


MAKEBA

MY STORY



**BY MIRIAM MAKEBA
WITH JAMES HALL**



NAL BOOKS

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I WALK HOME FROM SCHOOL

with two girlfriends. The journey is five miles. It's hard making this walk day after day. This afternoon there is another problem: The skies are low and black, and raindrops, big and wet, begin to pelt us. My friends and I begin to run. There is thunder and lightning. We run faster. A bright flash lights up the ground. The thunder sounds like a bomb. My companion and I look back. Our girlfriend is not there. We see orange flames on the ground. A black thing is burning. We rush back. The remains of my friend's clothes are afire on a body that has been charred black. Her eyes are empty sockets and her tongue sticks grotesquely out of her mouth. For a moment I stand and stare in horror and disbelief. Then I turn and run. Some boys have come upon the scene, but I pass them without stopping.

I run all the way home. I have never known such fear. When I get to my grandmother's mud-brick house, the door is closed. I do not slow down or even notice. I knock the door down! I am going so fast that the door on its old hinges falls down when I strike it. Below me, lying on a mat on the floor, is my older sister Mizpah. She is covered with blood. Sweaty strands of hair fall over her face as she looks at me, too exhausted to speak. I am so terrified I cannot talk or even scream. A woman I do not know is here. A squirming, newborn baby is in her arms. The woman is a midwife. My sister has just given birth. The world has lost a life and has gained a life almost at the same moment. I have

witnessed both. But the shocks are too great. Beside myself, I collapse. The boys who also witnessed the tragedy on the road appear and explain the reason for my delirium.

When clouds gather outside my window in the morning, I fear a rainstorm. My grandmother pampers me by letting me stay home from school when I tell her I have a headache. But there is something I have discovered at the all-black school that makes me overcome my terror of lightning. It is the senior chorus.

When she was in school, my sister Mizpah was a member, and I used to sneak into the school's little square auditorium after classes to listen. I liked the way the boys and girls were lined up on the stage, where the flag of the South African colony is posted on one side and the Union Jack is on the other. Whenever the teachers caught me peeking out from behind the seats, they threw me out. I was easy to find because I always sang along. Mizpah told me I shouldn't embarrass her, but I could not keep away. This senior chorus is much finer than the church choir that I was in. Listening to them, I got so stirred up inside that I had to sing along.

The teacher who leads the chorus is named Mr. Molefe. He is very dark, and his large hands cut through the air as he conducts the music. It was a scary moment for me when those hands stopped conducting, and Mr. Molefe turned and searched the auditorium to find the little voice that was singing behind him.

"You, there, little girl! What is your name?"

"Zenzi." My voice is very soft and shy when I am not singing.

"You look too young to be a senior."

"No, sir. I'm not even a junior."

There was some tittering from the big girls. My sister gave me a dirty look. I guess she was thinking to whoop me.

Mr. Molefe smiled at me. "How would you like to join us?"

I did not know what he meant. "Huh?"

"How would you like to sing with us? You can't seem to keep quiet down there. You might as well be on stage."

I couldn't believe it. I got up and stood on the stage where he placed me. I looked like a skinny, big-headed midget surrounded by the big girls with their long legs and full chests.

Now Mr. Molefe uses me as a surprise attraction. A novelty.

During rehearsals he tells me I really sing well. All I know is I enjoy it. We go to competitions with other schools. We perform songs written by South African composers. They are in the tribal languages, and some are frankly seditious to the white rule. But since whites do not speak our tongue, we get away with it.

As a black child, just attending school is almost an act of sedition. Education is considered "bad" for us, or, at best, unnecessary. The natives have been assigned the roles of servants to our colonial masters. We are not taught geometry because we will not be given a chance to use it. We are not taught geology. The less we know about the outside world the better. We are to live in isolation.

There is a child's book called *Black Beauty*. It is banned. The authorities do not read the book, so they do not know that it is about a horse. They think it is about racial pride!

What we are taught is the culture and history of England. Of our own tribal histories, there is nothing. Of the arts and accomplishments of our own people, not a word. We learn of Winston Churchill. I am told that he is a great statesmen, and I believe that he is: for England, if not for us. I am told that Franklin Roosevelt is a great statesmen. For America, we know he is, but not for us. The teachers talk a lot about Hitler. They say that if he ever gets to us he is going to make lamp shades out of our skin. I don't know why he is mad at us, because he is at war with England, and South Africa is just a colony, and, besides, what do we natives have to do with the colonial government here? But I do not want to have a lamp shade made from my skin.

We also hear of Mahatma Gandhi. He is making trouble for the British in India, but never to mind that, we are to study his message of pacifism. The authorities want us to be nonviolent, too.

I do not understand the war. I am only seven when it begins, and it is very far away. I'll be a teenager when it is over. My people have no rights in a country that has been taken from us, but we are still forced to die for it. My uncles are drafted into the army. Many of my friends' fathers leave. A long time passes, and some return to tell of fighting in North Africa. They return sick with malaria. At least they are alive. Two of my uncles never return. Their bodies are not shipped home for burial. We

never see them again. The authorities do not let us live in dignity, and they do not let us die with dignity. No one can say that the British are not consistent.

It is illegal for a black to own a shortwave radio. We might hear things from the outside world that we should not, like how other people in totalitarian states are rising up against their oppressors. If you can afford one, you can have a regular radio, and listen all day to syrupy white-people's music and censored newscasts. There are two sets of newspapers: the ones for the whites and the ones for us. The authorities control the content of the black press, although natives staff the editorial positions. There are collaborators throughout black South Africa: rich people who grow fat off the sufferings of their brothers, and the strong men who are betrayed by a lack of opportunity and must find work in the police forces. And there are the spies and informers. Informers are discovered all the time amongst us. If they are lucky, they are beaten. If they are not lucky, they die.

I open up a black newspaper and look at the fantasy inside. Nothing is connected with real life. There are stories about witches casting spells on people. Every crime committed by a black is played up. The advertisements tell us that we are ugly, and the only way to obtain true beauty is to try to become as much like a white as possible. We are encouraged to conk our hair to make it straight. The ads for chemicals to bleach our skin fill a page.

The whites have to justify their rape of our land, and so they claim that we are inferior. We are not worthy of God's gifts. It says so in their Bible. They lay claim to our land and our lives and then, to add insult to injury, they patronize us. They say we are ignorant children. Our salvation and welfare are—alas!—"the white man's burden."

And after a while a terrible thing happens. For many of my people, the message begins to sink in. Day after day we are treated like dirt and told we are inferior. It is drummed into our heads. First, your self-respect disappears. You begin to hate everything that is black. The white culture is full of references to things that are black and evil. We are told not to let a black cat cross our path. With the war, there has come a thing called the black market, where money is traded illegally. But what black person ever heard of money before the white man came?

When you begin to hate yourself, you look at someone who is in your own image and you don't have any love for him, either. The streets in our township at night erupt with violent fights. Young people stab each other, kill each other. "Why do you look at me like that?" a boy will shout, and then, stab! I see a knife fight almost every day. The authorities do nothing. They encourage this division among us. On weekends and at Christmastime the ghetto becomes a slaughterhouse. People kill each other, and the authorities say, "Oh, it's just holiday drunkenness." This way the authorities don't have to do anything. If someone wants to kill you, they just wait until a holiday, because they know they won't be prosecuted. Kill a dog or a bird in a protected area and you go to jail. Kill a white man and you hang. But kill a black man, it's all right.

I, too, fall victim to envy. You would have to be blind not to see that everything that is better or even good goes to the whites. You cannot help but think: I wish I was white so I might live well and not suffer the way I do. But if I am envious of white people as a little girl, I am only envious of the way they live. I do not want to *be* white. I will never bleach my skin, although I am dark. I will not straighten my hair. As time passes I begin to discover something about myself: I am not bad-looking. As my body grows, my head becomes more proportional. My mother says that I am pretty. Mothers are supposed to say that. But there are boys, certain boys, who also say I am cute. By the time I am a teenager I begin to believe them.

I don't have many girlfriends. Most of my friends, my best friends, are boys. I feel at ease with boys. They don't gossip like girls do. We go out to the field and fly kites. We talk about everything. They tell me about their girlfriends. I do have some girlfriends, and I get together with them every Sunday to play jazz records from America. We meet at somebody's house, make food, and sit for hours listening to Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holliday on the wind-up record player. I like them a lot, these great jazz singers. My big brother, Joseph, gives me his records to bring. He is very musical himself. He plays soprano saxophone and piano. Joseph encourages me to sing. He taught me American songs before I even knew the language. When his friends come over he has me sing for them. Sometimes I don't even know what I am saying, but I put all I have into it.

. . . a man is a two-face:
 a worrisome thing
 who'll leave you to sing
 the blues in the night!

Joseph is proud of me. His friends applaud.

When I am with boys whom I like I grow aware for the first time of how poor I am. When I was younger I didn't care if I had to go to school without shoes. But now I am embarrassed because the other girls have shoes and I don't. My mother buys me a pair, but I have to save these for Sunday to go to church. These are difficult days for my mother. Her work is not getting easier. I try not to complain. My older sister Hilda, who is my favorite, helps me. Usually I wear hand-me-down clothes. Hilda makes me some new dresses of my very own.

The World War comes to an end. Nothing changes for us, except that my uncles who are still alive come home. All the black war veterans have been promised pensions. The promises are not kept. Instead, each man is given ten pounds—and a bicycle. They have fought and died to make the world safe from an evil that wanted to enslave everyone. Those of my people who survived now return to a land where we are little more than slaves ourselves. And things are about to get worse.

For myself, as a teenage girl, it is a time of great personal change. I am becoming a young woman. There are ceremonies in our culture when a child comes of age. My boyfriends turn sixteen and they leave to go to the hills. For three months they are away from their parents and homes as they undergo the circumcision rites that will make them men. The elders teach them how to defend themselves with *intonga* sticks. There is other training. And then the boys are circumcised. At that age they can really feel the pain. But this is the idea: to learn to endure pain, to become a man.

Girls have their own rites. When a young girl becomes a woman at the time of her first period, she is put in the same house as other women of her age and condition. For three months the elders come and give instruction on lovemaking, and they teach the skills and graces a woman must know. But by my time, this tradition is observed less and less by girls. Who has the three months to spare? My mother, older sisters, and

grandmother teach me what I have to know. Besides, I am now enrolled in the Kilnerton Training Institution.

This is the senior high school. I still sing in the chorus. I have grown up in this chorus. I am no longer a novelty, but one of the ensemble. We stand rigid with our hands clasped over our chests when we perform, four rows of singers. As I grow older, I advance up row by row. Every Christmas, we sing Handel's *Messiah*. "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" But we also perform very profound songs written in the tribal languages that talk about our way of life as it is. These songs are to educate the people. We Africans have always been able to communicate with each other through singing. If something happens today, tomorrow somebody will write a song about it. Positive or negative: If it happened, there is a song. Some are played on the radio until the government finds out what they mean, and then they are banned. But we sing them amongst ourselves. Our songs mean more to us than the official media of the press and radio. The government realizes this. When the monetary system is changed from the pound to the rand, native artists are hired to explain to our people what the new money means.

One profound song we sing is "Today's Times," in Sotho. It was composed, like many of our songs, by our chorus director, Mr. Joseph Mutuba. Mr. Mutuba becomes a very important person in my life. He thinks I am a good singer, and he encourages me in every way. He forms a trio with myself and two other girls so we can gain experience performing. With Mr. Mutuba at the piano, we sing to raise funds for our school at community centers, churches, and at other schools. My partners and I make look-alike dresses. For the first time I learn stage movements. We move slowly and gracefully, using the entire body. Not everyone in our audiences knows Zulu or Sotho, so I have to make them understand with my gestures and facial expressions. Music has always affected me, but now I learn to project my emotions. Under Mr. Mutuba's direction, I also learn to do more than make pretty sounds with my singing voice. I begin to communicate. I am becoming a performer.

A big event is about to happen, and we in the chorus are thrown into a heavy schedule of rehearsals. The King of England is going to pay a visit to South Africa. His daughter, Princess Elizabeth, will celebrate her twenty-first birthday here. My friends

and I debate whether she will look like the princess in the storybooks. Will she and her father wear crowns? Will they ride in a coach?

And the most important question: Will they see *me*? It seems that Mr. Mutuba has decided to give me a solo spot when we sing to King George. The chorus and I work and work. Finally, the big day arrives. This will be my first command performance. I am nervous and excited.

The radio tells us that King George has been ill, and he has come to Africa for our sunshine. He doesn't get it. Instead, it rains this morning. I stand outside, in front of the chorus on a raised platform. We get sopping wet. Before me is a microphone. I have never sung into one before. I am terrified that the lightning will strike it and kill me. My grandmother, my brother and sisters, relatives, and other guests are among the crowd standing beneath umbrellas and watching us. The King's car is supposed to pull up in front. We wait and wait. I hate the rain. I hate getting wet. I'm so wet and cold I wonder how I am going to sing.

At last the motorcade is sighted. Mr. Mutuba gives the signal and we start to sing. I raise my voice as the cars come into view. I follow them with my eyes. They do not stop. They do not even slow down. The long black cars just drive right by. I think I see a man in a window waving at us. But I can't even tell if he is wearing a crown.

What a gyp.

Perhaps it is better that King George did not hear my song. Mr. Mutuba composed it, and gave it the title "What a Sad Life for a Black Man." The lyrics are in the vernacular, and the white people cannot understand. The song is very powerful. It attacks the bitterness and the divisiveness within our black nation that has been brought on because we are a colonized people. It ends:

*Wake up my people!
Let us get together
Because the fault is within us*

We sing this song at all the competitions for years. Then some smart aleck goes and tells the authorities what it means, and it is banned.

On weekends, I go with the other students to the school basketball games. This day we are playing Maravastad, our crosstown rival. I look down at the unfamiliar boys playing from the other school. They run around in their shorts. I think my thoughts. I pick one out. He is good-looking, tall, and very well built.

To my surprise, I spot him outside when the Maravastad team is headed for their bus. He sees me, too. He must be feeling cocky since their team won, because he comes right on up to me.

"Hello!" He is so much taller than me! He is older, too. His muscles seem to come right out of his jacket. I smile shyly. I don't know what to say.

"I love you," he says. South African boys always say they love you the first time they set eyes on you.

Suddenly sassy, I know what to say next. It's like a game. "What do you mean you love me? Where do you love me from?"

He says, "So long." His team bus is leaving and he runs off to catch it. I don't even know his name. I feel something inside that is confusing and wonderful, like a strange and exotic orchid opening up within me. Its perfume will stay with me and disturb my sleep for nights.

A few weeks pass, and it becomes our school's turn to go to Maravastad for the rematch. I have been waiting for this. During the game I spot the boy on the court. He is as cute as I remember. I gather my courage, and afterward I seek him out.

He remembers me, and he seems pleased to see me. I know this is true from his smile. It is like the sunrise, and it fills me with light. The boy's name is James Kubay. They call him Gooli, and so will I. He is nineteen years old and he is still in school. He asks me if he can take me home. I tell him that I live on the other side of town. It is nineteen miles away. He tells me that he doesn't mind the bus trip.

It will be a trip that he will take many times. I have had boy friends before, but never a boyfriend. It is so new and exciting, and he is so good-looking and strong that I fall right into love. My older sisters tease me. I tell them that they are jealous. I am so deeply and sincerely in love that perhaps they really are.

Gooli takes me to the movies. It is a theater for blacks. We sit

in the balcony, and his great big hand holds mine. The movies we see come from Hollywood. We can identify with the American blacks in them because they are servants like we are. But they are lucky ones because of where they live, and every African wants to go to America, because it is the land of opportunity. The official press will not tell us these things, but we learn that black people can make something of themselves in America. Although it is very hard to do, it is not impossible like it is here. We hear of blacks who have achieved this and that: Marcus Garvey and Booker T. Washington. Right up on the screen we see Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, and Ella Fitzgerald. I rest my cheek on Gooli's broad shoulder and dream what the life of a big American singer must be like.



A few months after King George's visit, a national election is held in South Africa. My people have no part in this election, but it will decide our fate. We will look back on the fall of 1947 as a time when things went from bad to worse.

The Afrikaners have always been a majority within the white minority. But the English have always held the political power. This is because Britain won the Boer War many years before. The English became the administrators and the Afrikaners became the farmers, policemen, and supervisors of the blacks. After World War II, the candidate of the Afrikaner's Nationalist party, Dr. Milner, began to charge up the Boers. "We are oppressed, yet we are the majority," he tells them. "We were the first to get here and this is our land." His words apply more to us than to the Boers, but the Boers rise up and elect the Nationalist party ticket.

It is in this year, 1947, that a new word enters our language: apartheid. It will become one of the most hated words the world has ever known. The Boers are going to create the type of country they always wanted, and to do this they must make us, the natives, invisible. The word *apartheid* is Afrikaans: *apart*, which means "apart" as it does in English, and *heid*, meaning "hood." "Aparthood." It is what Mr. Orwell in England would call "newspeak" in a book he publishes around this time called *1984*.

In *1984*, Mr. Orwell writes of a totalitarian state that oppresses its people by rewriting history and convincing everyone that

black is white, wrong is right, and war is peace. But, oh, Mr. Orwell, do not look to the future for such a place. Look to today. Look at South Africa.

To justify the way they have stolen our land from us, the Afrikaners suddenly declare that the country was never ours in the first place. In fact, we never existed. When the first Dutch settlers arrived in the 1600s at the Cape of Good Hope, there were no natives to meet them. We are now told that our ancestors migrated down from the northern Transvaal after the white settlers had already established themselves.

This rewriting of history makes us laugh and cry. We laugh, because we ask who it was the Dutch thought they were fighting during all those battles when they were slaughtering us? And we cry because we know a government that can make up a lie like this can lie about anything.

But the government is rewriting history for a reason. We are told that since we were not native to this region, it is improper to refer to us as natives. We are now "Bantu." The Native Affairs Department in Pretoria now becomes the Department of Bantu Affairs. What, we ask, is a Bantu? We are told: All Africans from the Congo in Central Africa all the way south are now considered "Bantu People." Tribes that have nothing in common are now lumped together. The British once liked to exploit tribal differences; the new authorities find it better to take away our identities.

Men come to each African house and install plastic radio speakers. There are no dials on these radios because there is only one station: the official station. We can only turn the volume up or down. All day and all night there is bland music and propaganda news broadcasts. The announcers tell us Africans how well off we are in this country, and how bad things are up north. There is never any news of the outside world. Announcements are made telling us what we can and cannot do. The broadcast system is called Ready Fusion, and it is different from something Mr. Orwell might invent only because we have to pay for it. We don't believe a word of the propaganda, but we listen. It is important to keep up on all the new acts that are being passed to control us.

The separation of races is now being enforced by the Immorality Act, which makes interracial relations illegal. But the new

official policy of apartheid calls for many more steps to distance us from the whites. The Group Areas Act is passed to segregate all housing for Africans. The law will lay the groundwork for the forced relocation of thousands of people into barren wastelands called "homelands"—a horror that as of now we cannot even imagine. We are too busy coping with another law: the Bantu Education Act.

It's all over for the separate but more-or-less equal education that I have experienced under the old regime. The Boers want us as ignorant as possible. Schools for blacks are closed down and teachers are fired. Class time is cut back. The curriculum is redesigned. The new system assures that the Africans will remain ignorant, and good for nothing but servant jobs and menial work.

I am almost all the way through the educational system before it changes. I do not see what happens next. With life more unsettled than before for Africans, things get harder for my family. My mother moves from job to job, and to help make ends meet I must leave school to go to work. I am now sixteen. My love for Gooli has not lessened. No matter what happens, we vow to go on seeing each other.



Now that I am going out into the white world, I must be careful how I act. I do not know any white people, but I have learned how to speak to them. If a man or woman addresses me, I must answer, "*Ja, baas,*" which is Afrikaans for "Yes, boss." Always to a policeman I must say, "*Ja, baas,*" or else I may end up somewhere! If a white child addresses me, I must say, "*Ja, klein baas,*" which is "Yes, little boss." I must be very careful if I want to survive.

I go and take a job in Wavely, a suburb at the foot of the mountains near Pretoria. I work for a Greek family, taking care of their child, washing their clothes, and cleaning their house. The little boy becomes very attached to me. We play games together, and he doesn't seem to care that I am black. We get along fine. I am comfortable with my first job. The husband is kind to me, and Gooli can come visit me here. I receive my first monthly pay and send it home.

The second month the woman does not pay me. She says she is short of cash, and she asks me to wait until the third month. I

agree. But when the time again comes to be paid, the woman refuses. She looks at me sternly when I ask her why.

"You'll get nothing out of me, thief."

I am astonished. "Thief? Me?"

"That's right. You stole a watch."

I protest that this is impossible. I never even go into the masters' room. But the more I plead, the nastier this woman gets. She picks up the phone and calls the police.

Two officers arrive, and they search my room. I stand to one side, afraid. The little boy is just as nervous. He knows something is wrong, and he is worried for me. He clings to my skirt. The police lift up the pillow off my bed and there it is: the missing watch.

I break down and cry. I have seen the wife give her husband dirty looks when he smiles and is kind to me, but I never thought she could do this. The little boy cries, too. He holds on to my skirt and begs them not to take me away.

I look up and there is the husband. He is speaking to the police. One of the policemen holds the watch and shakes his head with disbelief. "Look," he tells the husband, "these people know how to steal. She would never leave this in such an obvious place."

"Of course," the other policeman says, "we know the pattern, here." It seems that this woman has fired three previous maids. To keep from paying the wages she owes, she accuses them of stealing. She knows that whites can do anything they like to a black.

But the husband also knows his wife's ways. He knows how good I am to his son. And he feels sorry for me. When the police ask him if his wife is lying, he coolly tells them that yes, she is.

The woman storms out. "Oh!" she says to me. "Kaffir!"

I am still crying, but this time out of relief. The police ask me, "Do you want to stay here?"

I am sorry for the husband and the little boy, whom I am fond of, but I am too scared. "No! I'm going home. I don't even care if she never pays me."

But the husband gives me my wages for the two months. I also take this money home, and before long I am again employed. Another Pretoria family; another job as a nanny. This time I look after two children, a boy and a girl. In the backyard

away from the big house there is a small room for me. I keep my little suitcase there and my few things, as well as my prized possession: my one and only photograph of my father. Sometimes at night I take it out and look at it and try to recall what he was like. He died when I was so young. Already his image is hazy, and it is like trying to grasp smoke to remember him.

After a few weeks I am told that the family is going on vacation and I am to come along. We go by car to the seashore near Durban. The beach is wide and beautiful. It is for white people only. If blacks want to swim, they go to the city pool. While I am at the beach I stay close to the family. The wife has brought along two four-gallon tins. She gives them to me.

"Fill these up."

"With what, mistress?" I ask.

She looks at me as if I am too dumb to live. "With seashells, of course. I need them for my handicrafts."

For three months I pick up shells. Big ones, little ones, pretty ones. One afternoon I am told to stay behind when the family leaves. The end of the trip is getting near, and the wife wants her tins filled to the top.

I am left alone. People look at me, a black girl there on their beach, but I tell myself that I am a white family's servant just doing my job. Durban is tropical, and the sun sets slowly this summer day. People leave and I don't even notice them go. Suddenly, there are two Afrikaner policemen coming toward me. I wonder what kind of trouble I am in.

The police don't waste a minute. "You're under arrest for loitering."

I am scared, and I try to explain. "But I'm working. I'm gathering seashells for my mistress."

For a moment I think they are going to hit me. "Who told you to speak?"

They take me to the police station. I go meekly, but I drag along the eight gallons of seashells. I am afraid that if I lose them my story will also be lost. The policemen do not tell the sergeant that I was loitering. What they tell him instead means prison for sure.

"She was waiting to prostitute herself."

One crime committed by a black is the same as another to them. We are all guilty in their eyes. I beg them, "Oh, please,

please! Take me to my employers. I'll show you where they live. They'll explain."

They make me leave the shells at the station. The mistress is very angry when the policemen bring me, and she starts to scold me.

"Good for nothing! Can't you do anything right?"

She slaps me. I start to cry. "But you told me to stay behind and pick up shells."

She goes to the station to get the shells, and when she comes back she scolds me some more. Plans are made for the family's return trip to Pretoria. It is decided that they will go by car and I will travel by train with the mistress's stupid shells.

It is a black people's train, of course, and I travel third class. The two heavy cans of shells are a burden. I put them down on an empty space at the entrance of the next car, then I return to my seat and try to sleep sitting up. An announcement is made at a stop to tell us that the train will be changing cars and we should stay where we are.

I look out the window and I see the car behind moving backward. "Oh, no!" I am here, and the tins full of shells are there. This is big trouble for me. I get up, go to the door, open it, and jump down to the tracks. I run to the other car about fifty yards away. When I arrive I reach up and pull down the cans. Shells spill all over the track ties. I stoop and start to pick them up. A whistle blows. The train ahead begins to move away from me. I lift the cans and try to run, but they are heavy. The train is picking up speed, leaving me behind. I don't have a penny to my name. I say, "Good-bye, shells, Zenzi's going home!"

I drop the cans and race to catch up with the train. I make it back to Pretoria. My employers are to pay me my wages for the summer when I return. But I don't go back. The woman can have me arrested for losing her property. I have to give up my earnings and also leave behind my little suitcase and belongings. And I have lost my father's only photograph. This is the worst hurt of all.

I go back home and decide to get work taking in laundry. There are many bachelors from other African countries and from Europe who have come to work in South Africa under contract. We collect their clothes on Monday and return them, washed and ironed, on Friday. This brings in a little money. My mother

is living in my grandmother's compound now. She is ill with an infected foot that doesn't seem to want to get better.

Gooli still makes the nineteen-mile bus trip to see me. We go to the movies and watch our favorites: Humphrey Bogart and Richard Widmark. This day we do something different after the show. Gooli knows a place where we can go and kiss. We dare not kiss in the theater. I am too shy. We just hold hands.

Gooli has a friend who is older. This friend has a room of his own away from the main house where the rest of his family lives. I have known Gooli for a long time, and it does not take much convincing to get me to go with him. When we arrive we are all alone. Gooli turns off the light and he starts to do things to me that I have never felt before. I don't like it. I am frightened. I have no idea what is happening to me. But Gooli is forceful and determined. He is so strong and full of passion that I let him have his way.

At seventeen, it is the first time that I make love.

And I get pregnant.



WE ARE HAPPY AMATEURS.

Whenever there is a community sing, or a fund-raising activity for the church, or an amateur contest, the Cuban Brothers are there. I am the band's female vocalist. Like the others, I do not get paid. It's just fun for me. I like my friends in the group, these young boys. It seems as if my nightmare marriage to Gooli was from some other time, and I am starting over with this new life of mine. Of course, I am only twenty years old.

I guess I am as tall as I ever will be, which is five feet three inches. This is not very tall, is it? And I am very shy, too. I am just this way by nature.

Except when I sing. Then, watch out! "*Come on-a my house I give you candy!*" The hit songs from America make their way over to us. We include some in the Cuban Brothers' performances, along with ballads and dance tunes in all the tribal languages. We are getting to be known in our township of Orlando East. People come to the Donaldson Community Center to hear us. They dance. We have a good time.

But it is difficult for a young woman to be on stage. Many people in our society look at it as something bad. The old thing that women are not supposed to go on stage and show themselves takes some time to die. I have heard the neighbors gossip: "So-and-so's daughter is a whore because she is on stage." I can imagine what they are saying about *me*: "She left her husband

to show herself on stage! Why isn't she at home raising her child, instead of having her mother do it so she can sing?"

But my mother has made up her mind when it comes to my singing. She encourages me to do it because it is what my father would have wanted if he had lived. My father was a very musical man. He played piano and composed music. My mother would sing and he would accompany her. My mother tells me that my father wanted me to study music. It was his one real hope for me. Now that I am singing with my nephew Zweli's band, my mother thinks it is fine.

But I am not to be a female Cuban Brother for long. Some men show up at the Donaldson Center during one of our shows. Maybe they have heard of us. Maybe they just came by chance. But here they are, and one of them is a singer named Nathan Mdlhedlhe. Mr. Mdlhedlhe is the leader of one of the country's most popular bands: the Manhattan Brothers.

Everyone has heard of the Manhattan Brothers. We listen to them on the radio. They put out records, and they tour all over the country. When I finish singing with the band and Mr. Mdlhedlhe comes up to introduce himself, I can't believe it.

As I do whenever I meet someone who is older or someone I should respect, I curtsy to him. This is the way I have been brought up.

"I really enjoyed your show, Miss Makeba," he says. He is a tall and large man, very commanding. A thin mustache of the debonair "Manhattan" style runs above his lip. His suit, I notice, is a nice one.

I thank him for his compliment, although I think he is just being polite. Surely an amateur band like ours is beneath his notice.

But he seems sincere when he says, "You have a lovely voice. It's the voice of a nightingale."

I must look very surprised and embarrassed, because he smiles down at me. "I'm sincere. And I want you to come audition for us. The Manhattan Brothers need a female vocalist."

If I could manage to speak, I might argue. I would say that he surely does not mean *me*; that the Manhattan Brothers can choose among any female singers in the country as their vocalist; that I have never sung professionally before in my life . . .

Zweli and the others are too amazed to complain that they

might lose me. It's only an audition, I tell myself and everyone else. It's so farfetched.

Yes, it is farfetched. Very far. But somehow, I don't know how, I fetch it. The men listen to me sing. In addition to Nathan Mdlhedlhe and the musicians, there are the singers Joe Mogotsi, Rufus Khoza, and Ronnie Majola. They like the way I look, the sound of my voice, and the way I behave on stage. I listen to their compliments in a daze. And when they tell me I am hired, I really think I am dreaming. How did this happen? One day I am singing with an amateur band with Zweli, and the next moment I am to be with one of the biggest groups in the country. Life has not been easy for me, and it never made much sense to dream of things that are too impossible. I never wasted my time dreaming of living a life in show business, or of doing what I like to do more than anything else in the world, which is singing. But now, all of these are coming true as if it is, well, a dream!

They tell me that the job does not pay a lot of money. The travel is hard. But if they pay me a shilling it will be more than I have ever earned before as a singer. And the travel I think of as an adventure. All I can answer is: "When do you want me to start?"

"The first thing you'll need is a name," Nathan tells me. Even though he is the leader of the group, he won't allow me to call him Mr. Mdlhedlhe. "Miriam Makeba sounds better than Zenzi Makeba. We'll use your English name."

New handbills and posters are made for the Manhattan Brothers. They say: "And Introducing Miriam Makeba, Our Own *Nut Brown Baby*."

Rehearsals begin at Nathan's house. I learn right away that with four men singing behind me—Nathan, Ronnie, Joe, and Rufus—I have to be *loud*. There will be times when I won't have a microphone to help me. On their own, the men sing American songs by the Ink Spots and the Mills Brothers. When we are together we sing native African tunes as well as popular songs in English. Because we are black, however, we are not permitted to record songs in the English language. Six musicians make up the band: a sax, trumpet, straight-up bass, piano, and the drummers. I listen carefully to what everyone tells me. The men are older than I by at least ten years, and they know a lot about

show business. I am very eager to learn. Everyone is kind to me, and encouraging.

My older cousin, Peggy Phango, is also a big help. She takes me to the movies, and we talk. Peggy is a good singer and actress. She was just in a movie that was made here in South Africa called *Cry, the Beloved Country*. The story is about South Africa. The great old actor Canada Lee is the star, and also a young man by the name of Sidney Poitier.

Peggy is full of advice. She teaches me all about clothes and how to match colors. During the performances I am to wear Western-style outfits: the stiff petticoats that flare out. Sometimes I wear tight, strapless evening dresses. I am very tiny, but my proportions are good, and with Peggy's help, I can even look glamorous.

She tries to pluck my eyebrows, but it is too painful. "Please," I beg her, "leave me alone." Makeup does not agree with me, either. I don't like it. My mother says, "Don't put all those things on your face. They don't look right on you." Of course, there is nothing non-African about makeup. In the old days, people had different colors of clay that they used to make designs on their bodies and faces. The Egyptian women used makeup three thousand years ago. But today, ladies' makeup is manufactured by white companies for whites. It does not suit the color of our skin. A black girl looks as if she is wearing a mask. Her face is a different shade from her neck.

I am to be paid five pounds per show. This is not much money, but it is a living if we give five performances a week. The shows, held in concert halls in the black townships, are long. We sing for four hours, from eight in the evening until midnight. The audience sits in chairs, which are removed for dancing afterward. The musicians then play until five in the morning. But I do not stay to dance. I'm too tired. Also, if we are in the Pretoria area, I rush home to my mother's so I can be with Bonggi. She is a beautiful three-year-old; thin like me, but already growing tall like her father. My separation from Gooli is permanent, now. Soon we will be getting a divorce.

A journalist from the big African newspaper *The Bantu World* comes to one of our shows. The next day someone gives me the paper and there is my first review. The Manhattan Brothers gather around to see if their hunch about me was correct. I am

too nervous to read, so I give the paper to someone else. The reviewer writes that I "sing like a nightingale."

"What did I tell you!" Nathan says. Everybody whoops it up and is very happy.

"Oh, my!" I say. I am proud, but very embarrassed by the attention.

Now when Nathan introduces me during the shows, I am no longer the "Nut Brown Baby." I'm "the nightingale."

In South Africa, there is a new dance every week. The couples like to show off before the bandstand. But they are not the only ones who are showing off. Gangsters come to the clubs. I have been warned that these are very rough places. There are fights, shootings, stabbings. Some of our shows end in riots. It's very dangerous. The gangsters do whatever they want. Blacks are not supposed to drink, but these men come in, sit in front, and pull out their bottles. They put these before them on the table. Then they take out their guns and put these in front of them on the table, too. We are all supposed to look, and we can't help ourselves: We do. They are like actors, these gangsters, although they do not play. In South Africa, movies are taken very seriously, and there is a movie in the cinemas now in which Richard Widmark plays a hoodlum. They call him Styles, and he dresses up in a hat, a belted jacket, and those Florsheim shoes. The black gangsters go out and dress just like him. In the movie, Richard Widmark eats an apple after each of his crimes. So, all the African hoodlums have gone out and gotten apples, too! I see them right there on the tables between the bottles and the guns.

I am singing in Alexander Township. The club is known to be very, very rough. I look down from the stage and I see all these gangsters in front. They sit back with their feet up on the tables and they look at me. I can tell they want me as their gangster moll. I'm nervous. A girl may like them or not like them, it does not matter, because if they think they want her, they take her. I sing one of the Manhattan Brothers' most popular songs: "Saduva." When I am finished, the gangsters make me sing it again. Nathan and the boys play the number once more, because we know these men mean business. But the gangsters are not satisfied. They make me sing "Saduva" again, and then another time. It becomes a game to them. I am scared to death.

All the musicians can see the guns on the table. The gangsters can start shooting up the place anytime they want. I am forced to sing "Saduva" over and over, until I have sung it twenty times. I am about to collapse from nervous exhaustion. Nathan steps forward and says the show is over. He is very brave. I hurry off stage, and with another singer who is there, Susan Rabashan, we leave through a side exit.

We are in the alley when the gangsters come out and spot us. I think they are probably drunk and might try to do something to us right there. Susan and I run to the street to try to get a taxi. The men chase us. A car comes with other men inside. They signal for us to jump in. We do, and we find ourselves in the company of a rival gang. Susan is truly scared, but, fortunately, among these men I recognize a distant cousin. Siphso is his name. I know that even though these men belong to a gang, I am once again safe in the embrace of my extended family. I thank Siphso for rescuing us. His friends are amused and maybe disappointed that they can't have their way with us, but, really, Siphso would just have to kill them if they tried anything. So they take us home.

Home, at the end of 1953, is my very first house. Blacks are not allowed to own property anymore. We can only lease. I can't afford to buy a house, anyway, and I rent a little place in Mofolo. Mofolo is one of the black Southwestern Townships of Johannesburg. Because of apartheid, all of the Africans are being herded into these townships that the government is building. My house in Mofolo is a gray prefab one just like all the others. It has four rooms: a kitchen, a living room, and two bedrooms. The bathroom is outside. The yards are not big, but the people of each house make nice little flower gardens in front. In the backyards there are vegetable gardens, and sometimes chicken coops. We shop in clean, modern stores that are run by blacks but owned by whites.

My mother comes to live with me. For the first time in her life, she no longer has to work. I can support her. And Bongsi comes, too. My house is truly a home. I am not so busy with the Manhattan Brothers that I cannot appreciate this happiness. I watch my daughter run down the block, a happy little four-year-old, past all the gray houses with the little trees tied to the lawns with strings. The land is flat, and as far as the eye can see there

are gray houses. Where the gray of Mofolo ends, the white houses of White City township begin. My brother Joseph lives in the Dube Township, two train stops away. Other family members have been relocated here. We make the best of these settlements. Having relatives around helps. We are all in the same boat. But this is nothing new for Africans.



The Manhattan Brothers are recording stars for Gallotone Records. I join them in the studio many times to make 78 rpm recordings. We are paid for these sessions, and that is all. I receive two pounds ten shillings for a day's work. We don't know anything about royalties, and Gallotone is not offering. Even if we compose songs that are published, we are not paid royalties. There is a musicians' union in South Africa, but we are not permitted to join because we are black. Some of the groups decide to try to organize one of our own. It will be a difficult task, and even if we get all the black singers to sign on, there is no guarantee that we will be recognized by the record companies.

Work begins when we rent a three-story building in downtown Johannesburg. We call it the Artists' Union Center. There are meeting rooms here, and places for us to rehearse. Classes are offered for children who want to be musicians. Everyone volunteers to make the Center work. Some of us pose for advertisements for a piano manufacturer, and the company gives us a piano that we need. Not only professionals, but others who love music come and teach the young people.

At Gallotone one day, I am asked to make a record on my own.

"With the Manhattan Brothers backing me?" I ask.

"No," they tell me. "You'll be solo on this one. It'll be a Miriam Makeba record."

My very first record! The song is originally a Xhosa tune: "*Lakutshuna Ilangu.*" Mankhewekwe Dvushe wrote the beautiful love song, which is about a lonely man who sits before the setting sun. He does not see his lover, and he is asking what has happened to her. He says, "*I will come looking for you everywhere/in the hospitals, in the jails/until I find you/Because as the sun goes down, I can't stop thinking of you.*" Hospitals and jails: The Africans know what this means. Whenever one of us is missing

for a time and we don't come home, the first place the family looks is the hospital or the jail.

The song sells very well. I am asked to record other records on my own, but this one was my "breakthrough." They play my record on the radio. The song travels overseas. In America, a songwriter likes it and writes some English lyrics. Gallotone asks if I will rerecord the song. I wonder how I can do this, since it is forbidden for a black person to sing on a record in the English language. But the company knows a hit when they see one, and they insist. I guess color barriers are broken this way. I go back into the studio, and once again I record the beautiful song that now goes by the strange title, "You Tell Such Lovely Lies."

What has happened to my wonderful Xhosa song? The American version has nothing to do with the original. The new lyrics are terrible: "*You tell such lovely lies with your two lovely eyes/ When I leave your embrace, another takes my place.*" Everyone who hears the Xhosa version and the American version is disappointed. They are nothing alike. But the new one sells well.

People begin to recognize me on the street. Some say, "How do you do, Miss Makeba?" Some even thank me for a performance. But this is all. In my culture, no one wants to be impolite or pushy. In the West, show business people are always asked to sign their names on pieces of paper. It seems that their admirers find some magic in these signatures; they can say they now own a piece of the celebrity and a part of their idol's glamor. Someone tells me it's like the Aztec Indians who ate the hearts of mighty warriors killed in battle so they could obtain their enemy's strength. These Westerners are very superstitious people.



Just because we are performers does not mean that life is easier for the Manhattan Brothers or myself. Nothing can change the fact that we are still black. The apartheid laws bind us just as tightly. In fact, life is even more difficult for us because we have to travel, eat at restaurants, and stay at hotels all the time. Nathan makes sure that all our papers are in order. Still, this does not guarantee that we will not be harassed.

One night we are traveling from Pretoria to Johannesburg. Our bus passes the International Airport, and a moment later we are stopped by the police. Two young men order us out. The

policemen search the car, looking for anything from alcohol to weapons. Guns and knives are illegal for a black to possess, of course.

The policemen are irritated that they cannot find anything. Nathan steps forward and says, "Here are our night passes."

Nathan has made a bad mistake. He has spoken to the policemen in English. There are no English policemen, only Afrikaners, and they hate the English. We hold our breaths.

The young policeman is stern. "Can't you speak Afrikaans?"

Nathan apologizes. He explains who we are and says we are returning from a performance. It is sad to see this tall, proud, and handsome man forced to humble himself before two blond pimple-heads in uniform.

"You say you are a singing group?" one of the policeman asks in a sarcastic manner. I wonder what is going to happen, since he can do anything he pleases with us.

"Okay, then," he says, "sing."

And they make us sing. The Manhattan Brothers, one of the country's top groups, is forced to stand beside the road in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night, and serenade two arrogant white kids who are probably police because they're too dumb to be anything else. Nothing is more humiliating than this.

The police are enjoying their play. They finally wave us away when they are bored with us. We are stopped twice more that night before we make it back home. At least we do not have to perform again.

Many times we are stopped so the police can inspect our night passes. Even though we always take the precaution of having these, a policeman in a bad mood sometimes says, "We're going to lock you up." It's useless to protest, unless you want to get beaten. I end up in jail a lot. It is really bad when it happens on a Friday night. The courts are not in session until Monday. We must spend the weekend in jail. Our Saturday night performances have to be canceled, and we all lose the income. When Monday comes, we stand before the magistrate. Depending on his mood, we must pay a fine or face a jail sentence.

There are times when each African wonders how much longer we can stand living the way we do, as subhumans. The whites do not want to treat us like human beings because it is easier to

keep us down if they think we are animals. But we know we are human beings. We know we are as good as anybody. We also know that something has got to happen. There is only so much anger, resentment, pain, and fear that can build up in a person before there is an explosion.

One night we perform at a place where some men are meeting to try to keep that explosion from happening. They want change, but change through nonviolent means. I recognize the group's flag when I enter the hall. Its three colors are black, green, and gold. The black represents the African people. The green is for our fertile country. And the gold represents our land's great mineral wealth. Black, green, and gold: the colors of Africa, and the colors of the African National Congress. Over forty years ago the ANC was founded by the same type of black lawyers and educators who are meeting this day. After the Manhattan Brothers perform, we are introduced to them. I am very shy. Politics is something I know nothing about. I curtsy and do not look the men directly in the face when we shake hands. There is a bearded young man with a kind, round face to whom I show the same respect. His name is Nelson Mandela, and he says he enjoys my singing. I thank him and quickly leave, because everyone is busy with something called the Freedom Charter. In this document these men are about to declare: "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white." This is revolutionary. I fear the government is going to shoot them all.



The fame of the Manhattan Brothers spreads beyond the country's borders. Nathan arranges for us to tour Swaziland, Lesotho, and the Portuguese colony of Lourenço Marques. Lesotho is our first stop; an easy trip because the little British protectorate is completely surrounded, like a dot, by South Africa. In Lesotho, blacks are permitted to drink all the alcohol they want. This doesn't mean much to me, because I don't drink. I guess all that beer I had to make for my mother-in-law made me dislike the stuff. But the musicians have a real good time after the show. We drive back to the South African border, and the bus is loaded down with bottles.

Of course, the customs police won't let us in with the loot. "You can't come in here with that. Either you leave it here and go inside, or else back you go."

No one wants to part with a single bottle. The band piles back into the bus, we drive back into Lesotho for a mile, and then everyone sits down on the ground and starts to drink up everything they bought. I can only stand by and watch what happens. Plenty does. The Manhattan Brothers get *so* stoned! Somebody starts a fight, and I have never seen a fight last so long. The musicians, the singers, everybody is in it. Some try to step in and stop the fight and they get a punch. They punch back and now they are a part of it. I am going from group to group, trying to get out of the way, but saying, "How are we going to get home?" Nobody pays me any mind.

We spend the night here in this field, in the middle of nowhere. Everyone is either too stoned or too bruised to continue. I sit in the bus that night curled up in a blanket. The boys straggle in the next morning, all these puffed-up faces and black eyes. Everyone laughs about it, but it will be a funny-looking group at tonight's performance.

The longest tour that we make starts in the countries of Southern and Northern Rhodesia and ends up in the Belgian Congo. This is the type of Africa the West likes to think of when someone mentions our continent: dense jungle, wild animals, miles and miles of unspoiled forests. But we are not tourists, we are traveling professionals, and the going is very rough. We travel by train and car. Many nights we have to sleep along the side of the road in our car when the driver is tired. The windows are always tightly rolled up, because we are strangers here and we are never certain whether we are in a game park or not. In the darkness I hear the monkeys chatter and a lion roar. Lions eat at night. The men tell me not to be nervous, but even to them a lion is no joke.

By day we pass the herds of giraffes and springboks, the elephants and gazelles. And then, just where the forests of Rhodesia are the thickest and the monkeys are the noisiest, the car turns a corner and there I am: ten feet high, smiling from a great big billboard with a bottle of Coca-Cola in my hand. I have seen this picture all over South Africa. But here? The advertising men never told me it would go this far. They came to see me at the recording company and offered me 150 pounds. I was not going to turn down that much money. My daughter Bongi saw these billboards around town, and, very excited, she came home

to tell me how happy she is to have a famous mother. I had to smile, because I was down on my hands and knees at the time scrubbing the kitchen floor.

This is the way I like my life, though. And there is excitement and adventure in my days that I never dreamed of. This day, for instance, we take a break from our tour of Rhodesia and go to the famous Victoria Falls. We make our way down to the bottom, which is a very difficult journey. I have never seen anything like this great waterfall. The ground shakes beneath our feet. The sheer, vertical drop of white water reaches all the way up into the sky. We just stand, look, and listen. The Superior Being is always with us, but there are places where he really lets you know it.

Nathan, Ronnie, Rufus, I, and the others write our names on the rocks beneath Victoria Falls. I wonder how long our names will last. It doesn't matter. Our lives are so short compared to the falls, which will go on and on. But for now, here is little Miriam Makeba, writing her name on a rock. I am twenty-two years old. If you want, you can buy my records. You can hear me on the radio or see me give a show with the Manhattan Brothers. And I'll look right back at you from the pages of a magazine or from a billboard with a bottle of Coca-Cola in my hand!

Who would have ever imagined that any of this could happen so fast, and all at once? I forgive myself if I enjoy it, because there is too much danger and oppression in my country to think that any of it will last.



I AWAKEN TO FIND MYSELF in the worst nightmare of my life. I will not be free from its horror for two days.

My collarbone feels as if it is on fire. The air is hot and steamy. The van that I am in is on its side, and I am crumpled against the passenger's window. When I fell asleep I must have slumped down on the driver, and the steering wheel must have struck my collarbone. I do not remember the accident, but I know I must get out: quickly, before the car catches fire.

I stand and squeeze my way past the steering column, then out the window above me. I am that skinny. It is about four in the morning, and dark outside. The van is on a slope. When I drop down to the ground, I collapse. My hip is also hurt. I hear someone groan. Matthew Mbatha, the driver, is below. He has been thrown out. His face is bloody. It was Matthew who volunteered to drive some of us back to Johannesburg when the Manhattan Brothers wanted to stay behind and go to a party after our Durban concert. We are one of the acts in a show called *Township Jazz*. Matthew is a musician from another group. I remember there were more of us in his van, people who did not want to go to the party, like me, and wanted to start the eight-hour journey to Johannesburg early.

Everyone has been thrown clear of the wreck. I see Victor Mkhize, the famous comedian. He is unconscious, and hurt very badly. There is another young man, a musician, who is bleeding

from the head. He and two other teenage musicians are in shock. I think: Where are the children?

Four young boys are also in the show. They are part of a penny-whistle group. They lie scattered across the slope with our torn and battered luggage. Cuts and scratches cover their small, scared faces. But they are just shaken up, and not seriously hurt. Then I see the other car. My heart leaps into my throat: It is a family of whites. There is a husband and wife, the husband's brother, and two children. The husband and one of the children are dead. The brother will lose a leg.

We are in the middle of the country, twenty-eight miles from a town called Volksrust. We wait until dawn for the police to arrive. We are in too much shock to speak to each other. When the police appear they are furious that a car of natives has had an accident with a car of white people. They put the dead man and boy in their cars, and load the rest of the whites into the ambulance that comes. I have a mohair blanket from Scotland that I like very much. I curl it around me. It is winter, and we are cold. A policeman pulls my blanket off me and puts it over one of the dead bodies.

"Please," I say, "it's very special . . ."

"Shut up!"

I shut up, of course. The ambulance leaves. The police go away. No one has paid the slightest attention to our injuries. We wait for hours. The police come back, but not to help us. Whatever the facts were, to them we are guilty of the fatal accident. One of the policemen pulls out his gun and points it at us. "You killed white people! I could shoot every one of you!" We kneel, cringing, before him. I cover my eyes. We don't know if he will shoot or not.

He goes away. The police want us to leave, and they don't care how we do it. But the car is smashed. Matthew's face has swollen as big and round as a basketball. Victor Mkhize is still unconscious, the young man is in terrible pain, and the children cry with fright and cold. I am really hurting, myself, and scared.

It is early afternoon when two young Swiss men drive by in their Volvo. They see me waving. "Hey! You're Miriam Makeba!" I can't believe my good luck: They saw our show in Durban.

"Please, take me to town," I beg. Because I am the only older

person who is not seriously hurt, I leave the others beside the road.

In Volksrust we go to the hospital. I explain that there has been an accident, and some injured people have been lying unattended along the side of the road for ten hours. But it is a white hospital, and they won't listen. I am ordered to a native hospital. The two Swiss men are not permitted to enter the segregated black area without permits. They give me money to take a taxi. I thank them sincerely.

When I arrive at the native hospital, I find a small infirmary. My hip is giving me great pain. My neck is swollen. But I cannot rest. The infirmary is too poor to have an ambulance. With some directions, I go off to rent a little truck. The man is black, but he does not trust me because I am from the big city, Johannesburg, and he thinks I might cheat him. I beg his sons to help me. They convince their father by saying they will come with me. I have to pay nineteen pounds in cash, but I get the truck. We drive back to the scene of the accident.

Nobody is here. Our van lies on its side, and the other car has gone. The musicians in our group, the four children, Victor, and Matthew have disappeared. It is now late in the afternoon. Because it is the dead of winter, the day is already ending. I drive with the two young men around the countryside, searching for anyone who might know what has happened. We go for miles without passing a house. Finally, I see some people walking along with a lantern. Yes, they heard of the accident. They know that some young children are at the train station. I ask directions, and we go off to find not a station but a little roofless platform beside some tracks where the trains pick up passengers. The four little boys are there, shivering in the dark, hungry and scared. They tell me the Swiss gentlemen returned to the accident and took away the three injured men. After this, the police returned, chased away the two remaining teenage musicians, and brought the boys to this desolate place. Whatever luggage the children could carry in their arms they salvaged from the wreck. We load this into the truck, and we all go into town. The children have not eaten all day. I take them to some people's house, and the family gives them food. It is late at night, now, and I am worried about Matthew, Victor, and the young man.

Luckily, I see the Volvo of our Swiss friends. I ask them to which hospital they took the injured. They say, "The first one we came to."

This would be the white people's hospital, I know, so our men will have to be moved. I cannot do this alone. With the sons of the truck's owners, I set off for the long trip to Johannesburg to find the Manhattan Brothers. When we arrive it is early morning. Nathan tells me that they passed the site of the wreck the previous morning, but no one saw anything because it was still dark. We go immediately to Gallotone Records to get some cars. Twenty-four hours have passed since the accident. I am finally taken to a hospital to be treated, and after this I do not want to go back to Volksrust. The long car trip frightens me. But Nathan needs me to point out the hospital.

It is almost afternoon when we return to find our friends near death. Not only did the white hospital not admit them, which I had assumed, but the authorities also refused to give them *any type of medical treatment at all*. An injured dog would have been shown more compassion. Instead, Matthew, Victor, and the young musician were placed in a back room. The authorities assumed they would either be picked up, or they would die. It did not matter to the people in charge.

At the native infirmary, the men are given some treatment, but their injuries require that we take them to Baragwanth, the big hospital that serves the black townships of Johannesburg. It is late at night when we arrive. Matthew is treated, and he survives. The doctors operate on the young man for a ruptured bladder. His pain, like Matthew's, is at an end. But Victor dies on the operating table. He would have lived if he had been attended to when the accident first happened, *almost two days ago*.

Victor Mkhize, one of our most beloved comedians, is dead because he is black. All of us might have died because the authorities would rather threaten us like the policeman with his gun at the side of the road than lift a finger to help us. They would prefer us dead. There are too many of us. The land is no longer ours. Are we so stupid, our masters want to know, that we do not realize we are less than dirt beneath their feet? We are not human beings, we are scum. Why don't we just die? It

disgusts them that we do not. It makes them angry and upset, because they now have to find ways to do it themselves.

I have just looked genocide in the face. Hate-filled, murderous eyes were glaring at me, a black South African. Exhausted from my injuries, I pass out. This time, I and some of the others have survived. But for how long? How long?



Bongi is crying as she runs to me. She has just started school under the Bantu Education Act. My generation was the last to receive even minimal schooling. Under the new act, black children will learn to read a little and write a little, but no more. They are being prepared to be servants and manual laborers. Many of the children where I live who have been in school for years still do not speak proper English. The whites in South Africa complain that we are their intellectual inferiors, and they cannot even talk to us because we know nothing. But whose fault is this?

Bongi is not crying now over of the handicaps she will face because of her education.

"They called me *boesman*! They called me *boesman*!"

It hurts me to hear this. "*Boesman*" is an evil name the black Africans give light-skinned, mixed-raced people. Lighter skins are looked down upon by these people, and to call someone a *boesman* is like calling an American black a "nigger." Bongi is black, but she is not as dark as I am. She is light like her father.

I cannot fight my daughter's battles for her, so I say to her, "Go back and tell those children that, yes, you are light, but you are beautiful."

Already, Bongi knows she is a pretty little girl, and this is not going to change because of some mean children. Her smile lights up, and she runs back into the yard. "So what if I'm light?" I hear her say. "I'm beautiful!"

But if some blacks look down upon mulattoes, the government considers them superior to us. In our country, the authorities have made a third race: the Coloreds. According to the Immorality Act, no white can have any intimacy with a black, and vice versa. But even so, two million Coloreds have appeared. It just goes to show that you cannot keep people from doing what they want.

If a black mother gives birth to a Colored child, she is permit-

ted to keep the child, although the boy or girl will be sent to Colored schools. At the age of eighteen, the young person must decide whether he or she wants to live as a Colored or as an African. Because of the Group Areas Act, blacks, whites, Coloreds, and Indians—that sizable colony from India who have been here for many years—all live in separate neighborhoods. The authorities determine who is to live where by simply looking at a person's skin. If a black's skin is bright, he may be classified Colored. And in this way, many Coloreds "pass" as whites. The young Colored man or woman at age eighteen must decide to give up his or her family for good and enter the Colored world—where he or she will be rewarded by the System with clerical jobs and other privileges denied blacks—or else be classified as an African and face the hardships and discriminations that are our way of life. The choice to never see one's family again is difficult, but few choose to be black.

The Indians also feel superior to us. It is unheard of for a young Indian man to go out with a black girl and talk about marriage. Like the whites and the Chinese, the Indians usually impregnate black girls, give them some money, and then leave them.

There is quite a lot of talk, then, and even some scandal about Sonny and me.

Sonny Pillay is the first famous South African Indian—he is a well-known singer—who openly goes out with a black woman like me. He is one of the main performers in our new touring show, *African Jazz and Variety*. Thirty-six artists are on the program of the popular review. The great South African singer Dorothy Masuka, who was one of my idols when I was young, has top billing. Sonny is right below her, and then the rest of the names are listed on down until "Miriam Makeba, and Others." Although I am listed last, at least they now put me above the "Others." The Manhattan Brothers are not a part of this revue. I am working away from them for a while.

It is 1956, and I am twenty-four years old when *African Jazz and Variety* begins a tour that will last eighteen months. The troupe travels from city to city, playing to white audiences and, once a week when my people are permitted into the theater, to black audiences. This is always on Thursday, when the domestics are given the night off. The Manhattan Brothers and I still find time

to record for Gallotone. The company has also decided to create a new singing group called the Skylarks with me as the lead. Three other girls sing with me. I record songs with the Skylarks on the side, and we even have some hits.

It is funny how we dream up songs. We go up to the roof at Gallotone and start improvising. Someone comes up with a melody, and someone else thinks of some lyrics. The next thing you know, we are running downstairs and bursting into a recording room. "Please, we have to put this down before we forget it! Right away!"

The producers see us working like this, and after a while they give us a tape recorder.

It is a busy time. But love has never cared about my schedule. It just barges in whenever it wants. There is nothing I can do, especially if the man is Sonny Pillay.

Sonny is very handsome, with dark, straight hair, and brown eyes that are full of warmth and love and humor. Eyes don't lie, and I can tell by his that he wants me very much, as much as I want him. Because Sonny is famous, and I am getting to be known, we become an "item." This means that our private lives suddenly become everybody's business. My friends say, "You can't go out with an Indian!" I think that maybe they are afraid that I will get hurt. But I tell them, "I'm going out with an Indian who is not ashamed to be going out with me." Bongi likes him, and my mother is not shocked in any way. She has always liked my friends, no matter what color they are. As long as they are polite and have good manners, she doesn't care.

It is difficult to find time to be together, but somehow Sonny and I manage. He introduces me to the movies of Elvis Presley. Here is a white American who moves and sings almost like we do. My friends and I like Elvis, until we read in the paper that he has said that he does not care for black women to write him fan mail because we aren't good enough to wipe his shoes. We know that most of what we read in the official papers are lies—the authorities probably heard that black women like this white singer and they are trying to discourage it—but since we are never really sure what the reality is outside of our lives, we are a little disappointed.

The producer of *African Jazz and Variety*, Mr. Alfred Herbert, is the first white man I get to know. His mother is Sarah Silvia, one

of the major figures in the Jewish theater. Mr. Herbert is always full of energy and good cheer. He has to be an optimist, because there are so many problems trying to do a black review. With the help of his mother, Mrs. Silvia, he manages to book us into the Town Hall in Johannesburg. No blacks have ever sung here.

Traveling is still a problem for us. It is hard to find a restaurant. We are not permitted to eat with white people, of course, and the places for the Africans are not very good. I buy myself an enameled hot plate, a spoon, a fork, and a knife. At the stores I buy baked beans and sausages and eat them from the can in my room. Sometimes we have people invite us to their homes, and then we eat good food.

Mr. Herbert gets us the necessary permissions to travel. We go by bus, car, or the natives' train. On our way to Cape Town, the police stop us. A bus full of Africans to them is like a red flag in front of a bull. They make a search, and to our horror they discover a gun. This is trouble. No one claims it, and we are all taken to jail.

I am not permitted to call home. My mother does not know where I am. I am very worried that Bongi might get scared, because I make it a habit of calling her every day, no matter where I am. Sometimes I think I am practically working for the phone company. My worry becomes panic when the judge orders us to be held in jail until the matter with the gun is cleared up. A day passes, and then another. I am traveling with six men, and no other women. I sit alone in a woman's cell and cry. I want my mother and my little girl. I want to be held in Sonny's arms. But I am away from them all for an entire week. Finally, Mr. Herbert tracks us down. He convinces the gun's owner, an Indian musician, to claim his property and promises he will get him a lawyer. We are released, but it has been the most time I have been in jail since I was six-month-old baby.

Even though traveling has its dangers, Bongi comes with me during her summer vacation. She is six, now, and for three months we are together. I am very happy. She is my only child, and I think I may be spoiling her, but I can't help it. Whatever I can I give her, and sometimes that is bad for a parent to do. But I feel guilty because I am away from her so much, traveling around the country.

Bongi likes the musicians as much as they like her. She writes

a poem and reads it for us on the bus. One of the musicians puts it to music, I add some lyrics, and we have a song that we sing as we drive along. It's a silly little song, with the Zulu name "Sahamba." But when I get back to Gallotone, I record it. Bongi's poem becomes a hit!

Dorothy Masuka, the woman whose name tops the list of artists in *African Jazz*, has become my best friend. It is unusual for me to have a close friend who is a woman. I have always liked the company of boys, and then men. And then to have one of the singing idols of my youth as a friend is really unusual. Dorothy and I are always singing: backstage at the shows, on the train, or at Gallotone, where we begin to record together. She is smart and fast. Dorothy also composes beautiful melodies. Always, she is thinking of a new one. When one pops into her head, she comes to me and says, "Hey, Miriam! Take this part." I hum it, and she improvises by humming another part. It is too bad that we cannot record together, but we have contracts with different record companies. Still, we have fun together.



A filmmaker from America comes to the Town Hall to see *African Jazz and Variety*. He needs a singer for a documentary he is doing about a black's life in South Afrika. There are thirty-six cast members in our revue, but Lionel Rogosin says he thinks that I am the most original artist in the show. He asks me to play myself in a nightclub scene. All I have to do is sing two songs.

The idea of being in a movie excites me. But Mr. Rogosin's documentary offers as many dangers as it does opportunities. The authorities do not approve of his "true-life" story. So, the filming is being done in secret. If Mr. Rogosin is booted out of the country, he can go back to America and make another movie. But the other black cast members and I would be in real trouble.

Mr. Rogosin is very persuasive. "Miriam," he tells me, "no one can expect a talent like yours to stay cooped up in South Africa forever. People all over the world will see and hear you sing in my film. And they'll see you in person, if you let me take you with me when it comes time to do the promotion."

A chance to leave South Africa! To see Europe, and maybe America! I accept the part in the film, and Mr. Rogosin encourages me to apply for a passport right away. I do so, because for a