing near. It was the black one. He raised his stick and flung it. It caught me on the side of the face. The weight of my body, falling, ripped my pants off the prong. Dazed, I fell on the Vrededorp side of the fence. ~~For a moment I was stunned.~~

When I became aware of the world, ~~about me,~~ I was surrounded by a crowd of angry shouting women. One of them had the stick ~~with~~ which ~~the man~~ had felled me. She ~~was~~ brandishing it at the man on the other side of the fence.

"He's my prisoner," the man said. "And that is my stick. I'm coming over for them."

"Come!" the woman ~~with the stick~~ shouted. "Come you dog of the white man! We will show you where your manhood was lost!"

"A child," another said bitterly. "See the blood on his face. A child!"

"They were stealing," the man said.

"So you, a grown man must use a stick of battle on an unarmed child. Come over and we will kill you! I will kill you with my own hands!"

"It is my work," the man said. "A man must work to live."

"So you, a black man, must go on even after the white man has given up!"

"A black man!"

"But it is my work," the man protest.

"Our work is to protect our children. Stone the dog! He has sold his manhood to the white!"

The man turned and ran. A rain of stones ~~from the women~~ followed him. They flung stones long after he had gone.

UWI Library

The woman who had picked up the stick examined my face. There was a cut on the side of my ~~left~~ right eye.

"There is much blood but it is not bad. The cut is small. More to the left and the eye would have been gone....Is your home near, my child?"

"Yes, auntie."

"Then run home so that your mother can clean your face."

I trotted home with blood running down the ~~right~~ side of my face. ~~Mother would be upset. It would be best to wash the blood off my face before seeing her.~~ It was early afternoon so she would still be working. I tiptoed past the door where she worked and climbed the creaking stairs as quietly as I could. I opened our door then stopped dead.

My mother was lying on the bed, her eyes closed, her face strangely twisted.

"That you, Lee? Come here....Mother's very sick so you must do something for her."

I walked slowly to the side of the bed. She opened her eyes.

"Lee! Oh God!"

She half-raised herself, then flopped back and went limp. ~~Her eyes stared at nothing. Sudden fear took hold of me, turned into panic. "Ma! Ma! Ma!"~~

~~She lay limp, unhearing, her staring eyes seeing nothing. I shook her body, unmindful of her wounded side.~~ Death became real, suddenly. The fear of it was on me. I whimpered:

"Ma! Don't die, ma. Please...." I shook her.

I hardly noticed Aunt Betty's entrance. ~~I only noticed her when when she pulled me away from my mother and shook me.~~ She pushed me away and turned to my mother. I went to my favourite trunk and sat sobbing, my bloody face buried in my hands.

UWI Library

From a long way off, my mother's voice came to me.

"The child, Betty."

"I'll see to him, Lina."

"His eye....Blood...."

"Be quiet. I'll see to it."

She came over, examined my face, and said:

"It's a small cut. The blood frightened you."

She bathed my face and put vaseline on the cut. Then she led me to the bed.

"See."

My mother looked at my face.

"It frightened me...."

"It was enough to frighten anybody....I came as soon as I got your message. I met Oupa Ruiter on the way. He gave me his keys so we can move into his room tonight. I'll have to go with you, Lina. I've been sacked."

"Why?"

"The bitch didn't want me to come to you. Said I needn't ~~come~~ return if I came."

"You should've stayed, Bet."

"And leave you alone with a frightened child? Don't be silly. You rest. I'll see to the moving....Get some water, Lee."

On the stairs, I met the old Indian coming up.

"You can't go in. My mother is sick."

"Tell her," he said in halting Afrikaans, "Tell her I spoke to the landlord but he will not let us stay. We must go tonight. I am sorry it comes when she is sick, but I must go too, and there is nowhere for me."

I got the water and returned. I ~~told~~ gave them the old Indian's message.

UWI Library

"I'd better start packing," Aunt Betty said.

"I'll help," I offered.

"When I've sorted things. Go'n play now, but don't go far. I'll call you."

~~I/y/e/n/t/o/u/t/a/n/d/s/a/t/o/n/t/h/e/p/a/v/e/m/e/n/t~~

I looked at my mother. Her eyes were closed but her face was composed. ~~She looked peaceful and asleep.~~

I went downstairs ~~and out to the street~~. I sat on the pavement edge and watched the passing life. I had nothing better to do so I tried to widdle through my left trouser-hole. I was just getting to be good at it when I saw Maggie coming up the street. I flung sand on the little puddle I had made, got up, and walked to her.

"Hello, Mag." I fell into step beside her.

"You look dirty, Lee....What happened to your eye?"

"Accident....Mother's sick. She fainted. Aunt Betty's there. We're moving. Tonight."

"Moving....Where to?"

"Don't know. Why is mother always sick?"

"She's not always sick."

"Why is she?"

"She's not strong and she tries to do too much."

"Like when she burned?"

"Yes."

"Why can't we all live together, Mag?"

"We will one day, ~~little brother, we will.~~"

She went upstairs. I went back to the pavement edge. ~~Around me, all around, Vrededorp throbbed and vibrated. The deep, unending hum was everywhere.~~

Sitting there, fiddling, it seemed to me there was no sense in life. Things happened and no-one seemed to know why.

UWI Library

THREE.

1.

Oupa - grandpa - Ruiter was a drover. ~~He journeyed thousands of miles on foot each year.~~ He was a sheep specialist. He knew and loved sheep: they were his friends as no men could be. He had spent the best part of his life - as near a hundred years as not to matter - with them.

When a farmer in the Transvaal sold five hundred or a thousand sheep to a farmer in either the Orange Free State or the Cape, Oupa Ruiter would lead the flock on the long journey from the one place to the other. He would return with another flock, either for a farmer or for the great Johannesburg cattle market. Then, after a few days of drinking and resting and seeing old friends, he would set out again.

He had done this since his boyhood days that began in the distant years after the Great Trek. All the years of his life had been spent walking through the land; from east to west, then back; from north to south, then back. He knew every corner of the land, the name of every mountain and river, the piece of history behind every hill. He knew the mood of the weather too.

Hotnot Annie called him the last of the great Hottentots. She spoke of him with awe and was humble in his presence. She said he was the last member of her race who, as a boy, had looked on the face of the great Adam Kok ~~whom she~~ claimed to be the last king of the Hottentots.

~~In appearance~~ Oupa Ruiter was small and wiry, built on the same pattern of bumps as Hotnot Annie. His skin was a rusty golden yellow, dry as old parchment. His head was covered with white ~~little balls of~~

UWI Library

pepper-corn hair. His small eyes were almosy complete by hidden by the many folds of his eyelids.

All Vrededorp knew ~~Oupa Ruiter~~ him. Always, on his return from a long journey, people welcomed him in a very special way. He never had to pay for food or drink. ~~People fed him and sat by.~~ And if he wanted to talk they hung on every word he said. And if he wanted to be silent, they were content to sit ~~by~~ with him, ~~in silence. In some odd~~ ~~way~~ he was more than just an old man. He was a symbol of something important to all the citizens of Vrededorp.

Aunt Betty had found a dray-cart and our belongings had gone on that earlier in the evening. ~~She and Maggie had seen to everything.~~ Now, with my mother between ~~them~~ her and my sister, ~~supported by them~~, we walked up Fifteenth Street.

Oupa Ruiter ~~stood~~ waited for us on his verendah. ~~He waved and came to meet us as we drew near.~~

"Angelina, my child," he said in a loud cackle.

"Sorry to bother you, Oupa," my mother said. "It's only for a few days, then I go to Krugersdorp."

"Bother!" he snapped. "You've too much pride. Just like your mother! You know you can stay here as long as you want to. I don't forget what your father did for me. Only time I fell sick....Over thirty years ago....Come, come in...."

The room was twice the size of the ~~room~~ one we had ~~just~~ left. Brown paper was ~~pinned~~ stuck over the window. The flame of the solitary candle was too weak a to dispel the darkness. Shadowy things were strung across the ceiling on lines that criss-crossed.

"This calls for the lamp," Oupa Ruiter said.

He ~~took the candle and~~ lit the oil lamp that hung from the centre of the ceiling. It bathed the room in light. ~~It looked up.~~ The shadowy things were sheep's

UWI Library

~~intestines~~ entrails hung from one end of the room to the other, brown and dry, black waste matter showing at the open ends; a curtain of dried intestines that hid the ceiling of the room.

The old man saw me staring.

"Fodder, boy, fodder! And don't pull up your nose at the smell. You'll be glad to take one of those down when your own guts are empty and screaming. Nothing like 'em. The best fodder in the world. And all from my little friends."

The smell of sheep waste was everywhere in the room. ~~Most of~~ Our things were piled in a corner near my mother's bed, which the old man had set up and made. Maggie went to the window, tore off the paper, and opened ~~the window~~ it. Aunt Betty began to unsort the pile of our things.

"You staying with ma, Aunt Betty?" Maggie sounded depressed.

Aunt Betty nodded.

"Then I'll go....Thank you Oupa Ruiter."

"Pretty wench you've grown into," the old man ~~pinched and~~ touched Maggie's back. "You'll soon make a slave of some fool man."

"'Bye, ma," Maggie called miserably from the door and went out ~~without waiting for an answer~~.

"What's the matter with her?" Oupa Ruiter said.

"She's young," Aunt Betty said.

"Yes," the old man said, suddenly serious. "Yes. The young."

"Better lie down, Lina," Aunt Betty said.

My mother stretched herself on the bed. Oupa Ruiter went and sat on the edge of the bed. He took my mother's hand in his own gnarled and sinewy ~~time worn~~ old hand.

"Well, my child...."

"It's hard, Oupa."

UWI Library

"I remember you and your sister with your mother. You were always the quiet one, proud and quiet....~~Such~~ A long time ago. Only the children of friends are left now. And they are grown up and have children. Some are old....Yes, It's hard child. Make this your home as long as you like. I'm never here. And even if it is hard, don't admit it....Want to eat, ~~child.~~"?"

"No, Oupa."

"Where will you sleep Oupa Ruiter?" Aunt Betty asked.

"Are you blind? My bed's on the verendah. I let down my canvas and it's a room....Do you want to eat?"

"No thank you, Oupa," Aunt Betty said.

"Come boy."

I followed him out. He had a narrow canvas bed on the verandah. He had built shelves against the wall and on these his few personal possessions were stacked. ~~a few enamel mugs and plates, two saucepans, and a few spoons.~~ In one corner was a paraffin tin with holes knocked in its sides. Near it was a pile of coal and a small bundle of wood. He pulled a huge piece of tobacco from his khaki drilled jacket and ~~bit off a piece~~ took a bite.

"Now we'll cook. Can you make a fire?"

"Yes, Oupa."

"Then go to it."

~~"Where do I put it?"~~

~~"In the street, where else?"~~

I laid the fire and carried it out into the street. ~~Oupa Ruiter untied the canvas sheet that was rolled up to the sloping roof of the verendah. The canvas came down, walled the verendah off from the street, turned it into a little room. Oupa Ruiter went into the big room and returned with the candle and two lengths of intestines. I~~

lit a ~~////~~ piece of paper from the candle and set the fire alight. Oupa Ruiter pushed the dried sheepss waste out of the ~~pieces of~~ intestine with his thumb, turning the meat inside out as he went along. His room had no yard so I had to get water from the yard next door. He washed and salted the meat and put it into the pan. It would go on as soon as the fire was ready. He fished out a six-penny piece and gave it to me.

"Two pounds of yellow rice."

I walked the short distance to the Chinaman's grocery shop. ~~There were people ahead of me.~~ A thin boy moved to my side.

"Hello," ~~he said.~~

"Hello."

"I saw your things going into Oupa Ruiter's. You living there?"

~~"Only for a little while."~~

~~"Wish I could live there. I've seen all that hanging meat. And the old man cooks damn well. He gave me some food once. Boy, it was nice. I tried to pinch some of his meat while he was away but I couldn't open the window." He looked closely at me then smiled. "Let's be friends. We've got a gang. If you're my friend I'll let you in. I'm Binny." My name is Benjamin but I'm Binny. Shake."~~

I took his hand.

"I'm Lee."

~~"Real name?"~~

~~"Peter."~~

"Play tonight?"

"Yes."

My turn~~ed~~ came. I said:

"Two pounds of yellow rice and/monkey nuts bonsella."

I smiled at the tall, lean-faced Chinaman in the hope ~~that he~~

UWI Library

of a big bonsella. It worked. I needed both hands to take his fistful of monkey-nuts. Dinny's eyes popped. I stuffed the nuts into both pockets.

"You never give me so much!" Dinny accused.

"You never buy so much," the Chinaman retorted. "And you call me names."

"That's a lie!"

The Chinaman grinned and said:

"Ching-go-ma, tie-boss-ee, one-cigarette-and-two-toffee....Who shouted that at me this morning."

A broad grin cracked Dinny's face. He tried to wipe it off but failed.

"I didn't mean it."

"You said it."

~~"I'm sorry."~~

~~"You are not. You just want a big bonsella."~~

~~"I am. 'Strue's God!"~~

~~"What do you want?"~~

"Tuppence mealie meal."

After he had got and paid for the mealie meal, Dinny held out both hands for his bonsella. Grinning, the Chinaman only put a few monkey-nuts into his hands. Dinny looked at the nuts, then at the man. He picked up his meal and walked slowly to the door. There he turned. His voice was charged with venom:

"Ching-go-ma,
tie-boss-ee,
One-cigarette-and-two-toffee!"

He streaked away. The Chinaman chuckled softly and said:

"Here boy."

I collected another lot of nuts.

UWI Library

The fire had nearly stopped smoking when I got back. Two boys squatted around it. Oupa Ruiter washed the rice and poured the dirty water into the gutter. We waited for the fire.

At last, the smoke had gone. The fire glowed at its reddest. Oupa Ruiter carried it into the verendah. He put two iron bars across the fire and put the saucepans on. He added onions and potatoes to the meat. I sat on the floor near the fire. He sat on the edge of his bed, stirring the food, chewing his tobacco. The food began to give off hunger-making smells. My stomach rumbled loudly. The old man laughed.

"Told you there's no better fodder."

At last it was cooked. He dished up into four plates.

"Better take these to the women. They always say they can't eat when they're upset. They eat."

I went in with two plates. Aunt Betty sat sewing on the edge of the bed. It was clean and tidy. The hanging intestines had been moved to one corner. Almost, it was a completely different room, bigger, lighter, cheerful - a room that had been turned into a home. My mother turned her head.

"He knew," she said.

"Can't fool that old man," Aunt Betty said.

My mother sat up and took one plate, Aunt Betty took the other.

"And he can teach me how to cook," Aunt Betty said.

My mother smiled. They began to eat. I went out. Oupa Ruiter had my food ready. I finished eating. He gave me a second helping. I finished that. He gave me some more.

"I'm full, Oupa."

UWI Library

"Full!" he said in a sudden rage. "Full! Don't talk to me about full. You're a bag of skin and bones. You'll be as sickly as your mother if you don't eat. You eat all that or I'll get my whip. Full indeed."

The food was wonderful so it was no great hardship to overstuff myself. Oupa Ruiter leaned far forward and pushed the door open.

"Well, you women, there's a lot more food here. Want it or shall I throw it away? And no nonsense. It's eaten or it goes.

"Coming," Aunt Betty called.

She came with the emptied plates. He piled them high, his face stern. When she had gone inside his expression changed to one of smug amusement. He screwed his face up in a huge wink.

"Fooled 'em!" he whispered triumphantly. "That's how to deal with women. Don't argue with them, fool 'em. They don't know how to think like a man....More, boy?"

"No thank you, Oupa."

From up the street, Dinny's piercing voice rang:

"Lee!"

I had finished eat. I went my mother.

"Can I go'n play with Dinny, please Oupa?"

"Better ask your mother."

I went in. They were still eating. My mother seemed quite cheerful.

"Can I go'n play with Dinny, Ma?"

"Who's Dinny?"

"A boy."

"He's all right," Oupa Ruiter called. "I know him."

"Don't go far and don't come back too late and be careful."

"Lee!" the thin voice rang out.

I went out.

"Coming!" I shouted back.

UWI Library

We met under a street lamp. For a while we stood facing each other ~~across a small distance~~ each touched with uncertainty. He had mocked at the Chinaman. He might mock at me. I felt withdrawn and reserved. Perhaps he liked fighting. I didn't. Perhaps he would want to fight with me when he got to know me better. ~~I would hate that.~~

He pulled his hand out of his pocket. It was filled with many-coloured ~~glass~~ marbles. He chose three, one blue, one red, and one green. He offered them to me. I shook my head.

"No."

"O go on, take them."

"No."

"Why not?"

"You'll want them back....And you'll call me names."

"I won't."

"You called the Chinaman names."

"He's stingy."

~~"No."~~

~~"Anyhow, you're not a Chink."~~

~~"I am black."~~

~~"You're not white. You're Coloured same's me."~~

~~"I'm not. My mother says my father was black. I'm only half Coloured."~~

~~"Well?"~~

"You'll call me kaffir."

"No."

"My friend Joseph's black. All black. He's a Zulu and his mother too. You'll call them kaffir."

"Ag, I won't man!" he screamed. Then, suddenly, his voice became weedling. "I won't man.'Strue's God, I won't. I won't even call a

UWI Library

damn kaffir a kaffir any more. Take them, please. I'll only win them back."

"Are you dumb?"

"No, damn you! I'll fight you. Want to fight?" He bunched his fists and crouched forward.

"No. But I will fight if you call a black person kaffir."

"I said I wouldn't. You're the dumb ass."

The Chinaman had given me a lot of monkey nuts.

"What about the Chinaman?"

"Jeez, Lee! What's the matter with you?"

"Will you say that Ching-go-ma again?"

"All right," He sighed heavily, "you win. Now take the damn marbles."

I took them. I remembered my pockets were stuffed with monkey nuts. I took out two handfuls and offered them to Dinny. His face glowed with pleasure as he took the nuts.

"You're a pal, man, Lee man," he purred. "YouRre a damn pal."

We set off down the street, munching monkey nuts. About us, people moved up and down the street. On one of the verendahs a man sat in the shadows playing a guitar. We stopped and listened for a while. Almost, he made the instument speak. Its language was sad. The story it told was an unhappy, unfillfilled lament of frustration.

"Come on before I cry," Dinny said. "Damn him."

A woman came out of the house and shouted at the man:

"If you worked as well as you play we'd have something to give the children!"

The man shouted back at her. We carried on down the street. Their cursing voices followed us.

Further down the street a man and woman were fighting in a room.

UWI Library

The door was open and a group of grown-ups and children stood in the street, watching. We joined the crowd, pushed our way through till we had a good view. The man's face was smeared with blood and blood dripped from his mouth. The woman held him by the front of his shirt and kept butting him in the face with her head. His white shirt was stained red and in shreds in front. He fought till he broke loose. The woman grabbed at him. He stepped back. She grabbed again. He kicked her in the stomach. She screamed and doubled up. He hit her on the side of the face. She went down like a dead weight. The man swung about and rushed at us, cursing. The crowd scattered in all directions. Dinny and I streaked down the street.

"Geez what a fight!" Dinny said gleefully. "Just like the fillums. Our fights are never like that. My mother is not strong enough so my brother has to beat up my father when he beats my mother, but he's not strong enough for my brother so we don't have much of a fight. What a fight, heh?"

We slackened our pace.

"Want a woman like that when I'm big," Dinny said. "Strong. Anybody bothers me, I'll just say to her moer him. Boy, that'll be nice." I decided I didn't want a woman like that. If she could beat anybody else she would probably want to beat me too.

"Not me," I said.

We passed a group of young men and women courting on a verendah. Some held hands, others leaned against each other. The young men sang softly.

I'll be your sweatheart,
If you will be mine.

"Love!" Dinny said disgustedly.

I felt like he did. We passed on without looking at the lovers. We felt very superior.

UWI Library

"Got a sister?" Dinny asked.

"Yes."

"Lucky stiff. I wish I had one."

"Why?"

"Tips!"

"What's that?"

"Jeez, you're dumb! Tips! Don't you know what that is?"

"No."

"Jesus Maria Monk! Where are you from man, Leb/ man....When a fellow runs after your sister like those silly fellows there, you make him give you money. That's tips."

"But he may refuse."

"He won't. Just say you'll tell your mother or your sister that he's stingy. He'll shell up quick enough."

"Tips," I mused.

"Yes, man, you're lucky. Is she pretty?"

"Very."

"You're going to be a rich man."

We reached Delarey Street. For a while we watched the traffic: trams and cars rumbling up and down. Then Dinny led the way in the direction of the subway.

"Going to the gang," he said.

At the corner of Seventeenth Street a small boy called Dinny. He reached to below my shoulders. He was dressed in a sack about the sized of an orange sack. Three holes in the bottom of the sack allowed for his head and arms to come through. About his waist was a piece of rope that gathered the sack in like a dress and made it hang like some monkish garb. He was barefooted, very fair, and very dirty.

"Hello Pip," Dinny said. "Seen the gang?"

"They've gone begging."

UWI Library

"Why didn't they damn well wait?"

"Lippy said you weren't coming."

"Wait till I get that long lipped dog....Where'd they go?"

"They didn't say....Give us a rise, Dinny. I haven't eaten since yesterday."

"Jeez man, Pip, I'm flat broke man," Dinny said.

The ~~little~~ boy in the sack garb moved away, in the direction of the subway. ~~He moved slowly, like one grown infinitely weary.~~

"Poor bugger that bloody Pip," Dinny said.

"~~What's wrong?~~ Why does he wear that sack."

"Why don't you give him clothes, Mister Rich." Dinny was possessed by one of his sudden rages. ~~It passed as quickly as it came.~~ "He's alone in the bloody world. Both his people died last year."

I remembered the remaining monkey nuts in my pocket.

"I have ~~some~~ more nuts. We can give them to him."

Dinny hesitated. I knew that he really wanted the nuts for himself. He looked at me and I knew he knew I knew. A sheepish grin, half shy, half apologetic, cracked his face.

"Come on!" he said.

We streaked off, Dinny in the lead. We dodged in and out among people. Every now and then Dinny's voice rent the air in a shrill call for Pip. We caught up with ~~the boy in the sack at the~~ him at the bottom of Eighteenth Street.

"Lee's got some monkey nuts," Dinny said.

I turned out my pockets, picked out the three marbles, and passed the nuts to Pip. ~~Dinny watched hungrily.~~

"Thanks fellows," Pip said and turned once more for the subway. ~~Dinny stared after him, then shook his head.~~

~~"The poor bugger is hungry...."~~ "Let play Debs, Lee. Come!"

UWI Library

He shot across the wide street, heedless of the traffic, dodging speeding cars and motorcycles by inches. In his wake, I danced in and out of the flowing stream of vehicles. Horns hooted. Drivers cursed.

"To hell!" Dinny shouted as a car just missed him.

"To hell!" I echoed gaily.

He rushed to a huge glass window filled with men's suits on dummies. He licked his right thumb and pressed it against the window.

"Debs! That's mine!"

He pointed out the suits that were his. I did not like any of the remainder, so I ran to the next window, full of women's clothes.

"Debs! All these are mine for my mother and sister and Aunt Betty"

"Give you some suits for some dresses?"

"All right!"

"Two suits for half your dresses and things."

"Jou moer!"

"All right! Four."

"One for one."

"That's not fair! Suits are thicker."

"I don't care. Take it or leave it."

"All right....Mean bugger."

We made the exchanges. I saw a window filled with boys' clothes. I dashed to it.

"Debs! Debss! Debs! Debs! All these are mine!"

Dinny shot by.

"Debs! That bed, that chair, that table; they're all mine!"

We raced to the next window, reached and touched it at the same time.

"Debs! It's mine!"

UWI Library

"Debs! It's mine!"

"I touched it first!"

"Liar!"

"You want to steal my cakes. Thief!"

"You're the thief!"

"It's mine or I'll knock you!"

"It's mine!"

We leapt at each other and went down, arms and legs flailing, fighting furiously for the cakes in the window and cursing each other all the while. A white man came out of the shop with a stick. He raised it threateningly.

"Get! You little bastards!"

We scrambled up and scuttled away. At a safe distance Dinny stopped and thumbed his nose.

"Ya-hoo! White bastard!"

A beautiful motorcar flashed by.

"Debs! That's mine," Dinny said.

I saw a tram rumbling along.

"Debs! That's mine!" I cried.

Dinny pointed at a tall building. He crouched in the attitude of a jumper. He shot up.

"Zing! I'm jumping higher than that building."

I followed.

"Zing! I'm jumping higher than the tallest tree in the world."

"Zing! Higher than the highest aeroplane."

I saw the bright moon.

"Zing! As high as the moon!"

Dinny's face fell. I had caught him. There was nothing higher than the moon, or, if there were, he did not know about it. He looked at me, then up at the moon, and then rage possessed him.

UWI Library

"Unfair cheat!" he stormed, hopping from one foot to the other and waving his arms in a whirl of fury. "You're a cheating liar! A bastard! You don't know how high the moon is!...." He stopped quite suddenly. He looked up at the moon again, stared at it for a long while. He smiled. "You don't know how high it is," he whispered. He pushed his face close to mine and laughed into my face. "Got you! You don't know how high the moon is so you can't jump as high as the moon. There! How high is the moon?"

"High's you can see!" I retorted.

"How high, Mister Smart Man?"

I pointed at his building.

"How high is that?"

"Don't dodge!"

"Same thing. How high is your building? You say I must know how high the moon is."

"Don't know but...."

"There!" I cried.

"Shuddup! I can get a ladder and a builder's measure and find out. So there! How high's your moon?"

"I can measure it," I said.

"How?"

I thought of making the longest ladder in the world and changed my mind. It might not be long enough, and in trying to prop it up, it might miss the moon and fall away into space....Aeroplanes, of course!

"How...." I said softly.

"Yes, damn-you-rice! How!"

"I'll get into an aeroplane and fly close to the moon and I'll have lots of cotton. I'll put some chewinggum at the end of a piece of cotton and chuck it at the moon so that it sticks. Then I'll let

UWI Library

out the cotton all the way back. When I'm here I'll pull it in and measure it and I'll know how high the moon is. There!"

"Jeez! You can lie!"

"I'll do it when I'm big. You'll see!"

"God, man! They'll put you in the fillums. Then you'll be like Jackie Make-a-nut. Oh boy!"

A white policeman strolled slowly up the emptying street. From a distance we saw that he was watching us. When he shouted:

"You two!"

we turned and ran. For the policeman are the enemies of young as well as old in Vrededorp.

That night, in sleep, I had amazing adventures on my journey to measure the distance between the earth and the moon.

2.

Morning breaks gaily in Vrededorp. There is laughter among the people in the morning. It is as though they find themselves so happily surprised to be still alive that they cannot help laughing. Of course, there are homes where morning is sad and miserable. But these are exceptions. For the most part, Vrededorp is a place of laughter in the morning.

"Wake up!" Oupa Ruiter shouted gaily. "The sun's mocking you, lazy bones. Wake up!"

I opened my eyes. Daylight streamed in through the window. The old drover stood in the centre of the room, a mug of steaming coffee in each hand. My mother sat up in her bed, a smile on her face. Aunt Betty also slept on the floor, in front of my mother's bed. She pulled the blanket tighter over her head to stave off wakefulness a while longer. Oupa Ruiter laughed.

UWI Library

"No use, Bet. Day is here."

Aunt Betty gave up the struggle and showed her head.

"Sleep well, Lee?"

"Yes, ma. Morning Oupa: morning Aunt Betty."

"Stop dancing and give me that coffee, Oupa," my mother said.

The old man kept on dancing.

"How are you, woman?"

"Don't taunt, Oupa!"

"She's a sick woman you dirty old man," Aunt Betty said thickly.

Laughing his high pitched cackle, Oupa Ruiter gave them the coffee.

"Yours is outside, boy. And there's something special for you. Wash your face first."

I dressed and went out. Oupa Ruiter had made a fire while we slept. It was on the verendah, glowing a bright red. On the bench near it, heaped on a plate, were a pile of golden fatcakes. On another, smaller, plate were the three biggest fatcakes I had ever seen and, beside it, a mug of coffee. Those were mine. I took a bite out of one of the cakes before going round to the yard to wash. . .

I had eaten all my cakes and drunk my coffee, and I was toying with the idea of stealing a fourth when a sound other than the ordinary Vrededorp sounds drew my attention.

From some way up the street a rich, deep voice drifted down. It rang out loud and clear as an organ pipe, rich and sustained as organ notes.

I am coming, Lord,
Coming back to thee;
Wash me, cleanse me in the blood
That flowed on Calvary.

The voice drew near; was silent for a while; then rang out again.

UWI Library

When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound
And time shall be no more,
And the morning breaks, eternal, bright and fair;
When the saviour of the earth shall gather on the other shore,
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

There was a slight pause, then the voice sang on with glorious gusto.

When the roll
Is called up yonder -
When the roll
Is called up yonder,
When the roll
Is called up yon-on-der -
When the roll is called up yonder I'll be there!

Oupa Ruiter came out of the room.

"Better hurry," he flung over his shoulder, "The man of God wants breakfast."

His cackling laugh rang out, loud.

"Well boy, did you pinch another?"

"No, Oupa."

"Bet you wanted to."

"Yes."

"More fool you for not doing so. Go on!"

I took another fatcake and went into the street. The man of God ~~was~~ came slowly ~~coming~~ down its centre. He was tall and broad and very upright. His face was dark brown. It was crowned by a massive head of white wavy hair. He had a well trimmed white moustach that matched his hair. He was dressed in black: tight, stovepipe trousers gripped his ankles and climbed to his waist where they were held up by a purple sash; a shiny waistcoat hid his shirt; and he wore tails. He carried his hat in his left hand, holding it a little distance from his body, and with the hollow turned up as though to collect money. He carried his Bible, pressed against his chest, in his right hand.

~~The tall man in black~~ He stopped near me. For a while he studied me closely, then he came ~~up~~ to me. He slipped the Bible into a pocket and

UWI Library

put his hand on my head.

"Goodmorning, child. Do you know me? Have I baptised you?"

"No."

"Ah! Then we must look after you. Can't have you going around like a heathen. An accident may happen and if you are not baptised you may burn in the devil's fire forever. It's a hot fire. The hottest fire you can think of. And it never stops burning and you never stop hurting. You don't want that, do you?"

"No."

"Good. Where do you live? And if your mother argues you say you want to be baptised. Where?"

"Here." I pointed.

"But old Ruiter lives there. Don't play with me, child! You'll go to hell!"

"We do!" I cried.

"That's Lina Abrahams' child," Oupa Ruiter called from the recesses of the verendah.

The man of God straightened up.

"Hello Brother Ruiter. I didn't see you there. Didn't know you were back."

"Morning Reverend Rogerson."

"Morning to you, Brother Ruiter."

"The child told you the truth. He and his mother are with me."

"I must see her."

"Come, Reverend. They are just having breakfast."

"A good sign. I haven't had mine."

With his big hand on my head, the man of God steered me to the verendah door.

"I'd better make some more fatcakes," Oupa Ruiter said, wickedly. "I know God loves them."

UWI Library

"So he does, my brother, so he does," the priest said blandly.

Oupa Ruiter cackled and knocked at the door.

"God is here, Lina!"

"Come in," my mother called.

Oupa Ruiter turned back to the fire. The man of God steered me into the room. My mother and Aunt Betty were up and dressed. The two beds on the floor had been taken up. My mother's bed was made. And the room was tidy. The man of God steered me to the centre of ~~the room~~.

"Morning, Reverend," my mother said.

"Morning, Reverend," Aunt Betty said.

For answer, he threw back his head and sang. His deep voice filled the room, spilled out of the window and door, moved up and down the street.

Rock of ages
Cleft for me
Let me hide myself in thee.

My mother and Aunt Betty joined in. Oupa Ruiter pushed the door wide, and his reedy voice joined in too. And then, from the street, other voices joined in the singing. The hymn ended. The priest tightened his hold on my head. He kept his eyes closed. A feeling of excitement passed from him to me. He pushed out his chest and began a new hymn, lilting and strong, swinging it like the marching song of victorious soldiers. The women in the room, the old man on the verandah, and the little group of people in the street, joined in the chorus.

T-h-e-r-e is
Power, power,
Wonder-working power
In the b-l-o-o-d
Of the l-a-m-b:
There is power, power,
Wonder-working power,
In the precious blood of the lamb.

UWI Library

In the silence that followed the stirring hymn, the man of God raised both ~~his~~ hands and held them as in the act of blessing. I moved away from him to get a better view of his face. He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. Tears rolled down his cheeks, yet there was a happy smile on his face. He sang exultantly, in measured notes.

He taught me how
To watch and pray.

He waited. My mother and the others sang

He taught me how
To watch and pray.

Then he took it up.

To live in joy,
Sing everyday:

And they echoed him

To live in joy,
Sing every day:

His voice was charged with happiness.

Happy day
Happy day -

They caught some of it.

Happy day
Happy day -

He ended in triumph.

When Jesus washed
My sins away.

When Jesus washed
My sins away.

He went down on his knees. We in the room knelt with him. Oupa Ruiter knelt on the verendah. The people in the street knelt where they had stood.

He prayed. And as he prayed, God became a living being for me. A brown old man with a long beard who wore black clothes and who liked singing and laughter. The preacher told God about his backache and

UWI Library

asked that his aches and pains in his legs and feet be less this year than they had been last. He argued with God about last year's pains, and warned him not to forget this year. Then he prayed for my mother and me. He prayed long for Aunt Betty, listing all the times he had seen her drunk, recalling all the times she had used bad language. He said it was about time she did something for God. While he prayed, Aunt Betty got up and fumbled in the folds of her dress. She brought out a half-crown and gave it to him. His prayers became kinder. He told God she was just a poor weak woman in a hard world who had had no learning.

"That's not fair," Aunt Betty protested. "God knows I went to school. I can read and write!"

"I'm sorry," the ~~priest~~ preacher prayed. "She gave me no reason to know, Almighty. Which just goes to show you never can tell with us Coloured people. And forgive me, Lord. I did not mean to be unfair to your daughter, our sister Betty, who can read and write."

"I'm out of work," Aunt Betty hissed.

"Ah, yes, Oh Jehovah. Your daughter needs work. Help her to get it. She will not forget you when pay day comes around. Look down Our Father, and give her her daily bread lest she walks in the ways of sin."

"Amen," Aunt Betty said.

"And now, Almighty God...."

"Food's getting cold," Oupa Ruiter whispered.

"Bless our food and the mocking old man who made it, and let us always remember it comes from you, the Great Giver of all things in heaven and on earth. Amen."

Aunt Betty made a place for the ~~priest~~ preacher at the table. Oupa Ruiter brought in a pot of coffee and a pile of fatcakes. The people in the street dispersed. The ~~priest~~ preacher beamed on the food. I caught my mother's

UWI Library

eye. I pointed to the door. She nodded.

"God and I understand each other," Oupa Ruiter snapped.

"I am his minister," the ~~priest~~ preacher said.

"You make people afraid of him," Oupa Ruiter said. "I know him. He's a friend. A good friend. He goes on my journeys with me. We understand each other and it's no good your saying I mock."

I went out and walked slowly up the street. The people who had shared in our service had gone. The street was empty. But sounds of life came from the houses. And far down, from Delarey Street, came the echoes of the sounds of traffic. The autumn sun slanted up from the east and touched the corrugated iron rooftops. A young woman ran out of a house a little way up the street. She trotted down towards Delarey Street. ~~Hurry~~

"Hurry or you'll get the sack," a woman's voice called after her.

A little boy came out of a house and ran up the street with his school books tucked under his arm.

I stood outside the Chinaman's shop, waiting for Dinny. A flock of doves, ~~in the shape of~~ making an arc in the sky, flew over from the west. The Chinaman came out of the shop with a broom in his hand.

"Want to sweep, boy?"

"Yes."

He gave me the broom. I swept the shop. I was gathering the dirt when Dinny turned up.

"Hey! Lee!"

"Wait. I've got a job."

"Hurry up. The gang's waiting."

I gathered up the dirt and took it to the back. The Chinaman gave me tuppence and a paperbag filled with monkey nuts.

"Tomorrow?" I asked.

"Yes."

UWI Library

I went out to Dinny. We walked down the street muching nuts. After a while, we decided to race each other hopping on one leg. Thus hopping, we made our way into Delarey Street, down towards the subway. ~~We swung left just before we reached it.~~ We swung left on to the waste lot on the way to Fordsburg station. Here Pagel's Circus pitched its tents at Christmas time. A wide, deep, uncovered trench cut off the Fordsburg houses from the waste lot. It was a waste water trench, now dry. Three boys waved to us from the far corner of the trench, then disappeared into it.

We ran across the lot and scrambled into the trench. The gang looked me over carefully. Dinny introduced us.

There was Lippy, tall and thin as a matchstick. He had a long, loose, lower lip, the largest thing in a small face. He had sores at the sides of his mouth. Next was Sleepy. He was bubbling and wide awake. It seemed impossible for Sleepy to keep still. A long rent in his khaki shorts showed his privates whenever he moved, and he moved all the time. Finally, there was Fatty. A moving ball of fat, covered with creases in which thick greasy dirt hid. A clean line round his fair face showed the limits of the area he washed.

"Lee's joining the gang," Dinny said.

"Yeah!" Fatty said.

"Yeah!" Dinny said agressively. "I'm the leader."

"So you say," Fatty said. "Prove it!"

"I don't want to fight," Dinny said.

"Ag, let him join, man," Sleepy said.

"Scare arse!" Fatty jeered at Dinny. He looked me over carefully. "Want to join the gang?"

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"Dinny told you."

UWL Library

"Your name, shit arse!" he shouted.

The others watched me. I hesitated, torn between fear and anger.
"Shit arse yourself!" I yelled.
"So you want to fight," Fatty said, oddly.

I realised he had suddenly grown frightened. I jumped at him and hit him in the stomach. He grabbed at me. We went down together.

"Kill him!" Dinny shouted. "Kill the fat dog!"

It ended quite suddenly. I found myself sitting on Fatty's stomach, pinning his arms down with my knees. I put my hands on his neck.

~~"Choke the fat out!" Sleepy said happily.~~

"Best!" Fatty cried. "Best, please!"

~~"Knock him!" Dinny said.~~

"Am I a shit arse?"

"No."

"You know my name?"

"Yes, Lee."

I got up and moved away backward, watching him. But all the fight had gone out of him. ~~He got up slowly.~~

~~"Bloody Tarzan!" Lippy jeered at him. "Yah-hoo!"~~

~~Fatty stared at the ground, the defeated, too ashamed to look at me or any of the others.~~ Dinny moved to my side. He whispered:

"Say it's your gang."

"I'm the leader," I said.

"O.K. by me," Lippy said.

"Me too," Sleepy said, shadow-boxing in front of Fatty.

"Me too," Dinny said.

Fatty looked at me.

"Chuck him out," Sleepy said, smacking the fat face.

"Want to stay?"

"Please, Lee."

UWI Library

"Tell him he owes you sixpence," Dinny hissed.

I pushed out my chest and walked towards Fatty.

"You owe me sixpence," I said gruffly.

He looked into my eyes briefly, then down at my feet.

"Yes, Lee. Can I stay?"

"When do you pay?"

He pulled a podgy hand out of his pocket. He opened it ~~and offered it.~~ Two glittering, newly-polished, pennies lay on his palm.

"Sixpence!"

"All I got, ~~Lee.~~ Pay you off tomorrow."

I took the two pennies.

"Can I stay now?"

"Yes. ~~...If you don't bring the four tomorrow it's another sixpence fine." I calculated rapidly, using my fingers. "Four, five, six, seven, eight...." I faltered.~~

~~"Nine, ten," Dinny said.~~

~~"It's a shilling," Sleepy said.~~

~~"Go to hell, you can't count," Lippy shouted at him.~~

~~"Damn-you-rice shut up!" Dinny snapped. "That makes it tenpence, Lee."~~

~~"Tenpence," I said to Fatty.~~

~~"I'll bring your fourpence."~~

~~"What now, chief?" Sleepy looked at me.~~

I ~~felt like~~ savoured power and importance. It went to my head. I looked at my subjects and snapped:

"You are each fined a penny!"

"Jeez!" Dinny said.

"You refuse?"

"No....I'll bloody well pay. When?"

UWL Library

"Now."

"Have a heart," Sleepy cried. "Give us time."

Lippy turned out his pockets.

"I'm skinned," Dinny said.

"All right," I said briskly. "Tomorrow."

"Who's your deputy?" Sleepy said.

"Dinny."

~~"And after him?"~~

~~"You two."~~

~~"And fat balls is last?"~~

~~"Yes."~~

~~"Hear that, fat head?"~~

~~"Leave him."~~

~~"Just let me knock him once, please."~~

~~"Leave him."~~

"I must go'n give ma and the baby their food," Dinny said.

We climbed out of the trench and wandered back to Delarey Street. ~~I took the monkey nuts out of my pocket and shared~~ it out, giving Dinny ~~the bigger share and keeping the biggest for myself. We walked along throwing nuts into the air and catching them with our mouth. I soon grew as expert as the others at this.~~

~~Half way up Delarey street, a white man in a passing car flung a half-smoked cigarette away. It rolled into the gutter near us. Fatty made a dive for it. Sleepy followed.~~

~~"Give it here!"~~

~~Fatty dodged and circled away from him.~~

~~"Give! Fat face!"~~

~~"It's for Lee!" Fatty screamed.~~

~~Sleepy let him be. He brought me the cigarette. I took a puff. The smoke stung my throat, nose and eyes. I coughed and choked. I gave~~

UWI Library

the butt end to Fatty and lost all interest in their quarrel over it. When they grew tired of the cigarette end, Lippy thought up a new game. He ran into the middle of Delarey Street and taunted an oncoming car to run him over. At the last moment he jumped clear. We found this great fun and joined him. Some of the cars swerved dangerously to avoid us. Other just accelerated and came at us. We caused a collision between a lorry and a car. The two drivers chased us up the street.

We parted at Fifteenth Street.

"What about tonight?" Sleepy said. "Begging?"

"I want to steal," Lippy said.

"Yes, stealing," Dinny said. "Heh, Lee?"

"Stealing," I said.

"Me too?" Fatty said.

"Yes," I said.

"Where do we meet?" Skeepy said.

"Bottom of Seventeenth Street," Dinny said.

"So long, chief."

"So long."

"So long."

Dinny and I went up the street. There was no one at Oupa Ruiter's so I went with Dinny to his home.

Dinny's home was a big room in a muddy yard. As he opened the door, smoke streamed out of the room. It was dark with the smoke.

"Come in," Dinny said.

"That you, Benjamin?" a woman's voice called faintly from the depths of the darkness.

"Yes, ma."

"You're late. Baby's hungry."

My eyes grew accustomed to the fog. A thin, dark, woman with

UWI Library

long black hair sat propped up in an old bed in the far corner of the room. The bed was covered with pieces of rags. In her arms, the woman held a tiny baby, rocking it gently. The woman's black, melancholy eyes were huge in her small, drawn face.

Dinny said:

"This is Lee, ma."

The smoke filtered out through the open door. Dinny went to the smoking fire in the corner away from the bed. I heard, rather than saw, him busy with pots and pans. The child began to cry.

"Hurry up," the woman said plaintively.

"I damn well am!"

"Your language," she wailed.

"Sorry, ma."

I said:

"See you later, Dinny. 'Bye, auntie."

I crossed the muddy yard and went home. My mother was there, cooking.

"Hello Lee. Food's nearly ready. Where have you been?"

"Out with the gang. I'm the leader now. Look!" I showed her my four coppers. "I swept the Chinaman's shop and he gave me two. I got the other two by fining Fatty. I get four more from him tomorrow. Dinny and the others will pay me one each."

"All fines?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Because I'm the leader."

"But what did they do?"

"Nothing."

"And is it right to fine them for nothing?"

UWI Library

"Fatty would have done it if he'd won."

"So you fought...."

I lowered my head ~~in shame as I saw the disapproval in her eyes.~~

"He would have beaten me if I didn't."

"So you beat him and fined him."

"Yes."

"And the others....Why fine them?"

"To show them I'm the leader."

She did not say any more. But behind her silence, I sensed disapproval and disappointment. She dished up and we ate in silence. When I had eaten, I looked up and saw her watching me closely.

"Ma..."

"Yes, Lee?"

"All the other boys do it."

~~"I know, child. It was that that made your father want us to leave this place. He was sick but he worked himself to death. He said the slums made people forget that what is right has nothing to do with what others do."~~

I did not know what else to say, and I felt uncomfortable with my mother in her present mood. I sought to change the subject.

"Where's Aunt Betty?"

A slight smile touched her lips.

"All right....She's looking for work. I wish I could take you with me."

"Where?"

"To Krugersdorp."

I did not want to leave the gang now. But I did not say so. It might upset her. I decided not to mention the gang to her again.

"Can I go and play with Dinny."

"Yes."

UWI Library

I got up and went to the door.

"Lee...."

I turned. She stared at me for a while, then she shook her head, a slight, just perceptable movement.

"It's nothing....Your father had such dreams. You go and play. ~~But~~ Be careful."

I went up the street and crossed the muddy yard to Dinny's. ~~I knocked at the door and went in to the smoke-filled room. Dinny's mother sat propped up in her bed.~~ Dinny and the baby were not there. From the room next door came voices raised in loud quarrelling.

~~"Where's Dinny?"~~

~~"Out with the baby. Tell him I want him if you see him."~~

I went out and shut the door. The quarrel next door turned into a fight. The crash of falling furniture followed me across the yard and out into the street. I went through the muddy passage that linked Fifteenth and Sixteenth Street. It reeked of piddle.

A crowd was watching a fight a little way up Sixteenth Street. I made my way to it. Two men, naked from the waist up, fought in a human ring. ~~They were both spent and moved like gladiators in slow motion.~~ Both bled from the mouth and nose. The darker man with the long black hair was growing an ugly bump just above his left eye. The ring of men egged them on. ~~The fair man stepped forward. The dark man dodged and countered. The blow sent the fair man reeling back.~~

"Good show, Benny!" a tall man cried and coughed. When the spasm passed, he said: "Another five bob on Benny. Any takers?"

"I'll take it," someone called.

"Lee!"

I saw Dinny on the other side of the throng. He held the baby precariously on his left hip. I worked my way round to his side.

UWI Library

"That's my brother!" His eyes glowed with excitement.

"Which one?"

"The one they call Benny. His name's Joe....Sock him, Joe!"

"Why are they fighting?"

"They're not fighting. They're boxing. Sock him, Joe! Kill him!"

The child started crying. Joe held up his hand. His opponent stopped. Joe turned to Dinny and took a threatening step forward.

"Get that damn child home before I break your bloody neck!"

Dinny retreated fast. From a safe distance he turned and yelled: "I wish he knocks you dead! Big bully!"

Joe took another step. Dinny scuttled for the piddle-soaked passage and beckoned to me.

The sun was sinking when we took the baby home. Dinny passed the baby to his mother and prepared food. For the baby he made a liquid mielie pap with sugar in it. He gave his mother a more thickened pap with a small piece of cold meat. While mother and child ate, Joe came in. His mouth and nose were battered and bloodstained. The ugly bump above his eye had been punched open. He looked a gory mess.

"Oh Joe!" the woman wailed.

"Shuddup! I got you some money." He flung two half-crown pieces on the bed.

"I wish you would work for it," she moaned.

"Never satisfied, are you? Well, I'll murder before I crawl before anymore whites."

"Don't speak like that, Joe. You'll end up in great trouble."

"Great trouble...." he jeered.

He grabbed a dirty white rag and went out to the tap.

"Oh God!" the woman moaned.

"Get me some food, Dinny!" Joe called from the tap.

UWI Library

Joe returned. He looked less of a mess with the blood washed away. Dinny gave him a dollop of pap and a piece of cold meat.

"That all you got?"

"You know that's all," the woman said.

"Should take my five bob from you," he snapped. He went out, leaving the food untouched.

"He's a good boy really," the woman said to no one in particular.

"I'm going out for a little, ma," Dinny said.

"But you haven't eaten."

"I'm not hungry."

"No one eats with me," she complained.

"See you later."

"Where are you going."

"Just out."

"No stealing," she begged.

"No, ma."

"Have you...."

"I've done everything. The nappies are on that chair."

"All right then."

"Come, Lee."

We went out.

"Be careful," she called after us.

The street lights were on as we got out.

"They'll be waiting," Dinny said.

A small boy ran out of the Chinaman's shop with half a loaf of bread tucked under his arm. His shirt-tail flapped as he moved.

"Sonny!" Dinny shouted.

The boy stopped dead.

"Come here!"

UWI Library

The boy turned and approached us, slowly, unwillingly.

"Faster!"

The boy ran to us. Dinny's hand shot out, palm upwards. Silently, the boy pulled a fistful of sweets out of his pocket and passed them over. Dinny put them into his pocket. His hand shot out again. The boy took monkey nuts from his second pocket. Again the hand shot out. The boy unbuttoned his shirt pocket and brought out a penny. He looked lovingly at it then parted with it. His eyes filled with tears. Dinny slipped the coin into his pocket, then the hand shot out again. The boy tried to speak and failed. He shook his head mutely.

"Look at me!"

The boy raised frightened eyes to Dinny's face.

"What's in your left hand?"

"My mother's change," the boy whispered desperately.

"You lie!"

"'Strue."

"Let me see!"

"Please."

"Open up!"

The boy unclamped his hand slowly and showed the three pennies.

"Please...."

"All right! Go!"

"Jeez! Thanks Dinny." He streaked away with his mother's change intact.

"Good kid," Dinny said benevolently. He offered me the penny. "Here's my fine."

"Tomorrow," I said.

"Better take it now." He pushed it into my hand.

UWI Library

Suddenly, I did not want the penny. I gave it back to him.

"You keep it. It's yours."

"But the fine, man."

"I don't want it."

"Why?"

"I don't want it!" I cried in a fit of sudden rage.

Dinny stopped and stared at me, his mouth open. Then, slowly, he closed his mouth. A warm smile creased his face. He blinked his knowing eyes and looked away. I felt as uncomfortable as I had felt earlier with my mother.

We walked down the street in silence, unusually subdued. He pushed some sweets and nuts into my hand. We saw a fish and chips shop.

"God! I'm hungry," he said. "I'll get some chips."

I added a penny to his. He got tuppence worth.

"Better finish them before we get to those wolves."

We dallied while we ate our chips out of a dirty newspaper. We had nearly finished when we reached the gang. They fought over the remains. Lippy sat on the pavement sucking the oil and salt from the paper. Ingratiatingly, Fatty paid me two more pennies.

"That leaves tuppence from you and a penny each from Lippy and Sleepy."

"And Dinny," Sleepy said.

"He's paid. I bought chips with his penny."

"Buy some more chief."

"Shut up!"

The gang met that night and went stealing.

"Where do we steal?" Lippy asked.

"Twenty-fourth Street," I said. "Come on!"

We went down, looking at the stalls. I saw one with an old Indian in attendance. That seemed the easiest. And it was well stocked.

UWI Library

"That's it," I said.

We studied the place carefully then walked some distance from it. I told them the plan.

"Fatty is first. Grab what you can and make him follow you. Then you go, Lippy. He'll still be after Fatty so you'll have a chance to get as many eggs as you like. Take a lot. ~~Watch out. His friends will help him.~~ Then you, Sleepy. Grab oranges. He may not chase Lippy so you'll have to be quick. Dinny goes after you. I go last. It's most dangerous for the last man.... Ready Fatty? "

"Ready!"

"Go!"

Fatty waddled away, gathered momentum and bore down on the stall.

"Ready!....Go!"

Lippy shot away, arms and legs flailing like windmills. The old Indian dashed after Fatty.

"Go!" I said.

Sleepy shot away. Lippy was helping himself at the untended stall. The old man stopped following Fatty and turned as Sleepy reached the stall. He shouted. An Indian from the next stall came to his aid.

"Go!"

Dinny was off. He ran with his bottom stuck out and his head in the air. The two Indians chased after Lippy and Sleepy.

"Go!" I said and raced down to the stall.

The younger of the two Indians was gaining on Lippy. Fatty saw this. He ran across the Indians's path and taunted him, showing the stalen sweet potatoes. The Indian fell for the ruse and gave chase. As soon as Lippy was safe, Fatty turned on a burst of speed. For all his fat he moved like the wind.

I reached the stall. Dinny was shoving oranges into his shirt-

UWI Library

front. I grabbed hard-boiled eggs with both hands.

"Look out Lee!" Fatty's voice rang out.

We turned. The old Indian bore down on us. I stood, petrified for the moment. Dinny shot off to the right. The Indian lumbered across, arms outspread, cutting off his escape. Dinny veered left. The Indian cut him off there too. Dinny dashed forward desperately. He ducked under the oustretched arm. The Indian struck and caught him on the shoulder. The weight of the blow sent Dinny skidding across the street on the seat of his pants. He was too dazed to move and just sat there while the Indian bore down on him.

"Dinny!" It was Fatty again.

The voice brought Dinny to his senses. ~~He saw the Indian bearing down on him.~~ Suddenly, a horrible string of curses flowed from his lips. His voice quivered with rage. His frenzy gave him tongue and he cursed in a language I could not understand. But the old Indian understood. And what he heard shook him into momentary immobility. Dinny jumped up and shot away. I ran off in another direction. The operation was successful!

We met at the bottom of Eighteenth Street. Our shirts bulged with food.

"What language was that?" I asked Dinny.

He grinned sheepishly: "Indian."

"What did you say?"

"Don't know. My old man's Indian. He says that when he's drunk and wants to beat ma....Didn't know I was half Indian, heh?"

"What shall we do with the grub?" Sleepy asked.

"Let's have a party," Fatty said. "Heh, Lee?"

~~He was again an honoured member of the gang, so we agreed. We had a bottle of ginger beer and feasted by the light of the moon, on the Ottoman's Valley.~~

UWI Library

"Shut! Fat Dibs!" Sleepy yelled.

"Leave him be!" Dinny snapped at Sleepy.

"Yeah, you open bottom!" Lippy said.

Fatty beamed. He had retrieved his honour with the gang.

"Lovely moon," he said. "If we have a bottle of ginger beer we can kill all this chow on the field."

"My ma's sick," Dinny said. "I want to keep some oranges for her"

"What about beer money?" Lippy said.

"Lee's got it," Fatty said. "We can pay him our share tomorrow."

"Yeah?" I said.

"Yeah, man," Dinny grinned.

I was hopelessly lost about how much they owed me.

"How much will you owe me?"

"I owe you tuppence," Fatty said. "It'll be three if you buy the beer. And Sleepy and Lippy will owe you two and Dinny one."

"That right?" I tried to work it out for myself.

"Sure that's right," Dinny said.

"Three and two and two and one," I said.

"Eight pence," Fatty said.

"All right." I would be rich tomorrow.

We walked up the street, our shirts bulging with stolen food. We bought the ginger beer at a Chinaman's at the top of Nineteenth Street, then, after baiting the Chinaman for a while, we crossed over on to the field.

The moon was big, yellow and near the earth. The sky was clear. The stars stood out. Almost, one could leap up and touch their twinkling bodies. The night air was warm, tender. Far away, on the horizon, the mine dumps, white mountains, were ghostly shadows. Underfoot, the grass was tender. We stopped in a grassy hollow. Vrededorp

UWI Library

was out of sight, beyond the rise of the land.

"Look!" Sleepy hissed.

Two lovers were on the ground nearby.

"Yah-hoo!" Dinny cried piercingly.

We all laughed loudly. The lovers scrambled up and slunk away. We flung ourselves on the grass in a circle. We heaped our food and drink in the centre of the circle.

"See!" Fatty cried.

We looked up. A shooting star curved across the heavens to the west. It exploded in a burst of light, then was gone.

"Make a wish," Dinny said.

We turned our attention to the food. We feasted under the moon, in the Ottoman's Valley.

3.

One morning Maggie, Aunt Betty and I saw my mother off to Krugersdorp. Then we went back to Oupa Ruiter's. The gang was waiting there. They helped me carry my things down to Twenty-first Street where my mother's sister, Aunt Mattie lived.

She was waiting in the yard. She looked at the gang.

"Who are these children?"

"My gang," I said.

"No street gangs here."

The gang dumped my things and ~~slunk away~~ fled. Aunt Mattie looked me over.

"What a dirty child!" she snapped. "Take your things in, then wash yourself. See that you do it properly or I'll do it for you."

Maggie put a comforting arm about my shoulders. ~~Aunt Mattie turned away. I carried my things in.~~

My new home was two rooms that opened into the corner of a yard.

UWI Library

The back room was small and dark. It had one small window that opened on to the ~~back~~ wall of the adjacent building no more than two feet away. Hardly any light came in through it. ~~In her corner of the~~ The front room was larger and lighter. It served as sitting-room, ~~and~~ dining-room, and, at night, as bedroom. My aunt, her daughter **Catherine**, and my sister Maggie had slept in the small back room since the death of my father. My brother Harry and the young man who worked for Aunt Mattie slept in the front room. In her corner of the yard, my aunt had built two sheds ~~for her business.~~

My aunt, ~~herself,~~ was as ~~firm~~ loud and **assertive** ~~as~~ assertive as my mother was quiet and retiring. She was short and stocky and fair and had once been a very handsome woman. She chain-smoked.

~~She had been married to a Scotman.~~ Till the death of her husband she had lived on a level far above that of the Coloureds of Vrededorp. Her husband had been caught at either diamond or gold smuggling. All their money had gone on the defence. Then he had died, leaving her penniless and with a small child. She had worked in the homes of white folk, had dealt in the illicit liquor trade, had sold fruit and vegetables on a **push**cart. Now, as the winter drew near, she had a small, horse-drawn cart and was selling firewood. At weekends, she still dealt in illicit liquor.

She looked harshly, coldly, on a harsh, cold world. She was as harsh with herself as with anyone else. The only two people who ever seemed to pierce her coldness were my brother Harry and her daughter Catherine.

Maggie gave me a towel and piece of soap.

"Better wash well or she'll scrub you."

I went out to the tap. I washed as I had not washed before. When I had done, Aunt Mattie inspected me. She was not satisfied.

UWL Library

"Bring me the bath, Maggie."

"I'll wash him, Aunt Mattie."

"I told him to do it properly. I'll show him."

"He's small," Maggie protested.

Aunt Mattie glared at her ~~insilence~~ till she ~~turned away and~~ fetched the round, iron bath. ~~It was~~ She filled it with cold water. ~~Aunt Mattie fetched a scrubbing brush and soap.~~ I stripped and got ~~into the cold water~~. ~~She~~ Aunt Mattie scrubbed me ~~from head to foot~~ till all my skin was red and sore. And, whenever I moved, she smacked me resoundingly with the back of the brush. At last, I stepped out of the water, hurt and miserable.

"Look at it!" she snapped.

The water was dark and scummy. ~~All the oily dirt from my body was in it.~~ I dried myself and dressed.

"If you don't want this to happen again, wash properly."

"Yes, Aunt Mattie."

"All right....Help with the wood."

I followed her to the sheds. One shed was filled with split wood tied into neat bundles and stacked up. In the other shed were unsplit logs of even length. Maggie and my cousin Catherine were tying ~~s~~ split pieces into bundles ~~of even size~~.

Catherine was fair as a white person; blue-eyed and with long, straight, light brown hair of a golden texture.

"Hello," she smiled at me.

I felt too miserable to respond.

I sat beside Maggie, stacking up bundles of wood. Splinters entered my fingers. As fast as I pulled them out, others went in. After a time I grew used to the splinters and the routine. By lunch time I was working ~~quite~~ cheerfully.

UWI Library

My brother and Danny, the young man who worked for Aunt Mattie, came in for lunch. ~~The young man was called Danny.~~ They had been out selling wood all morning. Danny gave Aunt Mattie a ~~little~~ tobacco bag filled with the morning's earnings. I studied my big brother.

He had changed much since the day he and Maggie had brought me from Elsberg. Then, he had been dapper and neat in dress; a kind of buoyant radiance had gone out from him. It had said: Life is good, brother; life is mine: what fun! Now it was ~~all~~ gone: there was no neatness, no gaiety, no sense of strong elasticity. His clothes, ~~though clean,~~ hung drably on him. His shoulders slouched. An oily cap sat far back on his head, showing the dust in his hair. His eyes were sullen.

I watched him, anxious for warm recognition. His eyes flitted over my face.

"Hello Lee. Ma gone?"

"Yes."

Only Maggie saw my disappointment. She touched my hand and beamed reassuringly.

Aunt Mattie emptied the tobacco bag into her lap and counted the money. Maggie doled out the food. These were lean days at Aunt Mattie's, and lunch consisted of Magou and bread. Magou is another version of the inevitable ~~mi~~ maize pap. The meal is thinned to a thick ~~but~~ runny liquid. It is cooked then left to cool, ferment, and turn sour. It is served cold and drunk from mugs. In the long summer months, Magou is the main food of the very poor of Vrededorp. Maggie gave us each a mugful and a slice of bread.

Aunt Mattie finished her counting.

"You're two shillings short."

Harry and Danny looked at each other.

"We were hungry," Harry said.

UWI Library

"Well Danny?"

"It's as Harry says...." Danny began quietly.

"To hell with what Harry says! You're supposed to look after my money. I pay you, feed you, and keep a roof over your head so that you should do what I want."

"Yes, Aunt Mattie," Danny murmur. His thin, yellow, face looked drawn.

"I took you off the streets!"

Danny looked at the ground and stopped eating.

"Ma!" Catherine cried.

"Shut, Miss! How do you think I keep you at school. We go without when we are hungry, but not the great Mister Harry Abrahams. I work my fingers to the bone for you. And this is what I get!"

Harry dumped his mug on the ground and got up.

"I'm getting out of here," he said bitterly.

He stalked to the gate.

"Mister!!"

"I'm fed up with all your nagging!"

"Come back here!"

"Nag, nag, nag. That's all you do. Morning, noon, and night, you yap away at us, no matter what we do."

"I said come back here!"

"Better come back, Harry," Maggie said.

He turned slowly, reluctantly.

"I'm going to blow one day and you'll never see me again. You'll be sorry then."

Aunt Mattie laughed harshly.

"It'll be good riddance of bad rubbish....Till that happy day you'll do as I tell you. Better get ready to go and sell."

"More? Today?"

UWI Library

"Yes, more, today."

"But it's Saturday!" Harry's voice was strained.

"You don't stop eating on Saturdays."

"Have a heart, Mattie," he appeal. "Everybody else stops work on Saturday afternoon."

"We can't afford it."

Harry watched her for a while. Then, with a sudden decisiveness, he flung back his shoulders and shook his head. He pushed his hands deep into his pockets. A smile, half-challenging, touched his lips.

"I'm not going," he snapped.

They stared at each other. Aunt Mattie lit a cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"All right," she said calmly. "You're a man. You know your mind. You're not going. Get ready, Danny, and take the boy with you. Let him learn to earn his bread."

Danny got up and went into the shed. We heard him piling bundles of wood on his arm. Harry's firmness deserted him. His body relaxed and drooped again. Catherine sat biting her fingernails. I turned miserably to Maggie. Aunt Mattie kept her eyes on Harry's face. Maggie looked from the one to the other, a strange, unhappy expression on her face.

"Why don't you go?" Aunt Mattie taunted.

"I will!"

He swung about and stalked out.

"Harry!" Maggie called.

"Let him be," Aunt Mattie said.

Maggie closed her eyes and clenched her hands.

"Why don't you say it?" Aunt Mattie mocked. "Or are you still trying to be a lady?"

Maggie jumped up and followed Harry out of the yard. I ~~caught~~

UWI Library

~~sight of~~ a sudden, convulsive move on Catherine's face. I looked ~~again.~~ Her face moved in uncontrollable jerks. The convulsions spread to all her body. She ~~was~~ suffered from St. Vitus Dance, and this family storm had brought on an attack. Tears rushed from her eyes. She bit her lower lip, trying to stop the jerks. She jumped up and rushed, jerking, into the house.

Aunt Mattie sat staring into space. Danny came out of the shed, his arm piled high with bundles of wood. I got up and went in the shed. I came out with bundles of wood and carried them to the cart ~~outside in the street~~. I looked about but there was no sign of Harry or Maggie. Between us, Danny and I filled the cart. Then he went in to where Aunt Mattie still sat staring into space.

"We're going, Aunt Mattie."

She looked up.

"How much?"

"Two hundred bundles."

She gave him the little tobacco bag.

"There's five shillings in change."

I followed him out and walked beside him as he led the horse down the street. We walked away from Vrededorp, away from the narrow, mean streets, away from the throb of the pushing crowds. We walked steadily till we got to the broad, tree-lined streets of upper Fordsburg. We stopped the cart on a quiet corner. The world seemed hushed and empty here. Peace hung over it. The broad pavements were clean. No black water ran down the gutters of these streets. No half-naked, potbellied children fought and played in these gutters. The houses were of bricks. They had curtained windows. And each house had a back and front garden. There was room between one house and the next. And each had large windows to let in the light of day.

UWI Library

A stranger walking here, in the shade of the broad pavements, seeing the trim, fenced-off houses, and the riot of flowering colour within each front garden, would find it hard to believe a place called Vrededorp was less than half-an-hour's walk away. To me the contrast was so great, I might as well have stepped into another world, on another planet.

Danny instructed me.

"Two bundles for a tickey. And remember a tickey is three pennies, not two or two and a half. Aunt Mattie'll be mad if we are short. Always go to the back door. Be careful of dogs. And remember to say baas or missus. All right."

With four bundles on my arm, I went off to canvass my first house. Behind me, Danny's voice rang out, making a ~~most~~ melodious sound of the one ~~world~~ word:

"Firewood!"

I opened the gate and went to the back of the house. My heart thumped violently. Was there a dog? Would the white people chase me away? I reached the backyard. I saw no dog. I moved tentatively towards the kitchen door.

"Yes?"

I jumped and spun round. A white man, half in, half out of a little shed, stood looking down at me.

"Firewood, baas," I whispered. My throat ~~felt~~ was constricted.

The kitchen door opened. I looked quickly at the white woman who came out, then I turned back to the man.

"What is it?" The woman spoke to the man.

"This skepsel's selling firewood. You don't want any, do you?"

The woman moved round till she stood beside the man. I ~~fixed my gaze on~~ looked at the ground while I waited.

"I think the wood's only an excuse," the man said. "He looks

UWI Library

guilty as hell. If he'd found the place empty...."

"Stop it!" The woman laughed. "He's only a child."

"There are no children among them. They thieve before they can walk or talk properly."

"Don't be silly!"

"Look at his face. He can't even look at you."

"He's a child, frightened like any child would be with strangers."

"Guilty conscience, if you ask me."

"Nonsense....How much is the wood, boy?"

"Two for tickey, missus."

"That your last four?"

"No, missus."

"All right, leave the four here and get eight more."

I hurried out to the cart.

"You've been long," Danny said.

"Eight more," I said excitedly.

"Good fellow. ~~Hold that sack.~~"

I hurried back. The woman came out of the kitchen. The man stood by, amusement in his eyes.

"In that corner, boy."

She counted while I stacked ~~them up.~~ up the wood. She offered me half-a-crown.

"Have you change? ~~boy?~~"

"I can get it, missus." I took the money.

"Better keep it till he brings the change," the man said.

"Nonsense."

"He won't be back." His eyes challenged me. "Your chance, boy."

I collected a shilling fron Danny and brought it back. The woman was waiting for me with a large slice of homemade bread, a thick coat of butter on it.

UWA Library

"Thank you, missus."

"Thank you, boy."

I looked at the man then turned away quickly. Without knowing how, I realised I had angered him. I hurried out, confused.

I shared the bread with Danny. We rested while we ate. Then we went off again. He took one side of the street, I took the other. We went up one street and down another. Our cries rang over the quiet streets.

"Firewood!"

"Firewood!"

Sometimes, people chased me away. Sometimes, they set dogs on me. Twice, they cheated me. The first time a woman took six bundles and went into her kitchen. I waited a long time. Then a man came out.

"What are you waiting for, boy?"

"My money, baas."

"What money?"

"For the wood, baas. Six bundles."

"She paid you."

"The missus didn't pay me, baas."

"I saw her pay you, you dirty little black liar. Get out before I lose my temper! Lying about white people. Get out!"

I ran.

Danny took it calmly.

"Aunt Mattie won't be mad about that."

At the second place, they took ten bundles and paid for four. They swore that was all they had taken.

More often, they just bought their wood and paid for it. Sometimes, they were friendly and gave us something to eat.

We sold a third, then half, then a little more than half our

UWI Library

cartload. Shadows invaded the broad streets. The sun turned orange and sank rapidly. Bright lights went on in the houses about us. I turned to Danny.

"Are those the same as the street lights?"

"Yes."

"Why don't we have them in our houses?"

"Because we are not white."

"Are they only for white people?"

"Yes....We'd better be going home."

We turned for home.

"Danny...."

"Yes?"

"Why are those lights only for white people?"

"I don't know, man....Because they are on top."

"And their houses are nice."

"Ja."

"I'd like to live in a nice house."

"We all would."

"Would you, honestly?"

"Sure, kid."

"Did you? Once?"

He looked at me and smiled.

"No."

"Not even when you were with your mother and father?"

He put his hand on my head and tugged playfully at my mop.

"I never had a home, kid."

"Do you like it at Aunt Mattie's? I don't."

"She's all right once you understand her. ~~In fact, she's very good. Best billet I've had in all my life, kid. And I should know. No. Your aunt's all right.~~"

UWI Library

"She shouts at my brother. She doesn't like us. I don't like her. I don't like staying there."

"Forget about her shouting at Harry. It is because she loves him. She loves him more than her own daughter. Anyway, their fight is private. You're too young to undertsand but Aunt Mattie's a fine woman."

"I wish I was big."

He smiled wryly.

"You're a funny kid but I'll tell you something. It's better to be small. How old are you?"

"Nearly nine."

"You won't be small for long...."

We reached home just as the Vrededorp street lights were lit. jumping into being. I carried the wood in while Danny and Aunt Mattie went over the money. Aunt Mattie was alone at home. I finished carting the wood in and went into the big room. Aunt Mattie and Danny sat facing each other across the table. The money was stacked up in little piles on the table. She looked briefly at me as I went to a bench against the wall.

"How was he?"

"Good."

"That's something....I'm selling tonight, Danny. I have two tins of skokiaan. They should bring in a few pounds. I have someone to help with the selling but I need someone to watch. They say the police will be about."

"I'll do it," Danny said.

"I don't want to take your night as well as your day."

"That's all right. I'd like to."

"You're a fine boy, Dan. About this afternoon...."

"I know. Let's forget it. The girls?"

UWI Library

"They've gone to friends. They don't like me today."

"And Harry?" Danny did not look at her.

A faraway look crept into Aunt Mattie's eyes. She took a packet of 'Flags' out of her apron pocket, lit one, and pushed the packet over to Danny. She blew a thin, straight, column of bluish-white smoke across the room. A fly flew through the column and destroyed its shape. A small, grey, moth circled round the the candle. There was a faint crackle. The flame flickered, then was straight and steady again. Danny used a matchstick to remove the charred little body from the liquid grease near the taper. Aunt Mattie looked at me.

"We don't want him here. What'll feed him?"

"A tickey's fish and chips and a penny's bread," Danny said.

"And the bioscope?"

"Four pence."

She counted eight pennies from the pile of coppers and pushed them to me.

"Keep out of mischief."

"Been to the bioscope before?" Danny said.

"No."

"You'll like it."

I pocketed the coppers and went out. I decided to try and find the gang. I set off for Fifteenth Street and Dinny's.

About me, all about, the Saturday night crowds were thick and loud. The Mine boys, money in their pockets, thronged together. They talked at the top of their voice. They laughed often and loudly. They told each other where the most potent skokiaan, a foul-smelling rot-gut home-brewed liquor, could be had. Amid laughter, they discussed the current prices for women's bodies.

UWI Library

Rubbing shoulders with the, often blanketed, giants, were the small, smooth house-boys and kitchen-boys. They came from the homes and hotels of the white people of Johannesburg and its suburbs. On Saturday nights they were dressed in bright suits and ties that looped out in front of them. Their jackets were short and very tight, the bottoms of their trousers were very wide. Sometimes houseboys wore ~~two~~ suits made of two different coloured materials. The left half of a jacket would be a bright green, the right a bright orange. The right trouser leg would be of the same colour as the left half of the jacket; the left the same as the right of the jacket. They wore very pointed patent leather shoes, polished till they gave off mirror-like reflections. Fights often flare up between mineboys and houseboys on Saturday nights. The townsmen and the countrymen did not get on well together.

13

And there were the housemaids, dressed in their brightest and best. They pranced awkwardly up and down the streets on their high-heeled shoes. Their dark mouths and cheeks were brightly painted. They wore hats, white gloves, and hid their beautiful legs in cheap, shiny stockings. They laughed and chattered loudly ~~while showing their finery to all the world.~~ Later, as the night wore on and they found partners, they would take off the silly hat, the uncomfortable shoes, the gloves and stockings. They would relax and dance till daybreak at some maraba, egged on by the thumping noise of a broken down piano. ~~Till daybreak is~~ Till daybreak.... That is, if the police do not come.

I pushed and fought my way through the dark crowds that were everywhere. The crowds thinned a little as I reached Fifteenth Street. I hurried up to Dinny's, half fearing he might not be there. But he was. He sat feeding the baby in the smoke filled room. An Indian lay drunk across the foot of his mother's bed.

4

UWI Library

His mother lay on her back, staring dejectedly ~~up~~ at the soot-stained ceiling. At the little table near Dinny, a well dressed and well groomed young man sat. His long black hair was combed back in beautiful waves. It shone with grease.

"Lee man!" Dinny said happily.

I waited for him. The young man stared sullenly at the table. The drunk man snored. The woman kicked at him ~~from~~ under the blankets. Dinny finished feeding the child and took it to his mother.

"I'm going out with Lee, ma."

"Where?"

"Bioscope. All right?"

"Yes. But come straight back."

We went out and took the route round the top, by the side of the cemetery, to Twentieth Street. That way we would avoid some of the crowds, ~~for the lower end of Delarey Street was the concentration point.~~

"God man, it's nice to see you. The others said you won't come tonight. Only Fatty and me said you'd come."

"Where are they?"

"Waiting at the bioscope."

"Perhaps they've gone in."

"We were all going to wait for you till the last show. I was going to tell my ma to tell you. D'you see the end of SUNKEN SILVER last week?"

"No."

"Oh boy! ~~Henry~~ Walter Miller was in the water, out. The little crook had knocked him out with a hammer. He was floating. Two crocodiles with helluva big mouths were rushing at him ~~to eat him up~~. The crooks had the girl and his pal. Oh boy! How'll he escape?"

"You like the bioscope?"

UWI Library

Dinny looked at me as though I had asked the silliest question.

"Don't you?"

"I've never been."

"What!....You lie!"

"Honest."

"Oh boy! God man, Lee! You're going to see something!"

~~"What?"~~

~~"Everything! Fighting and killing and shooting and loving and dames almost naked with thick fat legs. Cowies and redskins. Everything! You wait!"~~

~~Anything that could so excite Dinny must be wonderful, I thought.~~

~~"You just wait," he promised again.~~

~~I thought of the people at his home.~~

"That your old man?"

"That drunk on the bed? Yes. He only comes home once in a while. The other fellow's my brother."

"He wears nice clothes," I said.

"He's a cissy. He puts stinking oil in his hair and runs after girls. He's a waiter in a club ~~of some rich whites. He's the only one that gives ma money so she doesn't want him to marry.... Your auntie's a rough woman.~~"

~~"Yes," I agreed.~~

~~"What'd you do after we left?"~~

I told him about ~~my scrubbing and~~ my ~~later~~ selling of firewood.

"So you got a job, you lucky dog!"

"I don't like it."

"I had a real job once. Good money too. But I had to leave it when ma got sick and the baby came. It brought in three bob a week. Good money."

"Where?"

UWI Library

"The tinsmith. I worked for Boeta Dick....Say Lee, do you want a job there?"

"Is there one?"

"Sure. Boeta Dick hasn't got a boy yet. Want it?"

"Yes!"

"Right. We'll go and see him tomorrow morning."

A job in a tinsmithy! My imagination ran riot as we walked down Twentieth Street. The exciting prospect of my first bioscope paled before the greater excitement of the job ahead.

"What'll I do, Dinny?"

"Smear tins for Boeta Dick to solder."

"Why?"

"So that they don't leak."

"Many tins?"

"Many gross every day."

"What's gross?"

"Twelve twelves."

"How much is that?"

"Go to hell. I don't know."

"And it's nice there?"

"Sure. There are lots of fellows. Now forget it or I won't take you to see Boeta Dick."

We neared the bioscope. The gang saw us, waved, called. Under a street lamp nearby a dice 'school' was in progress. Lippy grabbed my arm as we stopped at the bioscope door.

"Look, chief! Look!"

His left eye was black and puffy. His long lip quivered with pride.

"What happened?" Dinny asked.

"Cockeye and his gang beat me up. I told them our gang would fix

UWI Library

them tonight." ~~I told Cockeye our chief got mad if anybody touched his boys. He said he wants to meet you, chief."~~

"Who's Cockeye?" I asked.

"A cross-eyed dog from Seventeenth Street," Dinny said.

"Only three in the gang," Sleepy said. "Let's go."

~~"We'll murder them!" Fatty said happily. "I got my knife."~~

"We're going in the bioscope," Dinny said.

~~"What about my eye!" Lippy cried.~~

"We'll fight them tomorrow," I said.

"But they're waiting for us," Lippy protested.

"Tomorrow!" I shouted.

"O.k. O.k., chief." Lippy stepped back.

"How much?" I asked Dinny.

"Fourpence if you pay at the window, ~~but~~ two if you slip it to Sheriff."

~~"Who's he?"~~

~~"The fellow at the door."~~

The fellow at the door was a stocky black man. He was dressed in the colourful garb of a cinema cowboy: check shirt, ten-gallon hat, a bright kerchief round his neck, leather cuffs, chaps, and high-heeled boots with spurs. Two guns were strapped to his waist. A sheriff's star shone over his heart.

"You slip it to him," I said to Dinny.

"Shell up," Dinny said.

~~We gave him our money.~~

~~I gave him my tuppence, so did Fatty. Dinny added his own to the collection. Sleepy had only a penny. Lippy was completely broke. Fatty lent Sleepy a penny. I lent Lippy his fare.~~

Dinny made a sign to Sheriff. Sheriff winked. A while later, he came to the door. Dinny gave him the money. He slipped it into his pocket and returned to his post near the ticket window.

UWI Library

Two couples ~~came up the street. They~~ entered the ~~bioscope~~ foyer. Sheriff made a ~~slight~~ sign. One of the men winked. The two men barred the ticket window while they paid. ~~Sheriff motioned.~~ We sneaked in past the legs of the grown-ups, ~~one at a time, our bodies bent double.~~ In the darkness, one of Sheriff's henchmen guided us to the front seat where a score or more other little boys who had entered as we had ~~sat~~ sat. ~~With much pushing we found seats.~~

Suddenly, a train came rushing straight at me from the silver screen. I shut my eyes and screamed. I was not alone.

~~I abandoned myself to magic....~~

The bioscope in Twentieth Street was Vrededorp's most powerful and direct link with the outside world. Through it we kept touch with the scientific advances of our time. From it, we drew our picture of the world of white folk. Our morals were fashioned there. The young men of Vrededorp slapped their girls as they had seen men slap girls on the screen. The women girls modelled themselves on the ladies of the screen. Once, a Vrededorp murder was modelled on a murder we saw on the ~~silver~~ screen. People wept bitterly at screen tragedies, more bitterly than at their own, real-life tragedies. Often, the illusions of the screen became the reality of some frustrated boy or girl's life, and ~~Vrededorp,~~ drab Vrededorp became the illusion. There was a boy who became Douglas Fairbanks. He jumped off roofs, leapt on fast moving cars and leapt off before the shocked drivers realised what was happening. He drowned in one of the mine dams. He was trying to get into the pipe that pumped the water up from the bowels of the earth.

Illusion and reality often merged at the bioscope....

When I got home Harry and the girls were still absent. The big room and the yard were full of drinking people, black and Coloured.

UWI Library

Strapping men and drunken women leaned against each other and talked with wild animation. The sweet-sour smell of skokiaan hung over the place. Aunt Mattie and another woman went among the drinkers, serving. Aunt Mattie had a money pouch tied round her waist. A woman began to sing.

"Shut up!" Aunt Mattie snapped.

The woman's man protested.

"Will you pay my fine if I'm caught?"

"Only a little music, sister."

"I won't have it. The police are about. Be quiet or go."

"All right, sister. All right."

I went back to the street. Danny stood at the corner, keeping a look-out for the police. I went and kept watch with him.

"Hello kid."

"Danny."

The street lamp showed the smiling curve of his lips.

"Longing for your ma?"

I said nothing.

He punched me playfully.

"Cheer up, kid. Tomorrow is another day."

We watched till we were the only two people in the street. Even Delarey Street became deserted. No trams running; no trains rumble across the subway bridge; odd cars went through at long intervals. Even the dogs that scavenged in the gutters had gone.

UWI Library

~~would have stood there a few minutes, an hour, many hours, or a day.~~

"Look," Danny said.

~~And time, once more, had meaning. This was Saturday night. I had been to my first bioscope. People were drinking at Aunt Mattie's. And tomorrow morning Dinny was going to introduce me to a job.~~

~~I looked.~~ Far up Delarey Street, coming to us, two women walked.

"That's Maggie and Catherine," Danny said.

At the same time, people came out of our yard in a bunch. We heard Aunt Mattie's voice:

"I tell you there's no more!"

"I will sleep here," a man's drunken voice said.

"You must go. I have no room."

"You take all my money, now you chase me."

"You must go. Get out!"

The people passed us. ~~The drunken man~~ followed, protesting bitterly. Aunt Mattie ~~followed him. She~~ came out and stood ~~by~~ with us on the corner.

"That the girls?"

"Yes," Danny said.

"Go and meet them. I'll clear up."

~~She went back. We went to meet the girls.~~ When the four of us got back the place was clean: the beer tins were out of sight, the floor was swept, the table tidy. All that remained was the heavy smell of skokiaan. Aunt Mattie and the woman who had helped her were having a private drink. There was a drink waiting for Danny. The two girls pulled faces at the smell.

"Had a good time?" Aunt Mattie asked.

The ~~two~~ girls ~~exchanged looks but~~ said nothing. Danny sat near the table sipping his drink and pulling faces at the taste.

"To hell with you all!" Aunt Mattie said in sudden anger.

"I must go," the woman who had helped said.

UWI Library

Aunt Mattie paid her. She left. With her going, an uneasy, strained, silenced hung over us while we prepared for bed. Catherine and Maggie made a bed on the floor of the big room. We then all went into the small room and knelt in front of Aunt Mattie's bed. With the stench of skokiaan about us, we prayed. Aunt Mattie stood over us with a short rod. Danny led the prayer.

"Our father,"

We followed.

"Our father,"

"We charge in heaven,"

Maggie and Catherine started giggling. Aunt Mattie lashed out with the rod, striking at their arms and shoulders. I peeped through my fingers. Danny's face had gone red, his lips trembled. The girls stopped giggling. Aunt Mattie stopped beating them.

"Again, Danny."

"We charge in heaven."

The girls chortled and got another beating. Their laughter infected me and I, too, took a beating. Just as we quieted down, Danny burst out giggling. We joined in and were all beaten. Pain soon sobered us.

"Again," Aunt Mattie said.

"Oh no!" Catherine cried, and collapsed with laughter.

Plump Maggie held her sides. Tears ran down her cheeks. Danny leaned his head against the bed and shook. I screeched with uncontrollable laughter.

Aunt Mattie beat us till we laughed and cried at once.

"I'll get the damn devil out of you!"

She got a bucket of water and threw it over us. We sobered.

"Again!"

"We charge in heaven," Danny said.

UWI Library

"Which art in heaven," the girls said.

"Hello, be thy name," Danny said.

Maggie sank to the floor, writhing in the agony of a new gust of laughter.

"Please God, I'm bruised...." she moaned.

Once, in the early hours of the morning, Catherine's voice woke me.

"Come to bed, ma. It's nearly morning."

Aunt Mattie sat huddled near the door, a shawl over her shoulders. The long candle had burned down to nearly nothing. Beside me, on the floor, Danny snored evenly. I heard Catherine move on the bed in the other room. I closed my eyes. Sleep claimed me once more.

Groaning woke me. Harry was in the room, near the door. He was on his knees, being violently sick. Aunt Mattie knelt beside him, holding his head. The two girls, in their night clothes, stood in the doorway between the rooms. Danny sat hugging the blankets about his naked waist. A fresh candle had burned itself half away. Harry groaned. A rush of muck spurted from his mouth. Aunt Mattie compressed her lips. Tears shone in her eyes. She wiped the muck from his lips. Her voice had a strange newness to me:

"Oh God! How have we sinned?"

I sank back into sleep.

UWI Library

FOUR.
~~SEVEN~~

1.

I began work at the smithy on the Monday morning. My wages ~~y~~ was half a crown a week. My hours were from six in the morning till six at night, with an hour's break for lunch. My boss, Boeta Dick, was a tall, bent, reedy, consumptive. He had a parched yellow skin, drawn tight over his jutting bones. His cheeks were so sunken it was as though he were permanently sucking them in. His eyes were far back in his head. He coughed violently. And, beside his seat, was a bucket of sand into which he spat. Changing the sand daily was the only part of my job I ~~disliked~~ hated.

The ~~factory~~ smithy was divided into two parts. At one end were the machines that cut, shaped, and put the tins together. The men who worked on the machines were on a regular weekly wage. At the other, smaller, end, was a row of small furnaces, each with its own ~~little~~ small bellows and pile of fuel. Here, at each ~~little~~ furnace, a man sat soldering the seams of the tins as they came from the machines. ~~Unlike the machinists,~~ the solderers were on piece work. ~~They were paid according to the amount of work done.~~ To average two or three pounds a week, ~~therefore,~~ they had to do a mountainous amount of soldering. Each solderer had a boy to cart the tins from the machines to him, then, to smear ~~each~~ the seams of each tin with sulphur powder so that the lead took easily. And, after checking, to cart the tins out to the yard where the lorries collected them. ~~Boeta Dick was a solderer.~~

Dinny had, on the previous day, instructed me in the mysteries of of counting tins. I had a sheet of paper and a pencil. I made twelve marks on the same line. Each mark stood for a dozen tins. As each dozen tins were smeared and soldered, I cancelled off one

UWI Library

mark on the paper. When the twelve marks were cancelled, the result was a gross. ~~That much Dinny had made plain.~~ But neither ~~he~~ Dinny nor I knew what a gross was. ~~Anyhow, when the first twelve lines were cancelled, I started another row underneath the first, and after that, another.~~

On that first day ~~at work~~ I drew six rows of strokes and cancelled them ~~out~~; I made tea for Boeta Dick; I went near the strange, roaring machines whenever I had a chance.

35

There were four other boys. Three ~~of them~~ were about my own age and size. The fourth was bigger. Everyone called the big boy Mad Nondi. He fetched and carried for two of the solderers.

Toward late afternoon, as I stood in line with the other boys, waiting for tins to come off the machines, Nondi nudged me from behind. I turned. He opened his eyes wide, poked out his tongue, and snorted at me.

"Saucer eyes!" ~~he snapped.~~

I looked away. He pushed me in the back.

"What's your name, thin stick?"

I dared not ignore him so I said:

"Lee."

"Saucer-eyed Lee!" he cried and burst out laughing

~~He was silent for a while, then, suddenly, he burst out laughing.~~ I willed myself not to look at him. He kicked me in the seat. I staggered against the boy in front. The boy in front ~~of me~~ staggered against the one in front of him. The boy in the lead nearly fell against the machine. Nondi's laughter pealed above the rattled and drone of the machines.

When the working day ended, Nondi met me outside the smithy gate. I prepared myself for an ordeal. Instead, he linked his arm through mine and marched off in the direction of Vrededorp with me, babbling words I only half understood.

UWI Library

An old black man with a pushcart stood outside Braamfontein Station. Nondi brought me to a halt.

"Fatcake, big eyes?"

"I've no money."

"I have."

"I don't want anything," I said.

"Why not?"

"You'll fine me if I take it."

"Go to bloody hell!....Two fatcakes, father! Two fat, fatcakes! And let them taste like the foods of the heavens so that this big-eyed, small headed fool can taste the heart of corn and learn to understand...." His words flowed on faster than I could follow.

The old black man laughed and spoke in one of the Bantu languages. Nondi answered in the same language, eyes shining, arms waving. The old man threw back his head. His deep-throated laughter rang out. Nondi pointed at me, flung back his head, flung out one arm, and spoke at the top of his voice. The old man laughed till tears ran down his face.

The old man gave us a big, golden fatcake each. He filled two white enamel mugs with steaming coffee. A crowd came out of the station. Some came to the stall. We moved away, giving them room. We ate in silence. Nondi offered the old man money but he would not take it. We set off again. Nondi was silent for the rest of the way. His last outburst seemed to have sapped him. We parted in Delarey Street.

UWI Library

But there was peace at Aunt Mattie's that night: an uneasy peace, but peace for all that. ~~As I entered, Aunt Mattie smiled at me.~~

~~"Hello Lee."~~

~~"'Lo Aunt Mattie."~~

~~"How was work?"~~

~~"All right," I mumbled, and fled to the lavatory. Aunt Mattie had smiled at me!~~

Catherine was doing her homework. Harry and Danny were chopping and tying wood for the next day. Harry was subdued and looked green and sick. I washed ~~and~~ then went and helped ~~them~~ with the wood.

It grew dark. We lit candles.

"Come on!" Aunt Mattie called us to supper. The weekend liquor trade had been good so we had stew and rice. Maggie arrived in the middle of supper. She brought ~~some~~ cold meat which was shared out among us.

Aunt Mattie went off to Stokkveld after supper. Stokveld is the trade union of the women who deal in illicit liquor. ~~They~~ Each pays a weekly contribution. The total amount thus collected is given to a different member each week. The union also helped arrested members. Often, a well known 'Skokiaan Queen' was, ~~on being arrested~~, sent to prison without the option of a fine. In such cases the Stokveld helped with the home and children till the member came out of jail. They met every Monday evening.

Danny built a small fire after Aunt Mattie had gone. It was not cold. We were in the middle of summer. Christmas was drawing near. But a fire is a thing of friendship as well as of warmth. A ~~strange~~ young man called ~~Harry~~ Jacob Loff turned up. He was Catherine's boy: a stocky, muscular, good looking ~~young~~ Coloured man. Beside him,

UWI Library

Catherine looked very frail, very white, and, suddenly, not a girl but a woman. His coming brought a new radiance to her bearing.

Next, a girl called Emily arrived. She was tall, thin, and very dark, almost black. Her kinky hair ~~had been~~ was made into two tight, neat plaits. She had large, limpid eyes, and a shy wayward smile. This was Harry's girl. She had a habit of looking quickly at Harry's face then ~~looking~~ away at the ground. Her teeth, when she smiled, shone white and perfect from the setting of her dark face.

Maggie embraced her. As well as being my brother's girl, she was my sister's favourite friend and soon became my favourite young woman.

The circle was complete.

Danny carried the fire in. We made ourselves comfortable ~~around it~~. Maggie began a song. The others joined in.

I'll be loving you,
Always;
With a love that's true,
Always:
Days may not be fair,
That's when ~~Always~~ /////// I'll be there
Always.
Not for just an hour,
Not for just a day,
Not for just a year,
But always.

Danny looked longingly at Maggie. Harry started 'I'll be your Sweetheart'. Emily sang with a private little smile tugging at her lips. Catherine and Jacob held hands. I leaned against Maggie's comfortable body.

They turned from singing to storytelling. The fire glowed warmly. A free, hopeful, happiness hung over the room. They took turns at telling stories. ~~A chain, fashioned of words of magic, built my world of peace.~~ I closed my eyes. Maggie put an arm about me. I drifted off to the soft music of Emily's voice....

UWI Library

The long summer days passed. The big sun shone fiercely on the world of Vrededorp. ~~People discarded all clothes except for the bare necessities to hide their nakedness.~~ The coon shows began to assemble and practice for the great New Year's Day festival of song and dance. A lazy slowness came over the inhabitants of Vrededorp. They moved slowly about the streets while the hot, dry sun beat down.

At nights they gathered in little groups in the streets. Sometimes they stood talking, sometimes they sang and danced.

The summer sun set late. The summer moon rose early. So, when it was not day, the world was bathed in a soft half light. The summer sky seemed to move further away from the earth: the summer stars drew nearer, hung down just above the highest rooftop.

Young men and women walked under the moon on the Ottoman's Valley. And sometimes, a male voice, serenading its love drifted down to the crowded streets. Then, old women exchanged looks and smiled. Often, in the summer, there was 'trouble in the family' because the moon and the Ottoman's Valley and the soft night air and oh so many other things had made a girl give in to ~~the plea of~~ her lover and get 'into a family way'.

~~Summertime was a time of laughter in Vrededorp.~~

And there were the groups of little boys walking the streets with yard-long sticks of sugar-cane. And the way the cane juice ran out of the side of your mouth as you chewed.

And there were the girls playing skipping or high-jump or one of a large number of ball games.

And there were the dice schools of the bigger boys and the young men.

And on Saturday afternoons there were the rugby matches on the Ottoman's Valley. There Hakkies, 'the greatest full back' in the

UWI Library

world' had his days of glory, and the colourful play of a little Malay fly-half made him the most sought after young bachelor in Vrededorp. There too, one Saturday afternoon, I basked in my brother's reflected glory when he caught the ball inside his own half, sold four opponents the dummy, and outpaced the rest to put the ball between the posts, and then convert the try. His Emily and I shouted ourselves hoarse as they chaired him.

There were the days at work. I grew used to my job and the machines; used to changing the basin of sand into which Boeta Dick spat. I grew unafraid of Mad Nondi. In an oddly curious way we became friends. From him I learned that a gross was one hundred and forty-four; from him I learned to count up to a thousand. He taught me a smattering of English. Sometimes his mad words fell into order in my mind. When that happened he revealed vivid depths of feeling. And always, when he had money, he wanted me to share in spending it. Often, Nondi laughed and cried for no apparent reason.

And there was the gang. We still went out thieving at nights. At times we fought rival gangs. Often we went up to the Ottoman's Valley in the long summer nights. We were the scourge of loving couples with our rude remarks and raucaus laughter.

At home, time did nothing to alter the uneasy tension between us, the children, and Aunt Mattie. Her private fight with Harry often made the house a place of misery that we deserted whenever we could. But on Monday nights it was peaceful. Harry's girl and Catherine's boy came. There was the friendly circle of song and story. And Danny nursed his secret love for Maggie.

People talked about a depression. Money grew even scarcer than it had been. More men hung about street corners. More women sold their bodies to the mine boys. There was less food. But the sun

UWI Library

was shining, and while it shone nothing ~~was~~ seemed quite as bad as it ~~seemed~~ was.

The Reverend Rogerson, ~~the man of God,~~ walked the streets of Vrededorp each day. The people fed him. And in return, he sang and prayed to his God. On Sunday mornings, white men and women, dressed in the uniforms of the Salvation Army, marched through the streets of Vrededorp. Hundreds of little boys and girls ~~of all sizes and colours, except white,~~ danced behind the stirring music of the brass bands.

Two days before Christmas, Maggie called ~~me.~~ said:

"Would you like to spend Christmas with ma, Lee?"

"Yes."

"All right, we'll go tomorrow."

"You coming too?"

"For tomorrow but not for Christmas. I must be at work on Boxing Day."

3.

The man said:

"That is the Petersen house. The last one, right at the top of the hill. Well, I must leave you here."

~~"Thank you very much," Maggie said.~~

~~"Nothing at all," the man said. "Greet grandma Petersen for me and tell her Petersen will be in early tomorrow afternoon. I'll come over then to wish them Merry Christmas. I'll see you then."~~

~~"I'm going back tonight. Goodnight/ Goodbye."~~

~~"I'll pass the word on. If you want anything on the way back, just tell the steward you are Petersen's niece. Goodbye."~~

~~The man~~ He turned left for the upper end of Krugersdorp Location. We went straight on, ~~up the hill.~~ The little house stood on the crest

UWI Library

of the curving hill that overlooked ~~Krugersdorp~~ the Location. Where we walked the track was sandy. Fine ~~sand~~ particles jumped from the living earth and stung our eyes. And everywhere, beyond the little house, green rolling land, undulating gently, swept away to the greenish blue horizon far, far away in the mists of distance.

We were halfway between the house and the Location when a woman came out of the house. ~~She walked a little distance from the house, saw us, and stood staring.~~

"It's mother," Maggie said doubtfully.

The woman raised an arm and waved, hesitantly.

"It is mother!" Maggie cried.

"Mother!" I yelled.

We started to run, oblivious of the harsh heat of the sun and the cloud of choking dust we raised. As we neared my mother, Maggie began to laugh. ~~I looked at her.~~ Tears ~~were~~ streamed down her face. My mother hurried down to meet us. ~~After the excited rush of greetings were over, Maggie stepped back to study mother properly.~~

"You look well, Mrs. A....Better than I've seen you in a long time."

"I am," my mother said.

"And the wound?"

"Almost completely healed. You don't have to tear the bandage from the flesh any more."

"I'm so glad."

"How's Harry?"

"The same. I don't know what to do about him, ma. He's drinking. I think Emily's giving him up. She's very unhappy about it."

"Mattie loves him," my mother said sadly. "But he should've had a man to guide him."

UWI Library

"If only he had a job," Maggie said helplessly. "He could have married Emily."

My mother sighed and turned to me.

"And how's my Lee?"

"I'm working, ma!"

As we walked back to the house, I poured out the whole story of my work.

We entered the house. There were two bedrooms and a large kitchen.

"Granny and your Uncle Petersen's little girl are away on church business. They won't be back till sunset."

"Then I'll have you all to myself, Mrs. A.," Maggie said.

"Bless you... How long are you staying."

"Only till tonight. I've to be at work early on Boxing Day."

"And you, Lee?"

"I've got two days, ma."

While they made coffee, my mother and sister talked away animatedly. They had so much to tell each other, so much to ask, so many jokes to share, such juicy little morsels of gossip, that they all but forgot my presence. Every now and then they would remember me. They would draw me into their talk. But they would soon forget me again. I was content to sit and watch them and to smile at their happy laughter. Maggie had brought a parcel of food and cakes. We had some of the cakes with our coffee.

I left them talking and went out into the yard. Granny Petersen kept chickens and a dog. She also had a cow that had just calved a young calf. The calf and dog played around in the yard, so I joined them. The mother was grazing in the open field. The dog and calf chased each other about the yard and I ran after them. I was so intent on this that I did not notice the cow's coming till she was

only a few yards from me. I had a sudden glimpse of a huge dark body rushing down on me, head down. The next moment I was flying through the air. I landed on the low roof of the shed outside the kitchen door. The cow stood stamping under me, waiting to have another go. I opened my big mouth and yelled.

"Ma! Ma!"

My mother and Maggie rushed out. They took in the eloquent scene and screamed with laughter. Their laughter ended. The cow seemed mollified in the presence of my mother. They helped me down.

"Did you beat the calf?" my mother asked.

"I only played with him and the dog."

"Did you have a stick?"

"No."

My mother turned to the cow.

"You naughty girl! How would you like it if I threw your baby on the roof? That's my baby. And he was only playing with yours. I'm ashamed of you, and I'm going to tell granny."

The cow lowered her head and backed away.

"I believe she understands!" Maggie said.

My mother laughed.

"Of course she does. You should hear granny scolding her. Granny even scolds the cocks till they stop crowing. And she can scold a hen into laying....Away with you, you naughty cow!"

The cow walked dejectedly back to the green pastures. My mother felt over my body.

"No broken bones....Shall we go for a walk, children?

Later we went down into the valley behind the house. We walked where cattle grazed peacefully in the afternoon sun. I went in front, running here and there, exploring. My mother and Maggie followed,

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~~talking quietly.~~ Far to the right ~~of us~~, a line of stunted willows suggested a dried up river. The grazing cattle clustered thickly there. The earth, where we walked, was covered with tiny yellow flowers, their bodies erect, their faces to the sun. And the sun, ~~itself,~~ glowed hotly over the peaceful land.

I passed patches of moeroga.

"Shall I pick moeroga, ma?"

"Not today."

We climbed out of the valley. This hill was steeper than the one we had come down. I saw a body of springhaas ~~wild rabbits~~ sunning themselves on a cluster of rocks. I picked up two stones and rushed up the sloping land. The rabbits shot away in leaping lines, gliding across the veld at incredible speed. By the time I flung my stones they were out of sight.

I reached the crest of the hill and stood waiting for my women. ~~I looked about me and saw the land.~~ There was the valley out of which I had climbed, and beyond it, the hill on which Granny Petersen's house stood. Beyond that clustered the houses of the Location. Then there was a space of green sweeping down to the Station and Krugersdorp. A hill rose behind Krugersdorp and swung away, like a curving ledge, in the direction of Johannesburg. And behind the hill, hidden in the mists of distance, more hills and more valleys rolled away in waves: away, into an eternity of space.

I looked in the opposite direction. It was the same. The earth rolled on in undulating waves; rolled on to a point beyond the strength of my eyes. And, standing there, I knew that if I stood on the furthest point to which vision could carry me and looked ahead, the land would still stretch away as far as the strength of my eyes could see.

A strong sense of space and grandeur overwhelmed me. ~~Now, again~~

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~~feelings of a strange intensity, stirred in me, demanded to be given voice. I felt elated. My brain searched for words, beat about wildly to tell of this new thing that had come to birth in me.~~ I longed suddenly for Nondi to be on ~~that~~ this hill with me.

"Nondi!" I cried at the top of my voice. "Nondi!"

Space carried my shouts away. Then, Nondi's voice seemed to come back to me from a long, long way off.

"Lee!"

I opened my arms wide. And it was as if I embraced all the land I ~~had~~ looked upon, and all the people who lived in the land. An irrepressible shout, ~~beyond my control,~~ welled up in me and ~~burst forth.~~ I let it out with all the power of my lungs.

"Y-a-h-o-o!"

My mother and Maggie drew near.

" What's the matter with you?" my mother called, ~~out.~~

~~"Gone mad?" Maggie shouted.~~

I looked at them and they seemed strangers suddenly.... ~~I had no words to make them understand this. And even if I had the words, I knew they would not understand.~~ I turned my back on them and ran to a solitary tall tree, far to the left....

Granny Petersen was ~~an aunt of~~ my mother's aunt by marriage. She was small, black as night, and toothless. Her face was so wrinkled, it was impossible to see through the folds of loose flesh and get a picture of ~~its~~ its shape. She wore the numberless petticoats of her generation. This swelled her figure to a thickness that made her tiny face seem oddly out of place. In repose, her shrivelled up little body looked lifeless. But she had sharp, shrewd eyes that flickered in all directions and missed very little.

Now, as she presided over the supper table, the oil lamp from

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the central ceiling rafter shone full on her white, peppercorn, curls. Her sharp eyes glowed out of her shadowy face. Her granddaughter, the little full-faced ~~blade~~ dark brown girl of three, sat near.

Granny Petersen finished serving. We all stood with heads downcast while she prayed. It was a long prayer. It began with the food we were about to eat. Then it went on to the house, the chickens and the eggs they were to lay, the cow and her calf. It even remembered the dog. Then granny prayed for my mother, my sister, myself, and the whole of 'that branch of the family, O Lord.' The prayer swung from our branch of the family to her own. She prayed for her son who worked on that 'devil's cart', the railway. She asked God to spare the trains he went on. He had two children to feed and clothe. And this, Dear Lord, reminded her of that wicked woman who had left her son with two young girls and gone off with another man to the pleasures of the evil city. 'You know what to do with such as her, O Lord, don't you. You will punish her and show her that sin does not pay....'

By the time Granny Petersen had finished praying, the food was cold. My mother looked at her food, then at granny.

"I'm sure the Lord would like us to have our food hot, Auntie ."

~~Granny looked from my mother to each of us in turn.~~

"Thank you, Angellina, but I think I've lived with the Lord much longer than you have."

I caught the shadow of a ~~passing~~ smile on my mother's face as she bent ~~low~~ over her food. ~~Maggie,~~ laughter loving Maggie, choked and begged to be excused. ~~She hurried out of the room. I caught sight of a wickedly amused glint in Granny's eyes as she, too, bent low over her food.~~

~~Maggie returned with a straight face.~~

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~~"Feeling better?" Granny asked drily.~~

We were halfway through our meal when there was a knock at the door. Things happened fast. Granny whisked the two pots under the bed. The little girl gathered up the spoons and took them to the washing-up bucket in the corner. Then, ~~still with amazing speed, she~~ granny took our half-eaten plates of food and pushed them far back under the bed.

"Now talk and laugh!" she snapped.

My mother said something. It was drowned by Maggie's laughter. Old Granny opened her mouth and cackled away as though genuinely amused by something funny.

The knocked sounded again.

"I think there's someone at the door." Granny's voice was loud enough for those outside to hear.

My mother went to the door. The Location priest and his wife came in.

"We thought we might call on you tonight sister Petersen," the priest said.

"It is very thoughtful of you, Reverend."

~~"Our duty, sister."~~

~~"Yes," the woman said.~~

"But do not let us keep you from what you were doing," the priest said, looking at the bare table and the fire with nothing on it.

"Yes," the woman said. "Have your supper and don't mind us."

"We have already eaten," Granny said. "But do come and sit down."

The priest bit his lower lip as though in deep thought.

"Anything wrong?" Granny asked.

The priest turned to his wife.

"You did take the medicine to the sick old man, my dear?"

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An ~~expression~~ look of horror spread ~~slowly~~ over the woman's face. ~~The woman looked~~

"Dear God, forgive me. I forgot."

"I must ask you to excuse us, sister," the priest said.

"I understand, Reverend," Granny murmured.

They hurried out. ~~We waited a while.~~

"See if they've gone," Granny said.

My mother went ~~out.~~ ~~She returned some five minutes later.~~

"They've gone."

~~My mother and sister avoided looking at each other while~~ Granny got the food from under the bed.

"Seems you were right, Angelina. The good Lord seems to want us to eat warm food tonight. I'll put it all back into the pot to warm up.

"Why not pray while it's warming," my mother said.

~~The~~ wicked glint showed briefly in Granny's eyes. She prayed. There was no need for her to remind God how hard times were. He knew. He knew, too, that she had done her best by the preacher and his wife. Why, only today she had walked her poor old legs sick collecting for the preacher's rent. And she had fed them three times this week. And God knew how big their appetites were and how little she had. There were others who had more. It was up to God to stir their hearts so that they, too, took a share in supporting the priest and his good wife. And God had no right to be angry with her because she could not, like Our Lord Jesus, feed half the world on five loaves and two fishes. Anyway, God should not forget she was giving the priest and his wife Christmas dinner tomorrow. As for this little thing of tonight, well, she and God understood each other. They both knew what hard times meant even if younger people had silly thoughts. Amen.

When we had finished our meal it was time for Maggie to start

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back for Johannesburg. My mother and I walked down to the station with her.

The moon had risen early. It hung over us, very near the earth. The Southern Cross stood out clear and bright. And the Milky Way was a sweep of light. The night was so light, we saw our shadows was we walked slowly back to Granny Petersen's. We stopped once and looked back. The train carrying Maggie curved like a giant snail across the moon-kissed earth.

"Look, ma!" I pointed at my shadow.

"Moon shadow," my mother said.

We neared the house.

"Glad to be here, Lee?"

"Yes, ma." I took her hand.

"Seen Aunt Betty since I left?"

I remembered the last time I had seen Aunt Betty. It had been a Saturday night. I had been out stealing with the gang. We were coming through the passage that connected Nineteenth and Twentieth Streets. It was a dark, narrow, muddy passage, reeking with the smell of urine. We had passed a couple, both drunk. The man was propping the woman up against the corrugated iron wall. Her dress was raised high. It was Aunt Betty and a mine boy. The gang had mocked. I had left them and hurried away, a heavy burden of shame on me. Shame overcame me again as my mother asked after Aunt Betty.

"No, ma," I said.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Then you did see her."

I remained silent.

"She was drunk, heh?"

"Yes, ma."

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"What else?....Was she arrested?"

"No."

"Then what?"

There was no way of telling so I shook my head. We walked in silence for a while. The hand holding mine suddenly tightened.

"Oh Lee; I'm so sorry, my child.... So sorry."

The Christmas of my tenth year was a happy one. Granny and my mother prepared a feast. Uncle Petersen brought his elder daughter, a girl as big as Maggie. And he brought presents for me and the little girl. He, my mother, and the big girl, played with us all Christmas Day. And, of course, there were the most tasty things to be had throughout the long day.

Late in the golden afternoon, when the golden sun was setting, my mother and I climbed the hill we had climbed with Maggie the day before. I dashed forward when we neared its crest. Memories of the previous day were on me. I would again experience that strange and wonderful new feeling. I stood looking at the sweeping land. But nothing happened. There was no magic stirring me to shout, no urge to tell of what I saw. I turned dejectedly to my mother.

Why did things happen when they did? Yesterday, it happened when I did not wish for it. Now, in face of my will, it would not happen. What made things happen?

4.

The six days after Christmas were days of glory in Vrededorp and all the dark places of Coloured South Africa. For a brief span of days, the world belonged to us, was as we wanted it to be: a place of feasting, laughter, and good fellowship. And the grand carnival of coons was the heartbeat of these days.

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There were six coon teams in Vrededorp that year. Each team tried to outdo the others in uniform, dancing and singing. A team was made up of between twenty and thirty men and boys. Their uniforms were of the brightest and shiniest silk materials. And each team wore a different combination of colours.

My brother, Harry, was a member of the Twentieth Street team. On my first evening back from Krugerdorp, I watched him dress. His shirt was bright red with shining green ruffs and breast pockets. A green handkerchief, tied pirate fashion, covered his head. Over this he wore a flat-topped red straw hat with three tall green feathers. White gloves covered his hands. His knee-breeches were yellow, with black piping. A broad purple sash circled his waist. The ends hung down below his left knee. He wore red shoes with a big shining buckle, and long white stockings that tucked under his breeches. His cheeks were rouged and powdered. Side whiskers and a moustache of burnt cork completed his turnout.

In marching position, each team made a triangle. There were eight guitarists in a line. In front of them walked a line of banjoists. This line was slightly shorter than the line of the guitarists. Next came two lines of bone players. Each had an evenly shaped set of bones in each hand. They rattled these, producing a sound like that of castinets. Next came the tambourine players. They completed the orchestra. In front of them were the dancers, in two lines. Each dancer carried a beribboned stick which he twirled while pirouetting about the street. Finally, there was the leader, the apex of the triangle. He was the most elaborately madeup member of the team. His uniform, though of the same colour scheme, was different from that of the rest of the team. He was the brightest in a galaxy of bright peacocks. He did not dance all the time, like the others. But when he did, great artistry invaded

UWI Library

the mean streets of Vrededorp, and all my world came out to watch it and be carried away by an ~~opium~~ dagga smoking, dice playing, Coloured Boy who, for a brief moment in time, carried the Gods of grace and beauty in his heart and mind, and twinkling feet

All through those six days, the lucky men, those at work, rushed home at the end of the day's work. ~~They~~ changed quickly into their carnival clothes, and hurried to the meeting places of the coon teams. There, they met the unemployed who had whiled the long day away, ~~xxxx~~ waiting for assembly time. The teams fell in. The guitars and banjos struck up. The bones clicked. The tambourines banged and rattled. A whistle blew. The team set off, down the centre of the street. The leader twirled his stick. Those behind him danced.

Thus, they went up one street and down another. And the folk of Vrededorp, ~~big and small, had their favourite teams, and~~ marched with them ~~through the streets~~. And sometimes, when two teams met, there was a battle of dancing for the right of way. The teams would stop, facing each other. And the two leaders would dance against each other. That was a sight! They whirled and leaped; made intricate patterns with their sticks; danced on their brightly coloured handkerchiefs; on their bellies; on their hands. Right of way went to the victor. The vanquished made a passage and played the victors through. And oh how the victorious leader danced through that human passage!

Every now and then, ~~the~~ a team stopped in front of a house. They made a circle. ~~The bones and drums were silent~~. The guitars and banjos played till the people of the house came out. Then there was silence. The people of the house chose the song they wanted to hear, and the singer. ~~The singer stepped into the centre of the circle~~. The music struck up. ~~He~~ The singer sang the verses alone. The whole

UWI Library

team joined in the chorus. The soloist went around, collecting, after his song.

All the coon teams amalgamated on New Year's Eve. A giant coon procession sang and danced its way about Vrededorp ~~far~~ into the ~~night~~ new year. There was laughter and feasting, and great gaiety. On this, the last, night, the old year, the stern coon rules were relaxed. Women and girls could walk in procession with their husbands and lovers. We, the young children, wore paper hats, waved rattles and let off crackers. I was with the gang and we had a wonderful time letting off squibs under people's feet and watching them jump.

Once, I caught brief sight of Harry. A pretty, long haired, brown girl, walked beside him . As I looked, he turned and kissed her. I wondered about Emily. I shouted to him. The din of music, rattles, crackers, and human noises drowned my call.

Midnight came. Whistles hooted. People shouted and flung ~~their~~ paper hats in the air. They went about kissing strangers. Once, I caught sight of the Reverend Rogerson. He towered above a crowd that surrounded him. He sang Auld Lang Syne at the top of his voice. ~~I remembered~~ My mother had returned to he with us on New Year's Day, so I left the gang and ran home. People had been saying 'Happy New Year' to each other. I would do the same to ~~my mother~~ her. It would please her. And perhaps I would be the first one. I fought my way home through the crowds.

~~But Maggie was there before me. Aunt Mattie had gone to find Catherine in the crowds. We were alone in the house, my two women and I. And they were holding hands as I came in. And they were singing while tears ran down their cheeks.~~

~~"Oh ma! He's come!" Maggie hugged me fiercely. "Happy New Year, little brother."~~

~~"Happy New Year, my child," my mother said.~~

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We clasped hands. They sang. I made weird noises. And then Harry came in, breathless, still dressed in his coon finery. The two women burst out crying.

"We thought you'd forgotten," Maggie said.

A twisted smile passed over Harry's face.

"Not this, my dear. I may be a washout but not this." He moved to our mother. "Happy New Year, darling," he said hoarsely.

For a while they hesitated, then each took a step forward. They flung their arms about each other and held tight. Maggie snuffled beside me.

"You do love crying!" I snapped and turned away to hide my own tears.

"We're the softest family I know," Maggie said, smiling through her tears.

"Thank heaven for your softness," mother said happily. "Come, let's go out. This is no time to be indoors."

"We're all together, ma," Maggie said. "All four of us."

"Yes, my child."

Mother and Harry went out arm-in-arm. Maggie slipped an arm through mine. We followed them out to the crowded streets.

Before the sun was up, a fleet of double decker busses carried the great majority of the citizens of Vrededorp to a wooded green place far away from the town. There, people danced and sang and laughed and loved and drank and fed till the sun went down. Then they returned wearily. The week of glory was over. Ahead lay a year of drabness and want before they could have another week of glory. This week would be something to remember in the lean days ahead.... The coons packed their uniforms away lovingly....

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FIVE
~~EIGHT~~

1.

It was a mad day at the smithy. There had been one fist fight. The boss, Mr. Wylie, had himself stalked storming through the place. After months of ~~s~~ hardly any orders, there was a big rush order. Mr. Wylie said he had been losing money for months and was fed up. Two machinists and one solderer were sacked on the spot. The rest of ~~us~~ worked feverishly, goaded by panic. Jobs were scarce that year. Nearly all Vrededorp was at home. We were the lucky ones.

Boeta Dick worked till sweat ~~from his brow~~ rolled into his eyes and turned them a bright pink. He grew short of breath. He opened his mouth and panted audibly ~~as a dog after a long run. His tongue was dry and swollen.~~ He had a wet rag on his lap at which he sucked every now and then. When he spat into the bucket ~~of sand,~~ his spittle was a bright pink. His panic touched me and I ran between the machine and him, and then, when I had brought and smeared a huge stack of tins, I squatted beside him and soldered ~~with him.~~

In all the smithy only Nondi was unaffected by the panic that possessed ~~the place.~~ us. ~~Our panic amused him.~~ He went about casually, mumbling to himself. ~~He made us feel uneasy and guilty~~. His boss grew angry and shouted at him.

"Shut up and hurry up, you mad dog!"

Nondi flung back his head. The ~~mad~~ 'mad' look came into his eyes. He flung out one arm and spoke at the top of his voice.

"A dog! Yes! No dog can fear as ~~g~~fears a man. The fears of dogs are fears of truth. I'll be a dog without your fears!"

~~He laughed till~~ the echoes of his laughter rang above the noise of the machines. His boss had his soldering iron in ~~hot~~ molten lead. The man was beside himself with rage. He swung the iron. Drops of ~~molten~~ lead spattered the side of Nondi's face and ate into

UWI Library

his skin. ~~He~~ Nondi let out a piercing scream and clapped both hands ~~hands~~ to his left eye. He went on his knees, pushed his forehead against the floor, and moaned.

The smithy foreman hurried down from the machines. Mr. Wylie came running from his office.

"You saw nothing!" Boeta Dick snapped. "Understand?"

"Yes."

"What's wrong?" Mr. Wylie asked.

The foreman raised Nondi's head.

"How did this happen?" The foreman looked at Nondi's boss.

"Better get him to hospital," Mr. Wylie cut in. "You can find out later. Bring him out. I'll get the car."

The foreman and another supported Nondi between them and went out to the yard.

Nondi's boss came over to us.

"You'll stand by me, Dick," he appealed.

"Go to hell!" Boeta Dick snapped.

"He was mad. You saw it."

"He was just a kid. A good kid. Funny but good. Don't look to me for help."

I felt proud of my boss. ~~I would carry his spittle happily now.~~

"You'd better get while the going's good," a machinist called.

Nondi's boss turned to ~~them~~ machinists. He spread his hands appealingly.

"Have a heart fellows. I've got a wife and two kids. Stand with a fellow. You saw he was mad."

There were only two white men among the machinists. They worked the two most difficult machines. I had never heard them speak. Now one of them snapped harshly.

"Get, damn you! And that's the only mercy you'll get here."

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The machines had stopped. Silence hung over the place. Everyone, machinists and solderers, watched Nondi's boss. Even the Jewish girl who worked in the office stood in its doorway, peering through her thick glasses. Nondi's boss turned slowly, looking anxiously from face to face, the air of a trapped animal about him. All the faces were cold and unfriendly. The man shivered slightly.

"So you'll rob a man of his job!" he cried.

"Get!" the white man said.

Nondi's boss sighed. That last cry had sapped all his strength. He lowered his head and walked slowly to the door. And in my mind, I walked with him under the cold stares. And it seemed a long, long walk.

He met the foreman at the door.

"Where're you going?" the foreman snapped.

"Lavatory." He went out.

Mr. Wylie returned some time later.

"The boy will be blind in that eye....Where is the man?"

"Gone, sir," the foreman said.

"Gone? Where?"

"He ran away, sir."

Nondi returned two weeks later, as the day was ending. He was cleaner than I had ever seen him. He looked fatter, too. He walked into the place and began to laugh.

"Hello!" he cried and made it sound a song of joy.

"How's the eye?" someone asked.

"To hell and blind!" he shouted and went into the office.

The six o'clock hooter went. I lingered in the yard till he came out.

"Ah, big eyes!"

"Hello Nondi. Coming back tomorrow?"

"Not me!" He waved two pound notes. "Me, I'm going brother!"

"Where?"

UWI Library

He pointed at the setting sun.

"There! I'm going to see what it's like where the sun sets."

"What for?"

"Don't be dumber than a dog, big eyes. I want to."

"Where will you sleep? What'll you eat?"

"Where dogs sleep: what dogs eat."

"And your people?"

"I am my people."

"But your mother and father."

"I am my people.... Don't be ~~so~~ worried, big eyes. I'll be all right." He hugged me then punched me affectionately. "So-long, big eyes."

"You going now."

"Now!"

He saluted, smiled, and walked briskly in the direction of the setting sun. I stood watching him. Perhaps he would turn. I wanted to wave. But he did not turn. ~~So I turned and made for Vrededorp.~~

Goodbye Nondi! ~~Goodbye, my friend!~~ Poetry was dressed in filth and nobody recognised her. ~~And when the singing words moved you we called it madness....Goodbye, dear friend....~~

~~Come my ten-faced children,~~
~~Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,~~
~~Have you your pistols? Have you your sharpedged axes?~~
~~Pioneers! O Pioneers!~~

~~I will sing the song of a mad boy who found beauty in a world of darkness; I will sing of a lad with a free heart, in a land where all were slaves. And the slaves mocked the free man, and nailed him to the cross.~~

~~Wherever you are, Hail Nondi!~~

UWL Library

The long days and warm nights sped along, chased each other, and were lost in ~~that fathomless thing called~~ time. And time, men, and something within me, conspired against me and my innocence. The darkness of the land ~~was~~ rushing on to meet me.

One day, someone came with the news that my brother had been arrested in a dice game. ~~There was great weeping.~~

One a bleak Monday morning, my mother, Aunt Mattie, and Danny went through the subway to the court where he was ~~being~~ tried. ~~There was a crisis at home that evening.~~ He ~~had been~~ was sentenced to fourteen days but there ~~had been~~ was the option of a fine because it was a first offence. Aunt Mattie ~~had~~ refused to try and raise the fine. Maggie was bitter about this.

On the following Saturday Maggie, I, and the girl Harry had kissed on New Year's Eve, climbed the hill above Vrededorp and went down into a valley. Harry was at Diepkloof Reformatory and we were taking him food. Deep in the heart of the valley, we saw men breaking stones. They wore ~~the~~ striped prison uniform. And when we drew near, we saw my brother among them. ~~The two girls began to cry as we hurried forward.~~ When he saw us, Harry flung down his pick-axe ~~down~~, and waved and shouted. An armed white man ~~leaped forward and~~ struck him across the face with the back of his hand. Harry staggered back, regained his balance, then bent forward and retrieved his pick. My sister strangled ~~an involuntary~~ cry. The other girl cursed softly ~~but~~ and bitterly.

We went up to the white man. Prisoners stole quick, furtive, glances at us then carried on ~~with their task of~~ breaking rocks.

"Don't you know the law?" the white man snapped. "You're not

allowed so near the prisoners!"

"We'd like to see my brother," Maggie said ~~coldly~~.

"They're not on holiday!" the man snapped.

Maggie looked at the man's feet, then, unwillingly, she said:

"Please, baas."

~~A slight sneer touched the man's lips, then was gone.~~

"You! Prisoner Abrahams!"

Harry jumped to attention.

"Ja, baas?"

"Know these people?"

"Ja Baas. That's my sister and my little brother and," he seemed to hesitate, "my girl."

I looked at my brother's face. He had the expression of an unhappy, whipped dog, hurt terribly without quite knowing why. ~~He stared intently at Maggie, so intently, I felt something pass between them.~~

"You can greet them!"

Harry dropped his pickaxe and hurried forward. The man put out a big hand and shoved him back ~~violently~~. My brother staggered and sat on the hard earth with a bump. Maggie's chin trembled. Harry's girl breathed heavily through her mouth. Slowly, Harry picked himself up.

"I didn't say make love to them! Go on, greet them!"

"'Lo Mag." Harry looked at the ground.

"Hello Harry."

"Enna...."

"Harry," his girl murmured.

"Hello Lee."

UWI Library

"Hello Harry."

"All right!" the white man snapped.

"Can we give him...." Maggie began.

"No! ~~You can~~ Wait till they're marching back."

"But...."

"The baas is right, Mag," Harry cut in. "Go'n wait."

"You're learning, Abrahams," the white man said. ~~He looked at Maggie. Amusement curled his lips. "When he came here he thought he was as good as a white man." He turned his back on us.~~

Harry raised his pickaxe and struck the hard rock. We walked away to a safe distance and sat on the ground, watching the prisoners.

The afternoon sun slanted westward, but only slightly. A lone eagle circled overhead. Once, it spread its great wings and swooped down low. No doubt, to see what manner of men these striped beings were. Then, with movements of great power and grace, it climbed. It made an almost straight line up. I watched it grow smaller, hazy, and then merge into the blue sky that had suddenly grown infinitely far removed from the world of men. I longed, suddenly, to be like that eagle, able to fly right out of the range of this place, so that I would not have to watch my brother breaking rock under the hot sun.

Beside me, the two young women sat ~~silently~~ brooding. At length Enna burst out:

"I nearly gave that brute a piece of my mind!"

"And Harry would have suffered later," Maggie said tiredly.

"Nothing one can do!" Enna cried.

"One can keep out of their reach."

"Tell him that," Enna said.

UWC Library

"It's up to you if you're going to be his wife."

"It's this business of not humbling himself to white people. I've talked to him about that but he won't see it."

"Perhaps he can't."

"Other men do."

"They didn't have our father," Maggie said softly. ~~"And if my father had been here now all this would not be."~~

"Your father give him his airs?" Enna was interested.

Maggie smiled.

"If you like." ~~Harry was the eldest and understood more of what father said. My father had travelled about the world and spoke often about the worth of a person. There was a lot between him and Harry."~~

"It's foolish," Enna said. "How's he going to feed a wife and family with all this pride. It's silly not see it's not the same for the whites and us."

"Yes." Maggie grew thoughtful. "But you wouldn't have thought it silly if you heard my father. And I don't know if it is so silly either."

"You've got to work for white people."

"And crawl in front of them?....Tell me, Enna, are you in the family way?"

For a while the girl glared defiantly at Maggie, then she lowered her eyes and nodded.

"Then you must help him," Maggie said quietly.

"And what of me?"

"You want him to marry you, don't you?....He will."

"You don't like me. You would have been happy if it had been

UWI Library

that black, woolly-hair Emily."

"I didn't say so."

"But you would! I can see it!" Enna burst out crying ~~and wept noisily.~~

"My poor brother," Maggie murmured.

Enna did not hear.

After this, there was a long spell of silence between us. Far away, on the other side of the land where the prisoners worked, a shining, black macadamised road cut through the veld and curved away to Johannesburg in the one direction, and the north in the other. Cars, big shiny spiders from where I sat, sped along the road in both directions. One of these turned off the road and came bumping across the veld to the white man who watched the prisoners.

Two white men and two black men got out of the car. The black men carried knobkerries. They went ~~off~~ and stood guard at each end of the line of prisoners. The three white men talked together. The one who had been there all the time, pointed to where we sat. Then he and one of the other two got into the car. It bumped away to the curving road and picked up speed as it hit the road. It was soon out of sight. The new white man tucked his rifle under his arm and strode briskly towards us.

"Better get up," Maggie said.

The white man walked more slowly as he drew near. He was bigger and looked more brutal than the man ~~who~~ we had dealt with earlier.

"Hello," he said gruffly.

"Hello, baas," Maggie said.

"Want to see Abrahams?"

UWI Library

"Yes, please, baas."

He looked at Maggie then ~~looked~~ back at the line of prisoners.

"Abrahams!" His voice boomed across the silent space.

My brother straightened up and looked.

"Come here! Quick man!"

~~He~~ flung his pickaxe down and trotted across the space that was between us. He grew uncertain as he neared us, and we grew uncertain with him. ~~Was this white man going to humiliate him, and us, again?~~

The white man got a packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, pushed one between his lips, and held the packet to Harry. My brother lost his uncertainty. He took the cigarette and accepted a light from the white man. He inhaled a huge gulp of smoke, held it, then let it out with a sigh. His lips were swollen and there was a stain of dried blood at the side of his mouth.

"Your lip," the white man said. "What'd you do?"

"I saw them and waved," Harry said.

"You fellows ask for trouble." The white man shook his head gently and smiled. "That the only thing?"

"The other baas knocked him down," Enna protested.

"Quiet, Enna," Harry said.

"It's true!" said Enna.

"Quiet!" Maggie snapped.

"You two brother and sister?"

"Yes," Maggie said.

The man's eyes crept over Maggie's ample body.

"Must've been unpleasant for you. I'm sorry....All right, kêrel, relax." He left Harry with us and walked back to the line of

UWI Library

prisoners.

"Thank you, my basie!" Enna called fervently after him.

"What for?" Harry said bitterly.

"Because he's kind. They'd be kinder if you appreciate."

"You don't know him," Harry said.

"There you go again! What's the matter with you, Harry?"

"Stop it,Enna," Maggie said.

"I saw him peel the skin off a fellow's back this morning," Harry said. "You never know whether he's going to kick you or give you a cigarette. He likes it like that. The other fellowss better."

42 "Forget them now," Maggie said. "How are you?"

They looked at each other for a while. Harry's face grew bleak.

"All right," he said.

"Really?"

"They kick you around, but what do you expect!"

"There you go!" Enna said.

"And the food?" Maggie asked.

"You get hungry and you eat it."

"Ma sends her love."

"How is she?"

"All right.

"Any message from Mattie?"

"She couldn't raise the fine, Harry."

"Tell them I'm all right."

He sucked hard at the almost vanished cigarette end.

"I brought some," Enna said.

She gave him two packets and matches. He lit a fresh one. I heard the white man's booming voice and looked across. The prisoners

UWI Library

stopped working. Those who had cigarettes lit up.

"Kind basie," Harry murmured.

"I know about Enna," Maggie said. "Want me to do anything?"

"Better not tell them till I come out."

~~"I agree."~~

There seemed nothing more to say. They stared at each other for a while. Enna grew restless. Maggie noticed it.

"You'll want to speak to Enna," she said. "There's a nice piece of chicken from my work in the parcel. Take care."

"I'll be out soon," he said, ~~as though praying.~~ and it was a prayer.

"You will," Maggie said and turned away abruptly. "Come Lee."

"(Bye Lee," he called.

We walked up the sloping land till we came to a huge boulder. Here we waited for Enna. The big sun was nearing the horizon and turning orange. Far up in the heavens, a line of fleecy clouds raced through the sky. Though peaceful and windless on earth, a ~~unseen~~ storm ~~of wind~~ raged in heaven. Was the eagle caught in that storm?

Down in the valley, Enna flung her arms about Harry's neck and clung to him. A car left the road and bumped across the veld to the prisoners. The echo of the white man's voice came up to us:

"Abrahams!"

Harry ran back with his parcel. He stood in front of the white man for a while, then, stuffing his parcel into his ~~prison~~ shirt, he joined the line. The white man blew a whistle. The prisoners shouldered their axes and formed fours. One of the two black policemen went to the head of the column. The other went to the rear. The car bumped to a standstill. The white man got in. A whistle

UWI Library

blew. The prisoners marched away, an army in striped shirts, carrying pickaxes. And among them, one of them, marched my brother.

Enna reached us and leaned against the boulder sobbing. We watched them till they curved away with the curve of the shining road.

"A gang of prisoners will always remind me of my brother," Maggie said.

One fine autumn day, three white boys pounced on me as I walked home from work. It was between Braamfontein Station and the Vrededorp subway. The sun had gone down and the world was bathed in the half-light that precedes night. I was walking beside the iron railings that fenced off the railway land from the street. I was running a piece of wood along the iron bars and noting the variations of each tinkle. Suddenly, ~~as if out of nowhere, the~~ three boys were about me. ~~They were a little bigger than me, but not much.~~

"I'll have this one," a ginger-headed lad said.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"You're going to fight me," he said.

"We fight fair," another said.

"I don't want to fight," I said.

"You'll fight!" said ginger-head.

"Why?"

"I want to kill you!"

"I've done nothing," I cried.

"You're black," the third lad said.

"Ready!"

Ginger-head came at me with fists raised. I dodged his first

UWC Library

blow and noticed what beautifully clear blue eyes he had. Then his left caught me smack in the left eye.

"Please...." I appealed.

"Fight, Black coward!"

A blow on the chest sent me reeling against the iron rails. I clutched the rails and steadied myself. I saw the three of them briefly. There was no excitement about them. They were more like grown-ups than ~~three~~ boys. This was a calm, quiet, methodical business.

"Come on," Ginger-head said, coming in again.

Better fight, Lee. But, somehow, I had no will to fight. I had no reason to fight, no desire. I raised my hands and warded off the blows as best I could. Ginger-head cracked me on the nose and drew blood. This, because it hurt, stirred me to rage, I rushed in with flailing fists. Ginger-head gave ground under the flurry. But I did not land a single solid blow. He dodged, slipped, and caught all my punches. Then, as my flurry ended ineffectively, his fist sank into the pit of my stomach. I gasped and doubled up. He swung at my unprotected head and caught me on the ear. I went flat on my back, dazed and hurt.

"Get up!"

I raised myself to a sitting position. The other two yanked me to my feet and propped me against the iron rails. Ginger-head hit me again, but I did not know where. ~~Stars exploded in my head.~~ Then, as in a dream, I heard running feet. Someone shook me. The fog cleared I looked at the black man who supported me.

"Why did they beat you, son?"

"They say because I'm black," I said tiredly.

UWI Library

"Come," the man said, giving me support as we walked towards Vrededorp.

Another time, a white man on a cycle cleared his throat and spat as he flashed by. The muck struck me in the eye....

My mother found a job with a little room attached. I sometimes spent part of an evening with her in her little box room. The Boer family seemed thoughtful and considerate.

Harry came out of jail, subdued, quiet, and depressed. The scraps between him and Aunt Mattie grew more bitter. At last, he left the house and set up house with Enna in a room in Fifteenth Street.

Catherine and Jacob Loff got married suddenly one day. Then I discovered that a child was on the way.

My tenth birthday came and went.

Soon, the sharp, highveld winter was on us. It was very cold that winter and many people died in Vrededorp. Food was ~~short~~ scarce so a hungry Revered Rogerson walked the streets, looking pinched and blue ~~with cold and hunger~~. A number of Vrededorp men broke into grocers' and butchers' shops and stole food and money. Those arrested received stiff sentences because crime was on the increase.

Aunt Mattie's rent arrears were so big, the Indian landlord refused to give her any more grace. She found a house in Sixteenth Street and we moved there. In the removal, Aunt Mattie lost half a crown. It was the only money in the house. She remembered last putting it on the mantlepiece of the new house.

We were all there. Maggie, Catherine, Jacob Loff, Harry, Danny,

UWI Library

and myself. She taxed each in turn, and accepted their word when they disclaimed all knowledge of the money. Then she turned to me:

"Then it must be you!"

"I didn't take it."

"You must have!"

"I didn't!"

"Don't shout at me, you little thief!"

"Better search him," Maggie said quietly.

I held my hands above my head while Aunt Mattie went through my pockets.

"He must have hidden it," Aunt Mattie snapped at last.

"He's been with us all the time," Maggie said.

"He's a little thief!"

"I'm going," Harry said harshly, and went.

"Haven't you hurt him enough," Maggie said.

Aunt Mattie turned from me, still convinced I had taken the money. I went out and walked aimlessly about the bleak, cold world.

It was a Saturday night. Dinny and I walked down Delarey Street on the way to the Bioscope. The Saturday night crowds milled about us. A heavy hand fell on my shoulder. I turned and looked into the face of a big, brawny, black boy. His glazed eyes had the dagga - ~~opium~~ - Indian hemp - smoker's film over them. I tried to pull away. He hit me in the stomach, winding me. ~~I sat down on the pavement, hold my stomach.~~ Dinny slipped into the crowd and disappeared.

"Don't fight, sonny!" the big boy rumbled. "See this...."

I looked at the whip fashioned of coils of thin wire.

"Your skin pells if I hit you with this. Try'n run away and

UWI Library

I'll show you." He clouted me on the side of the head. "Get up!"

I bbeyed. He swished the whip.

"Now run!"

I dared not.

~~I looked at his face. Terror shot through me.~~

"Come on!"

I followed him through the crowds. He moved with the easy, springy grace of ~~some strange~~ a wild animal, ~~half wild~~. He pushed people out of his way. They looked at his face and ~~did~~ did not make the protests they felt.

We met two of his kind near the subway. Each had a little boy in tow. One little boy was Coloured, the other was black. The two big fellows were smoking dagga.

"Wait!" my 'boss' snapped.

He went over to the other two and had a smoke with them. His drugged eyes glittered more unnaturally when he returned.

"Come!"

We went through the subway, up Market Street, past the big market, into the very heart of the town. This was my first sight of Johannesburg proper. ~~I forgot some of my terror in seeing it.~~

The streets were very broad and very clean. Tall buildings rose high into the sky. And the streets were bathed in a myriad lights. The pavements were lined with shops, The shops had huge glass windows, each brightly lit for all the world to see what was in it. And everywhere, as though flung into the sky and held by nothing, coloured lights went on and off, spelling out things I could not read. Sleek motorcars flashed by in all directions. Well dressed white people paraded the pavements, sat in clean

UWI Library

spacious cafes, lounged in wonderful bars. And everywhere, here, people feasted. I passed a window where four people sat at table watching a man carve up a chicken for them. I passed another where a man and woman sat, heads close together, a huge box of chocolates and glasses of ~~interestingly~~ coloured drinks in front of them.

~~O feasting, drinking heaven of white people, so near and yet so far from from Vrededorp.~~

Was this place really so near Vrededorp? We of Vrededorp were lucky when we had chicken at Christmas. These were hard times in Vrededorp. Didn't hard times ever come to the white people? O feasting, drinking, heavem of white people, how far are you from us and Vrededorp?

My 'boss' took me to a crowded corner. He took off his cap and pushed it into my hands. He fondled the wire whip. Then he punched me in the ribs.

"I'll cut your skin to ribbons if you don't beg. Beg!"

He ~~left me,~~ crossed the road, and watched from the darkest corner he could find. I stood trembling.

A white man passed, stopped and turned back. He looked at me, then flung a sixpenny piece into the cap. A couple passed. The man flipped a penny. It fell at my feet, rolled into the gutter. I ran after it. The woman laughed. For a while after that nothing happened. People went past as though they did not see me. I shook the cap.

"Penny please baas. Penny, missus."

An elderly lady put a shilling into the cap and murmured:

"Poor thing."

A group of slightly drunk young men came along. They made a

UWI Library

ring about me and made bets with each other about flicking pennies into the cap. Passersby stopped and watched. They ran out of pennies and used threepenny and sixpenny bits. This went on till one of them saw three unescorted girls on the other side of the road.

After they had gone, my boss came over and emptied the cap, leaving only a few coppers in it. He had hardly got back to his quiet doorway when a black boy of his own size stopped beside me. He breathed heavily.

"Where's your boss?"

"Over there." I pointed.

My boss came out of his shadow and hurried across.

"'Tecs, the stranger said. "Got my boy and ~~got~~ another man and his boy."

"Van?" my boss asked.

"Yes."

A Black Maria turned a corner far up the road. The stranger shot off.

"Run!" my boss snapped. "Watch the cap."

I clutched the cap to my bosom and raced after him. We ran all the way to Vrededorp.

Dinny waited for me outside our house. The night was cold and he shivered. But he had done forced begging and wanted to be sure I got back.

The black boy waylaid me three times and forced me to beg for him. He became the curse and terror of my life. In the end, in spite of his threats to kill me if I did so, I told my brother.

I took Harry and Danny to where he hung out. He was with friends. I pointed him out. ~~Harry went up to him.~~

UWI Library

"You the fellow who took my kid brother begging?"

"Not on your life!" he cried.

"The kid says so."

The black boy glared at me.

"Did you say that, sonny?"

I decided he would kill me in any case now if he could.

"Yes. Three times."

"All right," Harry said.

"Any of you others fighting for him?" Danny asked.

A big black giant smiled and shook his head.

"A man fights for himself, brother."

"I'll take him, Harry," Danny said. "Kid's my friend."

"He's my brother," Harry said.

Harry took off his jacket and gave it to me.

"Come on, fellow."

"I don't want to fight. Look, I won't do it again. I swear."

Harry moved forward, my ex-boss moved back.

"Look man," he pulled a ten shilling note out of his pocket and flung it at Harry's feet. "Take that. That'll pay the kid."

"I hear you smacked him down," Harry said.

He leaped in suddenly. There was a flurry, and then my ex-boss was on the ground with a bleeding mouth and nose. Harry raised his foot. The others looked on calmly. I turned away and braced my body.

I went on no more forced begging expeditions....

UWI Library

A stranger called Chris Fortune came home with Maggie one night. He was small, ~~handsome~~ dapper, and very fair. His coming cast a shadow over Danny. He belonged to one of the best families in Vrededorp. His manners and clothes were those of a gentleman. He ~~belonged to~~ was one of that small, dying band: the skilled Coloured ~~tradesman~~ artisan. He was a cabinetmaker.

His coming brought a bubbling gaiety into my sister's heart. And on that first night, my mother was at Aunt Mattie's. While he drank tea and talked with Aunt Mattie in the front room, Maggie hugged my mother in the kitchen.

"Mister Right, ma!"

"Are you sure, my child? ~~It's not just his fine clothes, fair skin and straight hair?"~~

"~~I'm~~ As sure as I'll ever be, ma!"

"All right, my child."

~~"Happy for me, Mrs. A.?"~~

~~"My heart's full for you. Bless you."~~

I liked the look of Maggie's young man. I liked the way he looked at her. I liked him for giving me a sixpence on that first night.

Danny left us a few days later. He slipped away as quietly as he had lived among us. I never saw him again ~~in Vrededorp~~.

Enna gave birth to a boy. I visited their room ~~about~~ a month after it's birth. A stale smell hung over the place. The one window was shut. The bed was unmade. A pile of dirty crocks were stacked in a corner. Cigarette ends lay in the dust coating of the floor. The baby lay bawling on the bed. Enna ~~was~~ sat oiling her long tresses ~~in all this dirt~~. Harry sat sullenly in the only chair in

UWC Library

the room.

"Hello Harry, I've come to see the baby."

Harry stood beside me while I looked at the tiny creature.

"It's like you," I said.

"Think so?"

"Yes."

"Hope he doesn't grow up like him," Enna said.

"Better sweep this pigsty before you start talking," Harry said.

"I don't take orders from you!"

"Look at the place! Aren't you ashamed?"

"Aren't you ashamed of never working?"

Their voices grew louder.

"I've been looking! You know that!"

"But you never get anything!"

"Suppose you could!"

"Other men do!"

"You should've got another man!"

"Aren't I sorry I didn't! And all those chances!"

"Don't flatter yourself! No decent man would put up with this filth!"

"You're right! You're not a decent man!"

"I must go," I said and fled.

I did not really know my brother. We had never spent ~~any~~ time together. We had never talked. ~~He had never been the protective,~~ There were too many years between us. He was my ~~big~~ brother ~~to whom I ran in times of trouble.~~ but that was about all. There was the blood relation and a series of meetings. When I first met him in Elsberg he had been gay and spruce, clear-eyed and sure of himself. Now I left him, dirty, unshaven, baffled, bitter, a father, seething

UWI Library

with futile rage, yelling at the top of his voice in a filthy room. ~~But really, I had never been close enough to know him.~~

I thought of the other girl who had loved him, dark Emily. Would it have been different if she had been with him? Why, loving him, did she leave him? And as I thought of this, I became conscious of the beginnings of a new awareness. Something was happening to me and the way I saw the world in which I lived.

3.

Often, at the smithy, I cleaned Mr. Wylie's car during the lunch hour. For this ~~chore~~ he gave me a shilling at the end of each week. Boeta Dick had raised my wage to three shillings. Thus, I went home with four shillings every Saturday afternoon. Half this sum paid for my food and keep. I took a shilling as pocket money. The other shilling Aunt Mattie put away for me. Once or twice she had borrowed from my savings. She had always first asked. She had always returned it to my little hoard that she kept in her mattress.

One lunch time, after I had cleaned his car, Mr. Wylie ~~got in to it.~~ said.

"There are some sandwiches on my desk," ~~he said.~~ "Take them."

He drove off. I went to the office. The short-sighted Jewish girl was in her corner, eating her lunch and reading. She looked up.

"Mr. Wylie said I can have that." I pointed.

"All right."

I took the little package and turned to the door.

"Lee."

I stopped and turned to her.

"That is your name, isn't it?"

"Yes, missus."

UWI Library

"Miss, not missus. You only say missus to a married woman."

Her smile encouraged me.

"We say it to all white women."

"Then you are wrong. Say miss."

"yes, Miss."

"That's better....Tell me, how old are you?"

"Going on for eleven, Miss."

"Why don't you go to school?"

"I don't know, miss."

"Don't you want to?"

"I don't know, miss."

"Can you read or write?"

"No, miss."

"Stop saying miss now."

"Yes, miss."

She laughed.

"Sit down. Eat your sandwiches if you like."

I sat on the edge of the chair near the door.

"So you can't read?"

"No, miss."

"Wouldn't you like to?"

"I don't know, miss."

"Want to find out?"

"Yes, miss."

She turned the pages of the book in front of her. She looked at me, then began to read, from Lamb's Tales From Shakespeare.

The story of Othello jumped at me and invaded my heart and mind as the young woman read. ~~On words of magic,~~ I was transported to the land where the brave Moor lived and loved and destroyed his love.

UWI Library

The young woman finished.

"Like it?"

"Oh yes!"

"Good. This book is full of stories like that. If you go to school you'll be able to read them for yourself."

"But can I find a book like that?"

"Yes. There are many books."

"The same one with the same story?"

"There are thousands."

"Exactly like it?"

"Exactly."

"Then I'm going to school!"

"When?"

"Monday!"

"I've started something!" She laughed. "But why didn't you go before?"

"Nobody told me."

"You must have seen other children go to school."

"Nobody told me about the stories."

"Oh yes, the stories."

"When I can read and write I'll make stories like that!"

She smiled, leaned back suddenly and reached for her pen. She opened the book.

"Your surname?"

"Abrahams, miss. Peter is my real name, Peter Abrahams."

She wrote in the book.

"Here, I've put your name in it. It's for you."

I looked at her writing.

UWI Library

"That my name?"

"Yes. I've written 'this is the property of Peter Abrahams'.

"But which is my name?"

"Those two words." She pointed. "Well, take it!"

I took the book. I held it gingerly. I moved to the door, backward. She shook her head and laughed. The laughter ended ~~neither~~ abruptly ~~and strangely.~~

"Oh God," she said and shook her head again.

"Thank you, miss. Thank you!"

Her eyes looked strangely bright behind the thick glasses.

"Go away!" she said. "Go away....and goodluck...."

I hesitated awkwardly at the door. Was she crying? And why?

Yes, thank you, miss. Thank you!

UWI Library

4

"You know he will have missed half the lessons, sir. It's middle of term, my class is overflowing, and he's big and old enough to be in Standard Four....Why didn't you come at the start of term?"

"I was working, Miss."

"Now look here! Do I really have to tell you, a Coloured Teacher, that education is only compulsory for whites and no one cares whether this boy goes to school or not? Do I have to read you the illiteracy figures among your people? You're Coloured, I'm not: do I have to tell you about the condition of you people and your children?"

"No, sir....But."

"I know, Sarah. Your class is three times as big as it should be; you haven't slates or pencils for all of them; some are so big they're ready to have babies or grow beards; you haven't enough benches; you can't control them. I know all that. But set this against it. A boy at work hears a story and the story makes him come here. He says 'Please, I want to learn'. Are we to turn him away because he hasn't observed all the rules? Is your community so rich that it can afford to do that?....Listen! I've an idea. We'll press these big ones. We'll make them do the work of three days in one....Boy! Peter!"

"Sir?"

"Afraid of hard work?"

"No, sir."

"Alright! I'll make you work. I promise you'll read and write by the end of this year. The rules will be hard. If there is any

trouble or slackness I want the teacher to send you to me and I shall use the cane, hard. Alright?"

"Yes sir."

"See, Sarah. The boy and I are in a hurry. Help us. We haven't much time....Take him away!

"Yes sir."

"Hello Sarah! Another?"

"Yes. He and Visser are in a hurry. Visser's thinking up a new scheme for making the big ones do the work of three years in one."

"Oh my God!"

"It's killing."

"One thing to be said for the old boy. He's interested in Coloured education, and he's the only Principal about whom I can say that in all the years I've been here. And a Boer! You know he's been in an asylum."

"Yes. Mad Boer poet. Easy enough for him to sit at his desk thinking up beautiful schemes. We have to do all the dirty work."

"Cheer up, girl. He's not so bad. I must go'n silence my screaming brats. See you."

"Come."

"All right. You may sit down. This is our new boy, Peter Abrahams. Make room for him in the corner at the back, ~~Jones~~ Adams."

"Please Miss...."

"Yes?"

"There is no room. We're so tight we can hardly move our

UWI Library

arms to write."

"Peter must have a place. Make room as best you can."

"Yes, miss."

"Now! Put up your hands those of you who have whole slates. Not one?"

"They're all cracked, miss."

"It doesn't matter if they are cracked. Up now.... One...two. Only three?"

"Mine is my own, miss."

"What you mean, Margaret, is that it is one you bought and not one supplied by the school."

"Yes miss."

"Then say what you mean. Alright, you may put down your hand, Margaret."

"Please miss...."

"Yes, Thomas?"

"My slate is cracked across the middle. I can let him...."

"Peter."

"Peter, miss. I can let Peter have half. And please, miss, there's a little room here and he can sit with me."

"That is very good of you, Thomas. Thank you. But isn't that where Jones sits? He'll be back tomorrow and want his seat."

"He's not coming back, miss. His father's gone to jail so he must go to work to help his mother."

"Are you sure of this?"

"Yes miss."

"It's a shame. You liked Jones so much, didn't you, miss?"

"That's enough out of you, Adams. Thank you, Thomas...."

UWI Library

"Is your father alive, Peter?"

"No miss."

"Then things are not too easy?"

"No miss."

"Take this card. You'll see children standing in line during the lunch break. Join them and show this and you'll get a free lunch. That's all. You can go to your place."

"Thank you, miss. I'm sorry to make more work for you."

"Come back here, Peter....I don't want you to think any more about making work for me or anybody. Understand?"

"Yes miss."

"We are here to teach and help you. I'm sorry I made you think ~~of~~ that. You've often said something you don't mean, haven't you?"

"Yes miss."

"Well, it was the same. Don't think about it. And don't repeat what you heard me and the other teacher say about the Principal."

"Yes miss."

A B C D E F G,
H I J K L M N,
O P Q R S T U,
V W X Y Z makes the Alpha-bet.

Two times one are two,
Two times two are four - old woman scrubs the floor.
Two times three are six - the hen has many chicks.
Two times four are eight - for school I won't be late.
Two times seven are fourteen - haven't a thought in.
Two times nine are eighteen - oh golly!
Two times ten are twenty - these sums are very plenty!

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C is a letter in the alphabet,
A is a letter in the alphabet,
T is a letter in the alphabet:
Put them together and you have a cat.

"Please miss..."

"Yes?"

"Are all the books in the world made from the alphabet?"

"Yes, all the books in the world are made from the alphabet."

"Jee-zus!"

"What?"

"Nothing miss; thank you."

"Hey! Look at the new one among our hungry lot. He's in our class. Peter Abrahams. Hey! Peter Abrahams! Like lining up with the other cattle for a bit of bread and dirty cocoa? They spit in the cocoa!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Shssss! Old Visser's heard you!"

"Hey! No use running away, you little coward! I know you! Come here!"

"Sir...."

"I heard what you said. I've a good mind to expel you!"

"Didn't mean anything, sir."

"Of course not! That's the trouble with you and this country and all of us. We don't mean anything. We abuse,deny, outrage, insult, and don't mean anything. You're looked down upon. Have you learned nothing from it? Must you look down on someone else? Go away! If I hear any more remarks from you or anyone else..... Teacher!"

UWI Library

"Sir?"

"Is there no way we can protect these children from the vulgar remarks of others while they get their food?"

"No, sir."

"They're being humiliated for being poorer than their fellows. Snobbery among the oppressed!"

"Let's not play with him. He's got woolly hair like a kaffir."

"Go to hell! Yours may be straight but your skin is black!"

"....And that is the story of Joseph who had a coat of many colours."

"Is it a true story, sir?"

"Yes."

"Please read us another one,sir."

"You're one of the three-class students, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then off to your history class...."

"Ah, Abrahams. So you're letting things slip after only six months."

"No, sir."

"Are you calling the teacher a liar?"

"No, sir."

"Are you tired of working hard? Letting me down? None of the others have, you know. Do you want to do only the ordinary classes?"

"No sir."

"You'd better tell me all about it."

UWI Library

"It's arithmatic, sir."

"What about it?"

"I can't do it, sir."

"Have you tried?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hard?"

"Yes, sir."

"This record says you show no real interest in it."

"I've tried, sir."

"Do you mean the record is untrue?"

"No sir. I mean I've tried hard to be interested."

"And failed?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know of fourse that I don't make the laws about examinations."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, unless you get a certain average for arithmatic your very high average in all the other subjects won't help you. That is the law, and I didn't make it. I want to push you through as fast as I can but you must work at arithmatic. Relax a little with the other subjects if you like."

"I like the other subjects, sir."

"I know. But to get where you want to go you can't only do what you like.... Where do you want to go? What do you want to do?"

"Those stories, sir."

"In the book the young woman gave you?"

"Yes, sir."

UWI Library

"I was wondering whether you had begun to forget them."

"I'm trying to read it now, sir."

"Getting anything out of it?"

"A little."

"Well, there you have it. Between you and the further knowledge that would help you get everything out of that book, stands arithmetic. It's like a lion barring your road. You either turn back because you cannot cope with it, or you kill it, and go on. There is no other way. The makers of our educational laws have not provided for poets. I want you to kill that lion and go on. Arithmetic is silly in a poet's armoury but you must master it and get that average....I promised you my cane if you were ever sent to me. We must keep our promises. Let down your trousers, then go back and let the sting of the cane help you kill the lion...."

"But if the earth is round, sir, why don't things fall off it? Why don't people and things and the seas fall off it?"

"Because, my dear Arendse, it has a gravitational pull which prevents all these things happening."

"Then sir, will you please explain this pull thing to us?"

"Yes sir."

"Please...."

"Oh my aunt! Do you, Arendse, and all you others, do you realise that there is a strict set scheme for each class? Certain things are taught in Standard One, certain things in Standard Two and so on. Gravity and science are things you shouldn't know anything about till next year."

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"But sir...."

"Well?"

"That means that till next year we've just got to accept your word about everything you say about the earth. And for a year we'll go on wanting to know how things stick to the earth if it is round."

"And you know Mr. Visser told us always to ask if things didn't seem very clear to us."

"Alright! Sit down, Flora, and you Arendse. Mr. Visser's Specials!....But before I go on to gravity, Peter's been snapping his finger. What is it you want to know, Mr. Abrahams?"

"When you talked about how to prove the earth is round,sir, you said the curve of the land was sure proof. But the land is full of hills and valleys so how can one see this curve. And none of us have been to the sea so we don't know whether it does curve. So you see, sir, if you answer Arendse's question before proving the earth is round it will be hard to believe in this pull because you won't need it on a flat earth."

"You are the original flat-earthers. Now listen!....."

"Hello Peter."

"Hello Ellen."

"Walk with me to the end of the playground."

"I can't."

"Please....Or don't you want to?"

"I want to but I can't."

"Why not?"

"Why do you ask me when you know I have to line up!"

UWC Library

"Please don't be angry."

"Then dontt ask when you know the answer."

"I only asked because you don't have to line up."

"I want to eat."

"I brought an extra lunch."

"For me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I like you. You're the best boy in Visser's Special."

"Arendse gets better marks."

"Only in the things you don't like."

"His average is better."

"I heard a teacher say your intelligence was better. And I agree. Come. I'm shy. I don't want to give you your lunch where everybody can see."

"I thought you were poorer than me. You are thinner."

"We're poor in everything except food. My ma works where they waste a lot of food and she brings a lot of it home. There's chicken in your sandwiches. I can't get fat no matter how much I eat. Suppose I'd better tell you I've got a bad chest."

"Why?"

"Here take your sandwiches. We're far away from the others now. Let's go'n sit under that tree.... Nice?"

"Hmmm."

"I'm glad. I'll bring you all the nicest things. I've some sweets for after."

"I've nothing to give you."

"I don't want anything. I just want you to be my boy if you

UWL Library

like me. That's why I told you about my chest. My granny says one must always tell the truth. But even if you don't like me, I will still bring your lunch everyday. What I mean is everyday as long as my ma stays with us. She may go away and then there won't be any more food....Do you like me?"

"Yes."

"Really? Cross your heart?"
"Cross my heart."
"I thought you did, but I wasn't sure. But I knew you'd never tell me if I didn't ask you. And it's not easy for a girl to tell a boy she likes him."

"It's not easy for a boy."

"Not if he's like you....Have some of mine, please. I can't eat all of it. And a man must eat more than a woman. I told my granny all about you. She wants me to bring you home. But you must not come if you don't want to."

"I want to! I'll carry your books this afternoon."

"Good. Oh I'm so glad you won't be in the line up again. It made me want to cry when I heard them say things."

"Wish I could give you something. Here, I've a top and some marbles."

"Keep them....Just be my boy."

"I am your boy and I think you're the nicest girl in school."

"I'm dark and I have kinky hair."

"Who cares! I like you!"

"I want you to top the class for me!"

"No. You must be first. That's what I want. Will you?"

"I'll try if that's what you really want."

"You'll be first, I'll be second and old Arendse third. I want

UWI Library

to be proud of my girl."

"Alright! I'll do it....There's the bell. Golly, we'll have to run. We'll be late."

"Give me your hand."

"Not too fast, please. It'll make me cough."

"Old Visser's proud of his specials, Sarah. Nearly a dozen of them have passed the Standard Two exam. The first five topped even the regular Standard Two class. Makes one feel the awful grind was worthwhile."

"Yes, he is good....What is it, Peter?" ~~Forgotten anything~~

"Mr. Visser said you might like to see the prize he gave me for my essay."

"Oh....Let me see. I didn't know there was a prize for an essay....Poems of John Keats....But you can't read this yet."

"He told me to tell you I couldn't read Lamb's Tales once and that brought me here."

"The old devil! And I just had nice thoughts about him!"

"He wants you to read the Everyman text to me."

"Here it is: 'Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide in they most need to go by thy side.' Does it mean anything to you?"

"No, miss. But Mr. Visser said I should say it will one day."

"The old devil! And they thought him too mad for a white school!....Run along, Peter."

UWI Library

B O O K T W O,

UWI Library

ONE

1.

I attended school regularly for three years. I learned to read and write. Lamb's Tales From Shakespeare was my favourite reading matter. I stole, by finding, Palgrave's Golden Treasury. These two books, and the Everyman edition of John Keats, were my proudest and dearest possessions, my greatest wealth. They fed the/craving familiar hunger that awaits the sensitive young and poor when the moment of awareness comes.

> Bards of Passion and of Mirth
> Ye have left your souls on earth!
> Have ye souls in heaven too,
> Double-lived in regions new?

With Shakespeare and poetry, a new world was born. New dreams, new desires, a new self-consciousness, was born. I desired to know myself in terms of the new standards set by these books. I lived in two worlds, the world of Vrededorp and the world of these books. And, somehow, both were equally real. Each was a potent force in my life, compelling. My heart and mind were in turmoil. Only the victory of one or the other could bring me peace.

At home, meanwhile, life had run its course.

Loff had paid down a deposit on a plot of land in the new Coloured town of Albertsville. He had ~~put up~~ built the first room and he, Catherine, and the baby, had moved in. They were building the second room and kitchen. I sometimes went along to help at weekends.

I saw my brother Harry in the streets of Vrededorp. Sometimes I saw Enna and the little boy. I rarely went to the room. My

UWC Library

brother and his wife fought interminably and their home was a place of embarrassment to any outsider.

Both Enna and Catherine were again pregnant.

Aunt Mattie had aged suddenly. Her feet had swollen with rheumatism. She walked slowly and with great pain. A new, subdued, tiredness hung over her. The loud stridency left her. I rubbed her swollen feet every night before going to bed.

Only my mother and Maggie seemed unchanged. Maggie now slept in at her work and only came to Vrededorp at weekends. Then my mother would come down from her place of work in upper Vrededorp. We would walk together in the sunshine. I would tell them about my days at school, about the new things I had learned. And they, for their part, seemed to understand that some change was taking place in me. Often, on Saturday or Sunday evenings, their friends would come in. There would be coffee and bread fried in dripping. And they would sit talking about old times or telling stories. Quite often, Aunt Mattie would sit in a corner listening while tears ran down her cheeks.

Maggie and Chris Fortune had fixed the date for their marriage and were saving up for their furniture. The ~~great~~ day was very near and they had found a house in City and Suburban, where only the most select Coloureds lived. But Maggie very nearly called off the marriage because Chris Fortune's very fair mother had hesitated about meeting Maggie's very dark mother. However, the mothers met, and the marriage took place.

Maggie, all in white, made a very lovely bride. Half Vrededorp came out to watch her. My mother wept with pride, Aunt Mattie with the long look of memory in her eyes.

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Maggie wanted me to ~~go and~~ live with them. But City and Suburban was far from the Vrededorp school and my mother and Aunt Mattie were alone now. Beside, I was not really sure Chris Fortune would welcome me.

With Maggie gone, Aunt Mattie's only source of income was the little she got from my mother and the illicit liquor trade. I helped with the trade at weekends when the mine boys invaded Vrededorp in searched of drink and women.

The long depression that was lifting all over the world seemed permanent in Vrededorp. Desperately lean times had come to stay in our lean world.

2.

I still saw the gang but ~~all~~ the fun had gone out of stealing from the stalls of Indian traders. And whenever they went begging I found some excuse for not going with them. In the end, an awkward restraint grew up between me and them. Only with Dinny did I achieve the old intimacy sometimes, but even that did not last long. I was ripe for something new, the new things my books had revealed, to take the place of the old life. But what? And how was I to achieve it? I felt lonely and longed for something without being able to give it a name. The horizens of Vrededorp were inadequate. Where was I to find the new horizons of my needs?

Impelled by something I could not explain, I went, night after night, on long lonely walks into the white areas of Johannesburg.

Night after night, I left black Vrededorp and walked along

UWI Library

broad, clean, tree-lined streets. I walked slowly and felt the cool breeze and heard the sweet silences of these streets. I threw back my shoulders, raised my head, and filled my lungs with clean air. There was living, breathing space, and I felt better for being in it.

On either side of these broad streets were strong houses, made of bricks. Here, had the streets been noisy, the strong walls would have kept the noise out of the houses; here, had the wind howled, had the rain lashed, these houses would have been dry and quiet and warm.

50 I looked into the windows of these houses. There was the magic of electricity. A boy could read Lamb's Tales without strain in such light. And, often, I saw whole walls of books. What a sight! Sometimes, I saw people at table, eating from finely fashioned plates on a snowwhite cloth. And the chairs in these rooms were big and comfortable. And the rooms, ~~themselves,~~ had space. From some, where a window was open, came the kind of music I never heard in Vrededorp.

Sometimes, on these nightly walks, I had the urge to piddle. But the notices on the public lavatories I passed drove me away:

> RESERVED FOR EUROPEANS ONLY. Text caps, Unit #'ed

Sometimes I grew tired, but the park benches I passed said:

> EUROPEANS ONLY. Text caps, Unit #'ed

Sometimes I had the price of a cup of tea as I walked past cheerful looking little cafés. No visible sign was up. But I knew these, too, were:

> RESERVED FOR EUROPEANS ONLY. Text caps, Unit #'ed

Really, these streets and trees, almost, the clean air I

UWI Library

breathed here, were:

RESERVED FOR EUROPEANS ONLY. Test caps, (unit #'ed.

I was the intruder. And like the intruder, I walked carefully lest I be discovered.

I longed for what the white folk had. I envied them their superior, European lot.

The familiar mood that awaits the sensitive young who are poor and dispossessed is a mood of sharp and painful inferiority, of violently angry tensions, of desperate and overwhelming longings. On these nightly walks, that mood took possession of me. My three books fed it.

3.

One day, Aunt Mattie was caught in the act of serving drink. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, the place was full of black and white policemen. The leader of the policemen grinned as he took the one shilling tin of skokiaan from my aunt's trembling hands.

"Got you this time, heh!"

"Yes, basie."

He turned to the mine boys and their women.

"Get before I take you too!"

There was a general stampede. A few minutes later Aunt Mattie and I were alone with the group of policemen.

"Better tell me where the rest of the stuff is. It'll help you."

"I'll show you, basie."

Black policemen dug up two drums of skokiaan. They poured the foul-smelling, well-loved, liquid down the drain. Then they

UWI Library

knocked holes in the drums. I had invested my last few shillings in the contents of those drums. We would have cleared twelve pounds at least. My share of it would have been two. Now, I was broke, and Aunt Mattie was on her way to jail.

"Ready?" the white man said.

"A minute, please basie."

"Hurry up! We haven't all day."

"It's my feet, basie."

"Should've thought of that before. Hurry!"

"Get my boots, Lee."

I got them and helped Aunt Mattie force her swollen feet into them.

"Lee...."

"Aunt Mattie?"

"Look after this."

It was the tobacco pouch in which she kept her money.

"~~Now~~ listen ~~ca~~efully. Lock up as soon as I've gone. Use that money and take the tram to Albertsville. Tell Catherine and then go'n tell ~~you sister~~ Maggie. Perhaps your mother can help too. Got it clear?"

"Yes, Aunt Mattie."

"My basie...."

"Well?"

"Think there'll be a fine?"

"This your first time?"

"Second."

"When was the first?"

"Years ago."

UWI Library

"Then you should get off with a fine."

"Has my basie any idea how much?"

"I should say a month or between six and ten pounds."

"Tell them that, Lee."

"Yes, Aunt Mattie."

"Come on."

"Yes, I'm ready, baas...; 'Bye, Lee."

"'Bye Aunt Mattie."

I watched my Aunt hobbled painfully down the street, on her way to the subway and Fordsburg prison. Then I went back to lock up before taking the news of this new calamity to the rest of the family.

The family put all their savings together, and borrowed more. But it was not till all ~~her~~ Aunt Mattie's furniture had been sold as well, that there was enough to pay the fine. This ~~had taken~~ took a little time, and Aunt Mattie had to spend a few days in jail. She came out looking haggard.

She spent a few days with Catherine. Then she went out and found a job as a housemaid in Mayfair, on the other side of the railway tracks from Vrededorp.

I now had no home in Vrededorp. I agreed to go and live with Maggie. But my savings had run out. I decided to leave school. I would find a job to pay my own way. Somehow, I would find a way to carry on learning. Night school, perhaps. I was in my fifteenth year.

UWC Library

TWO

1.

"Carry your bags, missus...."

The old woman frowned at her marketing list and shook her head.

I shot away to another likely customer.

"Carry your bags, missus...."

Three other boys jostled with me for the job. A market policeman approached down the line of vegetable stalls. We none of us had permits to operate as market carriers. We could not afford the fee. If the boys with permits caught us, they gave us a beating. If the police caught us, we went to jail. Two of the boys veered away and disappeared into the moving crowd. The policeman was nearly on us. The tall, red-headed woman watched us with an amused glint in her eyes. The boy beside me moved slightly to the left. He could now dodge behind the cabbage stall and be gone in a flash. There was a crowd between me and safety, and the policeman was nearly on top of us.

"Your bags, please, missus...."

The redhead grinned at my desperation.

"So-long, mug,"the boy said and disappeared behind the cabbage stall.

I had left things too late. The policeman was on top of me. There was no way of escape. A wall of shoppers barred the way. The redhead's eyes shone with amusement. Panic gripped me.

The policeman gripped my arm.

"Come along!"

"Where to?" the redhead asked quietly.

UWI Library

"It's allright, lady. He knows he shouldn't be here. You know of course you should only use boys with permits. If everyone did that there wouldn't be so many thefts in the market and our job would be easier."

"But I don't need a permit for a boy I bring along."

The policeman stiffened. The hold on my arm tightened.

"I beg your pardon, Madam?"

"I said he's my boy," redhead said coolly.

I felt as bewildered as the policeman.

"But I saw...."

"He's my boy." Redhead's voice was cold now.

I sensed the policeman's mounting anger. He swung me about violently. He glared down at me. His face was red. ~~The anger of his eyes made me tremble.~~

"That true, boy?"

"Don't answer him, Peter! Take your hands off the boy!"

For a while they stared at each other ~~over my head~~, then, ~~shaking with fury,~~ the policeman released my arm.

"Now you'd better go, or else take me to your inspector."

The policeman studied my face as though he never wanted to forget it, then he raised his eyes to the woman's face.

"I beg your pardon, madam."

He swung about and walked away, his neck as red as his face ~~had been.~~ The anger died out of the redhead's eyes. The sterness passed from her face. Her body ~~seemed~~ relaxed, became less stiff and commanding. Her lips creased. Her eyes twinkled. She chuckled softly.

"Allright, Peter?"

UWI Library

"Alright, missus."

How did she know my name?....She caught the thought and chuckled again.

"Look at your left hand."

My name, in large capitals that covered the back of my hand, was there. ~~I recalled doing it earlier in the morning with an indelible pencil and my spittle.~~

"Not such a mystery after all, heh?"

"No missus."

A half-friendly, half-amused ~~smile~~ smile touched her lips and kindled her eyes. I fell victim to all redheads for all time. She gave me her basket and bag.

"Come on...."

I followed her from one stall to another. I received her shopping. The vegetables went into ~~one basket~~ the bag, the fruit into the basket. I pushed through crowded places after her, jostled against people. I passed market policemen with a new self-assurance. I exchanged hurried words of gossip with others of my kind who were also protected from the police and boys with permits ~~from~~ by the baskets and bags they carried. And the huge market was a hive of buzzing industry. ~~I followed my redhead in and out among the mountains of fruit and vegetables till both bag and basket were loaded full. I staggered happily in the wake of the tall, elegantly trim redhead, unmindful of the load that weighed me down.~~

She stopped at the corner where they served tea. I could not follow her to the neat little tables. But she made the waitress send her black boy to me with a cup. The stares of passing whites

UWI Library

embarrassed me. But I felt safe in the protection afforded by the redhead. Safe and confused because I had run up against a ~~another~~ person white who did not react and behave in the ~~time-honoured and traditional~~ way I understood so well. It made it so much more difficult to know where one was with whites. It complicated the business of building up defences.

My redhead finished her tea, looked at a few more stalls, then looked at her diamond studded little wristlet.

"Time to go home, Peter."

"Tram, missus?"

"No! No trams for us, Peter! We've a car!"

~~We moved to the exit nearest the parking space. The crowds were thinning. Most of the women shoppers had gone, those who remained hurried home to prepare the midday meal.~~

The policeman with whom we had had the run-in earlier was standing at the big door. ~~He looked back and saw us coming towards it.~~ He turned fully. He studied my redhead coldly, insolently. In a frankly insulting manner, his eyes moved over her body, from her trim ankles to her flaming hair. He looked briefly at me. I knew there would be trouble for me if ever I ran into that man, no matter where. I memorised his face.

The redhead paused a few yards from him. ~~I sensed the strong ~~of~~ feeling between them, but I dared not look at either. I felt unhappily guilty.~~

"Give me the basket, Peter."

"It's all right, missus."

"Give it to me, lad!"

The policeman walked away as she took the basket from my arm.

UWI Library

We crossed the street. I looked back. The policeman had come back to the door and stood watching us. He moved slowly down the steps.

"Following?"

"Yes, missus."

"Thought he might," she laughed. "Better keep out of his way."

"I don't need telling," I whispered.

"Heh?"

"Nothing, missus."

She paused and looked at me as though she saw me for the first time. Behind us, the policeman slowly crossed the street. We moved to a shining black car, sleek, big, and beautiful. It's body was close to the earth, like the big black spiders I had sometimes watched on the Ottoman's Valley.

I dumped my sack on the ground beside the rear wheel. Redhead ~~unlocked~~ unlocked the driver's door then gave me the keys.

"This one's for the back. Put the vegetables there."

I piled the ~~gab of vegetables~~ bag into the luggage compartment. The ~~policeman~~ policeman stood, arms akimbo, watching from the edge of the parking space. I returned the keys. She put the basket of fruit on the back seat.

"Our friend's watching you, Peter. Waiting."

"Yes, missus."

"Don't think you're safe here."

"I'm alright, missus."

"Can't you find another job?"

"I tried."

"What as?"

"Messenger boy."

UWI Library

"And?"

"Hundreds of others also want to be messenger boys, missus."

"So it's the market."

"I sell newspapers in the evenings, missus."

"You'd better stay away from the market for a few days."

I stole a quick glance. The enemy had moved a little nearer. The redhead was in the car and he was poised, ready to rush on me the moment the car drove off.

"I'm not always going to carry in the market, missus."

"But you can't be a messenger boy." She sighed then grinned. "I'm afraid you will, Peter. You'll be a market carrier when you're an old man."

"I won't!" I'd almost forgotten she was white.

"I'm afraid you will, boy.....Anyway, get in. Can't leave you to him."

"I'm alright, missus. I can run."

"Get in!"

I reached for the back door.

"In front. On the other side."

I got in beside her. She started the car. It purred gently, powerfully, then moved forward with the easy strength of a powerful black spider. We passed the policeman. The woman looked at him and inclined her head slightly. A wicked grin creased her face.

The car purred and gathered speed as we climbed the slight rise that led to the heart of the city. The redhead touched a knob. In a few seconds the car was filled with the popular music of the gay thirties. I stared at the spot from where the music came. Maggie's house in City and Suburban had electricity and she

UWI Library

had talked of getting a radio. I was used to the idea of radio. I had seen and heard sets as I passed shops. But a radio in a car!

"I'll put you off at the station. ~~You can~~ Alright?"

"Yes, missus."

She lit a cigarette. I glanced furtively at her. My eyes touched her face for a second then moved away quickly.

"Look if you must!"

But I could not after that.

All too soon, we reached the station. She pulled up. She took a crisp new ten-shilling note from her bag and pushed it into my hand.

"Thank you, missus! I'll carry your bags whenever you come to the market! I'll carry them for nothing for a year, missus! 'Stru's God!"

She grinned and pushed the door open.

"Only a foolish fairy princess appears more than once, Peter. Goodbye."

I got out. The car shot away with the door still open.

"Goodbye, missus!" I called. But the ~~most powerful black spider I had ever seen~~ was already swinging round a corner....

~~....Gloriana was a gay, laughing, redhead. And were her bright eyes really green? And tell me, and please tell me truly, was she real or a fairy queen?....~~

~~The ten-shilling note in my hand was real enough. I stuffed it hurriedly into my pocket and kept my hand there.~~ For three months, after giving up all hoppe of a messenger's job, I had carried baskets and bags for mean white women for coppers they gave grudgingly. In that time, I had been accused of theft, I had

UWI Library

been called all the pet names of abuse reserved by whites for blacks; I had carried heavy loads to the tram stop and women had conveniently forgotten to pay me. I had watched and polished cars and, an hour or two later, I had had to be content with a penny flipped in my general direction. Sometimes I had been lucky and I had received the standard three pennies for the journey from the market to the tram stop. Sometimes the fee had been doubled. When that happened it meant I had hit upon what we market boys called a "real lady". "Real ladies" were few and far between. A market boy was lucky if he got one once a week. And to earn anything he had to carry for at least fifty ladies a week. I had been as lucky as most. Like most, I had been caught by a boy with a permit. He had taken every penny from me and then given me a beating for poaching on his 'territory'. Unlike most, I had so far escaped being caught by the police. But as with the rest, the permit holders and the police had been the scourge of my three months at the market. Life at the market had been hard, rough, and brutal. At nights I had been in a scramble of another kind, that of the newspaper boy. I had fought bitterly to be able to sell a dozen copies of the Johannesburg Star and earn a penny.

Now, the redhead had appeared and thrown me completely off my balance....The ten-shilling note was still in my pocket so it was true....I walked across Johannesburg in a daze.

I was still in my daze when I fell over a black man scrubbing the front of a third rate hotel just above Malay Camp.

"What with you!" he snapped. "You blind or drunk?"

I sat up beside him.

"Sorry mister. I was thinking."

UWL Library

He threw back his head, leaned back on his haunches, and laughed. I saw nothing funny in my sitting in a puddle of water, but his laughter reassured me. ~~I would not have~~ There was no need to jump up and run ~~for life~~. At last he quietened down.

"You think with your eyes, boy?....No. I know what it is. It is not thinking. It is dreaming. It is a thing all boys do. In your mind you were not in this place. You were in another place. A fine place. And you were another person. A fine person. Maybe a rich person who could do wonderful things. Am I right?"

"Yes...."

"See! Once, a long time ago, I was a boy too. So I know. But you must not call it thinking, it is dreaming. Sometimes a man thinks and does not see. But he stops before he falls. The man who dreams only wakes after he has fallen....You are not hurt?"

"No."

"Only wet, heh? It is the price of your dream." ~~He laughed.~~

I got up and squeezed some of the water out of the seat of my pants. I walked away.

"Look out for cars when you dream!"

An idea hit me. I went back to him.

"I'm looking for work, mister."

He looked me up and down carefully, then got up. I followed him into the hotel. He went into an office and came out with a short, fat, redfaced whiteman. The white man looked me over.

"~~Joseph~~ Jim says you want work."

"Yes, baas."

"I'm no Boer."

"Yessir."

UWI Library

"Name?"

"Peter, sir."

"Surname?"

"Abrahams."

"Thought you were Coloured."

"I'll work hard, sir."

"Don't mind having a Coloured boy. Don't have to mess around with passes then. One lot for ~~Joseph's~~ Jim's enough. But I don't want any nonsense about your being better than ~~Joseph~~ him. Do as he tells you."

"Yessir."

"How old are you?"

"Nearly fifteen, sir."

It's against the law for you to be in the bar. Remember I've warned you. If a policeman finds you there you remember I've warned you and you went in there without my orders. Understand?"

"Yessir."

"Even if I send you there."

"Yessir."

"Alright. Now for terms. Pound a month. If you don't work out your month you get nothing. Got to be here everyday. You're fed while you're here. And you're under Jim. Alright?"

"Yessir."

"Alright Jim." He went back into his office.

"Come," Jim said.

UWI Library

[ii]

2.

My working day at the hotel began at five in the morning and ended after midnight. Each morning, I got up in the dark, dressed by moonlight, and set out. I walked through dark and silent streets. Occasionally, ~~on the early mornings~~, I passed shadowy black folk. Occasionally, the clatter of the milk-carts, the clang of horses' hooves, rang loud through the silent streets. Sometimes, if I were a little late, the water carts had passed and the streets were wet and shining. Usually, I walked alone through the broad, empty streets of the city while all the world slept. And at night, after the day's work, I walked through the same, empty, silent streets. The only difference was that I often encountered policemen at nights. They usually accepted my word that I was on my way home from work, and let me be. In all the time I worked at the hotel, I never once walked through the streets of my city in daylight. And because of the silence of the streets during my passage to and from my work, I heard the drone of the city clearly: the deep hum without end that seemed to come from the very bowels of the earth. I called it the song of the city and spun a web of tired dreams to it. It became the companion of my dark journeys. ~~I spoke to it.~~

The day's work began in the bar. Jim was ~~usually~~ hard at work when I arrived. First, we carried the large number of empty beer bottles out to the yard. Then, while Jim washed the hundreds of glasses, I emptied the ashtrays and swept up a mountain of ash and cigarette ends from the floor, carpets and chairs. The horrible stench of stale beer and stale tobacco pervaded the rooms of the bar. We opened doors and windows and toiled silently

UWI Library

till a cool freshness crept into the room, battled with the foul stench, and drove it out. We polished counters and mirrors, cleaned windows. By the time we had the bar fresh, clean, and shining, daylight had been with us for many hours. Jim gave the bar a final inspection then grinned at me. The conversation of the morning began.

"It is good, heh, Beet?"

"Peter, Jim."

"Beter. It is no matter, Beet or Beter."

"Never mind."

"Come Beet. We will eat now."

At at the door, he paused and looked back.

"It is clean now till tomorrow."

"Yes. Till tomorrow."

That little conversation became our morning ritual.

In the yard, at the back, was a small room. It was stacked with crates of beer and bottles. It had one free corner in which a small table stood. This was our rest-room and eating place. On the table was a primus stove, two small saucepans, two chipped enamel mugs, two enamel plates, and two rusty spoons and a knife with only half its blade. I got water in one of the pans while Jim lit the stove. I put the water on and sat on an empty crate. Jim got a pile of left-over sandwiches from the bar. ~~took the two plates and went back to the bar and returned with two piles of sandwiches left over from the night before. Beside each pile was a piece of cold meat.~~ I made coffee which we sweetened with condensed milk. While we ate we talked.

Once, Jim had wanted to go out at night without the boss knowing. He had brought a sheet of paper, pen and ink, and an old

Pass to use as model. I had dated the ~~loaded~~ paper and copied the white man's words:

PLEASE PASS NATIVE BOY JIM WHO IS IN MY EMPLOY.

I had copied the white man's signature.

Next morning, over our breakfast, we had talked about Passes.

"The Pass was alright, Jim?"

"I did not need it, Beet. I saw no police."

"I will do it whenever you want."

"Good. But it is wrong that a boy should do it for a man."

"But why don't Coloureds have Passes too?"

"It is because they are not so many, Beet. If your people were as many as the black people, they too would have to carry Passes."

"~~But~~ Why?"

"It is a thing of fear, Beet. If you have many enemies and you are not sure you have conquered them, then, always, you want to know where they are, what they do, where they go. If it is possible, you want to know what they think. For that, Passes are very good."

"Do you carry many?"

"For a man one Pass is many, boy. But these we carry...."

He listed them.

When Jim left his Pedi village in the Northern Transvaal ~~some three years ago,~~ he had to go to the nearest police station or Native Affairs Department. There he ~~had~~ got a Trek Pass. This permitted him to make the journey to Johannesburg. On reaching the city he got an Identification Pass and a Six Day Special Pass. He paid two shillings each month for the

UWH Library

Identification Pass. The Six Day Special was his protection while he looked for work. He did not find work during his first six days in the city. He did not go to the Pass Office to renew his Six Day Special. He was picked up on the eighth day and spent two weeks in jail as a vagrant. That taught him to attend the Pass Office regularly.

He found his first job in a suburb of the city. He got a Monthly Pass. This was regarded as his contract of service. Like all house boys, he got part of the weekend off. Like others, he wanted to visit places like Vrededorp and Malay Camp, to drink a little, find a woman if he were lucky, and get to know the life of the city. But these places were outside the district in which he was registered. To go there without fear of being picked up, he got a Travelling Pass. When he got to know black people of the city and wanted to visit them on his Sunday off, he got a Day Special Pass from his employer, made the journey, and got a Location Visitor's Pass from the superintendent of the location where his friends lived. Armed with these two, he could enter the location freely. He had decided, after a time, to lodge with his friends at the location. His employer had agreed. The local superintendent had contacted the Pass Office. Except for that one short spell in jail, his record was clear. The superintendent had agreed. He had got his Lodger's Permit and moved in.

He had met a woman, a nice young one. Good to look at. One who could laugh and who had reminded him of the one he had left in his village. It had been a good thing. They had gone out at nights. To walk without fear after nine at night he had to have a Night Special Pass.

UWI Library

But he had been happy with his laughing woman. And it did not matter about the Passes while he was happy. And, as it is with a man, he wanted more of his woman. He wanted her to sleep in his bed every night. And he wanted to be home to be in that bed every night. All men are like that. And his woman wanted that too. So, they had gone to the superintendent. And after a time the superintendent had given them a little room and they had lived as man and wife.

But now there had been trouble at his work. While he had been a man alone, the hours of work had been of no moment. And working late had not mattered because he had slept in. But a man wants to go home to his wife when he has one and is happy with her. And this wish of his, this wish of a man to be with his woman, had made trouble between him and the white woman. And the trouble had grown till there had been only bitterness. In the end he had given notice and asked for his Pass that would make him find other work, and for his money. The white woman had refused to give him his Pass till he had worked out the notice month.

But before that month had passed the white woman had called in the police. She had lied and said he had stolen. He had gone to jail for two months.

He had returned to the location after he had served his time. But his woman had gone. Another man and another woman lived in the room. And so he had found this place where he now worked.

He had ended with a crooked smile:

"A man's life is controlled by pieces of paper."

"Are those all the Passes?" I had asked.

"Those and the Poll Tax and Hut Tax receipts."

UWH Library

"Are they Passes too?"

"The countryman cannot pass without these, Beet."

He had suddenly burst out laughing then. Bubbling laughter had shaken his body and forced joyous tears down his cheeks.

"What's the matter, Jim?"

"I almost forgot the best Pass of all, Beet! It is the only one that makes me laugh!"

"Yes?"

"You have been in school, Beet."

"Yes."

"Well, if you were a black man who dressed and spoke like white people, you would have that Pass. It is for the black men who are educated and say only the things the white people want them to say. If you, Beet, were one like that you would have this Pass. "

"What is it?"

"I saw a man with one. He was proud. He looked at all my Passes and said he did not have any. He said he was free of them. I said; 'How is it?' He said: 'I am educated so I'm exempted.' I said:'So you carry no Pass?' He said: 'No.' I said:'But what if the police stop you?' He said: 'I show them this!' And he showed me a Pass!' I said: 'It is a Pass.' But he said: 'No.' And grew angry with me....So there is is, the Pass that is not a Pass!"

On this particular morning, Jim talked about the woman who had gone while he was in jail. Though it had all happened over a year ago, the memory of her laughter was strong with him. He spoke of her as one in a cold climate speaks with longing of the sun. His strong body leaned against the crates. He sipped his coffee slowly. His weary, bloodshot eyes stared into space. Almost

UWI Library

I felt the person of the laughing woman, so strongly did he evoke her. I wondered about her. Where was she? What was she doing? Did she ever think of him? Did she know how much he longed for her? Would they ever meet again? And what would happen if they did?....

We finished our breakfast. Work took the place of talk.

With buckets and mops we climbed the iron stairways that led to the forty odd rooms to be cleaned. Jim went to one door. I went to the next. I knocked. There was no answer. I went in.

First, the slops. I cleaned the washbasin with the remains of the drinking water. I took up the bucket into which the white man had emptied his dirty water after washing. Keeping it as far from my body as possible, and without looking at it, I clattered down the stairs. Empty the bucket. Rinse it. Up again. Make the bed. Sweep the room. Dust it. Smelly room. Leave the door and window open. So to the next, and the next, and the next.

When all the beds were made, all the floors swept, all the slops emptied, there were the forty windows to be cleaned. After that, there were the door knobs to polish. Then there were the landings to be swept and scrubbed. Then there was the yard and the front. The fat little manager came on an inspection tour in the late afternoon. He always found something else to be done.

Jim and I rarely had our lunch before five in the afternoon. We were usually too tired to do more than nibble at the food. But the silent rest was welcome. After 'lunch' and an hour's rest during which I invariably went to sleep, we shifted crates of bottles. We moved the empties out and the full ones in. This lasted till the bar opened and the white men returned to their

UWI Library

rooms. We split up then. Jim went to work in the bar cellar. I went upstairs to attend the needs of the roomers.

"Boy!"

"Yes, baas?"

"Get me some drinking water!"

"Boy!"

"Yes, baas?"

"Come and clean up this mess!"

"I say, boy...."
"Yes, baas?"
"Come here."

"Yes, baas?"

"Tell the manager - get him by himself - tell him I've a visitor. I want a tray. He knows what. Say it's for two."

"Yes, baas."

I went and returned with a tray. There was a plate of fresh sandwiches, two glasses, two big packets of cigarettes and a bottle of whisky. I knocked. The white man opened the door a slit and peered out. He opened it wider and took the tray. I saw a woman's back.

"Here, boy!"

I took the coin. He shut the door in my face.

"Boy!"

"Yes, baas?"

"Boy!"

"Coming, baas!"

"Boy!"

At last the calls grow less, then cease. The bar is shut. Jim comes ~~up~~ wearily up from the cellar. I go ~~down~~ wearily down from the

UWI Library

rooms. The day's work is done. There is food but we turn away from it.

"Goodnight, Jim."

"Goodnight, Beet."

Ahead is the long tramp home through the dark and silent streets.

Each day was like the one before. The work of each day was like that of the day before. We did the same things each day, the same things each night. When I got home to Maggie's place, she and her husband were asleep. When I left, each morning, they were still asleep. I became permanently tired, permanently sleepy. My eyes grew bloodshot, like Jim's. I moved with the heavy slowness of a leaden man, like Jim. I ate less and less. I just was not hungry. Only tired. Always tired. So the first week passed. Each day like the other. Days without name. I forgot the feel of the sun. I developed a dry cough that hurt my chest. I did not think about anything. I was too tired. There was only the work, and, at the end of the month, the pound.

On the Friday of my second week, I jerked awake about half past four in the morning. It was automatic. I reached for my ~~pants~~ trousers. I had to get to work. Then I saw Maggie as she got up from the chair where she had sat. Her face was tear-stained.

"Matter, Mag[illegible]?"

She took my ~~pants~~ trousers from me and pushed me back into bed.

"Go to sleep, Lee."

"I must go to work."

"Go to sleep [illegible] little brother. You're not going back that

UWI Library

place. Ma's been here twice. Each time she waited till the last tram. How do you think I feel when you live here and I haven't seen you in two weeks?"

"But the work. The pound."

"Not there. Go to sleep. Your coughing woke me."

I wanted to resist, to argue, but I was too tired. I lay back and shut my eyes....

The sun was high when I woke. Beams of sunlight fell across my bed under the window. Nearby, for my bed was in a corner of the large kitchen, a kettle sang gaily. Maggie came through from her front room.

"So you're awake."

"Hello, Mag."

"I thought you had sense, Lee. Killing yourself at whatever this job is! How'd you think I'd face ma? Tea? How do you feel?"

"Tired."

"Tired! You're sick!"

She gave me breakfast in bed. I went off to sleep again. I woke in the late afternoon feeling like a person again. I could think again. Yes, it was silly to have kept on with that job. It would have killed me. Maggie had saved me.

I went back to the hotel in the late afternoon. Jim was behind in his work.

"You're late, Beet. Whit man's gone to find another boy. If you start now maybe he'll forgive you."

"I've not come to work, Jim."

"What's the matter?"

UWI Library

"It's too hard. I'll find another job."

"All work is hard for us, Beet."

"Not like this."

"Maybe not, and maybe more hard."

"It will kill you, Jim."

"You mean it, this thing?"

"Yes, Jim."

"I'm sorry. I like you, Beet. It was good to work with you."

"I'm sorry to leave you, Jim."

"Maybe you'll be lucky....Here is the white man."

I turned. Another boy, a black boy this time, walked behind him. The white man frowned when he saw me.

"Why're you so late? And you're not working!"

"I'm not working here any more, sir."

"Not working! Then why are you here!"

"I want the money for which I've worked, sir. My sister says it's against the law if you don't pay me for my work. Two weeks."

The man's face went red. He took a step toward me. I moved back.

"Against the law!" He spluttered. "You!....You!....Damned!" Words failed him. He rushed at me.

I dodged him and ran out.

"It'll kill you," I said as I passed the new boy.

UWI Library

I went back to the market and the market boy's cry:

"Carry your bags, missus...."

I was back in the scuffling, scrambling world. The sun shone again. I learned to laugh again, to run and shout like a boy again. My remembrance of the hotel soon became a thing of the past, unreal, like a bad dream. ~~Had I really worked there for two weeks for nothing? Had I really known a black beast of burden named Jim who nursed the memory of a laughing woman?~~

Summer gave way to autumn.

"Carry your bags, missus...."

"Look out! Cops!"

Sometimes I met the old Vrededorp drover, Oupa Ruiter, collecting sheep at the ~~cattle section of the~~ market. I usually tended his flock while he went on little personal errands. Sometimes I helped him herd his flock through the busy city traffic and left him on the outskirts of the town. Once, I got permission from Maggie and my mother and went on a three-day journey with him. Something of the vast majesty of the land entered my heart in those three days.

My fifteenth birthday came. My mother came from Upper Vrededorp. Chris Fortune and Maggie bought me a Meccano set. We had a sumptuous rice meal. And, to end the evening, I read them a 'Wild West' story I had written.

Winter came: a mild, promising winter.

The police got so strict at the market that winter that the boys without permits dared not enter it. The foolhardy few who did were caught. With the majority, I hung around the tram stop

UWL Library

~~waiting to catch the ladies before they entered the market.~~ Often, there were vicious fights at the tram stop. Too many dogs were after too few bones. I collected two black eyes ~~that winter.~~

On a corner on the far side of the parking square, was an eating-house for black men, 'The Burning Meat'. The market boys went there whenever they had the price of ~~the~~ a meal. For three pennies one got a piece of meat swilling in a thin, oily soup, and a large hunk of bread. The place itself, belonged to the flies. Almost, we, the humans, were there on sufferance. Flies walked over the resin-covered floor, copulated on the long benches and tables where the humans sat, blackened the ceiling, and made the window opaque. They walked over the counter on which cooked meat was displayed. They fought and did their business on the meat. And their impudent drone filled the room and made it necessary for the humans to raise their voices ~~if they would be heard above the drone.~~ when speaking. I, and all the others, often had to pick out dead and dying bodies that had fallen into our soup. Sometimes, if a person opened his mouth to put in food, a fly would shoot in. Really, 'The Burning Meat' belonged to the flies. But we had nowhere else to eat, so the flies tolerated us.

All manner of black men came to The Burning Meat. I recognised those ~~men~~ new to the city by their uncertainty, by their tentativeness, and the anxious friendliness in their eyes. The men of the city, the city born, had cold, expressionless faces, and there was a hint of arrogance in their bearing. The educated men I recognised by their shame and furtiveness. They came in quickly, quietly, looked at no one, ate hurriedly, and slipped out again. ~~They were anxious not to be seen.~~ And if it happened that they saw

UWI Library

another of their kind, they deliberately sat with their back to him, gobbled their food even more hurriedly, and slunk away even more furtively. ~~I saw this happen often at "The Burning Meat" where the flies hold power.~~

On the other side of the parking space, the side furthest from "The Burning Meat", an old Zulu with a pushcart sometimes sold coffee and hot fatcakes. His pushcart and his person were spotlessly clean. Educated black men, and even some Coloureds, ~~ate~~ ate there without being ashamed. But for us, the market boys, coffee and fatcakes were a luxury we could rarely afford. One mug of coffee and one fatcake cost fourpence and was not half as filling as the three-penny meal at "The Burning Meat". But I had coffee and fatcake whenever I could.

One day a slim, neatly dressed, collar and tie-ed, young man stopped for coffee and fatcakes. While he ate he read a paper. I saw the paper's name: 'The Bantu World'. I knew the names of all the big Johannesburg papers because I sold them. But I had never come across ~~a paper by that name.~~ 'the Bantu World'. I twisted my body to see better. Yes, the pictures on the front page were of black people! All the papers I sold had only pictures of white folk. I ~~went a little and leaned forward to see if I could~~ tried to read what it said about the black people's pictures. The young man raised his eyes and looked at me over the top of the paper. I straightened up ~~embarrassed.~~

"Can you read?"

I nodded.

"Really?"

"Yes."

UWC Library

He looked me over. A half-smile touched his lips and creased his handsome face.

"Allright. Here, read this to me."

I took the paper and read aloud.

"By God, you can too! ~~And you understand what you read!~~"

"I told you. I went to school."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Working."

"At the market?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I want money to learn some more."

"And you're one of those who stop white women and ask to carry their bags...."

"Yes."

"~~My God!~~ Couldn't you find a better job?"

"No."

"Did you try?"

"I tried hard." ~~I want to learn so that I can write stories.~~"

"And that is why you carry white women's bags?"

"Yes."

"Incredible!" He shook his and burst out laughing. "Like another coffee and fatcake?"

While I ate, he kept looking at me. ~~At last, he shook his head and burst out laughing.~~ He seemed unable to control his laughter. He was laughing at me. It hurt. I could endure the laughter and mockery of whites. But this, from a black man, hurt. I put down the mug and walked away. He came bounding after me,

UWI Library

and grabbed my arm.

"You are wrong, my friend, you are wrong. I wasn't laughing at you. I was laughing at myself. I'm sorry. Come back and I'll explain. Honestly."

He led me back to the stand.

"Have another coffee and cake with me....I really was laughing at myself. At myself and all the others like me. You see, we despise you. Among ourselves, in our clubs and homes, we say it is you and those like you who make things difficult for us. We see you barefooted, dirty, running about the streets and markets. It makes us ashamed. We say the whites see you and think all blacks are like you. We say they never meet us, the educated, the teachers. So, to them, all blacks are the same. And we blame you for it. We do not try to find out about you, we just blame you. And how wrong we can be! It was that which made me laugh. You showed me how foolish and prejudiced our own people can be. That was all. I felt ashamed of myself and my laughter was against me and hid my shame. Alright?"

"Alright."

"What do you want to learn?"

~~"So you want to write?"~~

"To write stories."

~~"Yes."~~

"I cannot help there. But maybe I can help with a job. Do you know the Bantu Men's Social Centre?"

"No. But I can find it."

"Good. Go there. Ask for Mr. Peter Dabula. Describe me to him and tell him I said he might have a job for you." He studied me again. "Tell you what. You go home and have a good wash. Put on your best clothes and try and get a pair of shoes. Then go

UWI Library

along. I'll phone Mr. Dabula and tell him you're coming."

"Thank you very much, sir."

"You haven't got the job yet, my friend."

"Thank you all the same."

"Here, keep this paper. Although it's by and about black people, it's controlled by whites....Goodluck, my friend."

I watched him walked away in the direction of Fordsburg, then I swung about and hurried home....Please God, please, please let me get that job. Amen....

4.

Maggie was mystified by my goings-on.

I laid out my grey flannel shorts and jacket. I found the old pair of shoes her husband, Chris, had given me. I polished them till the leather glowed. I inspected my one whole white shirt carefully. The socks had 'potatoes' but I could hide those.. I heated two kettles of water, poured them into the washtub, stripped, and got in. I soaped myself vigorously from head to foot.

Maggie gave up her pretended nonchalance.

"What's this in aid of?"

I grinned at her through a mountain of soapsuds that rolled from my woolly hair down my face and into my eyes.

"Got a job!"

"Oh....Anyone would have thought you'd got a girl."

"A good job. An educated man told me about it!"

"Where?"

"Bantu Men's Social Centre."

UWI Library

"What's that?"

"Don't know."

"~~You don't know~~....Where's it?"

"Don't know."

"You don't know ~~where~~ what it is: you don't know where it is. Are you sure you've got the job?"

"No."

She flung up her hands and laughed.

"Now I've heard everything! ~~You're scrubbing yourself for a job. You don't know where it is, you don't know what it is, you don't know if you've got it!....Think I'd better tell ma about her bright boy.~~"

"A man told me about the job. It was at the market. I'm going to see a man called Peter Dabula. He said he'd telephone."

"And where will you find this Peter Dabula?"

"At the Bantu Men's Social Centre."

"And you don't know where or what that is...."

"I'll find it."

"I believe you, little brother. You're mad enough to do anything. ~~You know.~~ I sometimes wonder what goes on in that funny head of yours."

~~I got out and dried myself. I dressed. Maggie went into their bedroom and got one of her husband's ties. While I struggled to make a parting in my woolly curls, she tied the tie.~~

~~Her neighbour and closest from~~ friend came in just as I was ready to go.

~~"Hi! Rachel!" Maggie cried. "Look what I've got for a little brother! Isn't he beautiful! Mister Man!"~~

UWI Library

"If only I were fifteen...." Rachel sighed. "Better look after him now. What's it in aid of? First girl?"

"He says he's got a job. But it's a funny kind of job...."

"Not another hotel, I hope."

"No." I said.

"I feel sick whenever I think of that hotel. No, this must be something better," Maggie said. "But he doesn't know where it is, what it is, or if he's got it! Can you beat that?"

~~"No!"~~

~~"Yes!"~~

They bantered me for a while. But I caught the touch of pride behind Maggie's banter. I saw it in her eyes as she looked at me. They made me look at myself in the big bedroom mirror. I almost did not recognised the ~~stranger~~ grave-eyed stranger who looked at me.

...Hello Mister Abrahams. So that's what you look like. Big eyes in a lean tapering face. Lips that had an anxious upward curve. A long and incredibly thin neck. Narrow shoulders for a boy of fifteen. Still, not bad looking, not bad looking at all. Too grave and sad-looking perhaps. Go on, smile.... That's better. And you do look like an educated man. What a difference a nice tie makes to a man's appearance. Hello, Mister Abrahams. Nice to meet you. Do you know, I like you. But smile, man....

Maggie leaned over my shoulder and put her face close to mine. We looked at each other in the mirror.

"Like it, Lee?"

"Yes, Mag."

~~"I like it too. Keep clean for me to see you tonight."~~

UWI Library

I found the Bantu Men's Social Centre ~~of Johannesburg, near the~~ on the outer rim of Johannesburg, on the way to Langlaagte and the white mountains of sand that towered beyond it. ~~It was at Langlaagte that some of the earliest gold deposits were found in the early days of our modern history.~~

~~The Bantu Men's Social Centre~~ was a huge building that stood in its own grounds. But for the huge sign on its front, I would have passed it by as just another European building.

I hesitated uncertainly on the pavement, ~~Did one just walk in?~~ Two well-dressed black men speaking English passed me and went in. I followed them ~~in.~~ ~~Soon,~~ the passage widened into a rectangular hall. Doors led off to right and left. On the first door on the left was the word: 'Secretary'. The two men passed that and entered the second door on the left. I knocked on the door marked 'Secretary'. No one answered. Again. Still no answer. ~~What now?~~ I heard voices and looked about me. To my right, a flight of stairs led to a first floor landing. Two men leaned against a balustrade, talking. I called up to them:

"Excuse me please...."

"Yes, son?"

"I'm looking for Mr. Dabuba, please."

"Try the office."

"I have. There's no answer."

"I should wait. Mr. Rathebe won't be long."

From the other side of the huge door that faced the passage came a deep voice, touched with the velvet quality of organ notes:

UWI Library

There's an old man called the Mississippi,
That's the old man that I'd like to be.
What does he care if the world's got trouble?
What does he care if the land ain't free?

The organ notes stopped. Another, lighter voice, without the magic quality of the first, sang the same words, tried to make them sound the same, but failed. Then, the magnificent voice sang a little more of the song. And again the lighter voice repeated it. If only the lighter voice would leave the other alone! ~~I would not want anyone to hear my voice after they had heard that other. And I most certainly would not want to sing a song that other had sung unless I were where no one else could hear.~~ Others must have shared my feeling, for a man came out of the door where the two had gone in earlier. He pushed the great door open. I saw part of a huge hall.

"Hlubi man!" the man called. "The fellows want to hear Robeson. Turn it up!"

"Alright."

Old man river
That old man river
He must know something
But don't say nothing
He just keeps rolling
He keeps on rolling -along.

Black men appeared from everywhere and stood in silence.

He don't plant 'tatoes
He don't plant cotton
But them that plant 'em
Am soon forgotten
But old man river
He just keeps rolling - along....

That was a black man, one of us! I knew it. I needed no proof. The men about me, their faces, their bearing, carried all the proof. That was a black man! The voice of a black man!

UWI Library

The glorious voice stopped. The men went back to what they were doing. The moment that had given us a common identity was over. Robeson the man had called him. A name to remember, that. I would find out about that man. ~~Who was he? Where did he come from? What did he look like. Wish I could meet him. O that voice!~~

"Some voice, heh, son," a man said to me.

"Yessir!"

"He's an American Negro," the man said and moved away.

I followed him through the door where the greatest number went. It was a long room, spacious, and with big windows that let in light. At one end was a billiard table. Two men, in shirtsleeves, played. At the other end were shelves filled with books. Comfortable settees were ranged about the room. Men sat reading or talking. Others watched the game. They all spoke English here.

I moved over to the bookshelves. I wanted to touched the books but held back. Perhaps it was not permitted. Typed slips ~~indicated~~ showed what each shelf held: novels; history; sociology; travel; Africana; political science; American Negro literature.... I stopped there. American Negro literature. The man had said Robeson was an American Negro....

A man got up and came over. He ran his finger along the American Negro literature shelf and took out a book.

"Excuse me....Can I look at these?"

"Of course," he smiled ~~and went back to his seat.~~

I reached up and took out a flat black book. 'The Souls of Black Folk' by W.E.B. Du Bois. I turned the pages. It spoke about a people in a valley. And they were black, and dispossessed, and

UWI Library

denied. I skimmed through the pages, anxious to take it all in. I read:

"For this much all men know: despite compromise, war, and struggle, the Negro is not free."

The Negro is not free....I remembered those 'Reserved For Europeans Only' signs; I remembered no white boys ever carried at the market or ran from the police; I remembered my long walks in the white sections of the city, and the lavatories, and the park benches, and the tea-rooms; I remembered Elsberg; I remembered Jim's Passes; I remembered "The Burning Meat"; I remembered Harry at Diepkloof; I remembered Aunt Mattie going to jail; I remembered spittle on my face....The Negro is not free.

But why had I not thought of it myself? Now, having read the words, I knew that I had known this all along. But until now I had had no words to voice that knowledge. Du Bois's words had the impact of a revelation.

Elsewhere, I read:

"I have seen a land right merry with the sun, where children sing, and rolling hills lie like passioned women wanton with harvest. And therein the King's Highway sat and sits a figure veiled and bowed, by which the traveller's footsteps hasten as they go. On the tainted air broods fear. Three centuries' thought has been the raising and unveiling of that bowed human heart, and now behold a century new for the duty and the deed. The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colour-line.

I read on and found a reiteration:

"The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the

UWI Library

colour-line - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea."

For all the thousands of miles, for all the ocean, between the land and people of which he wrote and my land, Du Bois might have been writing about my land and people. The mood and feeling he described was native to me. I recognised the people as those among whom I lived. The only difference was that there was no laughter in this book. Here, in our land, in the midst of our miseries, we had moments of laughter, moments of playing. Though like us in every other respect, the Negroes in the 'Souls of Black Folk' seemed very solemn, without laughter. But for all that, Du Bois had given me a key to the understanding of my world. The Negro is not free....

I replaced the book and reached for others. There was 'Up From Slavery'; 'Along This Way' by Weldon Johnson; a slim volume called 'The Black Christ'; a fat volume called 'The New Negro'. I turned the pages of 'The New Negro'. These poems and stories were written by Negroes! Something burst deep inside me. The world could never again belong to white people only! Never again!

I took 'The New Negro' to a chair. I turned the pages. ~~Words sprang at me:~~

FROM THE DARK TOWER

We shall not always plant while others reap....

"Are you the young man who's been looking for me?"

For a while I stared foolishly at the neat little man who stood over my chair.

"My name's Rathebe."

"Yessir!" I shut the book and jumped up.

UWI Library

"Well young man?"

"I'm looking for Mr. Dabula, please."

"Your name?"

"Peter Abrahams."

"What's it about?"

"A job. I met a gentleman who said he'd phone."

"That's right. Mr. Dabula's expecting you. Go up the stairs and it's the first door on your right."

I replaced the book and followed Rathebe out of the room. He entered the door marked 'Secretary'. I climbed up the stairs. The voice of the man called Hlubi reached me from the big hall. He was practising without Robeson now.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they nailed him on the cross'

I knocked on the door.

"Come in!"

I went into a small office. A young man sat at a desk. In front of him was a typewriter with a sheet half filled with writing. The young man, ~~himself,~~ was small and chubby: not much taller than myself but well filled out. He had a round face, smooth and dark brown. His forehead was large, large enough to give the impression that his hair receded. His hair, a shade less uncontrollably kinked than mine, was cut short and very well groomed. He gave the impression of quiet freshness. He studied me with brown eyes that suggested gentleness. Indeed, this gentleness of the eyes seemed a thing common to all the men I had seen at the Bantu Men's Social Centre that afternoon. Almost, it was as if I had met a new kind of black person. ~~Perhaps I had.~~

UWI Library

"Mr. Dabula?"

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"I met a gentleman who said....."

"Ah! You're the young man from the market...." His eyes ran over my neat and proper dress. "I expected...."

I grinned and helped him out:

"I had a proper scrub. Nearly didn't know myself."

"Sit down....You've really been a market boy?"

"Yes."

His face creased into a smile.

"Well now, about the job." He explained:

This was the office of the black section of the Boy Scout Movement. In South Africa even this international organisation for co-operation, manliness, and understanding, was run on segregation lines. The white Scouts had one organisation, the blacks another, and the Coloureds yet another. As in all other spheres, there was no intermingling between black and white. The black Scouts were called Pathfinders. And this little office was their headquaters.

He outlined my tasks as office boy. I would have to file letters and keep the files in order. I would have to deal with the orders for Scout badges, whistles, lanyards, hats and belts: make them up into parcels, make out the invoices, and post the parcels. My wage would be ten shillings a week.

"What's your writing like?"

I did a specimen for him.

"Atrocious," he grinned. "Alright. Start in the morning."

UWI Library

I went down to the library and my newly discovered 'New Negroes'.

> We shall not always plant while others reap
> The golden increment of bursting fruit,
> Not always countenance, abject and mute,
> That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap
> Not everlastingly while others sleep
> Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,
> Not always bend to some more subtle brute;
> We were not made eternally to weep.

A man called Countee Cullen said that to me. And this man loved John Keats in a way I understood.

A man called Langston Hughes said:

> I'm looking for a house
> In the world
> Where the white shadows
> Will not fall.

Then he checked me with:

> There is no such house,
> Dark brother,
> No such house
> At all.

60 There were many others. Stirling Brown wrote with the authority of a man who had had a long talk with history. Claude McKay stirred me to aggressive pride:

> Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
> Though far outnumbered let us still be brave,
> And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
> What though before us lies the open grave?
> Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
> Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

I could go out and spit in a white man's face!....Fortunately, the mood passed long before I met a white man.

Georgia Douglas Johnson stirred me to pride in the darkness of my mother and sister; and Jean Toomer

UWM Library

Caroling softly souls of slavery,
What they were, and what they are to me,
Caroling softly souls of slavery.

stirred me to the verge of tears.

In the months that followed, I spent nearly all my spare time in the library of the Bantu Men's Social Centre. I read, ~~and devoured,~~ every one of the books on the shelf marked: American Negro Literature. I became a nationalist, a colour nationalist, through the writings of men and women who lived a world away from me. To them I owe a great debt for crystallising my vague yearnings to write and for showing me the long dream was attainable.

My mother came from Vrededorp that night and we had a little family party. ~~Maggie's friend, Rachel, came in with her husband. We ate, then sat talking by the fire.~~ I told them about my job and about my discovery of American Negro Literature. I tried to tell them what it meant to me. But they were not really interested America and Harlem were at the other end of the world. And in Coloured terminology Negroes were black people whom both whites and Coloureds called Natives in their polite moments. I gave up my attempts, sat back, and listened. They talked happily about the little rounds of their days. I realised, quite suddenly, that I was rapidly moving out of this Coloured world of mine, out of the reach of even my dear mother and sister. I saw them with the objective eyes of a stranger. My mother touched my arm.

"You're growing up fast, Lee...."

I looked into her eyes. Her lips curved in understanding. She had caught my thought. She was still with me.

UWI Library

A world of activity opened to me. I joined the Pathfinders, attended their meetings, and read all the literature on Scouting. I learned the very useful things each Scout knew.

In three weeks I had saved up enough to buy a ten-shilling postal order. ~~And I sent it~~ The 'Bantu World' carried a weekly ~~add~~ advertisement of a Correspondence School. The rate was ten shillings a month. I took their 'General Education' course. Also in the 'Bantu World', I saw an illustrated ~~ad~~ offering of ten beautifully bound volumes entitled 'Practical Knowledge for All' which could be had on easy terms. I sent off for these.

Often, I brought my lessons to the library of the Bantu Men's Social Centre. The atmosphere there was more conducive to learning than at home. Also, there were usually others studying. Some, like myself, had correspondence courses. Others, the more advanced, studied independently. And if I got stuck I could always find someone to help me out. ~~At home, on the other hand, my knowledge was already greater than the combined knowledge of everyone there.~~

Sometimes, of an evening, I listened to the debates of the Social Centre's Debating Society. Sometimes I went into the big hall and watched men rehearsing their songs and dances. Almost every evening, after the day's work, my boss, Peter Dabula, went into Rathebe's office downstairs. Others would be there and they would sit talking. I wormed my way into these sessions and became a silent, unobtrusive, listener.

Rathebe talked fascinatingly about his travels. He had been

UWI Library

to England and America. And we never tired of hearing him tell of his experiences. In England he had lived in the homes of white people, had sat at table with them! England had no colour bar. A man could go where he pleased when he pleased. A man was just a man. Of course, people had looked. He was different. But there was no colour bar. And he had met Negroes living in England. They had made it their home. Why, the great Paul Robeson lived there!

But Harlem! Harlem.... The city of Negroes. A city within a city: not a suburb, not a location, not a slum area, a city.... We hung on his words; words spoken in an easy, subdued manner, stirred our hearts and minds, and led us on to wild dreams.

So many questions stirred in me; so many things I wanted to know, but I dared not ask in case they turned me out. They had forgotten my presence. Best leave it like that.

Once, one of Rathebe's listeners was moved to exclaiming:

"Freedom!"

Rathebe's words gave us some slight yardstick with which to attempt an understanding of the meaning of freedom. And, to a man, his audience dreamed of one day leaving this land. They all expressed a desire to go to America. America held the promise. America was the land of hope and opportunity.

My mind was divided. The call of America's limitless opportunities was strong. The call of Harlem, Negro colleges, and the 'New Negro' writers, was compelling. But Charles Lamb, Elia, John Keats, Shelley, and the glorious host they led, made a counter call. And my mind's eye saw a peaceful land that offered peace to a poet.

UWI Library

INSERT AT TOP OF PAGE 262 IN PLACE OF THE VERSE NOW THERE:

Ye who have yearn'd
With too much passion, will here stay and pity,
For the mere sake of truth; as 'tis a ditty
Not of these days, but long ago 'twas told
By a cavern wind unto a forest old;
And then the forest told it in a dream
to a sleeping lake, whose cool and level gleam
A poet caught as he was journeying
To Phoebus' shrine; and in it he did fling
His weary limbs, bathing an hour's space,
And after, straight in that inspired place
He sang the story up into the air,
Giving it universal freedom.

UWA Library

lines that attracted me were:

And whoever wakes in England, sees, some morning, unaware
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England - Now!

So as these others expressed their dreams of getting to America, I tried to take stock of the two forces that pulled me, first this way, then that. And it seemed that America had more to offer me as ~~a man and~~ a black man. If ~~that~~ the American Negro was not free, he was, at least, free to give voice to his unfreedom. And there was promise for me in ~~that~~ the very fact that so many of them had risen to high eminence. ~~There was the promise of opportunity; the promise of working out my dreams and ambitions. Could there be a stronger call?~~

Yet England, holding out no offer, not even the comfort of being among my own kind, could counter that call because men now dead had once crossed its heaths and walked its lanes, quietly, unhurriedly, and had sung, with such beauty that their songs had pierced the heart of a black boy, a world away, and in another time.

~~So, while the others talked of the American promise,~~ I decided I would go to England one day. Perhaps I would go to America afterwards. But I would go to England first. I would go there because the dead men who called ~~me~~ were, for me, more alive than the most vitally living. In my heart I knew my going there would be in the nature of a pilgrimage.

But Harlem! A Negro city! Imagine Countee Cullen walking down a street and meeting Langston Hughes! And then imagine Paul Robeson joining them! And Du Bois! And Stirling Brown....Go on! Chuck in Pushkin too! And then let them talk! Imagine....

UWI Library

One day I discovered there were early morning gym classes at the Social Centre. I got up earlier and joined these before starting my dayss work. I was easily the skinniest runt in the class and became body conscious. I began to read the 'Are you a man or a mouse' ads. in the 'Bantu World'. I came across an offer by Charles Atlas to make a 'he-man' out of me if only I would give him a seven day trial. I wrote to Mr. Atlas' South African address. I told him I ~~most certainly~~ wanted to be turned into a 'he-man' by his Dynamic Tension course. The snag was that I could not at present stretch my money to meet his course. I explained my budget.

2/6 a week was set aside for my correspondence course;
2/6 a week to pay off the price of the ten volumes;
2/6 went to Maggie for my keep;
2/6 for clothing which I needed badly, and pocket money.

But I promised to set 2/6 aside to pay for my 'he-man' body as soon as I had finished paying for the books. I had no reply from Mr. Atlas. ~~He probably never got my letter.~~

I wrote to another body building expert, Mr. George F. Jowitt. He replied explaining in a kindly letter that he could not build up my body on credit and that all I really needed I could do by myself. He suggested a lot of fresh air and exercise.

To aid the fresh air and exercise, I later borrowed ten shillings from my savings for clothes and spent it on a large size bottle of 'Vikelp' tablets. These were advertised as made up of precious, life-giving minerals from the bed of the seas. They were guaranteed to put 'pounds of solid, healthy flesh' on my body. I spent a large number of pennies weighing myself. In three months I actually put on two pounds in weight!

UWI Library

Periodically, there were dances at the Centre. Usually on Saturday nights. Young men brought their wives or girl friends. I attended some of these but never worked up the courage to ask a young woman to dance. Instead, I took lessons from Maggie at home. Even these, however, did not give me the needed confidence to approach a strange young woman. Even my new long trousers, moral supports in everything else, could not support me to the point of asking to dance with a young woman.

But life was full and [illegible] Vrededorp, the market, the tinsmithy, all seemed to belong to another lifetime, in another world.

Peter Dabula responded to my lust for learning and helped me learn to type. Because everyone at the Social Centre spoke English, it became a habit with me. I thought in English. It took the place of Afrikaans as my first language. My range of words expanded, and with it, the range of my thoughts. All my days and half my nights were crammed with learning, working, watching, listening, and the long, long dreams of youth.

Sometimes I went back to Vrededorp and walked up and down its mean streets on a Sunday morning. Sometimes I went to Albertsville to visit Catherine and her family. Aunt Mattie was usually there on a Sunday. She had aged terribly. She could hardly walk. All her teeth were out. She looked an old woman. Catherine too, looked very much older than a young woman in her twenties. Her husband was beginning to have that drawn appearance that all the hard worked Coloured men had.

Already, they, and some of the other Coloureds of Vrededorp were beginning to look on me as someone not quite like them. I

UWC Library

wore a tie, and this set me apart. I did not smoke yet and this made those who had been my friends suspect me. I met Lippy and Sleepy once.

"Hello Lippy! Sleepy!"

They stared at me as at a stranger.

"Don't you know me, fellows. It's Lee!"

"Jasus God Maria Monk!" Sleepy cried. "It is!"

They drew nearer and inspected me. Lippy whistled on a rising note of amazement.

"Look at the bloody toff!"

He flicked my tie into my face.

"How are you fellows?" I asked.

"Hellø of a head," Sleepy said.

"Me, I'm tired," Lippy said. "Sexy hen wore me out last night."

"God I was drunk last night," Sleepy said. "Buy us a drink man, Lee."

"I don't drink."

"What?!!"

"I don't drink."

Lippy smacked his sides and laughed.

"Lee a come-to-Jesus! Just think! Suppose you never slept with a dame!"

"No."

"What do you do, man?" Sleepy asked.

"Work and learn."

"And you never want to get drunk and you never want one of these easy Lizzies?"

"No."

"Oh my uncle!"

UWI Library

Their laughter rang out, mocking me. I was the prize ass; not they. They enjoyed themselves as best they could in a mean world. I worked and did not even get a drink out of it. It was enough to make anyone laugh.

Lippy patted my pockets. A few coins jingled.

"Give us a smoke man."

"Maybe some Lizzie's got the guy under her thumb. Some of these skirts who've been to school try to make a guy holy-holy."

"I don't smoke, and I'm not married."

Lippy weighed me up. He had once respected me as a leader. But that was a long time ago, before I had become a tie-wearing cissy who neither drank nor smoked. He hesitated, then took a chance. He grabbed my tie near the throat, forced me backward to the wall, and tried to slip his hand into my pocket. I knew them. I had played with them. As a child, I had bullied them. I had to act firmly with the one if I didn't want the pair to set on me. To them, I was an enemy now: someone to beat up and strip of his possessions if they could.

I raised my fist and brought it down like a club on the arm that held my tie. At the same time, I kicked and caught him on the shin. He grunted, let go of my tie, and stepped back. I punched him hard on the chest.

I looked quickly at Sleepy. His expression changed. A sychophantic smile touched his lips. But his eyes were sullenly hostile. I felt depressed. These had been my friends.

"What the hell!" Lippy cried. "I was only playing."

"Still the same Lee," Sleepy said. "Heh, chief?"

"I don't like fellows touching my pockets."

UWI Library

Sleepy nodded and kept the lying smile on his lips.

"You always were like that. A proud bastard. That's why you became our leader. Always told Lippy you were too smart for us. Bloody fool tries it on again....What about a rise, chief? A bob'll give us a short drink and start us in a dice game."

"Sorry fellows."

"Don't tell me you're broke with that rich rig out."

"No. But I need what I have."

"Come on!" Lippy said with sudden bitterness. "Leave the sonofabitch alone. He thinks he's too good for us.... Watch out Mister bloody **Lee**! I'll plant a knife in your back!" He flung the last viciously at me as they walked away.

"Sleepy!" I shouted.

"Well....?"

"Where's Dinny?"

"In your mother's...."

I watched them walk away. They had been my childhood friends.

7.

Winter gave way to spring. The transition was suddenly, it nearly always is on the South African highveld. Suddenly, the mornings were cool, fresh, invigorating. And the evenings, moon-kissed, were charged with an easy, relaxing, friendly warmth.

I fell in love that spring.

When I got home one evening, I found Maggie and her friend, Rachel, on the verendah. From other verendahs other women, women whom I rarely saw, also looked out. They flung words at

UWI Library

each other across the street about the standard of the neighbourhood as neighbours do.

being lowered.

"~~thought the day was lovely earlier. Don't know now....~~"

"~~Yes! I feel a cloud's come over us.~~"

"~~Always thought the slums were happier in the slums!~~"

"~~One thing if people want to better themselves.~~"

"~~They're not the bettering kind, my dear.~~"

"~~Should be a law!~~"

"~~My husband warned about this.~~"

"~~We ought to tell them men to start their tenants' group.~~"

"~~My husband says we can't do anything without the landlord.~~"

"~~He's only concerned about his money.~~"

A new family was moving into a house in the little alley-way that connected our deadend street to the next. These loudly spoken remarks were for the benefit of that family. I watched the new family and the pile of junk they stacked on the pavement from the dray-cart.

~~Yes,~~ The women were right. This was a slice of the slumiest, filthiest, Vrededorp and Malay Camp moving into our 'select' area. The beds were of the wooden variety we had called 'bugs' heaven' in Vrededorp. They had cracks and nooks in which armies of bugs lived. From there, at nights, the bugs came out and feasted on ~~the precious~~ human blood ~~they loved so well.~~ In our Vrededorp days Aunt Mattie had turned out the house once every fortnight and we had attacked the enemy with innumerable kettles of boiling water and Jeyes Fluid. But somehow, we had never succeeded in making the army any smaller. We killed millions of swollen bugs at each turnout, only to meet millions more the next time. ~~The beds that came off the dray were the beds of slumland. Almost, I heard the~~

UWI Library

bugs protesting at being shaken up. The mattresses and bedding was heaped on the pavement, a pile of dirty, nondescript junk. Clothes were tied into bundles in dirty, yellowish sheets that had once been white. Numerous wooden and tin boxes held pots and pans and cracked and chipped crocks. Sacks stuffed with ragged possessions came off the dray. This was indeed slumland's good.

And the people were slumland's children: the old woman, hard and ageless, whose rasping voice carried to us as she interspersed her instructions with curses; the tough, brutal-looking young man who carried all the heavier things; the two fat, squat, ribald young women who spoke at the top of their voices; the litter of dirty children of all shapes and sizes; all this was slumland suddenly catapaulted into aspiring City and Suburban.

(2) And we, the aspiring, were ashamed to see ourselves as we had once been. We resented being reminded of our origins. Having escaped the slums, we dreaded slipping back, and we resented savagedly the turning of our new homes into a slum area. All this resentment was flung at the new arrivals. Had they left their junk, dressed in their best and moved in with even one suite of new furniture bought on the instalment plan, the women would have turned out with cups of tea. For then the new arrivals would have declared their repudiation of the slums and would have been, like us, the aspiring. But they had brought the slums with them, defiantly. So the voices of the women were bitter against them. And they, sensing hostility, became aggressively louder and more vulgar.

By the time darkness fell they had moved nearly all their things in. And though it was a warm spring night, they lit a

UWI Library

fire. The houses, here, all had grates. But theirs was the parafin tin fire of Vrededorp. They had no verandah as their house was smaller than the others. But there was a little clearing in front of the house.

I went in when Chris arrived from work. We had our meal. I did my chores and my lessons. Maggie talked indignantly of the new arrivals. She and Chris went off to neighbours to talk over this new problem. The whole street was united against the strangers. I went out ~~to the verandah~~ to look at them. About me, ~~on all the other verandahs~~, men and women stood, watching the strangers.

Their fire was glowing red and smokeless. And they sat round it, ~~in their own little clearing~~, eating their evening meal. ~~The grown-ups sat on benches and chairs, the children sat on the ground. They were noisy.~~ Their laughter rang up and down the street. And in the background, more controlled, more respectable, were the angry, protesting voices of the aspiring; among them, my sister's.

The tough young man went into the house and came out with a guitar. How many are there, I wondered. I counted them. Four grown-ups: three women and one man. ~~Three~~ Four children, ~~- no, four.~~ Two boys and two girls. I had not seen the bigger girl earlier. About my size. Something about her stirred my interest. The man plucked at the guitar strings. The old woman pushed a white clay pipe firmly into her mouth and lit it. One of the ~~other~~ women began singing. Soon, the others joined in. Only the girl did not join in. She sat with her head lowered, looking into the burning fire. I knew what it was. She felt and was hurt by the hostility of the aspiring. ~~That was it.~~ I felt ashamed for my sister suddenly. I wanted to tell the girl that Maggie was really a warm,

UWI Library

kind hearted person....Honestly, miss. My sister isn't the kind that goes around hurting people. She'd be sorry if she knew you're upset. It's just that she sometimes forget. Honestly, I know her. She's my sister. A very good sister. I'm sorry. Honestly, I'm sorry....

I went in. I had a lot of reading to do and an essay to write. Maths and arithmetic were giving me trouble, as usual. I could not settle to my work. I let my work be and went out. I walked up the street and turned left, up the sloping land, away from the city and people and houses, in the direction of the towering mine dumps.

I climbed the rising land till I stood on a green hill. Ahead, on the other side of the land dipping away into a valley, were the mine dumps. They towered white against the moonlit sky. I had never been close to one of those dumps. I would go there one day. Have a proper look at them. See what they looked like close up. They're beautiful in the moonlight. Beautiful, like a white, well-shaped mountain.

I turned and looked at the city. A sea of twinkling, multi-coloured lights leapt to the eye. They threw up the outlines of buildings. They made the wide streets shine. In gay colours, they spelt out advertisements. I could map the city by its lights.

That was the heart of it. There, where it was almost as light as day. I could see cars and trams clearly. And the outlines of people moving. White people. Yes. To the left, and a little toward me, was Malay Camp, an inky black spot in the sea of light. Couldn't see anything there. Dark folk move in darkness: white folk move in light. Well, Malay Camp wouldn't be a slum if it were as light as the city. Slum is darkness. Dark folk live in darkness.

UWI Library

Beyond Malay Camp, a little to the left again, was white Fordsburg. White: lights. Black: darkness. A strip of darkness ran through black Fordsburg and became a big black blob. Vrededorp. And to the left of it, that world of light was Mayfair. And the patch of light to the right of it was Upper, white, Vrededorp.

To the right of me, beyond the heart of the city, lights moved away in waves. Those were the white suburbs: there was Hospital Hill; beyond it, out of sight, was Parktown and the other suburbs of light. Light is white: dark is black.

And from the beautiful city a soft, eternal hum drifted up to me. And all else was silent.

The fat yellow moon hung low over the city. A cluster of bright, dancing stars looked down on the city. One exploded and streaked across the city leaving a tail of light in its wake.

....Dear God! Has earth a fairer land? Can there be one as fair? And if there can, can I feel for it as for this? And can my heart, ~~my secret heart,~~ ever ache for the people of another with the purity it does for the people of this? The whites here sing a love song to the land, from within. Would they have me sing it from without? Dear God, wherever you are, whatever you are, look down in pity on my unwisdom, on the unwisdom of man, and help me love this land as it <u>should</u> be loved. This land has made me, shaped my beating heart and wayward dreams, Dear God....

I stayed there for a while, a little self-conscious and ashamed at the intensity of my emotions. New feelings, elusive and uncontrollable, played on my heart and mind. A need, different from all the other needs I had ever known, moved me to longing. And I did not know what I longed for.

UWI Library

I left the green hill and went home.

From quite a way off, I saw ~~someone~~ the girl standing under the lamp at the corner of our street. I walked faster. ~~It was the girl.~~ As I neared, one of the boys joined her. They talked for a while, then the boy went away.

I could see her clearly now. ~~Her back~~ She leaned against the lamp-post, looking at a book by the lamp light. She wore a cheap cotton ~~print~~ dress that revealed her slim young body. Her long, kinky hair was pulled back straight and tied in a bun at the nape of her neck. Smooth brown skin stretched tight over a round face. ~~Her eyes were those of a girl in her first flowering. Her feet were in canvas shoes that had been scrubbed white.~~

I neared the lamp-post. The longing left me. A new courage led me on. I stopped beside her under the lamp light.

"Hello," I said.

She looked up from her book. I smiled.

"My name's Peter. I live here. I saw you move in."

"Hello."

"What's your name?"

"Anne."

"I like it."

Her shy smile revealed a gap where a front tooth was missing.

"You don't mind my talking to you?"

"No."

"I'm glad."

I looked at her. She looked at me. I could think of nothing more to say. She closed her book and leaned her head against the post. I put out one hand and balanced myself against the post.

UWI Library

Time and the world stood still while a great and aching happiness crept into me and spread through my body. Many years, many ages later, one of the boys approached us.

"Gran wants you, Anne."

"I'm coming."

"She said now!"

"Go on. I'm coming."

He turned and went back.

"I must go," she said.

"Yes."

Neither of us moved for a long while.

"Anne!!!"

"That's Gran," she smiled.

"She sounds angry."

"She isn't really....But I must go now."

"Yes."

Unwillingly, we moved down the street together. We moved as slowly as we could, making one step last a long time. But at last we had to part. We were near the fire. All her family turned to look. This disturbed me though Anne did not seem to mind her family seeing us together. She put out her hand. I took it.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight....Anne....Anne...."

"Yes?"

"Please come for a walk tomorrow night...."

Her lips curved in a quiet smile.

"Alright. I'll ask Gran."

"Perhaps she'll refuse."

UWI Library

"She won't. I know Gran."

Suddenly, Gran's rasping voice cut at us.

"How long do I have to wait while you stand holding hands!"

I released Anne's hand hurriedly.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

I slunk away from the watching eyes around the fire.

At home, Maggie had ~~some~~ friends in for a game of cards.

"Hello Lee....Want to join? Take my place while I make tea."

"No!"

I went through to my section of the kitchen and flung myself on my bed.

"I'll be damned," Chris said. "He usually pesters us to play."

I lay in a wakeful dream far into the night. And Anne was the heart of the dream. ~~Toward the early hours of the morning, when the moon hung low in the east, I turned on my side, ready for sleep. But first, I had to say goodnight to Anne. Let's see.... Where would she be? In the kitchen like me?.... Oh my aunt! How would I ever know? There were eight of them in two rooms and a kitchen. And our rooms were bigger than theirs. Never mind.... Goodnight, Anne. Goodnight, wherever you are....~~

I stood under the street lamp. In my pocket was a large bar of chocolate, and in my hand was a quart bottle of ginger beer. Our first night out would be a party.

There she was!....No. The girl who came to me was shorter and quite squat, not slender and long-limbed like Anne.

"Hello. You Peter? I'm Loo. Really Anne's my aunt but I

UWI Library

can't call her auntie because I'm twelve and she's only fifteen."

"Isn't she coming?"

"Oh yes! She's ready. Gran wants you to come and get her."

"Why?"

"Gran says she has a home and there's no need for you to meet on street corners. Really, Gran wants to look you over. She's funny. Says she doesn't want me all over again."

"Why?"

"Because I have no father and my mother wouldn't tell on the man who made me....Come on!"

I followed her down and into the house. They were all there, waiting to look me over. I endured their silent scrutiny for a painful half-minute. Then Anne came out of the other room and came to my side. She took my hand in hers and tried to still my trembling.

"This is Peter, Gran...."

She named her relatives for me. They said things to me. But I was too dazed to understand. The only comfort in the world was Anne's hand in mine. I clung to it while voices droned about me. At last, Anne pulled me to the door. The ordeal was over.

We walked up the street and turned the corner. Anne slipped her arm through mine. She chuckled softly.

"They liked you so much and you were so frightened."

"Did they?"

"You heard what Gran said."

"No."

"But you said 'yes'."

"What did she say?"

UWI Library

"Don't you remember anything?"

"No."

"Not even the promise you made?"

"No. What did I promise?"

"I'll tell you later if you want me to."

"I can't think or understand when I'm frightened."

"You did shake so. I'm sorry. But Gran understands. It's because you're not used to big families."

"Did they see me shaking?"

"Yes. That's why I took the bottle from you. Gran thought you would drop it. Better now?"

"Yes."

We were silent after that. We walked through the streets, past people and houses. We walked till there were no more people, till the houses were behind us, and only we walked in that place. We climbed to the top of the green hill. We looked across the valley to the mine dumps that lay white in the moonlight. Then we turned and looked at the lights of the city, and at the islands of darkness in that lighted city.

I said:

"This is my place. You're the first person I brought here."

"I'm glad," she said.

"It is because I love you," I said.

"And I love you," she said.

We went down on the green grass. We sat holding hands, leaning against each other. ~~We stared down at the city of which we were a part.~~ Above us, in a cloudless sky, was the big moon, the Milky Way, and the Southern Cross. At last I turned my eyes from the

UWI Library

city and looked at the girl beside me. She was beautiful, the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. And she was beside me. And her hand was in mine. And she loved me. And I loved her. I remembered lines from a poem written by one of the 'New Negroes'. I said it for her:

"I love you for your brownness,
And the rounded darkness of your breast,
I love you for the breaking sadness in your voice,
And shadows where your wayward eyelids rest."

"I can't understand all," she said.

I made a literal, line for line, translation into Afrikaans.

"I like it," she said.

The poem had mentioned breasts. I reached for her left breast. She stiffened, then relaxed immediately.

"Why did you do that?"

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I forgot what you said."

"What did I say?"

"Really want me to tell you?"

"Yes."

"Granny asked if you've ever had another girl. You said no. Only when you were little, at school."

"Yes, that was Ellen."

"Yes. You told us her name. Then Gran asked if you'd ever slept with a girl. That was when you shook terribly. But you said no. Gran said it would make it easier for us."

"Why?"

"Don't you know about these things?"

"No."

"Didn't anybody, your mother, ever tell you?"

UWI Library

"No."

"Oh we know all about it. But then girls must so that they know what they are doing."

"But why did Gran say it was easier for us."

"Because you are not as keen to do it as those who have."

"Is that true?"

"Gran says it is and she knows a lot."

"And you've never done it?"

"No. Boys tried to make me but I didn't love them."

"Will you do it with me?"

"If you want to."

"Any time?"

"Any time you want to."

"Now?"

She hung her head and sighed.

"Yes, if you want to."

"Do you want to?"

"No....But I'll let you if you want to. I'm your girl."

"I don't want to."

"I'm ~~so~~ glad."

She relaxed and raised her head. "I'm so glad," she repeated.

She leaned more trustingly against me. I put my arm about her shoulder. I took out the bar of chocolate and put it on her lap. She undid it and put a square of chocolate into my mouth. A load seemed to have lifted from us.

"Is that all your Gran said?"

"She said she would trust us both. She said you were free to come and go as you pleased and take me where you liked. She said

UWI Library

if we felt we must sleep with each other we should tell her and she would try to help us so that we shouldn't get a baby. It was then you promised...."

Something emerged from the fog of funk in which I had faced her family.

"Yes! I remember. I promised I would marry you and we wouldn't have a baby till then. And I will!"

"We'll have to wait a long time," Anne said. "And men sometimes get tired."

"I won't get tired of you. You're beautiful!"

I opened the bottle of ginger beer. We drank.

"Peter...."

"Yes?"

"I don't want to sleep with you and have a baby because we are too young. But I've seen boys leave their girls because they get tired of waiting. If you ever get tired, don't go and sleep with other girls. Come and I'll let you. Gran will help."

"I'll never get tired!"

"I want you always."

"I want you always, Anne."

We had finished with sex.

I lay on my back, my head pillowed on Anne's lap. I told her of my work, my studies, my dreams. The monn travelled east. The the world went to bed. We ate all the chocolate, drank all the ginger beer, talked till we tired of talking, and then, hand in hand, we went happily down into the city.

The passing days only enhanced our rapture. I lost my shyness with Anne's people. An odd understanding grew between Gran and me.

UWI Library

Anne and I walked every night. But though I did not work at them with the same passionate fervour, I did not neglect my lessons. Indeed, I gave my love lessons in English. I wanted her to read the things I read, to enter fully into my private world. We had stormy scenes when she could not grasp some simple literary point. Once, she left me in tears because I had railed at her for reading a passage badly.

Occasionally, we went down to Malay Camp on a Saturday night to see a film. Occasionally we went into the heart of the city because Anne liked looking at the pretty dresses in the shop windows.

Once, on a Saturday night, she stopped at a window that displayed pretty dresses. ~~A few yards away,~~ two young white women looked at the same window. Anne grabbed my arm.

"Peter! That one there! Oh....isn't it lovely. That's the one I want when we are rich!" Her eyes were bright, her lips parted.

The two young women turned their heads. They studied Anne and her shabby dress. They looked at the beautiful dress she admired. They burst out laughing. Till that moment, Anne had been unaware of them. She looked quickly at them. ~~Yes, they were laughing at her.~~

The ~~light of~~ joy went out of her eyes. Her dark skin looked parched and pale suddenly. She shivered and hurried down the street, head downcast. I followed her. The laughter of the young women followed us.

I caught up with her near Park Station. Her arm trembled to my touch. There was restraint between us. I led her into the station and the 'non-European' Tea Room. She went to a corner table.

UWI Library

I got two cups of tea and followed her.

The place was crowded with Coloured and black people. By the standards of The 'Burning Meat' ~~the place~~ it was wonderfully clean and comfortable. Only a few flies ~~of~~ made sport of the cakes on the counter. And there was more room. By the standards of some of the white places we had passed it was drab and shoddy.

We sat drinking our tea in silence, not looking at each other. Presently the shadow would pass. We would push it as far down as we can. And, in a little while perhaps, we would look at each other. We would touch hands and smile. And, by stages, we would go back to being young and happy and in love ~~again.~~

A sudden hush came over the Tea Room. ~~I looked at the door.~~ Three white policemen walked in. All eyes turned to them.

"Natives, get your Passes ready!" one of them snapped.

"Let's go," Anne said.

I looked at a young black boy who sat at the next table with his girl. They were both quietly and neatly dressed. Their clothes were better than ours. They looked like two young people who came from better homes than ours. In all likelihood they were both better educated than we were. Their behaviour was that of refined people.

~~As I looked at him,~~ The black boy took his wallet out ~~of his pocket~~ and began searching for his Passes. His girl lowered her head and stared at the tabletop.

I got up and followed Anne out, past the policemen at the door. We were Coloured and therefore free of the purely physical impact of this humiliation.

~~He~~ We hurried home without speaking. We parted at her door with-

UWI Library

out our customary kiss. She look at me on the point of parting.

"Peter...."

"Yes?"

"You say we're as good as they are...."

"Yes."

"Do you really believe that?"

I didn't really know.

"Yes, Anne."

"Then why do these things happen?"

I could not answer that. I did not know how. But her eyes told me she had found answer in my silence.

"Goodnight...."

"Goodnight, my Anne...."

8.

I had [redacted] worked in the Pathfinder office for about three months. During that time I had filed numerous letters headed:

Diocesan Training College,
Grace Dieu,
Pietersburg.

Caps & S. caps (unit letterspaced.)

These were signed: S.P. Woodfield.

I learned from Peter Dabula that Canon Woodfield was the Principal of the college as well as being Assistant Chief Scout and operative head of the Pathfinder Movement. I was always very careful about his invoices and the letters Dabula permitted me to type that went to him.

One day, as spring was slipping into summer, Canon Woodfield turned up at the office. He was an impressive little man: short and stockily built. There was an air of authority about him that flowed from more than the mere fact that

UWL Library

he was white. His coming threw Peter Dabula into a whirl of nervous activity. The twinkle in his eyes suggested that he enjoyed the stir his unexpected coming had caused.

I did not think about Canon Woodfield again till some weeks later. One morning, Peter Dabula told me that at a meeting the night before, the committee had decided they could not keep me on at the office. Orders had been small of late, and the Movement could not longer afford an office boy.

My plans and dreams crumbled.

"What'll you do?" Dabula asked.

"Don't know."

"What about your course?"

"I'll try and find another job to pay for it."

"Or go back to the market?"

"Perhaps."

"It won't be the same you know: you've changed a lot."

"I'll have to do something."

"Ever thought of going to college?"

"College....?"

"Yes: like the Diocesan Training College?"

"But how will I pay?"

"Work your way. Boys did it when I was at college."

"Really! Can I do it!!"

"Why not write to Canon Woodfield. He can only refuse you."

~~"Think I should?"~~

~~"I would."~~

~~"Alright! I will!"~~

I wrote to Canon Woodfield that night....

UWI Library

A few nights later I returned from work to find a letter, addressed to me, lying on the sitting-room table. The postmark was Pietersburg. I tore it open....

"MAG!!! MAG!!!"

66

"Oh God! What's the matter, Lee...." She rushed in, worried.

I flung my arms about her and whirled about the room with her.

"He'll take me! He'll take me!"

"Stop it, Lee! What are you talking about? ~~Are you mad?~~"

I stopped dancing. Maggie went to a chair and sat panting. ~~I willed myself into an unnatural calm.~~

"Now tell me what it's all about."

"I'm going to college!"

~~"Say that again."~~

~~"I'm going to college."~~

"What for? Going to be a teacher?"

That was the only thing to go to college for.

"No."

"Then why? And where'll you find the money for books and things?"

"Here...." I gave her the letter.

She looked up after a while, a bit dazed.

"But this is far away, in Pietersburg. Where's that?"

"Up in the north."

"And you really want to go?"

"Yes."

"But why don't you go to the Normal College at Vrededorp? ~~you can become a teacher there. Or do you want to go far from all your flesh and blood?~~"

UWC Library

Her eyes filled with tears. They spilled over her lids and ran down her face. ~~"Oh dear! If the thought of my going does this to Mag, what would it do to my mother?~~

"Please don't cry, Maggie. This is what I really want."

~~"Do you really want to go so far from us?"~~

~~"I must."~~

"Oh, Lee...."

I went to her then. Suddenly, I was the elder, the stronger. I put my arm about her. She leaned her head against my chest. I ran my fingers through her long wavy hair. ~~"I was lucky in my sister. She was a woman with a good heart, a big heart.~~

"I'll come back, Mag."

"All these books and all this learning of yours sometimes worries me. What'll you do with it? And will you be happy?" ~~You're like a stranger sometimes. What's going to happen to my little brother. You are my little brother...."~~

~~"Yes, Mag."~~

I hurried to Upper Vrededorp later to tell my mother. She was resting in her little room before giving the whites their evening meal.

"Hello, Lee." ~~I was coming over to see you later. Come to fetch me? You'll have to wait a while as I still have to feed the whites and then wash up."~~

~~"I'll help you, ma."~~

~~"You won't!"~~

~~"I'd like to. Please, ma."~~

How was I to tell her? How would she take it? I had not

UWC Library

expected Maggie to cry. Would my mother cry too?

~~"Allright....Now tell me what's got you so excited."~~

"How are you, ma?"

She laughed.

"It must be something important. I'm quite alright. Now tell me."

"I'm going away, ma. I'm going to a college in Pietersburg. They are willing to take me as a worker scholar."

I watched her anxiously.

"What work will you do?"

"Father Woodfield's letter says I can work in the college office."

"Then it won't be too hard."

"No....Is it alright, ma?"

"Has Mag been upset?"

"She cried."

"It's her soft heart. Don't let it worry you. I'll talk to her."

"And you, ma?"

"I'm happy for you, my child. Very happy. ~~I wish your father were here to see you doing all the things he wanted to do for you. He would have been so happy.~~"

"Then you really don't mind my going?"

"A mother always minds. But don't you think about that. You go and I'll pray to God to look after you."

Later, after the washing up, we went to black Vrededorp to see my brother as I was unlikely to see him again before leaving. We found Enna and her mother and the two little boys. The room was

UWI Library

a little more tidy than it had been on my previous visits. But Harry was not there. For a while, my mother talked to Enna and her mother, played with her two little grandsons, then we left. Enna did not know where Harry was or when he would return. She thought he was out gambling.

As we walked away from Vrededorp, ~~she~~ my mother said heavily:

"It is a bad place. I'm glad ~~two of my children~~ you and your son are out of it."

I told Anne the news later that night.

We climbed our hill and sat looking down at the lights of the city. We did not have much to say to each other, ~~that night~~. The little we had, we said on the way back.

"It will be lonely, Peter."

"I will come back."

"It will be as lonely as it was before we met."

"I will come back, Anne. I love you."

"No, it will be worse because I will remember you."

"We can write."

"I can't. I'm not educated like you."

"You must!"

"I'll try. But it'll be so lonely. You may find an educated girl like yourself and never come back to me."

"I'll come back to you."

"How long will you be away."

"I must stay on and work in one holiday so it'll be a year."

"A year's a long time...."

"I'll come back."

"If you don't...."

UWI Library

"I will!"

"Please! If you don't, will you remember me?"

"Always....But I'll come back. You'll see."

"I'll remember you always and always. Oh Peter...."

Ask me to stay and I'll stay, Anne. I'll stay for you. For you. Just say it....~~No. No, Peter, you'll go because you have to. I fought out the battle in myself. But, really, I was cheating. There was no battle. Everything was settled.~~

"Do you want me to stay, Anne?"

She did not answer.

We passed a street lamp. Its light touched her eyes and made her teardrops glisten like precious stones.

With Canon Woodfield's letter had been a list of required things: blankets, towels, soap, clothes. There was also a voucher permitting me to get my rail ticket at a reduced rate. I had just over a week before the new term began.

Chris presented me with a strong leather suitcase. Maggie and my mother cleaned and pressed all my clothes. They just about met the clothes requirement of the list. I wrote to the correspondence school explaining the new position and asked to end my course with them. Their reply filled me with panic. I had either to complete the course or pay for it or else they would take me to law. I sent the letter to Canon Woodfield. He wrote back reassuringly. ~~There was no need for me to worry.~~ He would deal with it. I had better see that I arrived in time for start of term.

UWI Library

So, the night of departure arrived. The ~~clock~~ platform clock showed two minutes before nine. ~~The train left at nine.~~

"Better get in," Maggie said.

I turned to my mother. Behind her, in the background, Anne stood alone. I had moved between her and Maggie and my mother while we were waiting. Now, I wanted all three of them to be together. I looked from my mother to Anne. She understood. She turned and held out her hand to Anne.

"Come, my child, it's time for him to go."

Anne drew near uncertainly.

"'Bye Mag. Thanks for the sandwiches and money. Say 'bye to Chris for me."

Maggie flung her arms about me. ~~Her tears wet my cheeks.~~

I turned to Anne.

"'Bye Anne...."

I couldn't kiss her infront of all these people, in front of Maggie and my mother.

"Kiss her you gawp!" Maggie cried in tearful laughter.

We kissed.

"I'll come back."

"Goodbye, Peter."

I turned to my mother. The whistle blew. I clung to her.

"Take care of yourself, my child. Write...."

I got in. The train began to move. I leaned out to them. Now, at the last moment, I saw my mother wipe her eyes....

Goodby, my loves, goodbye.

The train gathered speed.

UWI Library

THREE

1.

"De-bo-rah --
The stars are weeping,
De-bo-rah --
The night is sleeping,
Wait for me,
I'll surely be,
Under your window tonight...."

The light baritone ~~voice~~ drifted gaily up to me. That was Reuben, nicknamed Bing after the great Mr. Crosby.

I sat in the moonlight, under the old marula tree that marked the highest point of the land. The week of 'treating' - of the old students initiating the new by light-hearted bullying, ducking, parading and other general tortures - was over. I had ceased being a 'greenhorn', a 'thing', a 'dumb newy', at the mock baptism ceremony the night before. I was a student now, a person, the equal of all the others. Those who had called me 'monkey face' yesterday called me 'Peter' today and ~~made~~ brought me friends. The tradition of 'treating' had been satisfied and set aside till next term when I would take a hand in 'treating' the new students. Now, I had my first moment of peace. Sitting under the old marula, I took stock of the place. The night was warm. The moon was bright.

Grace Dieu. The Grace of God.

It was a shallow, wide bottomed green valley. A quiet, peaceful valley, miles away from the nearest farmstead, and eighteen miles from the town of Pietersburg: a valley in which low white buildings nestled. Far down to the left, off the sandy track that led to the big road and the outside world, stood the church: the finest building in the valley. About it trees grew.

UWI Library

To the right of the church, and almost hidden by the shading trees, were the homes of the Fathers of the Church who were also our teachers. There were three white Fathers: Father Woodfield, the Principal; Father Jones; Father Adams. There was one white lay teacher. Mr. Jansen, an Afrikaner. I never found out where the handful of black teachers lived. ~~Anyway,~~ To the right of the homes of the white teachers, and making one corner for the central quad of the valley, stood the college office. In line with the office, but moving upward to where I was, stood the large students' communal diningroom. Adjacent to it, after an interval of space, the long, low, class-rooms began. Beyond the class-rooms, and completing the quadrangle, were the dormitories. In the centre of the quadrangle was the belfry ~~tower~~. A river, nearly always dry, but cut deep in the earth, bordered our valley on the right. Across it was a bridge. On the other side of the bridge, in what must once have been part of our valley, was another quadrangle of low white buildings. That was the part of the college where the girls lived under the protection of the Sisters of Mercy of the Church of England.

And all about, beyond these two groups of low white buildings, the virgin veld, green and austere, and infinitely beautiful, swept away in all directions, rising and falling. And the air, here, was charged with a quiet peace that caressed tenderly. No deep hum came from the earth. No lights shone as in the city. Instead, there was the interminable song of the cricket; the private little light of the glow-worm in love. In the bright light of the big moon, and with the tolling Angelus, this was indeed the Grace of God. And there was Grace in the peace it brought to my heart and mind.

UWI Library

I took easily to my new routine of study and work. It was easy to learn in that peaceful place. And the work in the office was not exacting. From light and airy class-rooms I went to a neat little office. Arithmetic and maths still gave me headaches. I mastered all the other subjects easily. I swept and dusted the office, did ~~an~~ occasional ~~bit of~~ typing, and worked hardest on the stencilled monthly college magazine Father Woodfield edited.

68

The food was adequate but only just. But the ~~college~~ fees were very small and I was one of ~~quite~~ a host of non-paying scholars. Food could not be improved without increasing fees. And the parents of most students could just ~~about~~ afford the fees.

Between work and study and sleep, I learned to play. There was tennis and football. We also had athletic events. I learned to turn the earth and make things grow from it.

On my afternoons in the office, Father Woodfield sometimes talked about his home in England, his days at Oxford, and the English countryside. Fathers Woodfield, Jones, and Adams, were the first white men whose colour I forgot. After a very short while they were just men, men of God, men without colour. The Afrikaner, Mr. Jansen, was a big, gentle-natured man with a tentative manner. He soon ~~overcame~~ broke down the reserve all non-whites have toward Boers. He played football and tennis with us. In the end, I forgot even his colour and we had long sessions on Afrikaans poetry and prose. Through him I discovered the rich body of Afrikaner literature and the beauty of the language itself. I ~~even~~ wrote some Afrikaans verses which we discussed.

UWI Library

Tall, thin, serious Father Adams was the literary expert. I did an essay that pleased him one day. At the end of class ~~that day~~ he invited me to his rooms to look at his books and borrow any I might like to. I went that evening after supper. We talked books, writing, and writers till five minutes before lights-out. That night began a new series of literary studies for me. At last I could talk about my reading, check my understanding of it.

Father Adams was a purist about both spoken and written English. He set an exacting standard in these private lessons. Whenever I used big words or made ~~a~~ clumsy and almost meaningless sentences, he sent me to the Bible:

"The Bible says 'And Jesus wept'. I suppose that would be too simple for you. Read the Bible if you want to see how good English should be written!"

I read the Bible and saw.

Our days began and ended in the church. We attended chapel before breakfast each morning. After that, ~~the day began with~~ the Sisters marched a column of girls across the bridge to school. The day ended with the Sisters marching the column of girls back across the bridge after the evening service. And between morning and evening, we had the Angelus. Throughout the day, they interrupted us at work or study or play. We left whatever we did and turned our faces to the tolling bells. We crossed ourselves and responded:

Hail Mary, full of grace,
The Lord is with Thee;
Blessed art thou among women,
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

UWI Library

Holy Mary, mother of God,
Pray for us sinners
Now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

After the echoes of the last toll ~~had faded into the limitless skies,~~ we crossed ourselves again and went back to our duties or our play.

On Sundays we had more services than during the week. Those who were full members of the Church went to early morning Mass. Then there was the ten o'clock service. There was a catechism class for those preparing for confirmation. I attended this. And a Sunday School for the youngest students. We also had an afternoon service.

Sometimes both white and black people came in from the surrounding country for Mass or the afternoon Service. The white visitors sat in the front row. Males on one side of the aisle, females on the other.

Religion, and the symbolism of religion were all about us, real and compelling.

With others, Father Woodfield confirmed me one beautiful autumn morning. Later, I received my first Communion at his hands.

I was a full member now of the fellowship of ~~ther~~ the Christ who offered life and offered it more abundantly, who taught:

Love thy neighbour as thyself.

Alone that night, I went into the empty chapel. I went on my knees....Dear God, Dear Jesus, help me. Please help me....Then I went up to the old marula tree and looked down into the valley that had been named The Grace of God.

UWI Library

Vrededorp, the market, the dark places and those past hurts were forgotten. There was peace here, and I was happy. I was among people who were as brothers one unto another, and there were books and the land was beautiful. Almost, I was in another land. A land free of hurt, insult, colour and poverty.

3.

I had four special friends. Dan Koza and Reuben - Bing - Makubele, were from Johannesburg. Both were bigger boys than myself. But we were all from the big town and that was the common bond. The third was a 'first generation' Coloured boy, the offspring of a present-day mixed liaison. His black and white parents had not set up house together and he had not been born in a big town where the Coloured community could have assimilated him. He was much fairer than myself, fair enough to be a highveld Boer. His hair was straight. But he had grown up in a black rural area as a black boy with a white skin. This had created tensions in him which the college, and contact with boys from the cities was gradually easing. He was growing less aggressive, less eager to fight whenever he thought anybody was ~~being~~ disparaging ~~to~~ him.

These three were intensely interested in a young man in America who was making a name for himself as a prizefighter. They got copies of a magazine called 'The Ring' ~~from America~~. They stuck photographs of this young man on the walls near their beds. They never tired of talking about him. They knew the details of every fight he had been in, the time in which he had beaten his opponent. To them, he was the most important man in the world,

UWC Library

the greatest hero of our time.

One morning, ~~I woke to find~~ I found my friends in moods of black tragedy. They could not eat their breakfasts. Later, ~~one of them~~, Bing skipped classes and went to bed sick. I tried to find out what it was all about.

69

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sick, man."

"Why?"

"The Black Ulan smashed the Brown Bomber last night."

"You mean in boxing?"

"What else...."

"But if a black man smashed a brown man why should you be sick?

"Go way, Peter. You're dumb."

All through that day, and the next, and the next, the gloom hung over my friends. In the end, I went to their pile of 'Rings' to find out that the Black Ulan was a white man from Germany. Their misery made sense then.

That moment of misery was only matched and outdone by a moment of joy that came a very long time afterwards when they woke the sleepers of a whole dormitory in the small hours because the Bomber had crushed the Ulan. I woke to find Reuben dancing with his little radio in his arms.

The fourth, and most intimate of my friends, was a strapping, long-limbed boy called Jonathan. He came from a nearby native village. We had struck up a friendship when he had first come as a day scholar, making the long ~~journey~~ trek between ~~the~~ college and his village ~~twice~~ daily. His excellent work in class had earned him a place as a boarder. As a worker-scholar, he looked after Father

UWI Library

Jones' rooms and did his laundry.

Jonathan had never been to a big town. He had never been on a train. The little dorp of Pietersburg was his closest contact with the ways and world of white men.

Often, at the end of the day, we went on long, rambling walks across the veld. Sometimes we went through the wire fence that was the college bounds. Sometimes we set traps for Springhaas ~~rock-rabbits~~. The land, here, abound in them. And sometimes we caught one. Then, for a few days, there would be enough meat to make our thick pap more palatable. But most often, we would fling ourselves on a strip of soft grass and lay talking.

Jonathan had the most innocent eyes I had ever seen. His eyes, his smooth black, open, countryman's face, and his rippling muscles, had led many of the boys from the towns to regard him as simple. I found a sharp, clear thinking brain behind the simple-seeming face, and a warm, compassionate interest ~~interest~~ in the city-world he did not know. He even laughed kindly at the city boys' condescending attitude to him.

"They do not know the country. They do not know how much a man learns from it."

Usually, he led me on to talking about life in the city. ~~He wanted to know all about it.~~ Once, after I had told him how I had run from the market police, he ~~stared at me and~~ shook his head.

"And you were not ashamed to run like a dog before a white man?

I tried to explain. Jonathan only understood the shame of it.

"Others do this too? Black people?"

I told him about the Passes and the Pick-up vans around Vrededorp and Malay Camp.

UWI Library

"And grown black men do this? Even when they've done no wrong?"

"Yes."

"I do not understand. These white people are Christians. They believe like we do. They go to church. I do not understand."

"You will if you go to the city."

"I will go to the city."

I wrote home. The answers told me all was well. I sent a few of my poems to the 'Bantu World'. They were published. The Zulu poet Dhlomo wrote me a letter of encouragement. Some months later, I sent another batch. A new editor had taken Dhlomo's place. From him I got a note. In the note was a postal order for five shillings. The note said:

"Dear Peter,

> They will all praise. Few will think that a poet must eat. This is an investment so that you will speak for us one day. Call on me whenever you need. Look me up when you get back.

Yours,

Fezile B. Teka."

I had turned my first literary penny. I wrote a bubbling letter of thanks to Mr. Teka. He replied briefly:

"I have faith in your future."

I wrote a long letter to Anne. A month later, I received a tearstained, incoherent reply. I wrote again. I received no reply.

The seasons passed. The years came to an end. School ended. Students went home to spend Christmas with their families. Father Woodfield was travelling to Johannesburg and gave me a lift.

UWH Library

The first thing I noticed was that strangers lived where Anne had lived. It dulled the joy of home-coming. I knocked on Maggie's door.

"Who's there?"

I knocked again. I heard footsteps. The door opened. ~~A dark, round-faced buxom woman looked up at me. I saw my sister with the eyes of a stranger. I was taller than she was.~~ I had shot up in the ~~year of absence. She dropped the kitchen cloth. Her eyes opened wide. Her expression changed. I felt her love reach out to me. I saw it in her eyes. This was my sister. No matter how tall I grew, This was my big and loving sister.~~

"Hello, Mag."

"Lee!!!"

We flung our arms about each other and danced with joy.

"How are you, Lee? When did you arrive? Why didn't you write? Did they feed you well? You've grown, Lee. You're a big man now. You're thinner? Why are you so black?" Her words tumbled fast. "Have you eaten? Are you hungry? I've a chop for you. Come in, darling! Come in!"

~~After the the wonderful drive through the majesty of the African land, I was home.~~

She hustled me into the kitchen. While she fried the chop, she kept flinging questions at me. She gave me no time to answer. Then, quite suddenly, her words dried up.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Lee?"

"It's nice to see you, Mag. How's ma?"

She stared at me for a while.

UWI Library

"You've changed," she said slowly, frowning.

"I've grown," I said.

"It's more than that."

She was more subdued after that. She sat opposite me and watched me eat. There was a curiously intense quality about the way she watched me. It was as if she would force something out of me with her eyes. ~~It was disturbing.~~

"Matter Mag? I'm the same me."

She said nothing. Her eyes said; No, you're not. And because she had made me aware of it, I realised I had changed. I had a new, seeing, coldness that had nothing to do with coldness of feeling.

In the late afternoon, we set out together for Upper Vrededorp and my mother's place of work. Maggie was dressed in her best and had made herself look very pretty. She came from her bedroom smiling. I saw the anxiety behind her smile.

"Allright to go out with my educated brother?"

"You're beautiful, Mag."

We walked to the tram terminus in the heart of the city, near the City Hall. The white conductor stared at me as I followed Maggie on the tram. She saw it. Her eyes blazed.

"It's allright. He's my brother. He's Coloured."

"Enough of your lip," the conductor snapped.

"Go on, Mag."

We went upstairs and sat in one of the two back seats reserved for non-Europeans. Maggie shook with rage.

"Forget it," I said. "He's done nothing."

The tram moved off. The conductor came up and took our fares.

"Don't know how to behave with educated people!" Maggie snapped.

UWI Library

The conductor stared at her then clattered down the stairs.

The tram turned a corner and rattled down the incline past the market. I looked at the corner where the 'Burning Meat' had stood. It was still there. Were the flies still in control? A crowd of market boys, scruffy and nondescript, gambled on the now empty parking square. The old man with his fatcakes and coffee was still there. Nothing had changed. ~~Had I really once been one of those boys?~~

The tram rattled past Fordsburg, down towards the Vrededorp subway. It emerged on the other side. There was the stall on which I had led my gang on that first thieving raid. I could have been anyone of those scruffy boys scrapping down there on the pavement. Nothing had changed here. There was Nineteenth Street, the street in which I was born. ~~Had I really been born in this dark place of dirt and squalor and shouting, fighting humanity?~~

The tram swept on. We got off at the top, where it turned up to Newlands. Maggie and the conductor exchanged baleful looks. Then the tram rattled up the side of the cemetery. We crossed the wide street and went to my mother's place of work.

She was standing over a washtub in the yard. There was a huge bundle on the ground beside her. She looked small, ~~so~~ very small and frail. She raised her head. Weary eyes looked out of a drawn face. Then the face changed.

"Lee...."

I was caught up in waves of emotion and could see no more till the white woman came out of the house.

"My son, missus," my mother explained. "He's just come back

UWC Library

from college, missus."

"From college?"

"Yes, missus."

"You must be very proud and happy."

"Yes, missus."

"Why not take the day off, Lina. I'll see to the food tonight. Leave the washing till tomorrow. You want to be with your son today."

"Yes, missus. Thank you, missus. He's a good boy."

"I can see that. He looks quiet and well-behaved. I've just made a pot of coffee. Would you like some coffee and cookies young man?"

I looked at the smiling, kindly, motherly face. She meant well. ~~Yes, she meant well.~~ But she looked so rested, so strong and healthy, so comfortable. I looked at my mother. So frail and small and so weary looking.

"Have you lost your tongue, Lee?....He's shy, missus."

I looked into the kindly, comfortable face.

"Thank you very much."

The woman flushed and turned her eyes away from mine.

"Then it's there, Lina." She turned and hurried into the house.

My mother shook the soapsuds from her pitted hands then wiped them. Her eyes touched my face.

"You want to be careful,Lee. They're not used to educated Coloureds."

"I'll help you, ma," Maggie said.

"You go into the room," my mother said to me.

UWI Library

We looked up the rest of the family that afternoon.

We found Harry in Fifteenth Street. He and his family lived in another tiny, untidy room, in the same yard as the rest of Enna's family. He was not completely sober. Enna was nagging him because her grandmother had paid their last rent. His two boys, both potbellied and with bowed legs, played in the dirty yard. Enna sat in the sun, and her mother combed her long tresses while she nagged.

I said:

"Hello, Harry."

He said:

"Hello, my little gentleman brother. Hear you're a college man now. Don't be snooty about it. I sat in a dice school last night with two college men, and they're even worse than I am. Don't be snooty. You'll be like me yet."

"See what he's come to!" Enna cried.

I played with the two boys while my mother and Maggie talked to Enna's family. My brother went into the room and flung himself on the dirty bed....

We found Catherine and all her family at Albertsville. Aunt Mattie was now too infirm to work and lived with them. Catherine's husband was out of work. He and his stepfather, ~~who lived on the next plot~~, were ~~busy~~ putting up a new shed. Catherine's two fair little girls played in the sun. Though the younger of the two, when Catherine stood beside Maggie she looked years older.

Here, as in Vrededorp, they were really too concerned with their own problems to share my mother and Maggie's joy at my homecoming.

UWI Library

On the way back ~~to City and Suburban~~ at sunset, I asked about Anne.

"They moved about six months ago," Maggie said.

"Do you know where to?"

"No."

"Didn't Anne give you the address?"

"No. I told her to come and see me the night you left, but she never came."

"Such a nice quiet girl," my mother said. "I liked her."

That night, they talked worriedly about what I was to do with all my education. Whites did not like to employ non-whites with too much education. And why didn't I want to be a teacher? Writing? Would that feed me? And what would I write about? And why did I want to tell the whites how bad things were among us? It would only bring more shame on us.

They were happy to have me back but behind their joy was an anxiety they could not quite keep from me. I had changed. What was to become of me? What could I do with all my learning?

I visited the office of the 'Bantu World' next morning. Mr. Teka received me warmly. He was a young man with shrewd, kindly eyes and a very dry manner. He sent for tea and we talked. He asked about my college. We talked about books and poetry.

"We talk about you sometimes," Teka said. "We worry about your future. You know the Dhlomo brothers write in the vernacular. There are one or two others. The only place they can publish is the Lovedale Press. And they must be careful what they write. Well, we wonder about you. You write in English and already you are touching

UWI Library

things that should not be mentioned. See what I mean?"

"Yes, I see."

"Good. We say among ourselves: 'He can become a teacher but even then he will have to be careful what he writes or else he will have to put it away'. And someone else says: 'If only he were in another land'. And another says: 'There is no future for him'. See, your poems have reached us. And we think and talk about you; and we wonder and hope." He leaned back and raised his eyes to the ceiling. "We hope, my friend, we all hope. We know the road is hard but still we hope. Perhaps it is unfair, but we hope."

A boy brought in the tea. Teka's mood changed. He talked about his home and childhood with amusing dryness. I gave him a batch of new poems. He made a little pile of three half-crowns and pushed them to me.

"It is not much but a man wants to help...."

I spent days at the Bantu Men's Social Centre. Sometimes I borrowed a racquet from one of the members and had a game on the Centre's court. Sometimes I attended their discussions and debates. The little office upstairs was closed. I rarely saw Dabula. I gathered he had found another job. Rathebe still ran the Centre with quiet efficiency. The man who had tried to imitate Paul Robeson that day when I first arrived at the Centre, Mark Hlubi, had won some kind of award and was going ~~off~~ to England to study. ~~It~~ This was the talking point at the Centre. Who had given him the scholarship? The Bantu Welfare Trust? No one I asked seemed sure. I put out feelers. The Welfare Trust was only for pure blooded Africans. And although the Africans ~~may~~ might accept me as one of them-

UWI Library

selves, the whites who administered the Trust did not. Those to whom I spoke thought it crazy, but there you are.

Sometimes of an evening, I wandered through slumland hoping to come across Anne or a member of her family. I went to Malay Camp, Jeppestown, Doornfontein, Fordsburg, Vrededorp, Sophiatown, and Alberts-ville. But I found no sign of Anne and her people. Perhaps they had left the Rand. People often moved from town to town on the Golden Reef. Perhaps one member of the family had found a job in one of the neighbouring towns and they had all gone there.

At last the holidays ended. I returned gladly to Pietersburg and the peace of Grace Dieu. Except for Maggie's home and the Bantu Men's Social Centre, I had felt out of place in Johannesburg. I had been on the outside of things. The things I had wanted to do had been 'Reserved for Europeans Only'. There had been the concerts and theatres, the libraries and the parks, the bookshops and the clean, fresh looking tea-rooms. All these I had wanted and found out of bounds. I had wanted Anne: a girl to take on long walks and talk to, quietly: the warm, living presence of a woman. But Anne had gone away and I found no other like her. I had gone to two Coloured 'Grand Hops'. But I was a stranger without a partner and I did not drink. That made contact difficult. I had had more fun at a dance at the Centre. But that had been the only one the Centre had given during holidays. I had been pushed off a moving bus once and endured the cold stares a crowd of Europeans had turned on a presuming non-European. I had been bundled off a pavement and walked away as though it had not happened for fear of being set upon by a group of young drunks. I had queued at the

UWI Library

O.K. Bazaars, a big department store, while the young assistant pointedly ignored me as long as there was one white shopper in sight.

It was good to return to that peaceful valley after all this.

5.

My friend, Jonathan, took me on a long walk that first night after assembly. The moon was big and high. The night was clear and warm. The silence of the veld, after the city, was very powerful. We went past the old marula tree and up to the boundry corner. The low white buildings, sprawling in the moonlight, were out of sight behind the rising land. We walked along the boundry fence to the other corner. I sat on a giant anthill under the moon. All about us, engulfing us, was the vast stillness of the land.

"I want to talk," Jonathan said.

"Talk," I said.

"It is about the city, your city. You know I went there."

"You said you would go."

"Yes. I went. You said I would understand. But there is a thing I do not understand."

"What is it?"

He thought gravely for some time, then he said:

"I have told you about our village. I will take you there one day and you will see how it is. There is not much for a man there if he knows the ways of white men and the good things of the white man. The ways of the white man are better than our ways. I know that. There is more for a man in them. But this is

UWI Library

the thing I do not understand...."

Quietly, gravely, he talked about it.

A boy is satisfied with his village, and the life of his village, because he knows no other. That is his life. That is the life of his ancestors before him. And, for him, it is a good life. He herds his cattle and observes the rules and laws of the tribe. He is content.

And then the white man comes into his contentment. The white man shows him new things and new ways. And he is no longer content with the old ways. The white man says the key to this new world is to become a Christian and to have knowledge and education. The boy looks at the things of this new world. He finds them good. The toilet where the chain is pulled and the waste matter is flushed away, is cleaner, healthier, and more desirable than the hole in the ground or the foul-smelling can that is cleared two or three times a week; clean running water from taps mean healthier lives and the end of the many water diseases of the well, the river, or the unclean spring; the journey by train is faster and more comfortable than the long trek on foot or by oxwagon; roomy houses that let in air and light so that a man wakes fresh in the morning are superior to the dark, airless huts of old; electric lights instead of grease lamps and darkness; the superior medicine of the white man; oh a whole world of new things make the new world more desirable than the old.

And so he becomes a Christian and he goes to school. Knowledge brings new desires, new beliefs: the god of love in place of the pagan gods of war of old; the new view of the stranger, the foreigner, as a brother to be welcomed rather than an enemy to be

UWI Library

destroyed or feared; long dreams of a new life; new ways of thinking and responding opens to him. The vision of the humble Christ, the father of all men, of all races and colours, supplants the little gods of old. And so the boy turns his back on the old world of his ancestor, opens his arms wide, and reaches hungrily for the new, superior ways that offer a whole new world. And so, a new man, he goes to the city to see and get to know. All his future, now, will be linked with the city. Even if he is to spend the rest of his life in the country, he must go to the city because it is the symbol of this new world....

Jonathan's quiet voice was silent for a while. He turned his dark face so that I saw only a stern profile.

"It is difficult," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"I went to the city," he said. "And I learned these things are not for me."

"I told you," I said.

"I did not believe. You know how the boys from the cities lie."

"Yes."

"They should have told me. I believed it was for me too. It was wrong for them not to tell us...."

"Would it have changed anything?"

"I don't know. But it is better to know....Did a white person ever spit in your face?"

He turned his face to me again. I looked into his eyes.

"Yes."

"In mine too."

UWI Library

6.

Autumn gave way to the harsh highveld winter. Mornings were bleak: hard frost on the earth and sharp, penetrating coldness in the wind. Each morning a long line of boys ran briskly around the outer line of the football field. It was the best way of starting the day with some warmth. The class-rooms, so wonderfully cool in the hot summer, were terrible places in the winter. The hardier boys fought the cold with cold: they took icy showers first thing in the morning. They rubbed themselves till their dark skins glowed ~~a dull reddish brown.~~ They seemed refeshed and claimed they were warm. I tried it once. The icy water struck me and I was paralysed. I could not move my arm to stop the flow. My teeth chattered. I turned a bluish black. Jonathan came to the recue. I could not walk so he flung me across his shoulder and carried me to the dormitory. He covered me with my two blankets, piled his own two on top, and borrowed four more. I came alive again in time to reach the dining hall before late comers were shut out. I was not of the hardier type....

SPACE

I was in the final phases of my second year at college. I was in my seventeenth year of life. I had decisions to make. My work at the college office had reveal how many applications from students, both paying and non-paying, had to be turned down because there was no room and because the class-rooms were full.

Of a total population of roughly eight million non-Europeans, about 500,000 were at school, about 6.5%. Of these only ~~about~~ 2.4% received post-primary education of any kind. On the children of the 2,000,000 Europeans the State spent something like 10 million pounds: on those of the 8,000,000 non-Europeans about one million.

UWI Library

The real burden of non-European education was carried by the missionaries. Without ~~them~~ the missionaries of all denominations, but mainly the Anglican missionaries, much less than the half a million students would have been at school that year. And certainly less than 2.4%, probably less than .5% would have received any post-primary education.

The college at Grace Dieu was a teachers' training college. I had no intention of taking up teaching. Was it right for me to take the place of someone who might become a teacher and help the missionaries in their fight against illiteracy?

"I don't know what I'm going to do," I had told Canon Woodfield one day.

93 "There is a great need for teachers, Peter," he had said.

His eyes had twinkled understandingly. I had turned to my work feeling a cheat. I was keeping a would-be teacher out and in doing so, I was robbing the thousands of others that teacher would have taught.

But it was not as simple and purely altruistic as that. This pattern of thought was partly the result of another and flowed out of a need.

In the months after his visit to the city, Jonathan and I had again and again brooded over the way the white man treated the black. We had worked it down to Christianty. The white man believed in God. He had brought God to us. God taught: 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'. Christ came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. The Church taught that we were all brothers in Christ, one with another....And the whites, those who had spat on us and on others, were all Christians. The equation did not work out. Where was the error? In the religion? In the

UWI Library

white people? In us? In God or in man? And how were we to work it out.

Here, in this peaceful valley, the equation worked out. The Fathers who taught us lived up to their teaching. They were good men and they poured their lives into good work. Belief was translated into reality. We were the witnesses. ~~Yes, it worked out here.~~

But we would leave this peaceful valley and go out into the big world. And there, among the whites, it did not work out. It did not work out when whites came to our church. They sat in the front row. What made it so very difficult for us was the fact that the equation did work out with the Fathers and indeed with the Sisters from across the little bridge. But we had proof that the rest of the white Christians of our land were not like the Fathers and the Sisters. If there were any fault that we could lay at the door of the good Fathers and Sisters, it was that they had taught us too well. They had made Christianty a living reality for us, a way of life, a creed to live by, to measure our relations with others by. And the tragedy lay in the measuring.

~~Jonathan had said:~~

~~"They should have told me. I believed it was for me too. It was wrong for them not to tell us."~~

~~"Would it have changed anything?" I had asked.~~

~~"I don't know. But it is better to know. Did a white person ever spit in your face?"~~

~~I had looked into his eyes and said:~~

~~"Yes."~~

~~"In mine too," he had said quietly.~~

So the equation did not work out. And in the harshness of our

young idealism we demanded that it worked out as logically as a piece of mathematics. And it did not.

Where was the error: in man or God?

And so, under the pressure of my own and Jonathan's brooding, I thought of the would-be teacher whose place I was taking and thereby cheating thousands of others.

I wrote to Teka from time to time. He wrote and sent me copies of the Bantu World. My poetic efforts had spurred one or two other black boys on. Their poems were published. One of them wrote really brilliant verse. Teka thought he had the makings of a first rate poet and his letters said this young man and I had to meet next time I got back. Then, one day, I received a note of acknowledgement to a letter of mine. It said that Mr. Teka had left the Bantu World. He had left no forwarding address. The tone and signature of the letter were those of a European. My last real contact with Johannesburg was gone.

It was customary for boys to be given periodic weekend leave to go out of bounds. Armed with a weekend Pass, they usually went to the native Location on the fringe of Pietersburg. Jonathan and I decided to have a weekend off.

Father Woodfield's eyes twinkled as we collected our Passes that Friday evening. There was no real need for me to have a Pass. I was Coloured. I had a sudden moment of fear as we stood in front of him. Would he say I did not need one? If he did it would be a barrier between me and Jonathan....Please write out the Pass, Father I want the same identification as my friend....

UWI Library

Father Woodfield looked from me to Jonathan. The twinkle in his eyes deepened and carried a smile to his lips. He filled wrote our names on the two printed slips and signed them.

"Thank you, Father," Jonathan said.

"Thank you, Father," I said.

"Behave yourselves and be back before 'lights out' on Sunday."

"Yes, Father. Thank you."

We got a lift on the provision truck early the next morning. Perched on the back of the truck, our feet dangling, we swept away in a whirl of choking dust. The truck bumped and bounded over the uneven dusty road. It was so old that its noisy rattle made talk impossible. Through a thick haze of dust, we watched the rolling land sweep away in all direction.

And again I was struck by the aloofness of the land. Just so would a proud, austere man stand in his dignity, relaxed yet aloof. Not stiff, nor bending, just a silent, firm, relaxed presence, commanding respect in just being. Is there a land with the compelling power of this African land? Can any other land be cold and austere and yet tender? How does one tell of such a land, of the feel and hold of it on the hearts and minds of its children?

I turned to Jonathan.

"It is wonderful!"

The battling truck drowned my voice. His lips formed a word:

"What?"

I shouted louder: "I love it!"

He shook his head. I waved my arms to take in the land. He shook his head again. I gave it up.

A watery, pre-Spring, sun sat above the eastern hills when

UWI Library

we got to the wide macadamised road. The dust settled. The rattling and violent shaking of our bodies eased. The truck pulled up. We ~~all~~ jumped off and stretched aching legs. The driver took the cap off the boiling water tank. Steam blew out of the engine. He filled it with cold water.

A fine coating of dust covered us from head to foot, turned us into figures of grey dust. Our hair and eyebrows were coated with ~~fine dust~~. We spat dust, cleared our noses of dust, coughed dust, and blinked dust out of our eyes. We turned dust out of our pockets. We scratched our heads and raised dust clouds. We were possessed by great thirst but the motor needed all the water. So we continued on our journey bearing our thirst as best we could.

We passed a few farmsteads. ~~We were nearing the little dorp.~~ We passed black folk on the road. They walked with the steady, unvarying pace that covered great distances. At last we could see the dorp's church spire far ahead. The truck slowed down as we neared a group of sandhills some way off the road. We jumped off. We waved to the driver. He waved then accelerated.

We turned off the road and made for the sandhills. On the other side of the hills, the sand was damp. We found the dampest spot. We dug with our hands and made a deep hole. While water filtered through, we stripped. ~~We were completely hidden from the road by the hills.~~ We shook the dust out of our clothes then dressed again. The hole, now, was half-filled with clear water. We cupped our hands and drank. Then we washed the dust out of our hair and faces. We covered the hole so that others who passed here might find water that had been made clean by the earth. We continued our journey to the little dorp.

UWI Library

We reached Pietersburg a little before noon. It was very much like Elsburg, one of scores of little Boer dorps scattered up and down the land: a station, a church, a few rows of houses that make a few streets, a police station, a post office, and a few shops. A quiet place where life moves quietly, unhurriedly. And nearby, as in Elsburg, as in all the other little dorps, was a Location of blacks who worked in the homes of the whites.

We went to the station first. The truck was there but the driver had gone. The truck would be there till late that afternoon. We jumped on the back of the truck and rested. That way we were safe. This was known as the college truck. We had Passes to show we had a right to be on the truck. The police could not accuse us of anything. After our rest, we went to have a look at the town.

"We may meet some of the other boys," Jonathan said. "Then we can go to the Location."

"Yes," I said.

"My friends will give us good food," he said. "You will like them. They are country people like me."

"What shall we take to them?"

"Bread," he said. "They will like that."

We walked to the heart of the little ~~town~~ dorp. ~~How peaceful it was, and how silent!~~

"It is a nice place," he said.

"It is," I said.

"Maybe, one day, we will have little towns like this for ourselves. I prefer it to your big city. There is too much noise in your city and a man cannot think. In a place like this I would be

UWI Library

content~~ed~~. Perhaps I would be the teacher at the little school. It would be nice."

"I want to live on a farm," I said. "If I have the money one day, I will buy me a farm."

"But you are of the city."

"I would still like to get a farm."

"And the city?"

"I will visit it. But I like to live in a quiet place."

"You won't have time to write if you are a farmer. Our land is small but my father works all the time, and I, too, when I am at home."

"Yes," I said. "But I will get someone to help."

"You will need many helpers if it is a big farm."

"I want it to be very big."

An open trap drawn by a prancing grey with a shining coat turned a corner and shot past us.

"A beautiful horse," Jonathan sighed. "A beautiful horse."

I had been more interested in the cheerful young couple on the trap. They made ~~such~~ a fine picture.

"And I will go around like that," I said.

"With your wife?" Jonathan's eyes mocked affectionately.

"Why not!"

"You are such a dreamer," he laughed. Then he grew serious. "I wonder if a man who is not white can buy a farm."

I did not know. We carried on in silence along the quiet street. This point of reality had spoiled the illusion. Far ahead, we saw the shops.

"I'll get the bread," I said.

UWI Library

"I will pay half," he said.

"I have more money than you."

"I will pay half," he said firmly.

We reached the shop.

"Come," I said.

"I will wait," he said.

I went in. There were two women, ~~and~~ one man ~~beside the man behind the counter.~~ and the storekeeper. They all ~~looked at me~~ stared as I entered. The man behind the counter smiled at the others then moved slightly to my end of the counter.

"Ja klonkie?"

Better behave, Peter.

"A loaf of bread, please baas."

"You're new here....?"

"Not many of his kind around," the other man said.

"They prefer the towns," one of the women said.

They waited for me to tell them all about myself.

"I'm from the college, baas."

"The kaffir college?"

"Yes, baas."

"But you're Coloured, aren't you?"

"Yes, baas."

"Then why are you at a kaffir college?"

Careful, Peter.

"Because my parents want it, baas."

"Let him go," the second woman said boredly.

The storekeeper reached under the counter. He put a loaf of bread on it and pushed it in my direction. I put my coin on the

UWI Library

counter. He took it, counted out the change and put it beside the unwrapped loaf, ~~on the counter.~~ I gathered bread and money and hurried to the door. As I reached the door I flung myself forward in a dash. Too late, I saw the looming figure of a giant of a man.

The big man's arms shot out and caught me.

"O-O-o-o-p-s!" he grunted daily.

Then he saw my colour. My feet were off the ground. The laughter passed from his eyes. Disgust contorted his big tan face. He flung me away like one near the point of nausea through touching human waste. I hit the ground bodily. The bread and money went flying.

In a daze, I heard a woman's voice say something about 'church arrangements'. A booming voice, tinged with disgust, rumbled something about a 'black baboon'. I scrambled quickly to my feet. They may come out. Then Jonathan was beside me.

"Come!"

We gathered the bread and money and hurried down the street, back to the station. We did not look back. We got on the back on the truck. I sat shivering.

"Are you hurt?" Jonathan's voice was tight.

"No." I felt awfully tired and numb.

I looked at Jonathan's face. It was bleak. He avoided looking at me.

"We will go back," he said. "I think it is better, heh?"

"Yes," I said.

We got off the truck and took the road out of the little dorp, the road back to the college. We did not talk. There was nothing to talk about. In the late afternoon, we went off the road and

UWI Library

sat on a green hill while we ate the loaf of bread. Then we set out again. My brain began to function once more.

....Perhaps the truck would pick us up on its way back. Yes, perhaps it would. The truck rattles. The truck rattles. Yes, damn, the truck rattles. It is no use. Why did he look so sick with disgust? The other wouldn't have mattered if he had not looked so sick with it. Am I really like ~~a piece of shit~~ ordure to him? Only the touch of that could make me feel and look as he did. Only that. Only that. Sick with disgust. Only that. Yesterday I phoned the station. The white man said good-day to me. And I said Please reserve a first-class single coupé for Canon Woodfield. And he said I will do that. Thank you. Goodbye. The disgust one feels when touching human waste. A first-class coupé and human waste. White and black. No!! The truck will pick us up. You're only making it worse by being so tense, Jonathan. Relax. Let's try to forget it. Not the same as spittle. But that disgust. And the first-class coupé. No!!....

Savagely, insistently, my mind forced the error of the equation into the peaceful valley called the Grace of God.

Late that night I knelt in the dark and empty chapel. I knelt in front of the black statue of my patron saint, St. Peter. I offered him the error Jonathan and I had found in the equation. Why was it so? God had made miracles for white folk, would He make one miracle for one black boy? Would He make it now, please. That bowl of water at your feet, Dear St. Peter....

Jonathan moved from the shadows of a tree as I came out of the chapel. We moved slowly across the silent quad to our dormitory.

UWI Library

We lay awake far into the night, each aware that the other was awake. And our burning hearts ached as only the hearts of the young can, ~~ache.~~

A shadow now lay over our friendship. The weeks to the half-yearly holiday went heavily.

At last, end of term came. I was packing my case on that last night. At his bed next to mine, Jonathan was also packing.

"Peter...."

"Yes?"

"Are you coming back?"

"No."

"I thought not. I will miss you."

"I will miss you, Jon."

"Have you told Father Woodfield?"

"I can't. I will write to him."

"Yes. It is difficult. But you must write. He likes you and it will upset him. ...What will you do now?"

"I don't know."

"Let us walk for the last time."

In silence, under the early summer moon, we visited our old haunts.

In the morning, I took leave of my dear friend Jonathan and turned my face from that peaceful valley called the Grace of God.

~~Where to now, young dreamer?~~

UWI Library

BOOK THREE.

UWI Library

ONE

1.

I lay staring at the patch of moonlight on the wall....But afterwards? What were we to do afterwards? And was she sure? Really sure?....

She tapped lightly on the wall.

And what of the other two? My friends? Would they still be my friends afterwards?

I heard her move. I got out of bed and stood staring at the door. She tapped again, but only once. I went to the door and opened it. The house was very quiet. Two steps and I was at her door. I turned the handle quietly. The door moved without squeeking.

"Thought you'd never come," she whispered.

The moonlight touched her face with cream and roses. Her hair was a dark halo about it. Her eyes were pools of bottomless depth.

"They might be awake," I whispered.

"Stop worrying. You'll find out what they think tomorrow."

"Do they know?"

"Better shut the door and come....They'd have to be blind not to. Come."

I hesitated and all my past was in my hesitation. She opened the bed. I went to her....

"D'you really think they know?"

"You're stiff and cold. Relax. Of course, they know. Anyone would think love is unnatural. Forget your missionary inhibitions."

"You love me? Really?"

UWI Library

"You're with me, aren't you?"

"But do you?"

"Of course. Oh my poor Peter, stop shivering."

"Sure you want to?"

"I was seduced a long time ago so stop worrying about that. There now, you're shocked. Shouldn't have told you. But it's true. You have a poet's romantic ideas about sex. But you'll learn."

I lay beside her afterwards, completely relaxed but utterly depressed.

"Alright?" she murmured.

"Yes."

"Let's go to sleep."

She nestled against me and closed her eyes. Cream and roses beside me: a woman's hair in my face - the scent of dry leaves and mystery. But it had all gone wrong. It had not been as it should have been. The beauty my mind had charged it with had not been in the act. My fault? I did not know about these things. But for all my ignorance, I had wanted it to be an act of dedication. It had worked out as liberation without dedication, freedom without beauty.

Beside me, she breathed evenly in sleep. I eased myself away and got out of bed. She stirred.

"Where you going?"

"To my room."

"No."

"I'll oversleep here."

"Oh...." she groaned. "Alright...."

I knelt beside her and gathered the cream and roses to my bosom. The beauty will come. It had to come. The beauty must come.

UWI Library

"I love you, my dear, I love you."

"Goodnight dear," she murmured, half asleep.

I went back to my room and got into bed. I lay staring at the patch of moonlight on my wall. I was wide awake. My brain was too active for sleep.

Nearly Between this moment and that other when I had taken leave of my friend Jonathan, nearly two years had ~~gone by~~ passed. I was ninteen now, and this was the year 1938.

On reaching Johannesburg, I had written to Father Woodfield and told him I was not returning to college next term. I had not the courage to offer him the error Jonathan and I had found in the equation so I had made some excuse about not intending to be a teacher. I had expected him to be done with me after such ingratitude. I had received a gentle letter from him. He was sorry I had decided not to return. Perhaps I would be happier at St. Peter's Secondary just outside Johannesburg. I could work for my matriculation there. It was near my home. He had written to the Principal, Brother Roger, about me. He had also been in touch with Mr. J.D. Rheinalt Jones, Director of the South African Institute of Race Relations and Chief Scout for South Africa. Mr. Rheinalt Jones was willing to help. Both Mr. Rheinalt Jones and Brother Roger expected me to get in touch with them.

I had felt in a false position but unable to do anything about it. I had no way of coping with kindness. With a feeling of guilt and a sense of double-dealing, I submitted. I had seen Mr. Rheinalt Jones and gone to St. Peter's.

In Brother Roger, a tall, handsome man with the austere and hawk-like features of a Red Indian, I had met my first Christian

UWI Library

socialist. Through him, the world of visual art and classical music had opened to me. He had introduced me to the English poetry of my day. I had grown familiar with the work of Auden, Day Lewis, Isherwood and Spender. He had presented me with William Plomer's beautiful little book 'I Speak of Africa.'. Through Brother Roger, I had made my first white friends, a young brother and sister, Sammy and Phyllis Lieberman.

In my holidays, I had gone to the beautiful University of Johannesburg and there, in the offices of the Institute of Race Relations, I had worked. I had found young men and women there who seemed untouched by the racial disease of the land. Men like Julius Lewin. There, for the first time in my life, a white woman had served me a cup of tea. But there had been restraint: an unspoken, unexpressed, concern lest they ~~went~~ go too far in their intimacy or lest I forget that outside these offices the racial laws were still in full flower.

At St. Peter's, a motherly woman teacher of English, Mrs. Lindsay, took over where Father Adams had left off and help me on my journey into the golden realms of language and literature. With her, I first discovered the independent life possessed by a work of art and the strange loyalty art demands of those who would serve it.

At St. Peter's too, I had met a young couple. The woman had been with child and the man had had wrestling matches with the boys on the lawn. These had been the first white people to invite me to their home as a guest, the first white people who had sat at table with me. Gradually, over a period of time, they had nursed my friendship, had made me see that it was something they valued and

UWI Library

desired. Then, in easy stages, they had offered ~~an answer~~ an explanation of all the things that obssessed me: colour and the error Jonathan and I had found in the religious equation.

They had called their explanation Dialectical Materialism. They had called the creed by which they lived Marxism.

Marxism had the impact of a miraculous revelation. I had explored this new creed with delicate care. I had measured it's adherents by their creed. A profound revolution had taken place in my heart and mind.

Once, some six months after my return from Pietersburg, I had gone to a new Coloured township called Kliptown. I had turned a corner and come upon the girl who had, years earlier, called me from under the street lamp in City and Suburban and told me Gran wanted me to go into their house to get Anne.

"Peter!"

"Hello Loo. Where's Anne?"

"God they'll be glad to see you! We've talked about you all these years."

"Where's Anne?"

"Come on! Oh my God!"

She had taken me to their new home which was two small rooms in a corrugated-iron house. Anne's mother and old Gran had been there. Anne's mother had aged but old Gran had seemed unchanged.

"Go'n tell Anne Peter's here," Gran had snapped at Loo.

I had sensed a stiffness about them. Gran's eyes had flickered anxiously.

"A long time, boy."

"Yes, Gran."

UWI Library

"What've you been doing? Married?"

"No. I've been studying."

"Not forgotten Anne?"

"No, Gran. Why didn't she write?"

"She's not educated like you, boy. But she's not forgotten you. Make some tea for the boy."

Anne's mother had gone out. Gran had looked out at the dirty street.

"She'll be here in a minute. You know how I feel about her."

"Yes, Gran."

"When you see her you'll know what I hope for most."

"Anything wrong, Gran."

"You'll see boy. And just remember how hard life can be. You know anybody who's never made a mistake?"

"No, Gran."

I had taken out a packet of cigarettes.

"See you smoke now. But you're a man now. I'll have one."

Anne's mother had brought in the tea.

"No/~~thank/you~~

"Anything to eat, Peter?"

"No thank you."

"Why's the girl so long?" Gran had snapped nervously.

"Putting on a dress, ma."

"Can't wait all day. The boy may have things to do."

"That's all right, Gran."

"Get her!"

Anne's mother went out again.

"As I say, boy, life isn't always what we'd like it to be."

UWI Library

Anne had come in then. My eyes had moved quickly from her face to the child in her arms. Gran's voice had cut at me.

"That's what I mean, boy. She let us down. She made the mistake of any foolish girl. And after I had taught her sense."

I had stood up. Anne had looked at me with frightened, anxious eyes. She had held the child more firmly, more protectively, as I had moved forward.

"Hello, Anne...." So she was married.

"Peter...."

I had tried to smile.

"Your baby?"

"Yes."

"What's his name? How old's he?"

"Nearly a year," Gran had cut in. "He won't eat the child, girl! Give him to me. And sit down, both of you. We'll leave you to talk after all this time."

They had gone out and left us alone, caught up in an awkward silence. At last, Anne had broken it.

"More tea?"

"Please."

She had got it and reseated herself. Time had turned my childhood sweetheart into a beautiful, full-bosomed, young woman with a fine brown skin and soft curves. Time had cast a soft sadness over the once wistful and slightly melancholy young face.

"So you're married...."

"Not married, Peter...."

"That's not important if you're happy."

"We're not together. Never were."

UWI Library

"But the child...."

"Only once."

"I'm sorry."

"He doesn't care for me and I don't care for him."

"But then why did you go...."

"I don't know. And I promised you."

"Gran says we all make mistakes."

"Gran says it because....You know what she's hoping for."

"Yes. And you?"

"He's only a teacher, less educated than you, but he didn't want me."

"Did you want him to?"

"I don't know. But not now. He's no good. I hear he's got another girl in trouble."

"But you did love him once?"

"No! No!"

"Then why did you?"

"I don't know!"

"I'm sorry."

There had been a long silence after that. Then she had said:

"Do you want to go now?"

"Yes."

"I'll walk with you to the station. I'll tell Gran when I get back."

We had gone out to where Gran and her mother and Loo and the baby had caught the last rays of the setting sun.

"I'm going with him to the station," Anne had said.

"Will you come back, boy?"

UWI Library

"Yes, Gran," Anne had said quickly, with forced cheerfulness.

"Come back soon," they had called after me.

We had taken the long way to the station, the way round by the river. Willowy leaves, shadowy in the gloaming, had touched the face of the calm dark water. A peaceful hush had hung over the world there. And we had walked slowly, and in silence. As we had turned from the river, Anne had touched my arm and sobbed:

"I'm sorry, Peter. Sorry...."

"Please don't cry."

But she had not cried. At the station, as we waited for the train, she had looked me full in the face and smiled.

"Are you still going to do all those things we talked about?"

"Yes."

"Then it is better like this. I'm not educated like you. But it was nice to dream about. I'll remember all that and our walks."

The train pulled in.

"I'll come back if you want me to."

"No. You don't want to. Goodbye , Peter. I'll remember."

"Goodbye, Anne."

And I had tested the new creed called Marxism against the reality of my experience and the darkness of my land. And only by the Marxian theories of economics and imperialism had the racialism of the land made sense. Marxism had supplied an intelligent and reasonable explanation for the things that happened. Had it also the key to the solving of these problems?

My circle of white friends had extended. And only the Marxists had seemed wholly free of any taint of racialism in their dealings

UWI Library

with me and other non-Europeans. But I had found subtle and dangerous complications as I had moved deeper into this Marxist world. I had found two major factions: Trotskyists and Stalinists. To each, the other was the greatest enemy, greater even than the racialism of the land. I had listened to brilliant discourses about two men, one of whom preached 'permanent revolution' and the other 'revolution by stages'. And I had found a viciousness of abuse and vilification between the supporters of these two men. To each, the followers of the other were composed of beasts, morons, traitors, liars, and monsters. There was the 'Stalinist school of falsification' and the 'Trotskyist clique of counter-revolutionary traitors'. And each faction had claimed itself as the members of the one true group, the true guardians of Marxism, the true heirs of Lenin, the true vanguard of the proletarian revolution.

Though Marxism had offered a reasonable explanation of the world in which I lived, the factional But where, in this torrent of abuse and counter abuse, had I to find the allies with whom to change the world and shape it nearer to my hearts desire? And I had still to find, under the political creed, something that would take in human feeling, love and laughter, poetry and music, and the dear warmth of pure, motiveless friendship? Had Marxism any room for the compassionate humanity that pervaded the life and teaching of Christ

Thus I had, in 1938, left school and gone into the world, groping after the meaning of life. Once, to know why would have been all. I had found out why. But in finding out, I had created a new need.

Could the creed of Marxism raise all men to the full measure of a dignified humanity?

UWI Library

Early in 1938 I had been 'discovered' by the European press. Oliver Walker of the 'Daily Express' had written a feature article 'Coloured Boy Poet'. He had used some of my less 'revolutionary' poems. The face of a skinny, soulful-looking young man had stared at the whites from their papers. I had gone after a clerk-and-messenger job shortly after the feaure appeared. The white man had said:

"I know your face. You're the Coloured poet."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, we don't want you."

So my friend Harold who had wrestled on the lawn at St. Peters had taken me into his temporary trade. We had spent the nights repainting a block of city offices, and the days talking Marxism, attending meetings, and reading.

My mother and sister had grown worried about me. My new, Marxist language had disturbed Maggie's religious mind profoundly. My mother had been silent. But I had sensed her unhappiness and ~~her~~ fears for me. This new, challenging language of mine could only lead to trouble. Sooner or later my new attitude would lead to a head-on collision with the white lawmakers. She had had a harrowing dread of that. ~~Her only comment had been:~~

~~"You're going away from us, Lee...."~~

~~"No, ma."~~

~~"You are, my child. You don't see it but you are. You're not content with what your people have and are. But where will you go? Can these new friends of yours take the place of your people. And noone can live without God, my child. These friends of yours are strange people. I don't think they are good. I don't think you'll~~

UWI Library

stay with them long."

"They want us to be free. They want all Coloureds and blacks and all other people to be free, ma."

"Yes. But freedom cannot come out of hate."

"They hate what is wrong and evil, ma. You cannot fight against something without hating it."

"You can fight for something, my child. And you can do that without hate. But you must go your way, my child. I will not try to stop you. I will pray for you. You've come this far by yourself. Perhaps God will help you to get what you want. But whatever you want, child, try to remember love is cleaner than hate. That was something your father always said. There now...."

Yes, love is cleaner than hate....But was Marxism a creed of hate? 'Stalinist beats': 'Trotskyist swine'. The world is divided into two classes. The Internationale unites the human race. Racialism and colour prejudice is one of the by-products of Imperialism. The violent overthrowing of the capitalist society. We preach a new morality. Religion is the opium of the people. All means justify the ends. We have nothing to lose except our chains. We have a world to wing. The Soviet Union can never be wrong. Stalin's Russia has betrayed the revolution. Come the revolution and I'll get even with that swine! The revolution. Tell me, comrade what would happen to the artist? Come the revolution and the artist would enter into his own. He would write for the people, for the revolution. Would he be able to advocate change, comrade? The intellectuals are not as reliable as the proletariat. Their loyalty to bourgeois culture dies hard. Any counter-revolutionary activity will not be tolerated. Come the revolution.

UWI Library

I turned away from the patch of moonlight on the wall. It had shifted and narrowed to a sharp point. I got out of bed and went to the window. A bright, reddish-yellow light was creeping into the sky from the east. The weeks of painting offices had got me used to staying awake all night and sleeping by day. Anyway, it would soon be daylight. Next door, and in the other room, they were all sleeping. Lucky people. I went back to the bed. I got in and turned my back to the wall of light. What would Harold and Cath say if they found out about tonight? Cath and Jane are sisters. Jane says they know. Do they? And what would they say?

It had been saddening. It had left a heavy load of depression on my mind. It should have been different, an act of love and dedication, an act of beauty. It had been without beauty and she had not seen that. Spender echoed through my drowsing mind.

> For I had expected always
> Some brightness to hold in trust,
> Some final innocence
> To save from dust;
> that, hanging solid,
> Would dangle through all
> Like the created poem
> Or the dazzling crystal.

And it had been without beauty. I closed my eyes....

"Peter! Wake up, Peter! Here's a cup of tea."

I rolled onto my back. Jane, dressed and ready to go to work, stood over me with a steaming cup of tea. The early morning sun streamed into the room with dazzling brightness.

"Hello."

"'Morning sleepy woolly head. Drink this and then you can go off again. I'm a working woman."

UWI Library

I took the tea.

"You all right?"

"Of course. ~~Are you~~ Still worrying?" She ran her ~~hand~~ fingers through my woolly mop. "Wish I had your curls."

"Tell that to Coloured girls. They want theirs straight."

"And we pay to curl ours....I must go. See you tonight. Wish you could come and meet me. Oh damn! I'm sorry. This stupid set-up maddens me. I can't go anywhere with you. See you tonight."

She went out. I tried to sleep again but could not. ~~I thought about Jane.~~ she was right. I would not be able to take her anywhere, not even on quiet walks. For us just to be seen together would bring disaster. It was bad enough when Harold and I travelled together. Still, better not think of that now. A lovely girl. Must have been my fault that last night had fallen flat. ~~Trouble with you Peter is you're a romantic idealist. You're a dreamer. You prefer the dream to the reality. You will not allow for the inevitable gap between the dream and the reality. Last night was your fault really.~~ But she said she'd been seduced a long time ago. By whom? And had she been willing? A man wants to offer himself cleanly to the woman of his choice. He wants to say: Here, ~~dear choice of my heart~~, take all my heart and all the untouched purity of it. This is the best I have to offer. And he wants to hear her say: And here is mine, as purely untouched as yours and all for you....~~There you go again with your dreams. You're full of bourgeois romantic illusions about love. A myth and a mystery. But who had seduced her? And had she been willing?~~

I heard Cath and Harold in the kitchen. I got up, went to the bathroom, and then dressed. I went to the kitchen. Cath was

UWI Library

feeding the baby. Harold, in dressing-gown, prepared toast.

"Good morning," I said.

"'Morning, Peter," they said.

The flaxen-haired, blue-eyed, little girl opened her arms to me. I hugged her.

"Good night?" Harold said gruffly.

"Rather restless," I said.

I intercepted a look between them. Jane was right. They knew.

After breakfast, Cath and the child went out. On the point of going, she touched my shoulder.

"I'm for you, Peter. You know that."

Yes, they knew.

It came out into the open as Harold and I washed up.

"Peter...."

"Yes?"

"Anything between you and Jane?"

"Yes...."

"We've seen it brewing. Talk about it last night?"

"Yes."

He embraced me with gruff affection then turned away.

"I want you to know we think you're good enough for anybody."

"Thanks. Last night, Harold...."

"You went the whole way."

"Yes."

"Serious?"

"I think so."

"Jane's a nice kid, but there are problems. I don't mean about that. She knows how to cope. I mean political problems."

UWI Library

~~"I know."~~

~~"She hasn't our experience there and I don't want you to get hurt."~~

"I'll be alright."

"I know you will, Peter....Funny thing about women. Really, we shouldn't have this baby, but there you are. The ideal thing would be to do without them. For you more than me. You're not likely to find a woman as developed as yourself among your own people. That's why I say I couldn't marry a non-European myself. It isn't colour but the level of development. You're in the same situation. And for you it's a dilemma. In the present set-up your society is not likely to throw up many women who could be your intellectual companions as well as your bed companions. And there isn't much of an alternative, is there? Not in this country. But as I said, we're with you. You're good enough for anybody."

Here at least, with these two friends of mine who were Marxist the creed had measured up to reality. They had said colour was an artificial barrier. Now, though not deliberately, I had tested this belief and found them true to it. Was the Marxian creed then the true creed? If it could make people acknowledge my humanity so completely, without any reservations, why was it also charge with such strong factional hatreds?

Harold went out later to see about a job. This was a white suburb of Johannesburg so it was safest for me to stay indoors. There was a fine collection of books, most of Gollancz's Left Book Club editions. I had cigarettes, paper and pencil. I read and wrote.

For two weeks Jane and I spent evenings together. ~~We could~~

UWI Library

go nowhere together without great risks. So we read and talked and listened to records. During the day Harold went his way and I went mine, each ~~of us~~ hunting for jobs. At last he got a job as ~~foreman~~ supervisor to a gang of native builders. He hated it but there was no money in the house other than the little Jane brought. My job hunt proved utterly hopeless.

On rare occasions Jane and I went to the homes of other comrades. She did not like these outings because we had to travel like strangers till we reached our destination. And these visits usually turned into serious political meetings. But these, and the political meetings were, the only outings on which we could venture together. Harold and Cath looked on helplessly as our frustration grew. No theoretic analysis, however sound, could help us now. We grew irritable with each other, quarrelled, made up, and quarrelled again. We grew desperate. I told her to go out by herself and quarrelled with her for doing so. The end came as we sat alone one night.

"It's no good!" she cried suddenly. "Perhaps I don't understand your poet's temperament. I want fun even if we can't go out together. You're always tense and anxious. It's getting on my nerves. I don't think it's any good, Peter. I'm sorry but it just isn't."

"We can get away from here."

"That's silly. We haven't a penny."

"You're right. So...."

"So I'm calling it off, ~~Peter~~. There are mixed couples who manage in the Cape. Perhaps they're different from us."

UWH Library

"We could go there and try."

"It's no good."

"Don't you love me any more?"

"That's another thing. Love's so important to you. It even interferes with your having fun. I just can't. I'm sorry."

"Alright, Jane."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that!"

She left me and I sat alone. Really, I had been waiting for this, dreading it. There could be no other end. ~~except this.~~ What I had expected on that first night had not come, But even if it had, the end would still have been this, still the same. This end had been inevitable long before the beginning. Spender had it.

What I had not foreseen
Was the gradual day
Weakening the will
Leaking the brightness away,
The lack of good to touch
The fading of body and soul
Like smoke before wind
Corrupt, unsubstantial.

I was glad the end had come, glad with a desperately aching heart.

When Harold came in later that night, I said:

"I'm going."

"Going? Where?"

"I think I'll try and get down to the Cape. It may be easier to get a job there."

"Jane?"

"Not only that."

"But it is ended?"

"Yes. It is ended."

"You sound almost cheerful. I'll write to the comrades in the

UWI Library

Cape. They'll help."

"No....Alright. But give me the letter. It may take time to get there."

I loved my friends, Cath and Harold, but I had had enough of their particular brand of Marxism. I did not want to step into the same setting down in the Cape. I need not deliver the letter.

"We'll miss you, Peter."

"I'll miss the three of you, Harold."

"And Jane?"

"I don't know."

"Don't swing from extreme softness to extreme hardness."

I looked at him soberly. Marxism aside, this man and his wife had, by the nature of their ~~relation with me,~~ friendship helped me to the point where I could look beyond the whiteness of a white man's skin and see and comprehend his humanity. I knew if I told him this he would say it was because they were Marxists. But I had met other Marxists who had been unable to do this. It had come out of their sense of humanity and their essential goodness as human beings. ~~Marxism or no.~~

"I want you to know how I feel about you and Cath...." I choked on the words.

My friend nodded.

"We feel the same about you, laddie."

2.

I went to Max Gordon's office the next morning. Gordon had built up a black trade union movement ~~among the black workers on~~ on the Rand. Blacks were not allowed in white unions. Black unions were

UWI Library

not recognised by the State, the white unions, or the agencies of the employers. There had been black unions on the Rand before Gordon's time. The most famous of these had been Clement Kadalie's Industrial and Commercial ~~Workers'~~ Union. But these ~~unions~~ had been, for the most part, little more than movements of political protest, with little, if any, genuine trade union content. Indeed, the members of these unions saw very little, if anything at all, for their subscriptions. The communists, too, had had a hand in Rand trade unionism among the blacks.

But it was not till Max Gordon appeared on the Rand that black trade unions were formed that really served the interests of their members and/that were run on businesslike trade union lines. Nominally, Gordon was a Trotskyist, but his determined refusal to turn his unions into part of the Left faction fight made him unpopular with the majority of his comrades. The African workers, on the other hand, trusted him ~~completely~~. Gordon trained a number of African trade unionists. Among the most outstanding black unionists workin with Gordon were Gana Makabeni, an ex-communist, Dan Koza who had been a fellow student of mine at Grace Dieu, and D. Gosani. That year, 1938, Gordon had formed a Joint Committee of native trade unions and was again trying to get recognition for his unions.

~~Native trade unionism on the Rand owes much to Max Gordon.~~

In person, Gordon was a small, cheerful, fresh-faced young man with a quiet, casual manner and a sunny, crooked grin that suddenly made him appear shy.

I went into the basement in Commissioner Street from where Gordon ran his unions. Part of the big room had been partitioned into little cubicles. Gordon and his assistants occupied a cubicl

UWI Library

each. Rows of benches covered the rest of the room. And on the benches sat the black workers of the city, waiting to see their leaders and tell them of their problems. Others were unemployed and sat patiently waiting for Gordon's phone to ring. When it did, they looked up hopefully. And if Gordon came out of his little cubicle after a phone call, they grew tense. ~~Who would it be? Or would it be more than one?~~

I passed among the waiting workers and went into Gordon's cubicle. He was dealing with two men. ~~He looked up. The crooked grin creased his face.~~

"Ah, Peter."

"Hello Max."

"Sit down. There's material here for a story for you."

He turned back to the two workers. I sat in a corner and listened. The phone rang. He picked it up.

"Yes? Yes. Yes....I can do that. How many? Four dyers. I'll send them over straight away. Yes. You know our members are good. Oh, I say....Yes....No....There is this question of a raise. You know the rest of the trade's accepted this threpenny raise?.... Yes....Well, have it as you wish. But I would say you need them as much as they need you....Of course not. I don't want to threaten. But it's my business to look after their interests and I'm sure they'll go on leaving for a job where they get a little more. It is in your own interest in the long run to have your workers satisfied ....Well, can you blame them? Could you live on half of that?.... No....But you'll have trouble with your workers till you do, you know. You must realise they're getting organised now....Not a threat. A fact....Well now....Really....Wouldn't you say relations

UWI Library

and their work's been better since you've had the union to deal with....Well, I tell you all the others have accepted it as reasonable....You know it's reasonable....Yes....They are human, you know....Yes....N....No, I can't make any promise like that.... Now that sounds fair. Good....Good!....I'm glad you're seeing it. It really is the best way....Yes, I'll come down and we'll tell the workers together that you've agreed on this....Alright.... Yes....Yes, I'll send the four straight away. And believe me, I think you're being sensible. We don't want strikes if we can help it....Yes....You must admit our demands have been reasonable.... Right. Goodbye...."

He put down the phone and sat beaming for a while. Tall Dan Koza came in.

"I say, Max...."

"I've got it, Koza! The whole trade. We'll draft a new agreement."

"Your threpence?"

"Yes! And improved conditions!"

The two trade unionists, the black and the white, laughed with the joyous gaiety of boys who had won a great prize.

"We'll get recognition yet, comrades!"

Then they went back to work. The moment's happiness gave way to the problems to be solved, to the workers whose stories had to be heard, to the letters that had to be written.

And all through the morning, and well into the afternoon, I sat in my corner watching and listening. The picture was absorbing. Here, a new social and political consciousness was in the making. The black man of the past, the peasant, was being turned into a

UWI Library

townsman, a modern man who was part and parcel of the highly industrialised world of the present.

On a different mental and emotional level, my friend Jonathan had gone through the same process. Christianity and the knowledge it brought had made the tribal past inadequate. So he had turned to the Christian present and future. These working men had found the tribal economy inadequate when the new taxes, the new offerings and new prices of the white men came. So they had turned to the city, which is the industrialised Christian present, for work.

Both the working man and my friend Jonathan had found the good things of this present

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This became clear to me as I sat in my corner and listened while men talked and listened to Gordon explaining. Really, whatever shape and pattern the problem may take later, now it was the same for all who were not white.

We left the office late in the afternoon and walked to Gordon's flat. As we climbed the stairs to his modest home, he sighed tiredly and said:

"One day, a vigorous and strong native trade union movement will grow up. None of the government's prohibitions and restriction and arrests will count for anything then. And that movement is going to play a key part in the political emancipation of all non-whites. So, for the present, I ask for a threepenny rise, for a recognised and proper lunch hour, and for decent and safe condition of work. It's a small beginning, but it's a beginning. That's what was wrong with earlier efforts. They didn't know how to start.

They failed to lay sound foundations and personal jealousies wrecked the movements. I think we're laying the right base now. And each little gain will give the workers confidence in themselves, each small rise will make them realise their own strength, and their instrument of struggle...."

"Y-e-e-s-s, Comrade Max," I said heavily.

"Go to hell!" he snapped, and punched me in the back. Then the shy, crooked smile made his face very boyish. "Sorry, but I've sweated for that threpence."

We entered the flat. Max went into the kitchen and prepared a bread-and-cheese-and-salad-and-coffee lunch. I cleared the table in his bed-sitting room.

"Oh, Peter. I nearly forgot...."

"What?"

"Zena rang my office and asked for you. Wants you to phone her."

I stiffened.

"Tell you what about?"

"No. She only said it was important. Sounded funny. Anything wrong?"

"No."

"Now you're sounding funny."

He poked his head through the door and looked at me.

"There's nothing wrong, Max."

"As you wish.... You know friends are there to help."

"I'd tell you if anything was wrong."

"You're a bad liar so shut up."

He went back. After a while I said:

"What's her number?"

UWI Library

"It's on the pad."

I found the number and rang. She answered the phone herself.

"Hello. Peter here."

~~"Peter?"~~

~~"Abrahams."~~

~~"Oh....Oh yes....~~"I gave up hope of your call. I rang Max yesterday because I didn't know how else to reach you....I want to explain about yesterday morning...."

~~She was choking on each spurt of words.~~

"I understand, Zena."

"Please...."

"Honestly, I really do. There's no need to explain."

"I must....And you're making it terrible for me...."

"But I tell you...."

"Please listen to me, Peter. I must. Please...."

"Alright."

"The man you saw me with yesterday morning is stinkingly rich and just as prejudiced....He'd just been telling me how over-sexed all blacks are supposed to be....How angry he got with white women who behaved....Well, you know all about it....

"Yes."

"The point is, Peter, he can give me a job I want. A well-paying job....And then, as we left the coffee place we passed you. Do you see?...."

"Yes, I see."

"He's a Jew, Peter, like me, and he's more prejudiced than any Boer I know. It makes me sick. And then I had to meet you and pass you as though I didn't know you. I've been feeling sick ever since."

UWI Library

Behind me, Max put the food on the table. Then he returned to the kitchen. How could I ease the pain in this woman's voice?

"Zena, I know many more Jews who aren't prejudiced. And I know Coloureds who are prejudiced, and blacks."

"But I had to pass you."

~~"I understand."~~

~~"I don't want your Marxist understanding!"~~

"It could have happened to anyone."

"But it happened to you and me. And I was the gutless one."

"It's over...."

Max brought in the coffee, sat down, and began to eat. I felt him looking at me ~~but~~ and turned my back to him. ~~In my mind's eyes, I saw the cool, round-faced young woman with the perfect, model's figure, and the blonde hair pulled tight over her scalp and tied in a bun at the nape of her neck. Her coldly clinical voice and humorous cynicism had always intrigued me. when I had met her and spoken to her in 'safe' company. She was of the Left but disillusioned with groups and parties. I had never thought her capable of showing the depths of feeling her voice had carried to me over the phone.~~

~~"It's over," I repeated weakly.~~

"Peter, please, will you come and see me....Will you come tonight? Please...."

"Yes."

She gave me her address. ~~Then I rang off and joined Max.~~ and rang off. I joined

"A most illuminating conversation. All yesses, noes and I-sees.

"You know, Max. This country does mess people up badly."

He looked at me in mock horror.

UWL Library

"How bloody profound!"

"Stop it!"

"Seriously. Are you in love?"

"No. I was. But that ended last night."

"Zena?"

"Of course not. Jane."

"What's the trouble with Zena? Colour?"

"Could be."

"Thought it was about the only thing that could get her quite as upset. She has a good man, you know." His eyes went impish ~~and~~ my mocking.

I cheered up.

"Stop being foolish. I know her man and like him. I'm seeing her tonight."

In a flash, Gordon was in deadly ernest.

"One of those street scenes of no recognition, heh....Don't be hard on her, Pete. She's a good woman....Really, of course, real friendship between black and white is impossible in this country. You know that."

I had not thought about it. But, thinking ~~about~~ it then, I ~~know~~ realized he was right. Real friendship, friendship that had the creative force of building up wider areas of understanding, was impossible between black and white in ~~my~~ our country. The precondition, freedom of association, did not exist. Those whites who associated ~~with~~ openly with blacks, were foredoomed to social and ~~quite often~~ economic disaster. It needed courage on the level of near-martyrdom for even a communist white to associate personally, on the level of ~~pure~~ friendship, with a black.

UWI Library

"Max!"

He drained his coffee cup then looked at me.

"Well?"

"I want to get out of here. I want to go down to the Cape. I'm feeling choked."

"Good idea. It'll help for a while."

"It might help for good."

81 "Don't be a bloody fool. You know, and I know, that there's no room for you here. Who wants a writer? The whites? Sure if you'll be a performing monkey and tell them how happy you are with your lot. The blacks? They've no time for reading. Most of them can't. And those who can are concerned with improving their miserable lot, not with reading poetry. You could become a propagandist but you are too much of a bloody artist for that. You'll never be satisfied with being only a propagandist. You look at too many sides of a question. And it'll get worse as you develop. So what's left? Nothing. Nobody wants you, or, at least, even if those who do don't know it. Who's going to buy what you write and give you a chance to eat?"

"Allright. So black writers are unwanted. I still want to go to the Cape."

"I'm not saying they're unwanted. The facts say that. The facts say a man must eat or he dies. The facts say there is no future for you here. You've known it in your heart all along. Keep to your plan and get out of here. You may, as a writer, exert an influence on events from afar if you succeed. You can do damn all from here."

UWI Library

"That's better." I'll write to Goolam Gool in Cape Town. He's a doctor. He's got a big house. He's been to Europe. He's Trotskyist. Don't see why he shouldn't help. At least you can have proper food for a few weeks. When do you go?"

"Stop pretending you're such a tough bastard. You'll want to show me the hair on your chest next."

"Shut up and tell me when you're going."

"When I can raise the fare."

"Ha! That'll mean next year!"

"To hell with you! If I didn't know you I'd say you're a prejudiced sod."

"You can't go back to the market, old boy." His mood changed. "Seriously. I'm flat."

"I think I'll make it in a day or two."

"I'll write to Gool tonight. It should be a break for you and I don't see why he shouldn't give you a hand."

"Thanks, Max."

"Wish I could do more....Now I've got swot up some industrial law. Got a case coming up. Want to stay?"

"No."

We washed up the dirty crocks, then Max went to his books and I went to the door.

"See you before I leave, Max."

"Yes. I've got to give you Gool's address....You know I'm right about your getting out...."

"Yes. I know."

"See you then. Say hello to Zena for me. And be easy."

"So long, Max."

UWI Library

The sun was going down, but the world was still bathed in light. It would be better to wait till dark so that neighbours could not see the black boy going in by the front door of the big house that stood in it's own ground where Zena ~~stayed~~ lived with her ~~progressive friends~~.

I walked across town to Maggie's. I had seen progressively less of my sister in the last two years. And when we met, there had been the restraint of suppressed misunderstanding between us. She was deeply religious in the way all the Coloured people of the Rand ~~were~~ are. They did not understand what went into the making of the world in which they lived, so they leaned heavily on ~~the~~ 'The will of God'. 'The Will of God' explained everything. The American poet, Stirling Brown, had caught it:

> Mammy
> With deep religion
> Defeating the grief
> Life piled so closely about her.

And because I had read books on communism, my sister had decide I was against religion and therefore a communist. My attempts to explain that everything was not due to 'The will of God' had only led to further misunderstanding. But though we had often quarrelled the strong love between us had prevented the final break. And my mother had always been the great peace-maker ~~between us~~. For my mother had kept step with me even when I persued the most involved Marxian twists and turns. I had often gone to her little room to talk over my mental problems and she had listened tolerantly to my most outrageous and shocking ideas. Once, after a bitter quarrel, my mother had told Maggie that God had made people different, that

UWL Library

he had made some with minds that had to question everything, and surely, having made them thus, He would not turn against them for being the way he had made them. That had brought peace.

Now that I had made up my mind to go away, I wanted to make peace with my sister. I wanted to clear away the misunderstanding and recapture ~~that~~ the old ~~bond of~~ warmth that had been between us. ~~that had been such a strong force in my life.~~

Maggie was at the back, washing. I made her a cup of tea. Then I took a chair out and sat near her in the gathering dusk.

"Mag...."

"Yes, Lee?"

"I've decided to go to the Cape. Things may be better there."

"Do you know what you want now?"

"I think so."

"Do you really understand the things you wanted to understand?"

"The important ones."

She watched me for a while then nodded.

"You know, I really think you do. Is it this communism?"

"I couldn't have understood what I wanted to without understanding that. Want to listen? I'll try and explain."

"Yes....If you don't say anything against God."

"You know, I really never have, but let's not start that now. You know, Mag, I wanted to understand <u>why</u> the whites treated the non-Europeans as they did. That was the most important thing in the world to me. Nobody could or would explain it until these Marxists did it for me. Once I understood that, I could think out so many things for myself. I could even begin to think about life and about the hearts and minds of people. And that is important for a writer. Why, I could even think about whites being unhappy and hurt and

UWI Library

miserable and crying."

"I could have told you about whites being unhappy and crying without reading all those books."

"Yes, Mag. But would you see it in the same way as you would see mother crying? Would you feel and understand it in the same way?"

Maggie stopped washing and turned to me. She stared hard at me, then said:

"Help me take these things in. It's getting dark."

We carried the tub and the rest of the washing in. She poured two more cups of tea.

"Well now. Let's sit down. Now let's see. Ma is our mother. She has gone through a lot for you and me. When she cries it is something special for me and for you. When another Coloured person cries we may feel sorry but it is somebody else crying, not our mother. So I cannot feel the same...."

"And when a white person cries?"

"Do they care about us crying? I don't understand you, Lee...."

"I'm not on their side. But listen for a minute. When a Coloured person cries you don't feel the same about it as when it is our mother. But because you know how you feel when it is our mother, and if you know the reason for their crying, you understand because they are Coloured like our mother, and because you know how you feel when our mother cries. "

"I think so....Yes. Yes!"

"But you don't have the same understanding when a white person cries. Because that person is white, not like us, and because of all the things they deny us, you, and all of us, do not have the

UWI Library

same understanding as when one of our own is crying."

"But they are different. And they have everything."

"Yes. But supposing they were not."

"You mean supposing they were just like all Coloured people? And no colour-bar or anything?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't know. That would make the whole world different

"That's it. You may even have friends among them. Go out with them, laugh and play with them, and get to know them as well as you know Rachel Fox. You'd understand their crying then, wouldn't you?"

"I think so....But where are you getting, Lee?"

"To this. Just as you cannot understand them, so they cannot understand you. The laws of the country make it impossible. So you look on them as Europeans who have everything because they are white, and you and all the non-Europeans resent them having everything while you have nothing. They, in turn, look on you with fear because they know your resentment. They refuse to understand your tears in the same way as they understand their own: and you cannot see their tears as you would see the tears of your own. That means the colour-bar of our country makes it impossible for whites to understand the humanness of you or mother. A white mother who loves her children with all her heart, cannot understand the tender heart of our mother because her skin is not white. That leads to hardness and bitterness and fear on both sides, Mag. It's taken me many years to learn that, ~~Mag~~. Not much, is it?"

"Then what can be done, Lee?"

"A white man who is working hard to help the blacks told me,

UWI Library

today that friendship is impossible between black and white in this country. That is true. And it is wrong. Things are going to happen that will make the non-Europeans want to change their country so that there are no more colour-bar. The whites are not going to let them do it without fighting. So I think there'll be fighting and trouble. I want this change to come. I would like it to come without trouble. But I think there will be trouble. I want to try and write books about our country that will show how a white mother cannot understand the tender heart of a black mother and how a black mother cannot understand the tender heart of a white mother. And perhaps, if I succeed, people will understand and there may be a possibility of understanding and friendship after the trouble.

"We have a beautiful land, Mag. It could be a rich and happy land for white and black alike. ~~You see, Mag,~~ I have found out that in their minds, the whites are as unfree, if not more unfree, than we are."

"Why is it so important to you, Lee?"

"Because I love you and because I love ma and because I was born here and I love this land and because I'm angry that I have to leave you and ma to find my humanity."

"Humanity....You like that word, Lee."

"I'm leaving to find out what it really means, Mag. And so many other things; to seek for the meaning of life. England's so far away. It's almost mad, but I must try. I may not see things as clearly again if I stay here."

"But you said the Cape."

"I'll try to get on a ship from there."

UWH Library

"Oh Lee....Will we ever see you again?"

Darkness had invaded the room and we saw each other as shadows. But we were happy. The misunderstanding was gone.

"I'll come back one day....If I ever get away."

"Ma says you're the kind that can do anything you set your heart on."

"Ma thinks me a miracle worker."

"No. Just a stubborn mule like your father! He never knew when he was beaten."

We turned to the quiet voice. She was like a frail shadow in the doorway.

"Ma!" Maggie cried.

"Hello children. Why the darkness?"

"We've been talking. Lee's going away. To England."

"If I can."

"You will."

She came to me. I put my arm round her small waist. I pulled her to me. Mother!

"We'll miss you, my child," she said softly.

"You understand I must go, ma...."

"I understand. And your searching?"

"I must begin again, ma."

"Go over the same things?"

"Yes. But with new eyes."

"Then nothing is settled in your mind?"

"A few things."

"I mean believing in one sort of politics."

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"No, ma."

"I'm glad. I don't think it ever will be settled now. You are too interested in people and what you call the meaning of life."

"But I do want freedom for all people."

"That, yes."

Maggie moved to her light switch.

"Not yet, Mag," I said.

I wanted to keep this moment in the dark kitchen, to nurse it for a while longer. Mag came to us. I put my free arm round her ample waist. With my two women on either side of me, I turned to the window and looked out on the darkness. This moment of love may have to last a long time. A lifetime perhaps....Hold it for a while, Peter. Hold it. You may never see these beloved faces again. Hold the moment. I will come back. Yes, but hold the moment in case.... You've been lucky, Peter, very lucky. First, the typist at the smithy. Then Visser. The redhead at the market. Canon Woodfield. Fezile Teka. Harold and his wife. Zena. Max Gordon. People of all ~~creeds~~ colours and beliefs have helped you to a sense of humanity: have nursed your dream along. That's what you call luck, Peter. You owe these people something. When you get to the place where you are going, sit down and tell of these people who gave you light in a dark land. And remember the two humble, almost illiberate, women whose love was pure and true. Remember your mother and your sister, Peter. Tell of them. Of how they were the making of you as you sought your way through a dark land. And pay them homage....

~~Though I spent another year of adventure before I got~~

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[2]

Zena opened the door. ~~When she saw me, she~~ clung to it ~~for support. Her face went white. She shook.~~

"Hello, Zena."

"Peter....Oh Peter!"

~~She came to me for comfort. I put my arm about her. Her body shook with sobs.~~

"It's alright, my dear." ~~It's alright.~~

I closed the door. We went into a small, soothing, green room. A small table was laid for two.

I had been wrong about one important thing. I had not thought about the other side of the penny. The racialism of our land did not only hurt those who were not white. Basically, it hurt all of us, black and white alike. I would have to remember that, always. This deep, overflowing hurt of Zena's was the other side of the penny. And, really, her hurt was greater than mine. Whatever it had done to me, and other blacks, racialism had never driven us to this brand of shame and guilt that verged on self-hate. The sensitive, unprejudiced whites of our land walked a dangerous emotional tightrope. And the non-whites rarely understand it.

~~I comforted her as best I could. When she finally smiled, I felt greatly rewarded.~~

We ate. Then we sat in the sheltered moonlit garden with a glass of beer each. We did not talk much but we got as near understanding each other ~~as human beings~~ as I have known white and non-white get in our land. We both knew the corroding influence of the laws of our land could destroy this understanding ~~of our~~ if we met daily. But I was leaving. Normal friendship was not

UWI Library

possible, so it was best that I ~~left~~ leave on this high note of understanding. And it was good ~~that I left~~ to leave ~~that~~ the strange and harsh city in which I was born with the knowledge that the white girl beside me had suffered ~~as~~ grievously from the colour-bar as I had done ~~myself.~~ The knowledge ~~was~~ has sadly, but hopefully, comforting. The other side of the penny....

"When do you leave?" she said at last.

"I'll try and raise the fare tomorrow. I'm selling some of my books and/my typewriter."

"Oh....Now listen to me, please....I've got that damned job. The wage is stupidly high. I'll have more money than I need. I've only a few pounds now, but please take them. I'd feel so much better about the job. Please. Keep your typewriter and write that book. Please say you'll take it! Dedicate that book to me and I'll be more than paid. Yes!...?"

"You may wait a long while."

"I'll wait for it. You'll take the money?"

"Yes. You'll get your book."

"I know I will!"

"You and my mother!"

"She must be a fine person."

~~"I think so. And so are you.!' And dear Ma."~~

When I left, her man thanked me silently for Zena's new cheerfulness. I felt good....The other side of the penny....

UWI Library

TWO

1.

I reached Cape Town on a dull and misty morning. The journey down had taken ~~me~~ a week. I had started it with ~~my railway ticket, letters of introduction from Harold and Max Gordon, and~~ three pounds, in my pocket. I had got off the train twice. Once in the Orange Free State, and once on the borders of the Cape Province. I had spent four days moving from one ~~Coloured or Native~~ village to the next. I had built up a picture of non-European life. But for slight differences of detail, the picture had been the same as in the Transvaal. Everywhere, I had found the great majority of the people living in poverty and hunger, in sickness and misery, in shanty homes and with uncertainty and fear for companion. As I had neared the Cape border, I had noticed the numerical increase of Coloureds over ~~Natives~~ Africans. ~~The Cape is the home of the Coloureds, and they form half the total population.~~

When my three pounds were spent ~~in paying for food and a place to sleep at each village,~~ I had gone back to the railway line and continued my ~~broken~~ journey. Now I was in Cape Town.

I was tired, and terribly hungry. I had lived on cups of tea since I had left the last village a day and a half back. I had one and ~~tuppence~~ threepence in my pocket but I wanted to hold on to that till I was sure of the morrow. I booked my suitcase with 'Baggage' and went to look for a telephone. Gool. Gool. Dr. Goolam Gool. I found the number and phoned. The phone ~~rang. It~~ kept ~~on~~ ringing. I held it for ten minutes but no-one answered. ~~Oh God.~~ My stomach rumbled with hunger. What now? I put down the receiver, pressed the wrong button, and lost my tuppence. Only a shilling left now, and

UWC Library

I had made no contact and knew no-one. Better nurse the shilling in case Gool does not appear.

I left the phone box and went out of the station. A fine, invisible sheet of misty wet permeated the atmosphere. My clothes felt slightly damp. All about me, Coloureds moved. There were two or three of them for every black or white person I saw. I watched a bus go by. It was filled with Coloureds. They sat everywhere, upstairs and down. The racial line was not as rigid here as in the Transvaal and Free State.

I crossed the Parade ground and walked in the direction of District Six, the big Coloured slum area. I passed the old Fort that the first white settlers under Jan Van Riebeck had built. Table Mountain loomed over the town, as though in everybody's backyard. Its top was completely hidden in a white cloud - the traditional tablecloth.

District Six is on a steeply sloping hill. At the foot of the hill, on the edge of the District, I saw a nondescript cafe: neither clean nor dirty; the kind the poorer whites frequented in Johannesburg. My stomach rumbled again. I was slightly light-headed....Better have a cup of tea....

I waited till I saw a Coloured man go in. I followed him. A fat, cheerful, big-bellied Greek welcomed me with a large smile. . The cheapest food on the menu was sausages and mashed potatoes at one and six a portion. I wondered if I dared ask for a half portion. The Greek came to me.

"What'll it be?"

I stared blankly.

"Oh....Waiting for someone?"

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He seemed friendly and interested.

"Yes. Hope my friend knows I arrive today."

"New here?....Where you from?"

"Johannesburg."

"Long way. Been there myself once. Business too sharp. Cuppa tea while you wait?"

"Yes, please."

He went away and came back with the tea.

"Why not ring your friend?"

"I did. No answer."

"Don't worry. He'll come back. Stay here a while. Ring later on my phone. You know nobody else?"

An idea stirred in my brain. ~~Might as well try it, laddie.~~

"~~Can~~ May I use your phone?"

"Sure thing. I get your number if you like."

"Thanks. I want 'The Cape Standard'."

"I get it for you. Mr. Manuel comes here sometimes. Fine writer, Mr. Manuel....Something to eat?"

"No."

"Ah, go on! We can settle later."

"I don't know Mr. Manuel."

"I send it over and we settle later. Alright?"

"Thank you, Mister...."

"Fatty. Everyone call me Fatty. No Mister, heh."

"Thanks, Fatty. I'm Peter."

"Fine. I get the 'Standard' and send the food. What you have?"

"Sausages and mash."

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"Best in town!"

A haggard young woman who might have been Greek, or pale Coloured, brought me the sausages and mashed potatoes. I was halfway through the meal when Fatty called me.

"Your call. I think it's Mr. Manuel."

I took the phone. Fatty waved his arms at someone. The voice at the other end said:

"Hello? Hello?"

"My name is Peter Abrahams. I wonder...."

"What name?"

"Peter Abrahams."

"The poet?"

"Yes."

"Hello, Mr. Abrahams. I'm Manuel, assistant Editor. Why didn't you let us know you were coming. I could've...."

"I've just arrived. I'm supposed to stay with Dr. Gool but I can't get him on the phone. I wonder if...."

"Where are you?"

I turned to Fatty.

"Where am I?"

"I tell him." He took the phone from me. "This is Fatty, Mr. Manuel. You know my café....Yes....Yes....I'll make him very comfortable....Goodbye." Fatty put down the receiver and beamed at me. "Mr. Manuel comes....Yes, I was right. You learn to know people in my trade. When I see you, I say to myself: That one is different. It is in the way he looks at people and things. It is in the eyes. You learn these things in my trade....The girl keeps your food warm. Now she brings it....Mr. Manuel says you're a big

UWI Library

writing man, a poet."

"I'm broke."

"What the hell! Money ain't everything."

I felt cheerful suddenly. The prospects were much ~~more cheer-~~ lighter ~~ful~~ now. Manuel would soon be here, and he would help. I grinned.

"You'll never get rich if you think like that."

"What the hell again! I do my business; I make a little; I have my friends and I eat a lot: I'm fat and happy. I laugh a lot. My name is Fatty. Money ain't everything."

"It is when you're broke."

"You think it is, but it never is. One day I will tell you of the Greek poet who lived in my village when I was a boy. He sang a song about the happiness that you cannot buy....Here's your food. Now you eat. One day I will tell you of that poet...."

I went back to my table and finished my meal. Manuel arrived soon afterwards.

He was a big, copper-brown young man whose present bulk gave warning that he would be as fat, if not fatter, than Fatty in a few years' time. He stood a head higher than the tall Greek.

"I've heard so much about you, Mr. Abrahams. I'm glad to meet you. Welcome to Cape Town."

"You'll never know how glad I am to meet you , Mr. Manuel!"

So this was the man who, under the pen-name 'Gemel', had turned out the finest pieces of journalism yet done by any Coloured South African.

We talked about writing, and about the only two Coloured newspapers in the ~~whole~~ country. He made notes for a profile of me. We had tea and cakes. He paid Fatty for all I had eaten.

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As we left, Fatty touched my arm:

"Come back, my friend. Come even when you are broke. You can always pay another time. Money ain't everything. And I want to tell you of that poet in my village."

"I'll come back, Fatty."

Manuel took me to a photographer. The ghastly result of that visit appeared on the front page of the 'Standard' on the Saturday, two days later.

I phoned Gool at the photographer's. A suave, cultivated voice, answered immediately.

"Dr. Gool?"

"Y-e-s."

"Peter Abrahams here."

"Ah, yes. Gordon wrote me. Where are you?"

"Near the Parade."

"I'll pick you up in about fifteen minutes. Afraid you'll have to go with me on my afternoon rounds. ~~Y~~ Your bags?"

"One. At the station."

"Get it and I'll meet you outside the station. 'Bye."

I turned to Manuel.

"What's he like?"

"He's the leader of the young intellectuals and of the left-wing in the Liberation League....You'll find out all about that."

~~He~~ Manuel walked with me to the station, paid for my suitcase and then slipped three half-crowns into my hand.

"Sorry it's not more. You deserve more for all your stuff we've used. But they don't believe in paying writers, or me."

When Gool's car appeared Manuel left me abruptly.

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"You know where to reach me. Goodluck, Peter."

"Thanks, George."

The man who was to be my host got out of his car. He was tall and graceful; a light brown, but more Arabic and Malay and Persian than Negro had gone into that brownness. His features were sharply defined. He seemed assuredly relaxed and aloof. He wore his fine clothes with the casualness of those born to wealth. Forget his light brown skin and he could be any successful doctor or business-man anywhere in the land. I thought: This man has never gone hungry, has never known the stark misery of want and poverty. I grew worried. I had not expected this when I had accepted Max Gordon's offer. I picked up my case and moved hesitantly to him.

"A-h! Abrahams!" he beamed. "Welcome!"

The welcome in his voice was genuine. He pushed my case into the back.

"Sorry you have to go the rounds with me. But it'll show you the poverty in which the masses live. A writer needs to know that. Cigarette?"

I took a Menthol-cooled cigarette.

"I'm most grateful for your taking me in like this, Doctor...."

"Say no more; our comrades are always welcome. How's Gordon doing with his unions?....

The car purred and moved off. A white pedestrian hurried out of the way....

2.

I lay on my back and listened to the sound of the surf. The warm sun beat down on my face. I kept my eyes closed. To the left,

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on a green hillock overhanging the sea, Goolam Gool played with his wife. Not ~~very~~ much more than a year earlier, his wife had been a young woman in purdah, behind the Moslem veil. Now, she was playing in the sun in a bathing costume. But, more important to her, she was a revolutionary Marxist, rapidly becoming tough and skilled in the vicious art of Marxian Trotskyist invective. Behind them, in a sweet green hollow, Gool's sister, Jane, and her boyfriend, ~~Fabeta, an African,~~ lay quietly talking. And all about me was beauty and the eternal voice of the unending sea. Without opening my eyes, I could see the dazzling blue sky, far away - so far away that it was nothing but an eternity of space. And there, almost just behind me, almost so that I could reach up and touch it's cloud-kissed top, was Table Mountain. Cape Town had no point from which it could not be seen. ~~The mountain was in everybody's backyard.~~ What a thing to have in your backyard! And everywhere, in the nooks and crannies of the sloping land, grey-white houses lay, half-hidden by luxuriant trees. Oh the sun! And the sea! And the green! And the gold! Oh paradise! This must have been the Garden of Eden that announced the beginning of time! The beauty of this land brings an ache to the heart of a man. A man wants to say thank you for such beauty. A man needs to offer reverance and homage to the force that makes the green leaf sprout, to the force that makes his own heart ache. ~~Life. Reverence. Life and reverence....~~

Gool's sudden laughter reached me above the sound of the sea. Gool....Yes....

It was over two months since that day he had picked me up at the station. He had taken me to a lovely little house in a

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suburb of Cape Town called Wynburg, ~~It was a~~ a 'mixed' area. Coloureds and whites, ~~who could afford it,~~ lived side by side.

For me, the transition had been remarkable. I had gone into what was, in the Transvaal, a comfortable 'European' home. I had eaten regularly. ~~But more important,~~ My diet had been balanced. I had eaten, for the first time, well prepared green vegetables with each meal. The day had started with a tall glass of fruit juice. The sallowness had gone from my skin. My body had begun to fill out. My eyes had strengthened surprisingly. I had discarded the steel framed glasses Canon Woodfield had got for me at Grace Bieau.

At weekends, we had driven out to the sea. It had always been the same four people, with me as the odd one. The sun and sea and air had worked on me.

Some evenings, Goolam and I had driven into Cape Town and visited the home of his brother. The elder Gool ~~had~~ possessed all the qualities of an Eastern epicurian. He loved good food, good music, and his home was filled with things of beauty. I met a number of white artists and non-political intellectuals at his home. ~~of the elder Gool~~. I was fascinated by the grace and sophistication this man had gathered about him. I had not believed it possible for a Coloured man in our land to be as far removed from the ugly realities of life there. But then I had also believed, before coming to the Cape, that no Coloured doctor or lawyer existed in our country and that no Coloureds lived on an economic level that compared favourably with that of the majority of whites. And then I had met the Gools.

But the Gools, and the family with which they were linked by

UWI Library

marriage, the Abdurahmans, ~~//~~ were singular exceptions in the general scheme of Coloured poverty, ~~insecurity and want.~~ With the handful of Indian merchants in Natal, and the three or four African families like the Jabavus and Sogas, they formed the very small group of wealthy non-Europeans. Indeed, of the ten million non-whites of the country, no more than a dozen families knew the meaning of economic security and genuine freedom from want. ~~And the Gools were one of this small group.~~

Once, I had met Edward Roux at one of the gatherings of the elder Gool. He was tall and gaunt and there was something in his face that said the man had suffered much. I had not been able to say a word to him. For Roux had long been a hero to all non-whites, ~~but particularly the Africans,~~ who questioned the scheme of things.

Roux had sacrificed a brilliant acedamic career to work for African freedom. The wrath of white authority had broken on him. He had become a communist, had been involved in nearly all the labour and political struggles of the blacks. He had taught blacks to read and write, had organised night-schools, and worked out a basic English for black workers. Then there had been a change in the communist line. Roux had not agreed with the new line. He had been broken. His fine record of had been swept aside in the campaign to 'discredit' him among the blacks. But in this the communist party had failed. They had, however, succeeded in driving him into the social and economic wilderness. ~~//////////~~

~~On the Rand, an old black man, a one-time colleague of Roux's had told me that //////// necessity had forced Roux to driving the night carts that removed the dung from the city. I could not~~ had

~~believe this. I had heard too many legends about Roux and that one had been particularly far-fetched. But the story had stayed with me. Could the whites really be as savage as that with one of their own? And a man of fine intellectual attainments?~~

~~And~~ I had wanted to ~~ask~~ talk to Roux ~~about it~~ that night at the elder Gool's. But I had been driven to silence by the quiet sincerity and marks of suffering on the man. Instead, I had again marvelled unhappily at the ruthlessness with which the comrades seemed determined to herald in the New Future. I wanted to believe in that New Future that promised the equality and security of all men. If only they had room for pity, compassion, and mercy....If only they allowed for the human heart....

In the Transvaal I had met only one Coloured man who was interested in politics. He ~~was~~ had been a communist. The rest, the teachers artisans, casual labourers, were too busy trying to keep alive to bother about their Coloured lot. Or if they bothered, they did so in silence and in private. In the Cape, political interest was intense. The Coloureds had, subject to qualifications, the right to vote. Unlike their Transvaal and Free State brothers, they could affect local issues. Their attitude could even determine the results of a few parliamentary elections. The most popular Coloure leader in the Cape, Cissie Gool, estranged wife of the elder Gool, ~~brother~~ sat in the Cape Town City Council. Her father, Dr. Abdurahman, had had a seat in the Provincial Council. Father and daughter were in opposite political camps: the father represented the conservative leadership of old Coloured families; the daughter was the champion of the miserably poor, and the communists

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supported her. Her organisation, the National Liberation League, was thrustful and young. Coloureds from all walks of life flocked to it. At their meetings and parades they sang their anthem:

> Dark folks arise
> The long, long night is over;
> Faint in the east,
> Behold the dawn appear:
> Out of your evil dream of toil and sorrow,
> Arise ye dark folk
> For the dawn is here!

And her father's ~~body~~ group, the African Peoples Organisation, once the most famous Coloured body in the Cape, was little more than a name. It had never been popular with the mass of the ordinary Coloured people. But they had followed its lead at election times because there had been no other. Now, all were for the Liberation League.

Teachers and professional men made up the inner council of the League. And Goolam Gool was the leader of the leftwing inside the council of the League. He had behind him a group of young teachers who were the most brilliant young intellectuals in the Cape, ~~and~~ skilled in debate and public speaking. Goolam Gool's leftwing was a potent minority inside the League. Gool took his line from one of the two Trotskyist factions in Cape Town. And Cissie Gool was suspect because of her relations with some communists though she was not a communists herself. So the old Trotskyist opposition harried what they regarded as the old Stalinist betrayal. This Trotsky versus Stalin scrap/assumed at times more importance than the interests of the 'masses' who looked to the League for leadership.

Early in my stay with Gool I had been introduced to this 'inner struggle' for power. It had soon grown clear that Gool expected me to ~~join~~ join on his side in the factional fight. His sister spoke with more frankness about my becoming a 'stooge' to

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be launched against the 'Stalinist stooges'.

Things had come to a head a little later. A Coloured cultural body, The New Era Fellowship, had invited me to lecture on the prospects for the growth of non-European literature in South Africa. Some communists turned up for the lecture. At the end of my little piece, Gool phrased a question so that only one answer could be given. I refused to accept the premise of the question. After him, a Coloured communist, John Gomas, phrased another in like manner. I agreed with what he was leading up to. I answered the question and so said the things he, the communist, wanted me to say. Gool's face had flushed when I had not accepted the premise of his question as correct. Now I had answered the communist. The Stalinists had scored over the Trotskyists! The rights and wrongs of the question were unimportant beside this fact. Really, what I had been trying to say was unimportant except where it endorsed one line or the other. Yet both Gool and Gomas were bitterly opposed to racialism, and both were sincere and honest in their strivings for non-European emancipation. And each was all that was untruthworthy to the other. Labels had conquered the men....

85

Again Gools laughing voice cut into my thoughts. And the sea was about me, and the ~~limitless~~ sky above. The sun had travelled far to the west. I opened my eyes and sat up. The trees were starting to cast long shadows. Night, as yet unseen, was racing on. Though Gool had said nothing ~~about~~ after that meeting, ~~that had taken place a few days earlier~~, I knew it had finally convinced him that I was no good. The break could not be long now. And I would be glad when it came.

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I walked down to the roaring sea.

Gool had taken me in. He had housed me and fed me. When I had mentioned finding a job ~~to him~~ he had dismissed it laughingly, had over-ridden me with his easy charm. But a man ~~could~~ cannot not live on the kindness of another forever. And there had been something clean and acceptable about his kindness. I ~~would be very glad~~ wanted to tell him of my grattitude. But I knew the shadow of leftwing political intolerance would be over our parting. I did not mind that. What I minded was that this political intolerance would ~~attempt to~~ stop the genuine grattitude I wanted to convey to him before I left. And I wanted to say to him: ~~Another thing,~~ Of all the Coloureds I've met you are, most completely, most naturally, ~~////~~ free of the slightest hint of prejudice, upwards, to the whites, or downwards, to the blacks. And that is important.

But I left him, two days later, with only time for a hurried "Thank you very much for everything."

3.

On my own again, I drifted back to District Six and Fatty's. I had no money so I slept in the office of the Liberation League. I rarely spent a night there alone. There were others who had nowhere else to go. Fatty fed me one meal a day on the cuff. Finding a job seemed impossible. The few that were advertised had numberless applicants. And the whites were not inclined, in any case, to give jobs to a well-known Coloured agitator. I went down to the docks. But there, too, Cape Town's Coloured 'skollies' waited in their numbers for one ship that might need one more stoker. And these men were giants beside me. No captain was likely to look at me

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while they were about. Oh damn their rippling muscles! Damn the hair on their chests!

Cape Town docks were out. I would have to try another tack. I went to the Passport Office.

"What do I do to get a Passport, please."

"Going to study?"

"No."

"What're you going for?"

"Just going."

The man's face hardened.

"Any money?"

"My fare." I lied.

"Any more?"

"Fifty."

"You'd have to leave the fifty as a deposit. How would you live?"

"What deposit?"

"In case you can't pay to get back."

"I see."

"Well, how would you live?"

"I have relatives," I lied again.

"In England?"

"Yes."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"Got a letter from your parents?"

"No."

"They know you want a Passport?"

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"Yes."

"You'll have to bring a letter from them, from your father."

"He's dead. Will my mother do?"

"Yes....WHat's your name?"

He wrote it on a slip of paper.

I went back to the office of the League and wrote to my mother. While I awaited her reply, I typed a thesis of some three hundred foolscap pages for a Chinese student. He gave me a pound and a parcel of groceries for this job.

One day I bumped into Boonzaier, one of our most famous white painters. We had first met at the home of the elder Gool.

"What are you doing, Peter? Any time to sit for me?"

I thought: He's an artist, a famous brother, he might have some ideas that would help me raise the fare.

"Ja!" I said.

"Good. When?"

"Now."

"Today?"

"Yes. Now."

"I was going to....What the hell! Come on! They're silly."

"I want your advice about something."

We jumped on a slow-moving bus. Some small part of my mind tensed for a split second, then I followed him to a seat downstairs. It took some getting used to the fact that here the colour-bar was not as strong as in my home-town. No one took much notice of me and a white man sitting together talking.

"What's on your mind?"

UWI Library

"I want to get out of the country, to England."

He stroked his long fair beard.

"Passport the problem?"

"No. The fare."

"That's no problem once you have the Passport."

"I saw them. They said all I needed was a letter from my mother and a hundred and fifty quid."

"You'd be awfully lucky if you get it that easily. But the money. How much have you?"

"Blow-all."

"Hmmm....Fallen out with Goolam?"

"Yes."

He grunted. It said: To be expected. I said:

"I sent a batch of poems to Faber's in England. But nothing came of that. Only an encouraging letter."

"That's something though the fare would have been better."

"I'm a lousy poet."

"Not enough elbow room? Tried prose?" Just beginning. Been doing sketches for a long time but I want to try my hand at a proper book now."

"Concentrate on getting out. That's about the best thing you can do. Tell you what, you get that Passport. Once that's done, we can concentrate on a sort of artists jumble sale. Some of the others will give pictures and things. That should raise your hundred and fifty. How's that?"

"Think it can be done?"

"Sure. Get that Passport first."

I spent the rest of that afternoon posing for Boonzaier. He

UWC Library

finished the portrait near sundown. It was a more mature likeness than the person I usually saw in a mirror. There was a soulful, malencholy quality about the general expression.

"Am I really as soulful-looking as that?"

"Sour John with a cold detachment."

"What the hell! I'm not sour or detached."

"This thing doesn't lie. You can't be an artist without that detachment. It's there. The one thing I pin my faith on...."

"Ah cold, cold Peter!....To hell. I refuse to be cold."

"You'll see."

We ate, and then I left him marching up and down his studio, and muttering for all the world as though he had gone mad and I was not there to see it....Ah brother artist! Half-god and half-man and all a sheer delight of whirling madness. Tell me, what do you see in that grease smudge on your wall? What is a grain of sand to you? A universe as frightening as our own?....Salud. Salud.

My mother's letter of consent arrived a few days later. Would she see me again before I went away? She wanted to look at my face just once more. England was so far away. I must take care of myself and behave myself when I got to the world of white people.

I went back to the Passport Office with ~~my mother's~~ the letter. I still had ten shillings left of the pound I had earned from the Chinaman. I had cleared up my account with Fatty. ~~Boonzaier's brilliant idea was going to raise the fare. Not long now, not long at all now, boy.~~

The man who had spoken to me the first time, faced me. I took the letter out of my pocket.

UWC Library

He read the letter then looked at me. His eyes were cold and remote. They looked at a thing, not a person. I forced myself to speak though I knew it was hopeless.

"You said I needed a letter of consent."

"I can't give you a Passport."

"But you said....I have the money. I can get it and show it to you."

"You can't have a Passport!"

"But why?"

He lost his temper.

"I said you can't have a Passport!"

I took my mother's letter and slunk out. No use wasting any more time there. And there was no authority I could appeal to. I went back to District Six.

This year, 1938, was the year the South African Government made it's first moves to deprive the Cape Coloureds of their right to vote on the same roll as the whites. Hertzog was Prime Minister and Smuts was his Deputy. In 1936 the Hertzog Government had removed the blacks of the Cape from the voters' roll. The two major organisations of the black people, The African National Congress and the All African Convention, had protested to no effect. One or two of the more far-sighted of their leaders had called on the Coloureds for joint action and had warned that the Coloured vote would go after the African vote. A miserably small handful of Coloureds, chief among them Goolam Gool, had shown interest and tried to work with the Africans. The rest had been indifferent. The Africans in the Cape had lost their right to vote on an equal

UWI Library

footing with the whites. Now the turn of the Coloureds had come.

The National Liberation League formed a non-European United Front to fight the Hertzog Bill. The United Front wooed the African organisations. In spite of the earlier Coloured indifferenc ~~when they lost their own Cape vote~~, the two big African bodies gave moral support. Perhaps this was largely due to the part Gool had played in their struggle. And quite a surprising number of lesser African organisations came into the United Front.

A day of national protest to wind up with a march on the Houses of Parliament was planned. I flung myself into the work of preparation.

At last the day arrived. Delegates ~~turned up~~ poured into Cape Town from all corners of the ~~Cape~~ Province, and from further afield. The ~~slum~~ streets of District Six seethed. The office of the Liberation League was crowded ~~with delegates~~. Throughout the day a conference was held. Documents were drawn up listing the harsh disabilities under which ~~Coloured folk~~ non-Europeans lived. Delegates made fiery speeches.

~~In the~~ That evening, a monster meeting was held on the Parade ground. The huge ground was packed with dark faces. The atmosphere of tension spread from the Coloured area to the areas of the whites. Police and soldiers were brought out in force. They were armed and made a ring about the monster meeting. Beginning with Cissie Gool, speaker after speaker stirred the vast throng to a new realisation of the ~~abject~~ misery of their lives in such a fair and pleasant land....Look at this land on which the warm sun shines. Look at the vineyards and the orchards; look at the wheat fields and cornfields; look at the vegetable gardens. Who work in them? You, the dark people of this land. Who gets the rewards of your

UWI Library

labours? ~~Do you? No.~~ They do, the white people. Nowhere else on earth do white people do as little real work and live as well as they do here. Do you know why? It is because they have slaves to do ~~all~~ the ~~dirty~~ work for them. You sow and they reap. You sweat and they have beautiful homes. You hunger and they are well fed. Remember your own homes, and with that in mind, remember the homes in which you work. For your one room, how many rooms have they? Remember the meals you eat. For your dry bread and coffee, what do you put on their tables? And remember the places where their children play. And your children? Why, the slums streets are good enough for your children. Turn and look at what they have. And then look at what you have. They have all and you have nothing. Is it because they work harder than you? You know the answer to that. You know who does the real work. They say you are not civilised. They say you don't understand machines. And they have a law called The Civilised Labour Policy with they want to make sure that you never understand machines. They say you're not educated. They tax you, pay you starvation wages, and spend so little on your education that it becomes impossible for you to educate your children. They speak of democracy. General Smuts has quite a way with words about freedom. But when you say: I am a man too, what about this democracy and freedom for me? The Smutses talk about 'parallel development' and about 'developing along your own lines'. They lie. And you know they lie. And they know they lie. They do not believe in democracy. It is all a mountain of hypocracy. They believe in slavery. Their Pass Laws, their Colour Bar Laws, their Civilised Labour Policy, their taxation without representation, the low wages they give you, the miserable conditions

UWI Library

in which they keep you: these are the chains of your slavery. But all their soldiers and all their police cannot keep you there forever. Let us ~~//~~ tell them that. Let us tell them we have had enough! Let us fight to be free! Dark folk arise!

And a voice cried:

"TO PARLIAMENT! LET THEM KNOW HOW WE FEEL!"

The procession formed. The toughs of District Six flanked their leaders. I strayed out of the tight little group. A huge giant grabbed me and lifted me bodily. He pushed his fierce face close to mine.

"Damn you! Stay there! You're a damn leader now!"

My laughter angered him so much, I thought he was going to swipe me into kingdom come.

The procession moved. Directly in the path ~~they~~ it took, soldiers stood, their arms at the ready. There was a moment of ugly tension, then the soldiers broke and gave way. The procession turned into Parliament Street. I heard the tinkle of glass as huge shop windows were knocked in. Most of the windows had iron grilles to protect the ~~glass~~, but all those that did not have such protection were smashed that night. A cordon of police that barred the way was swept aside. Angry slogans rent the air:

WE WANT FREEDOM!

DECENT HOMES!

WORK!

DOWN WITH SEGRAGATION!!

F R E E D O M !

We neared the Houses of Parliament. A body of members had come out to the steps of the House to see what was going on. They soon

UWI Library

retreated to their chamber because of the angry,howling, crowd. One tipsy Member tried to address the crowd from behind the protection of the high iron bars. This infuriated the crowd. They flung whatever came to hand. A handful of 'skollies' tried to shin up the bars. The tipsy Member fled.

The procession swept on, past Parliament. There were no white people on the streets that night....

Back at the League office, I heard stories of clashes between the police and groups of marchers who had continued to roam the town at the end of the official demonstration. When most of the demonstrators had dispersed, police vans swooped through District Six arresting and attacking whomever they saw on the streets. In the early hours of the morning they raided the office of the League. With others, I got away through a window and over a roof....

SPACE

The monster demonstration was a seven-day sensation throughout the country. A number of Coloureds and police had been injured in the clashes. A number were in hospital. Some of the injuries had been ~~very~~ serious. A number of arrests had been made. The papers were full of the affair. Some papers revived talk about the 'Black Peril'. There were a number of court cases. ~~And for a long time~~ Questions were asked in Parliament. The proposed Bill was posponed. For many days police vans haunted District Six. Whites did not come near it. Coloureds did not venture far from it. In the end, excitement died down. The League seemed to have exhausted itself in that one giant effort.

Though an active participant, I had been shaken by these events I had seen a terrifying quality in mob-anger. At best, mob justice would be savagely brutal and blind. Had the whites seen the portent

UWI Library

in that night? Could they visualise that night, expanded to take in the whole country and with all the dark folk gone blind with anger? For it seemed to me, after that night, that unless the whites did something to stay it, ~~that~~ a day will come when non-European anger will burst throughout the land, and angry black voices and angry black hands will be raised against the white citizens of our land. And it seemed so unwise and stupid, so against their own interests, for the whites to push the blacks so hard toward that horrible and ugly day. For it would be a horrible and ugly day for us all.... ~~It is the tragedy of those who live by the authority of the sword that they recognise only the authority of the sword.~~

One day I found a message at the League office. My sister was in Cape Town and had looked for me. I hurried to the address she had left. I found Mag in an overcrowded little slumhouse in District Six. She fought back ~~the~~ tears while she told me her story. Chris had lost his good job. Things were bad on the Rand. He had suggested that they tried the Cape where it might be better. They'd been here a while, nearly a month. He'd gone out looking for a job every day. But Cape Town was full of skilled Coloured cabinet-makers. This was the home of a relative of Chris'. They had a small room. She remember her beautiful house and fine furniture and the tears finally flowed. She had eked out a living for them by hawking fruit and vegetables. She touched my hand.

"They all seem to know you here, Lee. They say you're a leader and friends with rich people like the Gools. Can you help?"

~~It was depressing to see my sister like this.~~

UWI Library

"Have you any money, Mag?"

"A little."

"Enough for two single tickets back?"

"I think so."

"Well, get those two tickets. Get them and go straight back home. I don't think Chris will get a job here. There are fifty men standing by for every job there is. Sure there's less colour bar here, but there are also less chances of making a living. Life is hard for the poor here, harder than in Johannesburg in some ways. Go back, my love. Go where ma can help and advise you. If you spend your fares now, it may take you years to make it up again. And you'll be very unhappy here."

~~"Really think so, Lee?"~~

~~"I know it Mag."~~

"But can't you help with all your important friends?"

"Darling, I haven't a penny and I haven't a home."

"But when you wrote about going to England."

"I know: you thought I had money. Well, I haven't."

"And nowhere to sleep. Oh Lee...."

"Don't worry about me. I'm a man and alone."

"But will you ever get away?"

"I'll get away. What about you? Will you go?"

"Chris will be difficult."

"You insist."

"He likes it here. But I think you're right. We'll go back and start again. I can get a job there. I don't like this place."

"It's alright, but hard."

"Yes! We'll go back!"

UWI Library

I recognised decision. Nothing Chris said would change her now.

"Better make it as soon as possible, Mag."

"But what about you, Lee?"

"I think I'll try and get to Natal. A seaman told me it's easier from there. There are not so many Coloured giants there. The Indians are more my size."

"Got your Passport?"

"No."

"Then ~~Wh~~ how'll you get away?"

"I'll get away. But don't worry about me. Look after yourself and get home, Mag."

~~"I will. I promise."~~

~~"Good lass. Tell me about Ma...."~~

We remembered old times. Soon I was cheered by Mag's laughter. She was a woman born for laughter, my plump, smooth-skinned, dimpled sister. I carried her laughter away with me. She would be alright. She would go back to where she could cope. I thought of my quiet, introspective mother. Really, my mother had performed a miracle in giving us a sense of family without the support of a husband.

A stranger stopped me on the stairs to the League office.

"Aren't you Mr. Abrahams...."

"Yes?"

"My name's Roderiques. I've just been in there trying to get your people to give me some help. They say they can't. Perhaps you'l persuade them...."

"What's wrong?"

"Can we talk somewhere?"

I led him to Fatty's. He cheered up as we entered the café.

UWI Library

"Hello Fatty."

"Ah! It's good to see you, my friend. I see your poem in the Standard. I like that one....Two teas?"

"Please."

We sat in a corner. Roderiques looked at me out of clear green eyes. He was small, with reddish kinky hair and a fair, freckled face. His mouth protruded. He smiled anxiously.

"Look man, I've not eaten since last night....I'm sorry.... But I'm sick with hunger...."

I laughed. It had to be me.

"I haven't a penny, but I can get you a meal."

"I'll pay you back. I swear...."

Fatty brought the tea.

"Could we have something to eat, Fatty - on the cuff?"

"My cuff is good for you....As usual?"

"Yes, please."

In a little while Fatty brought two plates of sausages and mash. We ate in silence. Roderiques pushed his plate away.

"You know the Cape Flats?"

"I've seen them," I said.

"Well, the place I'm talking about has about fifty families. The men mostly work on the docks as casual labourers. Well, they have no school and they are too poor to send their children to Cape Town. Their leader is a good man. He's a dock labourer but he's also a preacher. He asked me to start a school. It is about the school that I want help."

"What kind of help?"

"I need everything. I've got the children and a tin church and

UWI Library

that is all. I haven't one book, one slate, or one blackboard. Can you persuade your people to give me some money, about a hundred pounds, and some books?"

"I know they won't do it. It's a waste of time to ask them." I made up my mind. This Roderiques did not look the pioneering kind. There was something faintly unwholesome about him. But I would go and see and give a hand. And I thought I knew where I might be able to get help. "But I can give you another kind of help," I said.

"Any help will do....What?"

"I can come along and help you with the school for a while."

"Of course, I'd like that. But how will we teach them?"

"Let me come with you know and see the place. Tmorrow I'll get in touch with someone who'll help with books."

"And money?"

"No. But with everything we need."

"Really think they will?"

"I'm sure they will if they can....How much is the return fare? I'll borrow it from Fatty."

"Don't worry. I have a season."

"I haven't."

"Oh you'll use my season. We'll meet at the other end."

The sun was down when I got off the train. Roderiques waited for me.

"How'd you do it?"

He smiled with secretive cunning but gave no answer.

We walked away from the small station, and soon, ~~we~~ entered the desolate world of the Cape Flats.

UWI Library

Entering the Cape Flats was stepping into a new Dark Age.

The earth, here, is barren of all but the hardiest shrub. It is a dirty-white, sandy earth. The sea had once been here. In its retreat it had left a white, unyielding sand, grown dirty with time. Almost, it had left a desert. And in this desert strip, on the fringe of a beautiful garden city, men had made their homes. They had taken pieces of corrugated iron and tied them together with bits of string, ~~iron~~ wire, and rope. They had piled sacking on top of this. The 'fortunate' had made floors; the unfortunate had the sandy earth for floor. Into these hovels men had taken their women. They had called these places home. They had lain with their women. And their women had brought forth children. And the children grew, stunted as the shrubs on this desert strip.

There were whole villages scattered about the Cape Flats. Behind one sandy hill or another, one was bound to come across a cluster of little hovels in which parched and dried up human beings lived and played out the short years of their lives. Only, one did not know of these places. There was no electricity. The trains only touched the very fringes of this area. No busses went there. So, few men went across these sandy hills. And fewer still knew that life went on there, and that human beings played out their lives there in the starkest misery imaginable. Indeed, when Rodericques took me to the Cape Flats, he might as well have taken me to another land and another time for all that Cape Town was less than an hour's journey away. The people of the Cape Flats lived in a twilight world of darkness.

UWC Library

The people

They gathered in their tin church to hear the result of Roderiques' mission. A tall, haggard man with a greater authority and assurance than the rest, but with the same parched skin and bloodsho eyes, moved among them as we entered. ~~Somehow~~, I found it hard to believe that these dried up creatures were human, till I looked into their eyes and heard their voices. ~~They were human alright.~~ They were But such humans as I had not seen in all my wanderings through the land!

The preacher came to us. The people stood up. The oil lamp cast shadows that made phantom forms of ~~most of the people~~.

"This is Mr. Abrahams from the League." Roderiques' voice was hushed and sanctimonious. Automatically, he ~~folded his hands~~ pressed his palms together as a Jesuit brother might do in chapel.

The old man took my hand. He spoke normally:

"I have heard your name, Mr. Abrahams. You are one of our leaders. It is a great honour...."

Roderiques cut in on the quiet voice of authority.

"They would not help. Then I met Mr. Abrahams and...."

"Report it to all of us, Mr. Roderiques. That is what we are all here for."

Roderiques seemed put out but nodded. He moved slowly, measuredly to the preacher's platform. He went on one knee in front of the little cross, crossed himself, and then stood up. He went through an elaborate little ceremony of bowing and crossing himself, his lips moving all the while. At last it was over. He mounted the platform. He raised his hands as in the act of benediction. An odd fellow, I thought. I turned my eyes to the old preacher at my side. He had read my thought and nodded.

UWI Library

Roderiques spoke in a 'special' voice, as though preaching a sermon. When he had done, he held out his hand to me.

"Mr. Abrahams will tell you his plan to help."

I looked at the preacher. He nodded. I said:

"I haven't much of a plan. I want to find out what you need, and tomorrow I'll go into Cape Town to get it. I can't get money but I think I can get books and slates and all the other things a school needs. And I should like to stay here for a while and help with the school. That is all."

The preacher said:

"I speak for all my people when I say we are honoured to have you here, Mr. Abrahams. We will never be able to repay you but God, in his mercy will. I read the paper from Cape Town and I have preached to my people about you and those like you. Now God has sent you here. Let us be thankful...."

89

He prayed. Then the gathering ended. We stood at the door of the little church. People filed out, said hushed 'goodnights' and walked away into the darkness. When all but the three of us had gone, the preacher took my arm.

"I will take Mr. Abrahams with me, Mr. Roderiques. Sister Adams has food for you but not enough for two."

"I will come with you," Roderiques said.

"There is no need for it. And do not worry. You are head of the school and Mr. Abrahams knows it. I will return him to you."

The old man guided me past the houses and over a number of fine sandhills. Suddenly, the moon burst through the clouds. It lightened the dark earth a little. We walked in silence till we neared another cluster of houses.

UWI Library

"There is only a little soup and dry bread, my son. But you have known hunger so there is no need to apologise."

He led me into his home. It was a little larger than most of the others I had seen. A deal of effort had gone into making it a home. A young woman, the preacher's daughter, stood over the soup in the ~~/a/~~ kitchen that was also the dining-room, and a bedroom

"We have a guest, my child."

The girl could not have been my age, but already her face was lined, and there were hollows under her eyes. She put potato soup and bread in front of us. The preacher said grace; then we ate.

Afterwards, he sat back, took out his pipe and began the long preparation for a pleasant smoke. I looked about the room. It was as dried and parched and barren as all this place, as the people of this place. Everything had faded to a dirty grey. And there were sand grains everywhere. A stove in one corner, a bed in another, a homemade kitchen cupboard for crocks, a table, and two benches, ~~was~~ all the furniture of the room. Pictures from magazines of another world were pasted on the wall.

Two sandy-grey children, a boy and a girl, came in noisily. The elder girl hushed them and gave them their soup.

"My grand-children," the old man said. "Their mother's somewhere in Cape Town. Some of my children are bad, and they haven't a mother to control them...." He lit his pipe."Now you want to know about me, Mr. Abrahams...."

"No, I don't. Please."

His face creased in a gentle smile.

"Then I will tell you about Mr. Roderiques....He's a Roman - or perhaps I should say he was. But he still has the habits of a

UWI Library

Roman. No, that is not fair to the Romans. But let us come to the matter. He was trained in a Roman school for priests when I first met him. It was at the docks....You know I'm just an ordinary labourer there?"

"I know."

"Well, he was on a journey in his long black dress. I think it was to the Portuguese land. He saw me there and he spoke to me. I don't know why, but he spoke to me. He said he was going to be one of these people who worked among heathens. There's a word for them."

"Missionaries."

"I thought he did not look strong. Not just in body: I mean the will. I know the Romans, especially the leaders, are not foolish. So I wondered how they had made such a mistake as to think this young man could win souls. But I said to him, half in play, 'I am the preacher of my people. But although we are not heathens, and although we are not Romans, we would welcome some of you to teach us and our children to read and write'. He tried to make me a Roman on the spot! Said that was the only true church. He said I would not have to work as a labourer if I were a Roman preacher. I told him we were all children of the same God if we were Christians. It did not matter whether we were Romans or not. 'You tell them to send us teachers' I said. 'And if they make our children Romans, I will not object, as long as they teach them'. I believe that knowledge is the key to a better life, my son. Anyhow, his boat came. I told him where we lived. He put it in a piece of paper and then he went. I did not expect to see the young man again.

UWI Library

"But he turned up here a little while ago, without his Roman dress. He was hungry and homeless. So I fed him. He told me something had gone wrong and he had to leave the Roman school. He said he had no people. He said he would start a school here if we would feed him and give him shelter. I knew there had to be good reason for the Romans to turn a person out. But I also knew he was a weak young man, too weak to do any real evil. I did not think he could harm my people if a few of us kept watch. And our need for a school is great....That is the story of Mr. Roderiques. It is right that you should know it. You have understanding, my son. Do you think he can harm our children? I don't."

"I don't think so either, father."

"Then you will still help us?"

"All I can."

"If you have trouble...."

"Please don't worry....Tell me though, are the Cape Flats like this everywhere?"

"Not everywhere. There are places that are better, much better, further along the coast. Some are as good as District Six: some better."

"Any worse than this?"

An odd smile crossed his face without touching his eyes.

"I've seen two places worse than this. Can you believe it? Man is so strong, he can live where nothing else can live. It makes you wonder...."

When I got back Roderiques had gone to bed. He had a bit of candle stuck to the wall above his head. By its light, he read Judge Rutherford.

UWI Library

"Yours is the other room," he said. "Here."

I took, and lit, the bit of candle he offered me. I went into the next room. As with Roderiques' room, there was nothing except a small iron bed in a corner. Half the room had wood flooring. I heated the wall and stuck my candle against it as Roderiques had done.

"Good meal?" Roderiques called.

"Bread and soup."

90 I examined the bed. Two blankets covered a much stained mattress. There was no pillow or sheets.

"What did you talk about?"

"Oh nothing much. Politics mostly."

I took off my jacket, folded it, and propped it up as a pillow. I sat on the bed. It creaked dangerously. A gust of wind came in through the nearest crack in the wall. It blew out the candle. I found matches and relit it.

"What d'you think of him?"

"I like him."

"You want to be careful. He's not a fool. These people are cunning. Don't tell them too much about yourself."

"He didn't try to pry."

I took off my shoes.

"Talk about me?"

"Only said how glad they are to have you here."

Should I take off my pants? No, better not. Mattress not too clean. I took off my shoes but stayed in my socks. I got under the blankets. The bed shivered and groaned as though it would collapse.

"I sometimes wonder if they are grateful....Want anything to

UWI Library

read?"

"No thanks. Goodnight."

"Thought you might like to talk...."

"I'm rather tired."

"Alright. Goodnight."

I blew out the candle. The many cracks and holes in the ceiling and walls showed up clearly. In the corner immediately above my bed was a round hole, as large as the head of a man. I looked through it and saw part of the sky and a cluster of stars.

"Roderiques...."

"Yes?"

"Where are the lavatories here?"

"You walk away from the houses and dig a hole. But some of the people have built some."

"Thanks."

In the morning, Roderiques took me to the home of Sister Adams. He explained that she would give us our meals and look after our laundry. The Adams family had the best house and were the most 'well-to-do' in the community. The husband had a job in a factory near Cape Town and actually owned a bicycle!

Husband and wife received us cheerfully. Their three young children gaped shyly at me. Mother and father could not be much over thirty, and they, and their children, though patched and parche looked better clothed and fed than the rest of their neighbours. The difference was very subtle, but it was there.

The man rode off to work. The elder boy brought us water from the well. We washed. Then we went into breakfast. There was one whole and one broken knife, two cracked china plates, one handleless

UWI Library

~~cup and its saucer. There was a larger supply of tin mugs and plates. The best crocks were put before us.~~ Sister Adams fed us bread fried in dripping and black coffee. ~~Sister Adams~~ She fussed about us while we ate.

After breakfast we walked to the little church where a growing crowd of youngsters awaited us.

"There are more than I've had before," Roderiques said.

"The preacher said he was sending some from nearby houses."

"He should have told me."

"My fault. He asked me to tell you last night. I forgot. If you lend me your season I'll go into Cape Town this morning."

He gave me the ticket.

"Sure you'll get the things?"

"Yes. I think so."

"We need some money, you know."

"Can't do anything about that."

"Why not try...."

I thought it best to say nothing.

"In you go!" Roderiques cried.

The skinny, dried-up, ragged mass of children fought and scuffled their way into the little church.

Roderiques went through his elaborate little ceremony in front of the cross. Then he made the children kneel while he prayed in Latin. I had the feeling of looking on at a queerly distorted ritual, robbed of all substance. There was something ugly about this. It was a mockery of the Christian ceremony of prayer. When he began a little sermon, my mind revolted. I repressed an urge to stop him, and went out.

UWI Library

I walked to the little station with the picture of Rodériques and the mystified children in my mind. There was something queer about Roderiques. I would have to be careful in my dealings with him. And how would he affect the children?...

When I reached Cape Town, I went to the office of the Guardian. The Guardian was South Africa's only 'popular' general socialist paper. All the other papers of the left were all 'official' organs of factions and parties. The Guardian was the only national weekly of the left, the only paper that attempted an objective statement of the South African situation. But even it rarely saw anything good in any 'line' other than the communist party 'line'.

I had met Betty Radford who edited the Guardian. She and a young woman building up Coloured trade unions, Ray Alexander, had impressed me as the most human of the C.P. wing of the South African left. Ray Alexander was an avowed communist. Betty Radford claimed only to be a socialist.

I went into Betty Radford's office, and told her about the school.

"I need a lot of material, Betty. I think you can help."

"What sort of material?"

I told her about the little village on the Flats.

"How many children?" she asked.

"About fifty."

She thought for a while, then nodded.

"I think I can get what you want by this afternoon."

I had expected such an answer. I had slowly worked my way to a view of the South African left. Whatever labels they had, there were two types of leftwingers: those who were hellbent on

UWI Library

revolution for its own sake and were, really, indifferent to the welfare of individuals or groups of people, and the others, the humanists, who saw an ugly world and wanted to make it better. And Betty Radford had struck me as belonging to the humanist left.

I told her how to get to the little village then went back.

Betty Radford drove into the little place in the late afternoon All the women, and some of the men, had ~~came out of their homes to~~ watched me teach their children the game of rounders. They ~~all~~ gathered about the small car and watched the finely dressed white woman get out. They made way for me and were silent while I welcomed my white friend.

"You've found a place for work alright," Betty said.

The back of her car was stacked with school material. The children formed relay teams and carried the books, pencils, slates, chalks, rulers and paper into the church. We stacked the material at the back. Roderiques tugged at my sleeve.

"Introduce us."

I introduced him. ~~to Betty Radford. She was not taken with him and avoided his attempts to improve the acquaintence. At last, he~~ He whispered ~~to me:~~

"Tell her we need money."

I shook my head. As the pile in the back of the car grew less, I noticed Roderiques steeling himself to mention money. ~~to Betty.~~ I began a long and foolish speech of thanks that lasted till ~~she~~ Betty Radford drove away. ~~She leaned smiling towards me:~~

~~"Don't try so hard to protect me. I can cope."~~

~~Then she waved and the car shot away.~~

UWI Library

Work began in earnest next morning. Once Roderiques felt assured that I had no desire to usurp his position as head of the school we got along well. I managed, in time, to make him shorten his morning services. On the few occasions when we had differences the old preacher mediated with great skill and wisdom. Really, the old man had been right. Roderiques was queer but there was no real harm in him. And he went with

The children, meanwhile, were learning eagerly. A month after Betty Radford had brought the material, we started a night-school for the grown-ups.

Development was uneven, and we were soon faced with the problem of classes. Also, people started sending children from neighbouring villages. Roderiques took the whole school for the morning prayers and Bible lesson. Then we split them into three classes: beginners those who knew their alphabet and were starting to build words, and those who had begun to put one word behind another and make sentences with sense. I cope with the beginners, Roderiques with those who had begun to build words; and we shared the lessons for the more advanced. We split the night-school into two classes.

I was soon so immersed in the work of teaching that I forgot my plans to leave the country.

So the months passed. Autumn gave way to winter. Life on the Flats became terrible. We had not enough to eat and we were always cold. I put on all the clothes I had to go to bed. Still, lay shivering for the best part of the night. When the winter was at its worse Roderiques pulled up half the flooring of his room and burned it. For a few weeks we had a fire every night. Then the

UWI Library

wood ran out. We now both only had flooring where our beds stood. The community brought us bits of fuel whenever they could. But the majority of them were in a worse plight than we were. Children came to school so cold that they could not grip their pencils. They were too listless and hungry to exercise some warmth into their bodies. In common with the majority of the villagers, I began to cough.

A man arrived from Namaqualand that winter. He came among us and made our misery seem paradise. He was a walking skeleton. He had walked all the way from South-West Africa to this place to seek for help. He stood in our little church and told us calmly that his people were dying of starvation, that they had eaten all the snakes and lizards they could find and that there were now none left to dig up and eat. And my miserable community managed to collect a few shillings together for the starving people of Namaqualand. Our old preacher took him preaching through the Flats to try and raise help. Roderiques went with them. For some days I managed the school alone. The memory of the man from Namaqualand and his quiet statement about death and starvation kept me awake for two nights. On the third night I ~~took pencil and paper~~ slipped papers into my battered typewriter and wrote. I called what I had written 'Cape Flats Limited'. Then I went to sleep.

On the day the preacher and Roderiques returned I went into Cape Town with the piece I had written. I took it to Betty Radford.

She looked at my face and exclaimed:

"Good heavens! You're sick!"

"Will you please read ~~that, Betty~~ this."

"Here," she wrote on a piece of paper. "~~Will you~~ Go and see my

UWI Library

husband? Now?"

"Will you please read that thing."

"If you'll go and see my husband now."

"Alright."

"I'll phone him. Go straight there. Have you the bus fare?"

"No."

"Here." She gave me a ten shilling note. "Now you go over."

I read the address on the piece of paper then went to the door.

"You will read it? ~~"This is [illegible]."~~

"Yes. Go on."

Her husband's surgery was in the white section. I could not just walk into the waiting room and sit down among his white patients, if there were any. Best knock on the door and see. I knocked. A young woman ~~receptionist~~ opened the door.

"Mr. Abrahams?"

"yes."

"The doctor's waiting for you."

~~I followed her.~~ A big, cheerful man welcomed me. The young woman left us. He gave me a cigarette and made me feel at ease.

"Betty's worried about your health, and I can see why. I think it would be a good idea to give you a thorough examination."

I stripped to the waist and ~~laid~~ and stretched out on the table. He examined me carefully.

"Tell me about the school. Do you eat enough?"

While he worked he plied me with questions. At last the examination was over.

"Now I'll check your blood."

"I've not messed about with women."

UWI Library

"Copulation isn't the only way you get these things....When did you last have a woman? Don't be shy. I'm a doctor."

"In Johannesburg. Nearly a year ago."

"Remember that's not the only way you get these things."

"How else?"

"You get some of these things by contact: beds, food, filth, and not having enough of things. We don't know all the causes yet. One more thing. I want you to go over to a friend of mine. He'll X-Ray your lungs. When can you go?"

"Now."

He phoned.

"Yes. He's free. Go over now. Here's the address. Come back here in three days' time."

From the X-Ray place I went back to the Cape Flats.

I returned to the doctor's surgery three days later. The news was good. My lungs were alright. My blood was negative. The doctor said:

"Medically you're alright. But you need proper food. That place isn't doing you any good. Can't you teach in some more healthy place?"

"I'm leaving it," I said. "I only helped them to start."

"Perhaps that would be best....Oh, Betty's printing your article. Best thing you've done, you know. Better than your poetry. It might start something."

Back on the Flats, I went to the home of the old preacher that night. Now that I had decided to leave I might as well go the next morning. I would try and work my way to Durban.

~~The old man welcomed me warmly.~~

UWI Library

"I've come to tell you that I'm leaving in the morning."

"Leaving?....For good?"

"Yes."

We sat in silence for a long time. The young woman gave us coffee. At last the old man sighed and looked at me.

"I knew you would go some day, but not so suddenly. I thought we would have a little time. I thought it might be good to send you away with something to show our gratitude. Why do you go so suddenly?"

"My doctor advised it. My health isn't too good."

"Yes....I've noticed your coughing. Perhaps it is better that you go. You might do more elsewhere."

"I'm sorry, father."

"So am I, my son. You've become like a real son to me. And how can I tell you of the thanks in my heart?"

"There is no need."

"There is always need to say thank you. It is good for the sayer....Where will you go, my son?"

"I don't know....I'll try and work my way to Durban and get on a ship there."

"And then?"

"I want to get to England."

"And what will you do there?"

"I want to write books and tell them about life in this country."

"Will you tell them about us? About this little place?"

"Yes, father. I will try to tell everything; the bad as well as the good."

UWI Library

The old man got up and went into the other room. He came back with a black gabardine overcoat. It had a rubber lining, and over that, a silk lining.

"I have noticed how thin your overcoat is. It keeps out the rain but there's no warmth in it. They say winter is cold in England. Take this and I'll take yours."

"But I can't, father!"

"You'll do as I say, young man!....I want you to wear it and to remember me by it. Remember that an old man is always praying for you. And tell them about us. They must be good people over there. Tell them about us."

"I will, father."

"Remember the story you made up for the children at Christmas? Well, the children, and many of us grown-ups still remember it. If you make stories like that for the white people of England, they will listen and you can tell them about us."

"I will try."

"Come now, my son. We will go to the church. All our people will want to pray for you and wish you well on your journey. Put on your new coat."

We walked across the sand to the little church. The tinny bell rang out. The people came from their shacks to wish me well on my journey. Strange Roderiques wept his farewell to me.

Early next morning, I walked across the sandy earth to the station for the last time. And the children watched me go. I would have to make up for leaving them.

UWI Library

THREE

1.

I got off the train at the furthest point to which my ticket allowed me to travel. It was about a hundred miles north of Cape Town. I gave up my ticket and went out of the station. I walked through the little dorp till I struck the main highway to the north. This was part of Rhodes' ~~unfinished~~ dream of linking the Cape with Cairo. I rested for a while, then picked up my case and set off for the north.

I did not bother to waved at the shining cars that shot by ~~from time to time.~~ Their occupants were white. ~~and in nine cases out of ten it would be a waste of time. If the tenth case came, I knew he or she would slow down, for he or she would understand my unwillingness to wave.~~

I grew hot and took off my three-ply overcoat. About me, the land stretched, vast and unending. I looked back. Far behind, in a mist of distance, Table Mountain towered over the city I could not now see. I was nowhere, and a long, long way from everywhere. Better keep moving brother; the road is long; better keep moving, brother. A weak, red-rimmed sun kept pace with me, or so it seemed.

I had walked for what seemed hours when a lorry slowed down near me. ~~There was a~~ Coloured man was driving.

"Hello there!" he called.

"Hello!"

"Which way?"

"Making for Natal."

"Jesus!....I turn off about ten miles up. Get in."

I flung my case on the back and got in beside him. The lorry

UWI Library

sped along.

"Hell of a trip to make," the man said.

"Yes. Must get there though. And they say this is the best way."

"Yes. Long way round but the best. No lifts on the coast roads."

He dropped me off ten miles further along the road and veered off to a wine-growing farm far off the road. I stuffed the two bunches of carrots he had given me into my case.

93 - Towards sunset I reached a little siding. I sought out the Coloured section ~~of the place~~ and knocked on the first door I came to. Yes, they would be glad to put me up for the night. Was half-a-crown too much? No, not while I had the money. Well, really, things hadn't been too bad of late and I might need the half-a-crown later if my journey was very long. A member of their family might be on the road one day....Was I going far? Durban. An awful long way off, wasn't it? It might be an idea to try and get to a big railway station where Coloured stewards might help. We poor had to stick together in these times.

I left with a little parcel of sanwiches the next morning.

Thus, I made my long journey through the land: up to the northern borders of the Cape Province; into the Free State, and then down into Natal. Sometimes I got lifts. Sometimes only cars with whites in them were on the roads. Occasionally I had to spend a night in the open. But mostly the dark people fed me and housed me. Often, they provided me with a little food to carry me on to the next stage of the journey. They rarely asked for money. On one farm a kindly old Boer grandma spread a feast before me in her

UWL Library

kitchen while her farmer son argued politics and race with me. He was a Stellenbosch university man.

"But look, man! You're educated. You should be able to see our problem. We have a side too. If we gave all you people the vote it would be like cutting our own throats. It isn't that we hate people because they are black or Coloured. We just have to protect ourselves."

"And to protect yourselves you have to repress and deny others!

"Ag man! You are just refusing to see my point. Now look! We are a minority. We are running the country and we are making a better job of it than Dingaan or Chaka did...."

"We are not in the times of Dingaan and Chaka. Have you given the descendants of Dingaan and Chaka a chance to prove that they can do as well if not better than you?"

"How can we? They'll swamp us and turn on us."

"So you repress them."

"I don't want to."

"But you do."

"Would you cut your own throat?"

"Would it really be cutting your own throat? Can't you think of us as ordinary human beings who are not anxious to cut white throats or rape white women? We are people, you know. As fond of our land as you are...."

"But look at that fuss in the Cape."

"That was precisely because you repress us. It seems to me repression is the one way of cutting your own throats in the long run."

"It's easy for you. You have nothing to lose. If the position

UWC Library

were reversed and you, the non-Europeans, were in a majority minority in control, would you still talk like this?"

"Yes. I think....I'm sure of it."

"And you would be against a black colour bar that worked against the whites?"

"Yes, I would."

"You're just saying it."

"I mean it. Honestly."

"Well, kêrel, it's not easy. We have all our history against that. Perhaps Rhodes had something with his equal rights for all civilised men."

"That would be a beginning, provided we tried to turn all men into civilised men. But any forward looking beginning would help."

"And you think the colour bar only makes for more hatred?"

"What do you think?"

"If only we knew what went on in your minds...."

"It is not we who raise the barrier."

"There you go again. It's easy enough for you."

The young Stellenbosch man was reluctant to see me go. He had not really talked to anybody since his university days. His old grandma gave me a parcel of cookies.

In another place I came across a tense situation. The ugly problem of 'miscegnation' had reared its head. A Coloured boy and a white girl were or had been in love. It had been discovered. The Coloured community said the whites were now trying to make the girl say the boy had raped her. They wondered how long she would hold out. The boy? He had gone into hiding. I sensed that they

UWH Library

knew where the boy was. But I was a stranger, and they would not tell me.

I left the valley of tension and moved down into the beautiful Natal grassland. Here, my scanty knowledge of Zulu stood me in good stead as I exchanged Coloured hospitality for African hospitality.

I paused at villages where life seemed not to have changed since before the coming of the whites. I stopped at others where the men had gone off to the cities and only the women and children and old men were there. Sometimes I arrived during a feast of drinking and talking and much laughter. And always, they welcomed the stranger and shared what they had with him. It was only the better-off among both Coloured and African who occasionally turned me away.

And so I reached Durban on a scorching ~~hot~~ day in June, 1939.

2.

I found a small room with an Indian family. I paid them ten shillings for the first week. That left me with only coppers in my pocket. But I had arrived. The journey had taken me nearly three months, but I had arrived.

I still had some bread in my case. It had gone hard. But that could be remedied with milk. I went across the street and got a ~~pint~~ of milk. The Indian woman lent me a bowl. I ~~soaked~~ the bread then ate. Then I went to bed. I slept all through that day, all through that night, and all through the next day. I got up on the second night. I had some more bread with milk gone sour, then I went out to see Durban.

UWI Library

Just as ~~the~~ Cape Town was essentially a Coloured town, so Durban was essentially an Indian town. In place of Coloured quarters like District Six and the Cape Flats, there were Indian quarters, equally slummy and equally mean. For Natal was the home of just over a quarter of a million Indians, the descendants of those who had been brought ~~here~~ from India as indentured labour in the early history of the country. They had been brought to work on the sugar plantations in the days before the Africans had been reduced to their present acceptence of white rule. And in time, the Indians had become as much a part of the country as the Africans or Coloureds or whites. Like all the others, their sweat and strength had gone into the making of this beautiful dark land. ~~Natal was the Province in which they lived. And Durban was the main city of the Province. So I walked past Indian stores and Indian cafés and heard shrill Indian voices in the steamy night.~~

I knew no one in Durban, but the Indians also had their nationalist movement ~~for better conditions~~ and I was familiar with the efforts of the younger men, so I made my way to their head-quarters, the Liberal Study Group. They had been in contact with the United Front in the Cape.

~~I found the place~~. They welcomed me as one of their own. Soon, I was as involved in their efforts as I had been in those of the United Front in the Cape. ~~The problems were the same as those in the Cape and in the Transvaal~~. The Liberal Study group published a stencilled monthly bulletin. I was soon up to my neck in editorial work on this. For this work the study group helped me with my rent.

But I had not forgotten my main purpose in coming to Durban.

UWC Library

I visited the docks often and built up a ~~fairly~~ extensive system of contacts.

Thus June and July passed. The meetings of the Liberal Study Group aroused the interests of the police. One day in August I was called down to the police station. The white sergeant who had attended many of our meetings questioned me.

"Now Abrahams, you're no fool. I don't know why you mess around with these Coolies. None of your other Coloureds do."

"They're South Africans just like you and me, sergeant."

"Don't be silly, Abrahams. Do you see any Coloureds riding about in big cars like they do?"

"I've also seen the poor among them. And you have the same number of Coloureds with cars in the Cape. Anyway, what do you want?"

"You're a bright fellow, [illegible] for you."

"What do you want to know?"

"Who's behind this?"

"Behind what?"

"These meetings and this Bulletin of yours. You're a lot of youngsters, you can't think this up by yourselves. Who's behind it?"

"We're doing this by ourselves."

"You're not! There are some clever white communists who write your articles. Who's 'Jim Fish'?!"

Even if it meant going to jail, I could not help laughing.

"Well..;.?"

"I am, sergeant. I wrote that article about [illegible] Passes."

"Who told you about it? You never carried one."

UWI Library

"I was born here, sergeant. I know what goes on in this land."

"I don't understand you, Abrahams. Here you are, the country's given you a good education. You could make something good out of it for yourself. Instead you mess around with these foreign communists. What's wrong with you?"

"I don't think there's anything wrong."

"You're against your own country. Are you a communist?"

"It so happens that I'm not but I don't see that it's any of your business whether I am or not. Your business is to see that I don't break the law, not to examine my thoughts."

"This is your last chance, Abrahams. Why did you write that thing about the Passes. Who told you to do it?"

"I wrote it because it is the truth. No one cam tell me what to write, not you or the communists."

"Where do you think all this will get you?"

"Do you know the meaning of the word freedom, sergeant?"

"I tried to be friendly. I've warned you. You've had your chance. You may go."

In September of that year, war broke on the world. The government and country were thrown into a crisis. Pirow, the Union Minister of Defence had just returned from Germany where he had been an honoured guest of Hitler's. Smuts and Hertzog split. The Prime Minister was for neutrality and showed his pro-Hitler sympathies. Smuts, the Deputy Prime Minister, was for war on the side of Britain and France. The split between the two leaders divided the ~~country~~ whites of the country into two camps.

UWI Library

One day, in the period of uneasy crisis, I heard there was a ship needing a whole crew. I rushed down to the docks. There was a queue at the shipping office. I joined it behind a hulking ~~brute of a~~ Coloured man.

The clerk glanced at the man then made him sign the articles. It was my turn. The clerk looked me over and snorted.

"And what do you think ÿöu can do?"

He passed on to the next person. The Coloured giant bent over me and whispered:

~~"Two pounds."~~

"Any money?"

"Two pounds," I whispered.

"Not enough."

"How much do you want?"

"Five."

"And can you get me on for that?"

"Yes."

"I'll give you the rest tomorrow morning."

"Alright. Give me the two. But I'll break your neck if you don't give me the rest."

"Don't worry. You'll get it."

"I'm not worrying. It's your neck."

I didn't like the sound of this. This brute could break my neck with no effort. I gave him the two pounds. The clerk moved back up the line. The gaint said:

"Aren't you going to sign my buddy, sir? He's the best trimmer I ever shipped with. Had a layoff for a while but he's

UWI Library

damn good. Don't be fooled by his size, sir. You know how these Bushman types are."

I expanded my chest as far as it would go. I held my breath till I heard drumming in my ears.

"Alright," the clerk said doubtfully. "Sign here and get your police clearance."

I signed and sighed. The moment had arrived. This was the turning point. Dear God, the moment had arrived!

We left the shipping office. The giant brute called:

"Three pounds tomorrow, or God help you!"

I hurried to the police. I thought: God help me in any case with that unholy looking crew.

At the police station, I explained my business.

"Name?" the policeman said without looking up.

"Peter Abrahams."

The man stopped writing. He raised his ~~eyes~~ head and stared at me. My heart began to pound, my body to tremble. He picked up the phone and called the political sergeant. Then he turned to me.

"Know where the sergeant's office is?"

"Yes."

"He wants to see you ~~there.~~"

I leaned against a wall for a long time outside. When I felt a little more under control, I went to the sergeant's office.

"What's this about your getting on a ship, Abrahams?"

"I want a change, sergeant."

"But why on a ship?"

"I don't know. I just thought a change would be good and I'll be earning my keep."

UWI Library

"You're an odd one, ~~Abrahams~~. Wish I knew what went on in that brown head of yours."

I thought it best to remain silent. The sergeant said:

"well, I can't decide this by myself. Wait here while I go and see my chief."

I sat in the office for a long while. At last he came back.

"We are going to let you go, Abrahams. The chief thinks it will be better to have one less of you on our hands. Here, take this back to the officer and he'll give you your clearance. Good fishing, Abrahams."

"Thank you, sergeant!"

I got my clearance and went out. I felt drained of all strength so I sat for a long time on a bench in the yard of the charge office. It was true! I was free at last, free to go. And down there, at the docks, a ship was waiting for me. I was free!

3.

I raised the last few shillings that made up the three pounds late that night. My neck was now safe. I felt was too worked up and tired to feel hungry or be able to eat. I went to the office of the Study Group. It was locked up. That meant I had nowhere to sleep. I had given up my room a long time ago. I met an African friend and told him I needed a bed.

"What's the matter with you, man? There are compounds. You can hire a bed for fourpence. Come with me."

He took me to a compound. It was like going to prison. High walls shut the place in. Black policemen guarded the entrance.

UWI Library

My friend paid eight pence at the little office. In exchange, he received two blue slips. These entitled us to beds for the night. An old black man led us through a maze of connected rooms. Each room was a dormitory filled with beds. They went in three tiers. There were enough beds to sleep well over a thousand men. Many of the men had already come in. Some lay on their beds. Others sat talking to their neighbours. Yet others sat doing little jobs on their clothes. Here and there, men chewed pencils and frowned with painful concentration as they tried to let those at home know about this place. The warm, sickly smell of many bodies in a confined space, hung over the rooms.

This was home from home for the peasant who had been driven to the city in search of money to pay his taxes: here the young boys ended who had come to the city in search of the wondrous things of the white man: here, on these beds, many black dreams were played out. This was the home of the rickshawboy and the casual labourer. A man has been uprooted and this took the place of his tribal home and the customs of his village. Here he spent long weeks or months or years of his life.

At last we reached the room where we had to sleep. The old man showed us two beds then went off. My friend was an educated man, a teacher, and I sensed his embarrassment at having taken me to this place. So I said:

"This will be heaven compared to some of the nights I spent on the road."

But I was wrong. The bed came alive as soon as I got into it. Creatures attacked my body with a brazen boldness that left

UWI Library

me helpless. I turned back the blankets to see. They marched like armies: armies of lice, and armies of bugs.

Nearby, an old rickshawboy lay coughing his lungs out. His drawn face, glistening with sweat, and the bloody spittle about his lips told their story well. He could not last long. Perhaps tonight, or tomorrow night, or the night after.

But really, the bed was no good. I knew now that I could not sleep. I was tired but I would not sleep this night. This was the last night.

I got up. I went to my friend's bed.

"The animals?" he asked.

"No. I just can't sleep. I'm leaving in the morning," ~~you see.~~"

"Back north?"

"No. On a ship. Out of this country. To England. I'm going down to the beach now."

"'Bye old man. Don't forget us."

"I won't."

I left the compound. I walked through the empty streets of the moon-kissed town, down to the sea.

The big yellow moon hung low over the sea. The sea, though calm, seemed raised in an effort to meet the moon. I stripped and walked into the cool water. I kept walking till the water rose to my chest, my armpits, shoulders, my neck, my chin. Then I flung myself forward and kicked out. I looked back. The beach was a long way off. I swam on. My arms began to ache. They grew sluggish. Turn back! Turn back! I swung about desperately. I was terribly tired. Easy does it. Easy does it. I went down once. Don't lose your head. Don't fight. Keep your head and live. Easy

UVI Library

does it.

At last, my toes touched earth. Joy shot through me. I crawled onto dry earth and flopped down. After a long while, I rolled on to my back and looked up at the stars. They were very bright and very far away.

419a, 419b

~~....You up there! Can you tell me man's purpose on the earth?~~ Or do we make our own purposes? What is the meaning of life? You have watched me flounder about for nearly twenty-one years. Can you tell me what made me flounder? ~~about?~~ I can tell you one thing, stars. There can be no understanding in this land until those who ~~have~~ hate have turned to love. And the slave will not love his lord. And the lord will not free his slaves. So the moment of violence approaches. But what of the meaning of life, stars?....And do you know my friends, the poets? They have sustained me. They, and the love I ~~have~~ found in the hearts of people of all colours. Yet the land is dark with fear and hatred. The moment of violence draws near. It seems too late now to stop that moment. But we who believe in Man more than in creeds can prepare for the day after the moment of violence. And if enough of us prepare, perhaps the new day will be better. That is the hope and the task. That and the other, bigger task; the task of heralding in the age of man 'tribeless and nationless' as Shelley sings him. If I can use words to help in that I will have kept faith with the poets, and with those, others, living, who poured their love into me.....

Perhaps the meaning of life is love.... hidden in the meaning of

The first rays of the morning sun touched the sky in the east. I got up and dressed. The night was over. This was the moment of departure. I felt in my pocket. The three pounds were still there. My neck was safe.

I walked briskly down to the docks

With my eyes on the stars, I took stock and searched for the meaning of life in terms of the life I had known in this land for nearly twenty-one years.

All my life had been dominated by a sign, often invisible but no less real for that, which said:

RESERVED FOR EUROPEANS ONLY.

Because of that sign I had been born into the filth and squalor of the slums and had spent nearly all my childhood and youth there; because of it, a whole generation, many generations, had been born, had grown up and died amid the filth and squalor of the slums. I had the marks of rickets on my body; but I was only one of many, not unique. I had had to go to work before I went to school. Many had never gone to school. Free compulsory education was 'Reserved for Europeans only'. All that was finest and best in life was 'Reserved for Europeans only'. The world, today, belonged to the 'Europeans'.

And in my contacts with them, the Europeans had made it clear that they were the overlords, that the earth and all its wealth belonged to them. They had spoken the language of physical strength, the language of force. And I had submitted to their superior strength. But submission can be a subtle thing. A man can submit today in order to resist tomorrow. My submission had been such. And because I had not been free to show my real feeling, to voice my true thoughts, my submission had bred bitterness and anger. And there were nearly ten million others who had submitted with equal anger and bitterness. One day, the whites would have to reckon with these people. One day there sons and daughters would have to face the wrath of these

embittered people. The two million whites ~~could not~~ cannot forever be overlords of the ten million non-whites. One day they may have to submit to the same judgement of force they have invoked//// in their dealings with us.....

For me personally life in South Africa had come to an end. I had been lucky in some of the whites I had met. Meeting them had made a strange 'all-blacks-are-good-all-whites-are-bad' attitude impossible. But I had reached a point where the gestures of even my friends among the whites were suspect, so I had to go or be forever lost. I needed, not friends, not gestures, but my manhood. And the need was desperate.

Perhaps life had a meaning that transcended race and color. If it had, I would not find it in South Africa. Also, there was the need to write, to tell freedom, and for this I needed to be personally free.....

When the first rays of the morning sun touched the sky in the east I got up and dressed. The long night was over. This was the moment of departure. I felt in my pocket. The three pounds were still there.

I walked briskly down to the docks. And all my dreams walked with me.

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