

Chapter Seven

MMA

THERE IT STOOD, a great pink house with its own grass lawn and trees in front, even its own road leading up to the front door! The two children stopped at the wide iron gates, looking up to it. The gates were closed, with a notice on them: BEWARE OF THE DOG.

"Are we allowed in?" Tiro whispered.

"We must go in," Naledi replied, opening the gate a little.

Nervously they slipped in and slowly walked up the drive to the large front door. Before they dared to knock, they heard a fierce barking from inside which made them grip each other's hands, ready to run back to the street. Then they heard a sharp voice

inside call out, in English, "Joyce, see who it is!"

The door opened...

As Mma gasped, the children flung themselves at her and she clasped them in her arms, hugging them. Tears welled up in her eyes as the children sobbed against her.

"What is wrong? What is wrong?" Mma cried softly.

"Who is it, Joyce?" came a brisk voice from behind. The dog was still barking.

"Be quiet, Tiger!" ordered the brisk voice, and the barking stopped.

Mma stifled her sobs.



"Madam, these are my children."

"What are they doing here?" asked the white lady.

"Madam, I don't know. They haven't told me yet."

"Dineo is very ill, Mma," Naledi spoke between sobs. "Her fever won't go away. Nono and Mmangwane don't want to trouble you, but I told Tiro we must come and bring you home."

Mma gasped again and held her children more tightly.

"Madam, my little girl is very sick. Can I go home to see her?"

The Madam raised her eyebrows.

"Well, Joyce, I can't possibly let you go today. I need you tonight to stay in with Belinda. The Master and I are going to a very important dinner party..."

She paused.

"But I suppose you can go tomorrow."

"Thank you, Madam."

"I hope you realise how inconvenient this will be for me. If you are not back in a week, I shall just have to look for another maid, you understand?"

"Yes, Madam."

The children couldn't follow everything the Madam was saying in English, but her voice sounded

annoyed, while Mma spoke so softly. Why does the white lady seem cross with Mma? It's not Mma's fault that Dineo is sick, Naledi thought.

The children huddled close to Mma's starched white apron. They hadn't seen her in this strange servant's uniform before.

As Mma led the children through to the kitchen, they glanced across at open doors leading into other large rooms. A wide staircase also led upwards. Never had they imagined a house could be this size!

In the kitchen Mma gave them a drink of water and some porridge she had cooked earlier. The kitchen seemed like a picture out of a magazine Mma had once brought home from the Madam. Their mother must have been busy cleaning that afternoon because glistening plates, of different sizes, cups and saucers and delicate glasses were neatly stacked close to a large empty cupboard.

Naledi noticed that Mma took the tin plates and mugs for them from a separate little cupboard. While they ate, Mma quickly got on with her work.

When she had finished, she took the children to her room at the back of the yard. The children looked around the little room with interest. On the big

iron bed was a white cover which Mma had neatly embroidered. It must be strange sleeping all on your own, thought Tiro. At home they all shared a room.

When the children noticed the electric light, Mma said they could try it. But after Tiro had flicked it on and off about ten times, Mma told him to stop.

Bringing the children close to her now, Mma sat down at last and asked them to tell her fully what had happened.

The Madam had made it clear to Mma that the police wouldn't like it if the children spent the night in Parktown. So when Naledi spoke about Grace and her offer to take them to Soweto, Mma seemed in two minds. She knew Grace's mother well, but Soweto was also dangerous.

After getting the Madam's permission to go out for a little, Mma took her children by the hand and they walked to number seventeen in the next road. They went round to the back of the house and found Grace still there.

"These two will be just fine with me," Grace assured Mma.

It was arranged that Grace and the children would

meet Mma at Johannesburg station at seven the next morning. Mma gave Grace some money for the fares and, close to tears again, she hugged the children goodbye.

"Cheer up, you two," said Grace. "You can come and meet my brothers."



Chapter Eight

POLICE

IT WAS RUSH HOUR when they got on the train to Soweto and the children clung on tightly to Grace. There was no sitting space and it felt as if all their breath was being squeezed out of them. Grown-up bodies pressed in from above and all around them. Some people laughed, some people swore and others kept silent, as the train shook and lurched on its way.

At each station the crowd heaved towards the carriage door, people urgently pushing their way through. Naledi and Tiro tried to press backwards to stay close to Grace.

But in a sudden surge at one of the stations, they found themselves being carried forwards, hurling out

on to the platform. Desperately they tried to reach back to the open door, but passengers were still coming out, although the train was already beginning to move on.

Naledi was just able to see Grace wedged inside. She was trying to get out, but the train was on its way! Naledi and Tiro looked at each other in dismay. What now?

Everyone was walking towards the stairs which led to a bridge over the railway line. Soon the platform would be empty and the guard would see them. No tickets, no money, no idea of how they could find Grace. They would have to wait until she came back to get them, yet there was nowhere to hide on the platform.

"Let's go and look from the bridge," Naledi suggested.

Suddenly, without any warning, there was a commotion up ahead. Three figures in uniform stood at the top of the stairs.

Police!

People began turning around and coming rapidly back down. Some began running along the platform towards a high barbed-wire fence at the other end. The runners leapt at the fence and scrambled over it.

Others jumped down to the track, sprinted over the railway lines and clambered up to the opposite

platform. But just as they got there, more policemen appeared on that side.

"Where can we go?" Tiro urgently tugged at his sister's hand.

"We'll have to slip past them," she whispered, pulling him towards the stairs.

Some people were feeling into pockets, others frantically searching through bags.

Pass raid!

A man was protesting loudly that he had left his pass at home. It would only take two minutes to get it. The police could come and see, or someone could call his child to bring it. He cried out his address, once, twice... Slap!

"*Hou jou bek*,"[1] barked the white officer in charge. His blue eyes stared coldly as a black policeman pushed the man against the wall.

One at a time people were pulled forwards to be checked. When a boy said that he wasn't yet sixteen, the policeman just yelled that he was a "liar" and a "loafer". Tiro felt his heart freeze, but the boy didn't cry. Instead his eyes seemed to have fire in them as he was handcuffed.

A voice in the crowd shouted, "Shame! Locking up children!"

[1] "shut up"



As the muttering grew louder, a woman spotted Naledi and Tiro and screamed, "You'll say these kids are sixteen next!"

The white officer took a threatening step forwards. He looked murderous. Then, glancing at the children, he made a sign with his hand for them to go through.

"We can't stay on the bridge while the police are here," panted Naledi when they had got past. From the bridge they could see the road outside the railway

station. Next to a large van were more police. An old woman was being pushed inside the van. Tiro looked back at the people in handcuffs on the bridge.

"Why don't we run and call the child to bring his father's pass? We heard the address so we can find it."

"Let's hurry then!" agreed Naledi.

Once past the police van, they asked a lady selling apples at the roadside to point out the way. The children weaved in and out of people as they ran along the stony road, between rows of grey block houses all looking exactly alike. No great leafy trees here, only grey smoke settling everywhere.

When they reached the right house, they found a boy struggling with a heavy tub. As soon as he understood their message, he dashed into the house, and a minute later came rushing out with a book in his hand.

All three raced back down the road, but just as they came in sight of the station, there was the big police van pulling off.

The boy shouted at it as it sped past them, carrying away his father. He flung the pass down, picked up a stone and let it fly at the van. The van swung round the corner, the stone just grazing the mudguard.

"I'll burn this one day!" stormed the boy, picking up his father's pass. "How can our parents put up with it?" There was fury in his voice. Then it became gentler. "Thanks anyway for trying... I must go and tell my mother now."

The children stood silently watching as he walked back home.

"Naledi! Tiro!"

Startled they looked around to find from where the voice was coming. It sounded quite far off.

Looking up towards the railway bridge, they saw Grace waving. Quickly they ran back to the station.

Grace came down with their tickets to get them through. it was a relief to be with her again.

"This time I'm really going to hold on to you," she told them, taking each firmly by the hand.

"Do you know what happened to us, Mma?" Tiro was anxious to tell Grace all.



Chapter Nine

THE PHOTOGRAPH

WHEN AT LAST they arrived at Grace's house, two boys, a little younger than Tiro, came racing out, then stopped short to look at Naledi and Tiro.

"Paul, Jonas. I've brought some friends for you," Grace announced.

Her brothers smiled shyly.

Inside the house was dark until Grace lit a lamp. The small room was almost filled by a table, a cupboard and stove.

"Hungry?" asked Grace. Four heads nodded.

It wasn't long before a good smell of beans was coming from the pot. Jonas and Paul brought out some wire cars and the younger children were soon

busy discussing different things they had made, while Grace chatted with Naledi.

Before the meal, hands had to be washed at the tap outside the back door.

"Our people wash and clean up for others all day, but look how we must wash ourselves!" Grace spoke sharply.

Naledi wanted to ask Grace what she meant, but Tiro had begun splashing water.

"Stop it, Tiro! You're wasting water." Naledi made him come away from the tap. She explained how they had to buy water from the village tap at home.

"We used to get our water from the river, but it's all dried up now."

"Was your river very big?"

"Were there crocodiles?" Paul and Jonas, who had never been beyond Johannesburg, were curious!

It was while they were eating that Naledi noticed a small photograph on the wall of Grace's mother with four children. It had been taken some years ago, when Paul and Jonas were no more than babies.

"Who's this?" Naledi enquired, pointing to a boy who looked a few years older than Grace.

"That's our eldest brother, Dumi, but he isn't here

any more," replied Grace rather quietly.

"Where is he?" asked Tiro.

"If I tell you, you mustn't go shouting about it."

Naledi and Tiro shook their heads.

"But remember what Mma said, Grace. We mustn't talk about it, or Dumi will be in trouble."

Paul looked very worried.

"It's all right," assured his older sister. "These two aren't big mouths like some kids round here."

By now Tiro and Naledi were looking quite puzzled.

"You see," Grace began, "our brother Dumi got picked up by the police, in '76. That was the time when the students here and all over were marching, and the place was on fire..."

Grace paused.

"You must know about it. Or were you too young then?"

"The older students at school sometimes talk about such things, but we don't know much," Naledi admitted.

So, with the dim light from the lamp flickering their shadows on the walls of the small room, Grace began to tell the children her story.



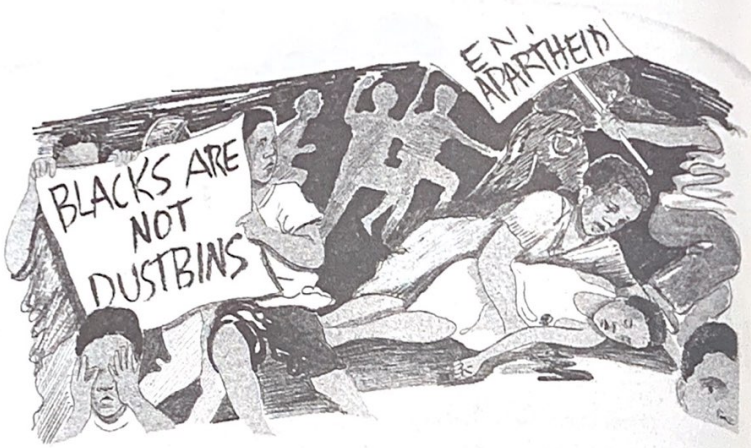
Chapter Ten

GRACE'S STORY

IT WAS A "time of fire" as Grace called it, when she and Dumi had marched in the streets with thousands of other schoolchildren. They were protesting that their schools taught them only what the white government wanted them to know.

On the banner that Dumi and his friends carried, they had written 'BLACKS ARE NOT DUSTBINS.'

Everything went all right until the police saw the schoolchildren marching, and then the trouble started. The police aimed their guns and began to shoot with real bullets, killing whoever was in the way.



It was terrible. The police shot tear gas too, making everyone's eyes burn.

People were screaming, bleeding, falling. More police came in great steel tanks, and more in helicopters, firing from above. A little girl standing near Grace, about eight years old, raised her fist, and next thing she was lying dead.

People became fighting mad, throwing stones at the police, burning down schools and government offices. Smoke and flames were everywhere.

But the police kept shooting, until hundreds were dead. Hundreds were hurt and hundreds were arrested.

Dumi was one of those arrested.

When he came out of prison, he said that the

police had beaten him up badly, but he would go on fighting even if they killed him.

Then one night he disappeared. When their mother went to each police station, asking if he was there, the police said "No". But maybe they were lying. Maybe they had killed him too.

For a year they had no news.

Until one day a letter came. It was from Dumi. There was no address, but it had been posted in Johannesburg. Dumi wrote that he was well and studying in another country. He was giving the letter to a friend to post. He also wrote that he would be coming back one day. Coming back to help fight for FREEDOM and make life better for everyone. He had written FREEDOM in big letters.

The family had been so excited that he was alive, so worried about the dangers he faced, yet so proud of his courage. Dumi had been a boy when he left, but now he would be a man. Although it was a long time since they had heard from him, they hadn't given up hope. They were still waiting.

When Grace finished talking, the children remained quite silent.

"Well, it's time to sleep," Grace said, pushing

back her chair and stretching herself up. Her young brothers cleared up the dishes, stacking them up ready to wash them outside in the morning.

Grace shared her bed with Naledi and the boys shared theirs with Tiro. He was soon fast asleep but Naledi lay awake for a while, thinking.

So much had happened. She wondered what her mother was doing. Was Mma alone in the little room in the yard, or was she still watching over the child in the big house?

Naledi was sure Mma must be thinking of Dineo. Why couldn't Mma have left straight away, and what if something happened to Dineo before they arrived? Naledi didn't want to think about that. At least the delay had led to them being with Grace, and she really liked Grace.

Her mind wandered over the terrible events in Soweto, to Dumi and to the word in big letters – FREEDOM. What did the word really mean? Did it mean they could live with their mother? Did it mean they could go to secondary school? But Grace said the children marched because they had to learn a lot of "rubbish" in school. So what would you learn in a school with FREEDOM?

There were so many questions, Naledi thought, as she drifted into sleep.



Chapter Eleven

JOURNEY HOME

"WAKE UP! It's five o'clock."

When Grace's voice reached Naledi and Tiro, they pulled themselves up. Silently they drank the tea Grace had made before slipping quietly out of the house, leaving Jonas and Paul still asleep.

It was half dark, but already many people were hurrying towards the station, and the train was crowded all over again. Most of the faces still looked tired. Bones squeezed against bones as they jolted, jerked and swayed with each movement of the train. At each station yet more bodies crammed in against them, until at last they were thrown out with the crowd rushing off to another day's work in Johannesburg.

When they arrived at the main ticket office, Mma was already waiting with her case. She thanked Grace warmly.

"Any time you need help, let me know," Mma added.

"*Tsamaya sentle*," Grace called as they parted at the barrier.

"*Sala sentle!*" They waved goodbye as they went.

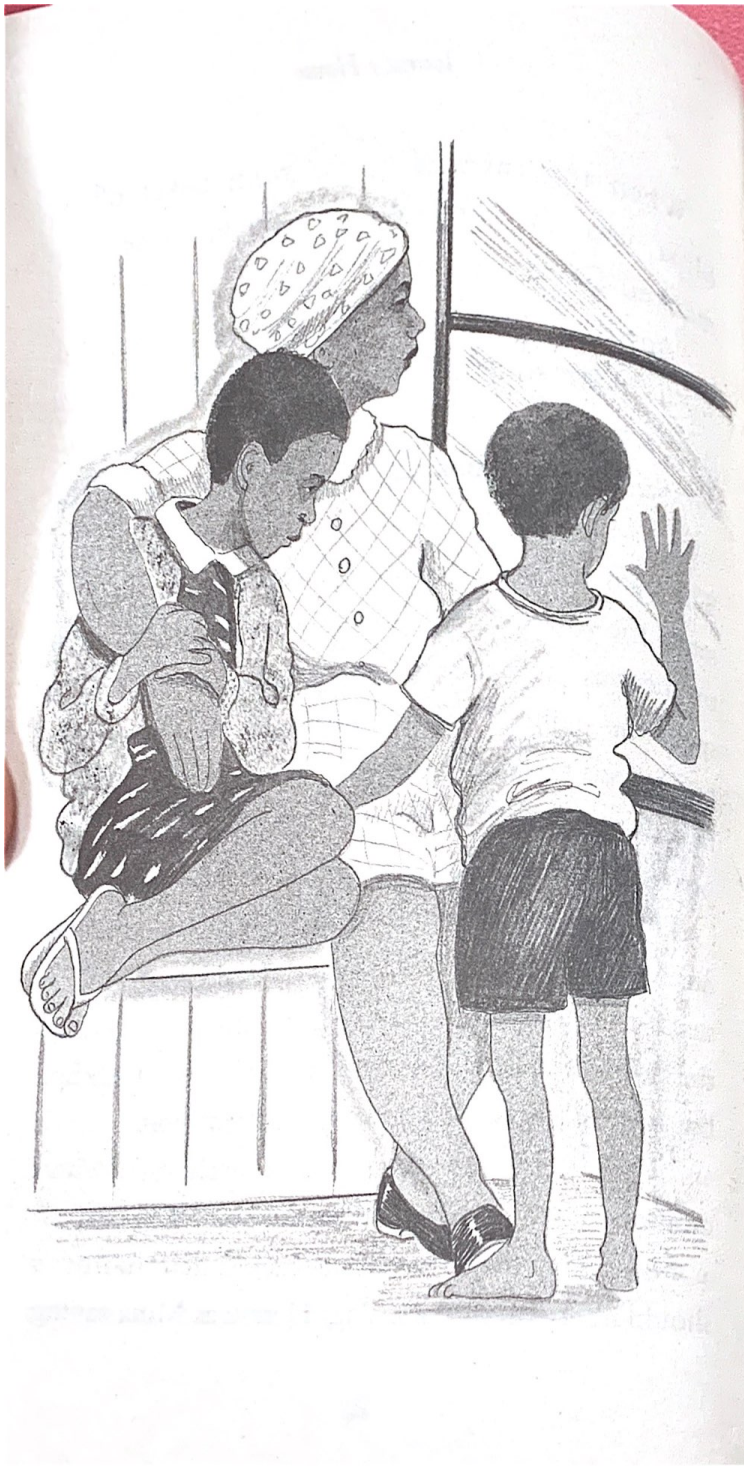
The train going home wasn't crowded so the children sat by the window, hoping to see places they had passed on the way, especially the orange farm where they had spent the night. They told Mma about the boy who had helped them. She said quietly, "That was brave of him. He could have got into a lot of trouble."

"Mma, do you know Grace has a br—"

Tiro was beginning to talk about Dumi, but Naledi quickly nudged him with her foot and gave him a stern look. The scatterbrain! Already he was forgetting the promise they had made to Grace. Tiro bit his lip, but fortunately Mma hadn't noticed anything.

"Those children should be in school," Mma continued, still thinking about the boy on the farm.

Naledi lay with her head against her mother's shoulder. It was so confusing. Here was Mma saying



that children should be in school, and there was Grace saying that schools taught black children rubbish.

Didn't Dumi and his friends carry a poster saying 'BLACKS ARE NOT DUSTBINS!'

What did Mma think about that and all the shooting? Had she heard about the little girl who was killed close to Grace? Mma had never spoken to them about such things. Did she think they were too young to be told?

Naledi stared out of the window, without seeing anything. Her mind was too full of questions. Surely she could talk to Mma about what was troubling her? As she leant against Mma's body and felt its warmth, it seemed silly to hold back problems. Especially when their time together was so short.

"Mma…" Naledi began, turning to look up at her mother's face. "Grace told us how the schoolchildren marched in the streets…"

Naledi stopped, seeing shock and pain flash through Mma's eyes. She became even more alarmed when Mma remained quite silent for what seemed like an age, gazing down at her lap.

At last, Mma spoke very softly. "Do you know how

many children died on those streets? Do you know how many mothers were crying 'Where's my child'?"

Mma was shaking her head slowly. There was another long pause, as if she was thinking whether to say any more. Then she leant forwards and covered her face with one hand, wiping her forehead.

"You know, every day I must struggle... struggle... to make everything just how the Madam wants it. The cooking, the cleaning, the washing, the ironing. From seven every morning, sometimes till ten, even eleven at night, when they have their parties. The only time I sit is when I eat! But I keep quiet and do everything, because if I lose my job I won't get another one. This Madam will say I am no good. Then there will be no food for you, no clothes for you, no school for you."

Mma pulled her back up straight and put an arm around her children. Tiro shifted to come closer.

"It's very bad, Mma," Naledi said, in a low voice.

"Yes, it's bad. But those children who marched in the streets don't want to be like us... learning in school just how to be servants. They want to change what is wrong... even if they must die!"

"Oh, Mma, oh, Mma," Naledi whispered.

Tiro clutched Mma's hand and she pulled him towards her lap.

"What did their parents say?" he asked.

"Some tried to stop their children so they wouldn't get hurt, but there were also parents who helped them."

Mma explained how the children had asked their parents not to work on certain days, and how many people had stayed at home. It had been a time of terrible worry for Mma's friends who had families in Soweto. The eldest Mbatha boy had been arrested and Mma told them about his mother's dreadful search at all the police stations.

So... Mma knew something about Dumi, Naledi thought. But neither she nor Tiro broke their own promise.

When Mma finished speaking, they sat in silence. They watched the train stop at stations on the way, passengers climbing in and out with cases, bags and bundles.

Vast stretches of land flashed by; grassland, mountains, grassland again. Naledi suddenly felt very small. Before this journey to fetch Mma, she had never imagined that all this land existed. Nor had she any

idea of what the city was like. She had never known a person like Grace before, and she had never known her own mother in the way she was beginning to know her now…

"That's it. I'm sure that's it!"

Tiro's voice startled Naledi from her thoughts, but already the orange farm to which he was pointing was in the distance. Mma nodded with a slight smile.



Chapter Twelve

THE HOSPITAL

NONE OF THEM spoke after that, their thoughts all turned to Dineo. When the train pulled in at their station, Mma hurried the children out on to the platform. Outside, she spoke anxiously to a man standing against a car. After she had taken some notes from her purse, he agreed to take them first to their village and then go on to the hospital. So much money, thought Naledi. Mma must have borrowed it.

As the car bumped along the road into the village, churning up the dust, it seemed longer than two days that they had set off walking. Mma directed the driver to the house and people looked up as the car passed by. It wasn't often a car came this way. The

sound of the engine brought Nono and Mmangwane outside. Nono looked so thin and weary, but her eyes lit up when she saw whom it was.

"The child is very sick," she whispered in a low voice.

Mma rushed in and came out clasping Dineo close to her, the little girl lying limply in Mma's arms, her eyes sunken.

"You children must stay with Nono," Mma said firmly, as they struggled to bring the case out of the car.

"Oh please, Mma, can't I come with you? Please?" Naledi pleaded. "Tiro can help Nono."

Mma looked across at Nono, whose tired face nodded "yes". Naledi gave her grandmother a quick hug.

"Thank you, Nono! Tiro will tell you everything... and please don't be angry with us. We're very sorry we gave you more worry."

"But we had to get Mma!" put in Tiro.

"Well, come in and tell us about it," invited Mmangwane.

Nono put an arm round Tiro's shoulders as they waved goodbye. From inside the car Naledi watched the little group grow smaller until they had quite disappeared behind the clouds of dust.

As the car now jerked its way back to the town over the rough roads, Mma cradled Dineo in her arms, whispering soft words to her. Naledi held Dineo's little hand, stroking and playing gently with her fingers. But the little girl made no response. Each minute on the way to the hospital now seemed important. What if they got there just a minute too late. That couldn't happen... could it?

At last they were travelling through the town, and then out into the open again, until at last there was a cluster of low white buildings with a few trees and bushes scattered between them. Some people were waiting by the roadside outside the hospital, and as soon as Mma and Naledi climbed out of the car, an old man came hobbling over to the driver. He was followed by others and almost immediately the car, packed tight with people, was rumbling off back to the town.

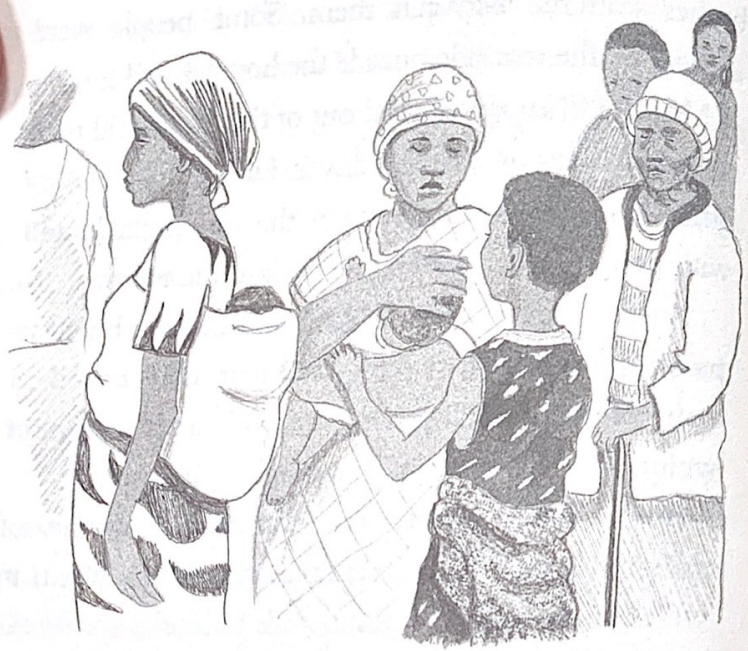
Naledi stayed close to Mma as she made her way past people sitting or lying down on the ground in front of the buildings. A lady with a thin blanket wrapped over her shoulders pointed the way.

Around the corner they found the queue of patients. It led up to a verandah where a woman in white sat at a desk.

"Is that the doctor for Dineo?" Naledi whispered.

Mma shook her head. "No. We must get a card first. The doctor is inside."

The queue moved very slowly as people shuffled forwards after every few minutes. Some patients, who were too weak to stand, lay wedged against the wall and had to be helped along. Just in front of Mma and Naledi was a young woman with a small baby tied in a blanket to her back. Naledi wondered if the woman or the baby was the patient.



The sun shone down on the queue. Mma tried to screen Dineo from the glare, but the heat seemed to soak in everywhere and Dineo began to whimper. Mma tried rocking her gently, while Naledi tried singing her little songs which had always made her laugh. However, now Dineo didn't even seem to hear them…

When finally it was Mma's turn at the desk, Naledi relaxed a little. Now Dineo could go inside and be given medicine. But when Mma led the way down a corridor and into a room filled with far more people than had been outside, Naledi felt panic grip her.

"Are all these people before Dineo, Mma?" she cried softly.

"They are also very sick, Naledi. We must be patient."

They were lucky to find space on a bench next to the young woman with the baby. She didn't look much older than Grace, thought Naledi.

It was the young woman who spoke first.

"It's always long to wait. I was here before with my baby and now he's sick again."

"What's the problem?" Mma asked.

"Last time the doctor said he must have more milk, but I've no money to buy it."

Mma sighed. "I think it's the same sickness with my child."



Chapter Thirteen

LIFE AND DEATH

ALL THROUGH THE afternoon, they watched the patients being called one at a time by the nurse. Once th doctor himself came out. His face seemed nearly white as his coat, except for the dark shadows under his eyes.

By mid-afternoon, Dineo needed water, but when Mma carried her to a small fountain in one corner, she almost turned away. It was so dirty! Naledi came over and struggled to cup some water in her hand without touching the sides. Then she let the water dribble over Dineo's dry little lips.

Naledi now began to feel her own empty stomach twist and turn. Her last meal had been with Grace

the night before. Mma seemed to read her thoughts and sent her out to see what she could buy for a few cents. When Naledi came back with three small buns, Mma offered one to the young woman. From the way she ate it, Naledi could tell that she was very hungry too.

It was only after the light had begun to fade outside that the young woman was called to take her baby to the doctor. The child had been very quiet all afternoon, wrapped snugly against its mother's back.

In a very little time the young woman came out of the doctor's room, clutching a plastic bag. Her whole body was shaking and a man close to the door caught her just as her legs gave way.

"My baby, my baby... he's dead, he's dead!"

Her sobs filled the waiting room. Before Mma could go to comfort her, the nurse reappeared calling for Dineo. The sobbing pierced Naledi's mind. She heard Mma telling her to stay where she was and she watched numbly as her little sister was now carried away. Then Naledi's gaze shifted to the plastic bag. The little baby had seemed to be sleeping so peacefully just a few minutes ago. Was it already dead then?

With head bowed, almost buried in the parcel, the young woman forced herself up and stumbled out of the waiting room. Naledi's eye now fixed on the doctor's door, but instead she saw a plastic parcel being laid in a grave. It made her want to run to Mma. She sat gripping tightly on to her seat.

When Mma finally returned, her arms were empty.

"What happened, Mma?" Naledi cried.

"We must leave Dineo here and I must come back in three days... her throat is very bad... and her body is too weak..." Mma's voice sounded choked.

Before leaving Mma had to pay at the desk. There would be more to pay later, so she checked the remaining notes in her purse.

"We've nothing for bus fare... we'll just have to walk home."

Mma looked drained.

"But it's not so far as Jo'burg, Mma!" Naledi put her arm through Mma's. She was surprised at her own sudden confidence when only a little while ago she had wanted to run to Mma for comfort herself. Well, at least they had each other.

Outside it was dark, but the moon fortunately lit the road and Mma knew a way which avoided the town. So with arms linked, they set off on the long walk home.

On the way Naledi asked about the doctor. Mma said they were lucky because he had been very gentle with Dineo, although he looked sick himself from tiredness.

"Did he say Dineo will get better, Mma?"

"We can only hope, my child..." Mma paused and pressed Naledi's hand. "I'm thankful you came for me. We must hope the medicine will save her."

The doctor had also told Mma that Dineo needed milk, fruit and vegetables to keep her body strong.

"But he didn't tell me how to find the money to buy them all," Mma added quietly.

By the time they reached their village, the moon had moved far across the dark sky. Nono stirred as they entered the house. She had been waiting anxiously for their return. Naledi could hardly keep her eyes open while she drank the tea Nono gave her. She crept under the blanket, finishing her last mouthful.



Chapter Fourteen

WAITING

IT WAS USUALLY a good time for the children when Mma was at home. First there would be the excitement of waiting for her to arrive and then the flurry of greetings, hugs and news. Later, Mma would open her case and bring out the presents she had been saving for the family. On her 'day off' in the city, she sometimes went to jumble sales to buy the clothes the white people no longer wanted. Then would follow the pleasure of days when Mma would be around the house – helping Nono with the work, or playing with Dineo, and always ready to listen to the children's stories about what they had been doing.

But this time was different – like the time when Mma came just after Rra died.

The three days of waiting before Mma had to return to the hospital passed slowly. The grown-ups didn't speak of their worst fear, although Naledi saw the heavy, worried look in their eyes. Each morning Tiro asked Mma how much longer it was until she had to collect Dineo. Then, after he had helped bring the water, he would go off to play for short periods, but Naledi preferred to stay all the while at home with Mma.

On the fourth day Mma set off very early, alone. She had borrowed just enough money from a neighbour to pay for her bus fare to and from the hospital. That day seemed to pass even more slowly. Tiro stayed right outside the house fiddling with a piece of wire, changing its shape many times, then using it to draw in the sand. When Naledi wasn't busy, she came and sat on the doorstep, gazing out at the road. She forced her mind to stay blank, just searching the distance for any figures coming from the direction of the big road, where the bus would stop. She didn't want to think about what was happening in the hospital, because it would bring

back the picture of the plastic bag.

From time to time, Naledi would see the vague shape of a woman appear with a baby wrapped to her back, but as she came closer, Naledi would see it wasn't Mma. It was late in the afternoon when at last there was a figure which really did seem to be Mma. Naledi called out to Nono, who was in the house, and she and Tiro began racing up the dusty road.

"It's Mma! It is!" Tiro shouted as they ran.

"Dineo's on her back!" Naledi panted.

As the two children came sprinting towards her, Mma stopped and turned a little so they could see their sister. As the children greeted her, she gave a shy smile, resting her head on Mma's shoulder.

"She's still quite weak, but her fever has gone," said Mma.

With Naledi and Tiro either side of her, Mma walked on to the house. Mmangwane came up the road, calling out in delight. Nono remained at the door, holding on to the side for support.

"My child," she whispered, as she put out her hand to touch Dineo's head.



Chapter Fifteen

HOPE

THAT NIGHT THE children found it hard to get to sleep. Mma had to return to the city the next morning as each day she was losing pay.

There was all the borrowed money to pay back now, as well as the money to send Nono each month for food, school and all the other expenses. Mma was clearly worried about Dineo not getting enough milk. The nurse had repeated what the doctor had told Mma about Dineo needing milk, fruit and vegetables.

"But we work very hard and earn very little," Mma had said with a sigh as she cuddled Dineo, before putting her down to sleep.

Tiro had said goodnight, but lay thinking about

the boy on the orange farm. He wondered if he himself was old enough to go and find work. But he knew Mma wouldn't agree. Hadn't she said the children working the farm should be in school?

Then he thought of Dumi and the bit in the letter about studying in another country. Studying what? Tiro wondered. He would ask Naledi tomorrow…

Tomorrow he would also remake his wire car and try out Jonas and Paul's design. Putting out his arm, he touched Dineo. It was lovely knowing she was there again. If only Mma didn't have to go away now…

Naledi lay awake too, listening to the murmuring voices of Nono, Mmangwane and Mma. It was so comforting to hear them all together. But tomorrow night Mma's voice would be missing.

Naledi buried her head in her arms, forcing back her tears. Crying wouldn't help. She couldn't imagine Grace crying and Grace had to look after her young brothers and the house all by herself most of the time. Yet Grace had said things in a way that made you feel better, like when she had said, "We're pushed all over the place, but it won't be like that for ever."

But when would they see Grace again? It

occurred to Naledi that at least they could write to each other. Tomorrow she must ask Mma to find out Grace's address.

Then a new idea came to her. Wasn't it possible that in her own school there were people like Grace? Naledi had overheard bits of conversations amongst the older students, although she had never taken much notice before. But why shouldn't she begin to talk to them and become friends, even if she was a little younger? If they heard she had been to Johannesburg, they could be interested, she was sure.

What was it Mma had said about the children in Soweto? That they didn't want to learn just to be servants. Oh yes, they were right.

All of a sudden, lying there in the dark, it became so clear to Naledi. It wasn't just *their* schools they were talking about. It was *her* school too. All those lessons on writing letters... for jobs as servants... always writing how good they were at cooking, cleaning, washing, gardening... always ending with "Yours obediently".

Naledi had never thought about it before tonight, but never, never, had she written about wanting to be... say, a doctor. Yes, that's what she'd like to be.



Imagine how useful it would be if she became a doctor. Especially in their own village, she could even look after her own family.

For a few moments, Naledi lay imagining herself in a long white coat, in a bright room with shining cupboards all around her (like the cupboards where Mma worked). Then something jarred...

She saw in her mind someone bringing her a little baby. The mother looked like the young woman in

the queue at the hospital and the baby was so thin that its little rib bones pushed up from under its skin. The mother was clearly poor and had no food for her child.

Where would she, the doctor, get food for the baby? When she opened her shining cupboards they were empty.

Naledi then began to imagine a whole line of mothers and grandmothers bringing weak, thin little babies up to her. What could she do?

For a while she felt the tears pressing on her eyelids again. No! She wouldn't give in to tears. It was just that she couldn't work this all out by herself. Well, school would be starting again in a week. That wasn't long. At break time she would go where the older students usually sat chatting. Just wait till they heard where she and Tiro had been.

Naledi turned over and stroked Dineo's cheek, making her sister smile a little in her sleep. How strange, thought Naledi. If Dineo hadn't been so terribly ill, she and Tiro would never have made the journey to get Mma. It had saved Dineo, she was sure. But also through this journey, she had begun to find out so much…

The grown-up voices had stopped and Naledi heard Mma blow out the lamp and quietly shift into bed. Naledi's eyelids were heavy and she felt sleep pulling at her. She fell asleep at last, picturing her first day back at school, surrounded by friends, old and new.