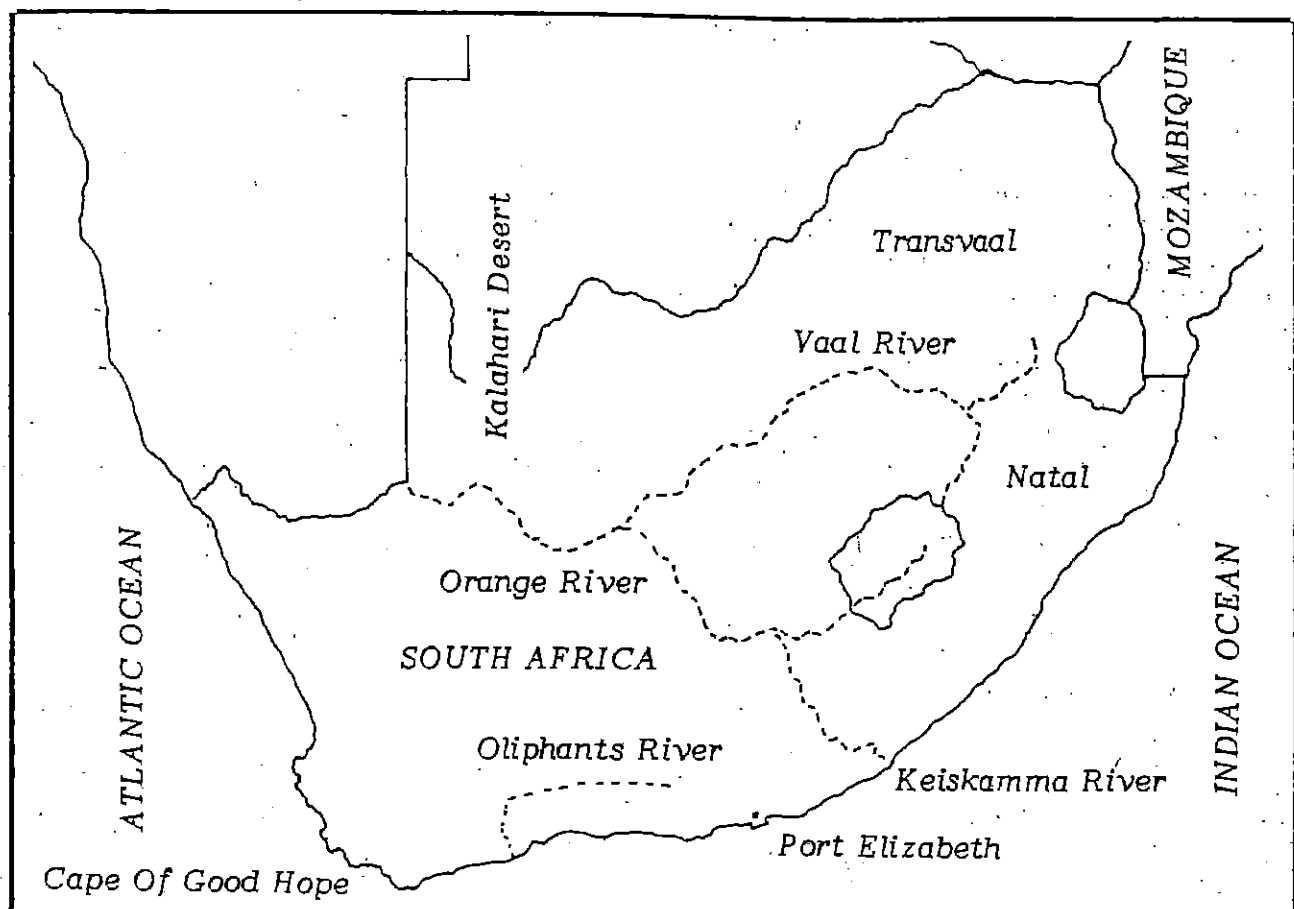


Kaffir Boy Study Guide

1. In the introduction, Mark Mathabane explains the system of Apartheid and how he escaped its clutches. How did Mark Mathabane escape the poverty of the Alexandra ghetto?
2. The living conditions of South Africans in the Bantu locations (forced homelands) were especially cruel. Who lived in these areas and how did the government keep most white South Africans and the world ignorant to the extent of these conditions?
3. Describe Alexandra. How was society structured? How were jobs and living conditions based on skin color?
4. On the map of South Africa, show where Mark's parents came from? Why might they have moved to Alexandra?



5. Who were the Peri-Urban? Describe their weapon.
  
6. What is the problem regarding Mark's mother's passbook? How is this resolved?
  
7. How does Mark treat his siblings when the Peri-Urban are in the neighborhood? How could one explain his actions? Give specific examples.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. Who are the Msomi?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. Although the Peri-Urban decide to leave Mark's family alone they have already accomplished something that affects Mark? What is this?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. What beliefs does Mark hold? How do they affect his daily life? How might they affect him in the future, if they remain the same?

# KAFFIR BOY

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

## MARK MATHABANE

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

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

# PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

New York, 1986

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

—Albert Luthuli, 1960 Nobel Peace Prize winner

"Rise like Lions after slumber

In unvanquishable number—

Shake your chains to earth like  
dew

Which in sleep had fallen on you—

Ye are many—they are few."

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Mask of Anarchy*

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

—Frederick Douglass

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

—John Milton

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# PART ONE

## THE ROAD TO ALEXANDRA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2

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

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

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

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

"Bye, bye, Papa."

"Go back to sleep."

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

"Where are you going, Mama?"

"To the outhouse."

"Those bad dreams came back, Mama."

"I'll be back soon."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's the matter, Mama?"

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

"What's the matter, Mama?"

"Peri-Urban is here."

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

"Where are they?" I stammered.

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

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

\* An animal-hide whip used to enforce apartheid.

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

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

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

"What book?" I said blankly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't ever do that!"

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

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

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

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

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

She did not leave.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shut up and go back to sleep!"

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

"Dare and I'll whip you!"

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

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

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

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

"That's number thirty-seven."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You heard that?"

"Yes. It's an infant crying."

"I bet you they left that one alone too."

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

"Yowee! Yowee!" she bawled. "Johannes! Come an' see! Come an' see!"

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

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

"There's no point in going in. I've had enough of hollering infants."

"Me too."

"I bet you there's no one in there but the bloody children."

"You just took the words right out of my mouth."

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

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