Tucking his thumbs in his pockets like a cowboy, Evan swaggered toward the jacaranda tree blooming with trumpet-shaped flowers.

Cyril, who sat under the tree eating lunch, called out, “Howdy, partner. How ya doin’?”

“Lekker,” Evan answered, stepping closer. “I mean, swell.” He swatted a mosquito on his forearm, splatting his palm with a drop of blood.

“And what’s our Yank up to today?” Cyril asked.

“Roundin’ up a few moo-cows.” Evan did his best to imitate a Texas drawl.

Cyril laughed, then pretended to swing a lasso toward Evan. “Got ya! Sit down, Cowboy!”

Evan stationed himself upwind of the dreadful yeasty smell of Cyril’s Marmite sandwich. The new mosquito bite itched. Before opening his biscuit tin with the picture of the Scottie dog on the outside, he scratched the bite until it reddened.
Cream-colored school buildings enclosed the rectangle of lawn on three sides. The fourth side was open to the rugby and cricket fields. Eating his ham-and-cheese sandwich, Evan gazed beyond the fields to the wild bush of the savanna scrub and the forests of small msasa trees. The shrill screech of Christmas beetles filled the yellow air.

An afternoon storm was already brewing, wrapping everything in a damp blanket of heat. In the distance, lightning flashed. Clouds like bruised purple plums crowned the tops of the mountains. Would the rain arrive before lunch break ended?

Leaning down on one elbow, his sandy hair falling across his eyes, Cyril said, “My grandmum sent me a miniature sailboat from England. Maybe you can come over and help me sail it.”

“That’d be fun,” Evan said. “Maybe after school someday.”

But a toy boat was nothing compared with the real raft that he and Blessing had found abandoned in the high grass up by the Mission pond. That discovery had occupied his thoughts since last Saturday.

Yet he wouldn’t mention the raft to Cyril. It was best to keep school life and Mission life separate.

“Maybe this Saturday,” pressed Cyril.

“Maybe.” But Evan had already promised Saturday to Blessing. Blessing and the raft.

Johan and Graham sauntered across the grass and plopped themselves down on the carpet of fallen purple flowers. Opening their biscuit tins, they unwrapped more Marmite sandwiches and bit in with gusto.

Evan scooted away, trying not to be obvious. He wished a
breeze would blow away that awful Marmite smell. He lifted a
miniature purple trumpet flower from his thermos cup. “Damn!
A flower fell in my milk!” He flung it—drops of milk flying—at
Johan.

Johan ducked just in time. He took one last bite of his sand-
wich, then hurled it at Evan.

Evan cried, “Oh, no! A Marmite bomb!”

“The war is on!” Cyril declared. He held a trumpet flower to
his lips, making bugle sounds.

Graham picked up another flower and trumpeted along with
Cyril. And then, stretching his arms full length, he pretended to
hold a real trumpet.

“Here’s to our Rhodesian army,” said Cyril, lifting his plaid
thermos.

Johan joined in with a rat-a-tat drumroll on his sandwich box.

“Rhodies against kaffirs!” yelled Cyril. “Army, army, army!”

“Our army will show those kaffirs not to make trouble!”
declared Graham.

Evan shut his biscuit tin. He hated it when the boys talked
this way. On the Mission, whites and Africans lived in harmony
together.

The storm clouds were rolling in, and the breeze stiffened.
Jacaranda flowers fell like purple shadows.

“Without our know-how, those munts would starve. And they
think they can take it all away from us,” said Graham. Because
of his Scottish ancestors, every inch of his skin was covered
with freckles. Sometimes the boys called him Scottie or Scottie
Graham.
Johan suddenly turned to Evan. “I hear your kaffirs in America are troublemakers too.”

“Depends on what you call trouble,” Evan replied.

“Ha!” said Johan. “It’s all trouble.” Johan’s family came from South Africa. His hair was so blond it was almost white.

“Kaffirs want to take over the world,” Graham said.

“Like the Commies,” added Cyril.

Johan said, “That Commie Martin Luther Fink is getting the American kaffirs all stirred up.”

“It’s not Fink,” Evan said. “And he’s not a Commie.”

Evan had watched the riots in newsreels at the movie theater in Umtali. In black and white, he’d seen the clash of Negroes and police in Birmingham, the clubs, the fire hoses, the snarling dogs. He’d seen how bravely the Reverend King was fighting for justice.

“Rain’s coming,” said Johan. “Run for it!”

The sky broke open, sending everyone dashing for cover.

After school Dad picked Evan up in the plum-colored station wagon, rusty from many rainy seasons. The Africans called it the car that tried to be red.

Dad wore glasses with flesh-colored rims that matched his skin. Whenever Mom was working at the Mission tuckshop, selling warm sodas and tinned meats, Dad picked Evan up.

As Dad pulled out of the circular drive, Evan ran his finger through the dust on the door’s armrest, saying, “My friends say mean things about Africans.”
“Ignore them. No one knows much at age twelve. Besides”—he glanced over—“you’re lucky to have Blessing as a friend. None of them is so lucky.”

Evan nodded.

Back in the States, Dad had been a teacher. Here on the Mission, he trained the Africans to teach. Because he spent time around students, Dad always had solutions to school problems.

Dad drove past the plastered houses and neat gardens of the suburbs, then crossed the road leading to Cyril’s house. Giant tulip trees edged the road, their leaves a rich, dark green, their flowers fiery orange cups.

Someday soon, Evan would go to Cyril’s to sail the little boat. Afterward, they’d take a dip in Cyril’s sky-blue pool. Maybe they’d even sleep overnight in the canvas tent.

It would all be fun, but it was the raft, not some toy boat, that made Evan’s heart drum with excitement.

The car climbed past the rocky outcropping of the kopje.

It was early in the rainy season, and the msasa trees were sprouting deep red and gold leaves. Evan had never seen the leopard that was said to live in the kopje, but every day he stared deep into the forest as the car sped past.

He imagined the leopard moving under the trees, the leafy shadows making irregular splotches over the spotted fur.

Today he saw nothing more than a small brown dassie darting between the granite boulders.

The car continued to crawl up Christmas Pass. At the summit stood a statue of Kingsley Fairbridge, a nineteenth-century white
colonialist. The statue depicted Fairbridge at age fourteen, standing tall, gazing off to the horizon as though looking for lands to conquer. His African servant knelt at his feet.

“Today that servant cowers like a loyal dog,” Dad always remarked when they passed the statue. “Tomorrow those two will be standing shoulder to shoulder.”

The border town of Umtali lay behind them now, nestled in the hills of the Vumba Mountains. Beyond the mountains lay the country of Mozambique, where Evan’s family sometimes vacationed at the beach.

Just past the summit, Dad drove by a big green bus. The roof rack was loaded with chickens in baskets and sacks of mealie, the provisions of people headed back to the countryside.

They passed a group of African boys walking along the side of the road, carrying short-handled *mapadza*.

“Hardworking fellows, out of school and off to the fields,” Dad said. “Wave to those boys, Evan, and feel lucky that you don’t have to dig weeds until dark. Now, when I was a boy in Indiana . . .”

Evan leaned out the window to wave.

The boys waved back.

Dad’s voice trailed off before he could describe again how he too had picked vegetables and sold them door-to-door.

Dad slowed the car on the narrow downhill road. In the valley below lay the Mission, the size of a small town.

As the car drew closer, the buildings disappeared into the blue-gum trees.

Now crossing the river, where the black bishop birds swooped
over the green water, they soon peeled off the gravel highway through the stone pillars marking the Mission gate.

Motoring in, they passed two neat rows of brick African houses, the athletic fields, and the building that housed the printing press—then suddenly, rising out of the blue-gum trees, the steeple of the church, pointing straight to God.

“Remember the visiting pastor who said that heaven was one mile up?” Dad said, smiling.

Evan smiled too and replied, “Closer than going to school.”

At last, they entered the area where the white missionaries lived. The corrugated tin roofs were painted red, and the houses had wide stoeps, or verandas, on three sides.

As Dad pulled into the driveway and stopped the car, Evan loosened his school tie. “Thanks, Dad,” he said, getting out.

“You’re most welcome,” Dad said.

Evan shut the car door behind him with a thunk. Friday had finally come. Now he wouldn’t have to ride anywhere until after he and Blessing had rescued the raft.
Blessing wiped his face with the hem of his shirt. It was panting hot—the sun was at the top of the sky—and they were off to the pond.

He needed distraction from this hot trek, needed to think of anything but walking uphill forever. “Remember the tree house we built in the chinaberry?” he said to Evan, who pushed the empty wheelbarrow. “Remember how we sat way high in the flowers? And they felt so cool. . . .”

“Yeah. Too bad it fell down in the storm,” Evan said. “And don’t forget the survival pit.”

“With the secret door. All those tunnels.”

“What about the trampoline we made out of inner tubes and gunnysacks?”

“You fell off. . . .” Blessing recalled the surprised look on Evan’s face.

“This raft’ll be the best yet.”
“Sure thing.”

Even if it were not the best, even if Evan were taking him to a pit of hungry lions, Blessing would have gone. He considered Evan his sahwira, a friend closer than a brother.

A brother his own age. Because Blessing’s own little brother, Caleb, was also close as close to him. Caleb had begged to go fetch the raft, but Blessing had told him no, this would be men’s work. Caleb’s legs were too short to keep up. He could have a ride when the raft got fixed. Blessing imagined the big smile that would spread across Caleb’s face.

With the wheelbarrow squeaking in front, they crossed the dirt dam, the irrigation ditch on one side, the muddy pond on the other. They headed straight for the raft, half buried in the grass.

Evan kicked at the tires lashed to its underside. A rusty wire snapped. A bamboo pole cracked off.

“Maiwe!” Blessing got down in the grass and felt that raft all over—the cracked bamboo, the rotted tires. He looked closer than he had the first time they’d come. That day they’d just been happy. They hadn’t cared that the raft was too wrecked to float. Today was different. They were seriously looking the thing over.

“It needs work,” Blessing said.

“Of course,” Evan said, gazing off at the pond.

Blessing looked too. Was that sea of red mud even deep enough to float a raft?

Evan sat down in the little bit of shadow from the wheelbarrow. He patted the ground beside him. “Let’s rest.”

Blessing got into the shade, sweat pouring off him.

Evan picked blackjack seeds from his socks. “Yeow,” he said,
throwing a prickly seed, then sucking his finger. His legs above the socks were red with sunburn.

“Serves you right for wearing socks,” Blessing said. “Do you even have toes?”

“Yes, ten. But look at you.” Evan pointed at Blessing’s ankles. Blessing covered his ankles with his hands. “Blackjacks poking through socks are worse than scratches.”

Tossing a blackjack into the air, Evan said, “When the raft is fixed, we’ll fish from it.”

“And spend the night on it,” Blessing added. “We can watch stars.”

“We’ll spy from it like James Bond.”

Blessing closed his eyes and tried to picture the scenes from James Bond’s latest movie, *Goldfinger.* Evan had described everything to him in detail because Africans weren’t allowed in the whites-only movie theater. In his mind, Blessing saw the tiny airplanes that flew in formation over the gold reserves of a place called Fort Knox.

A spiky red feeling rose in his chest, a feeling not appropriate for a pastor’s son. The day Evan had seen *Goldfinger,* he’d gone on and on about it. He’d even taken out the sketchbook he always carried in his back pocket and had drawn scenes from the movie. He’d rubbed it in—the way he’d seen *Goldfinger* and Blessing hadn’t.

Now Blessing squeezed his eyes shut even harder. If only he could see those airplanes for himself!

He heard a rustling sound and opened his eyes.

Evan was taking folded sheets of newspaper from his pocket.
“Copy me,” he ordered, handing Blessing a piece. He unfolded the newspaper and folded it back into a square.

Soon both pieces of paper were triangles.

“Ta-da,” said Evan, opening the triangle and putting it on his head. “An admiral needs a hat.”

Blessing put on his hat, tilting it down over his eyes. It gave good shade. Later, he’d show Caleb how to make this hat. And yet he wished that the idea had been his. Evan thought of everything.

On the side of Evan’s hat was an ad for skin-lightening cream.

“What’re you laughing at?” Evan asked.

Blessing pointed to the ad.

Evan took off the hat, looked, and laughed too.

The other African boys teased Blessing for being best friends with a bhunu. Even though he and Evan had been friends since they were Caleb’s age, the African boys couldn’t get over it. They said that Blessing was after Evan’s stuff and the good food at his house.

Blessing did like those things. But they weren’t the reason why Evan was his sahwira. While the other boys played football, he and Evan played games with a box of postage stamps in the print shop. They collected rocks from streams and hillsides. They built tree forts and trampolines and survival pits.

They loved to play James Bond, pretending they had glasses that could let them see in the dark, capes that made them invisible. They held bananas to their ears, pretending they were using phones disguised as fruit.

The African boys said that Blessing was privileged with a white
boy’s friendship because he was the pastor’s son. They said that wasn’t fair, because a pastor’s son was already better off than other boys. Blessing’s family had more than other families on the Mission. They had real furniture and lived in the biggest house, the pastor’s manse. Baba even had a huge American car. According to the African boys, Blessing didn’t need a white boy’s friendship.

Whenever the boys talked like that, Blessing’s head filled with hot blood. He wanted to shout back at them but instead gritted his teeth. He hated what they said and the confusion it triggered.

Baba preached that you were either on Jesus’s side or you weren’t. If he, Blessing Mudavanhu, entertained hateful thoughts, how could he be good? And if he was bad, how did that fit with being a pastor’s son?

But Blessing didn’t like to dwell on such thoughts. “Let’s get the raft back to your house,” he said to Evan.

They stood up and untangled the raft from the grass.

“Here, get this side,” Evan said.

They lifted the raft onto the wheelbarrow, but it wobbled off.

“You stay there, and I’ll try from here,” Evan said. “One, two, three!”

The raft landed on the wheelbarrow and stayed put.

They marched over the dirt dam that formed the pond. Evan went first, walking backward, while Blessing pushed.

Once over the dam, they paused, looking back.

“Do you think the Kariba Dam looks like that?” Blessing gestured at the dam. He hadn’t seen the newsreels of Kariba in the whites-only theater. As with *Goldfinger*, Evan had had to tell him everything: how the enormous dam had stopped the river and
flooded the valley behind it. How because of Kariba there had to be Operation Noah. Evan had described the way the animals got stunned with dart guns and dragged onto boats, rescued from that flood like in the story of Noah’s Ark.

“Kariba is way bigger,” Evan answered. “But when we sail, we can pretend it’s Lake Kariba.”

Blessing wished he’d seen the newsreels for himself so he wouldn’t have to ask Evan.

They each took a handle, balancing the wheelbarrow. The steel wheel crushed the rocks on the path.

Salty sweat poured into Blessing’s eyes. Bushes brushed against his legs, scratching them, making them itch. Halfway down, he said, “Let’s stop there.” He motioned with his chin toward the loquat tree.

“Good idea,” said Evan.

They pushed the wheelbarrow into the deep shade cast by the stiff green leaves, then climbed onto a low branch.

From here, they could see the whole Mission, spread out like a picture in a book. The steeple of the church poked upward like a sharp white finger. Blessing made out the pastor’s manse and, beyond, close to the blue mountains, his family’s okra farm, the neat rows shining in the afternoon sun.

Evan took a bite of a round yellow loquat, then spat the seeds onto the path below.

Blessing yanked a loquat from its stem, bit, and spat.

“One of my seeds landed in those thorns,” said Evan.

“The wise man planted his in good soil, where it bears fruit. Yours is going to choke. Anyway, mine went farther. Over there,
past the little bush,” Blessing said. “But let’s go. Let’s get this over with.”

Blessing, then Evan, jumped down from the low branch.

“Look at this.” Blessing held out his hands. A blister swelled on each palm. “From pushing.”

“I’ve got ‘em too,” said Evan. “But what’s a bear’s fruit?”

Blessing laughed.

They grabbed the splintered wooden handles and moved downhill again. The blisters made Blessing wince every time the wheelbarrow hit a bump. “Baba says if we have faith, we can move mountains. Why can’t faith move this wheelbarrow down the hill?”

At the bottom of the hill, the tin plaques appeared. A long time ago, a missionary had put them there to identify the English and Latin names of the trees: golden shower, bottlebrush, *Bambusa vulgaris*.

“Maybe one of these says ‘Bear’s Fruit,’” Evan said.

The path led into Evan’s backyard.

Evan dumped the raft by the door of his baba’s toolshed and leaned the wheelbarrow against the wall.

“Finally!” He wiped sweat from his forehead. “Let’s get a drink.”

Inside the kitchen, the Campbells’ house helper, Grace, poured Mazoe Orange Crush into two glasses. She added water and handed Evan and Blessing each a glass.

Blessing drank up quickly — the liquid slippery and cool in his throat — and held out his glass for more.

“Thirsty boy!” Grace said, pouring more of the thick orange syrup. “What kind of mischief have you two been up to?”

“We’ve rescued a ship,” Blessing said.
“A sheep?” Grace’s eyes widened.

“Not a sheep, a ship,” Evan said, teasing Grace about her accent. “But, really, it’s just a raft,” he said. “Once we get it repaired, we’ll take you sailing on the pond.”

Grace laughed. “Not me! I don’t swim.” She put the bottle of Mazoe Orange Crush back in the fridge.

“You won’t have to swim, Grace,” said Evan. “Our raft will be seaworthy.”

This time, Blessing laughed, then sputtered a little when the drink went down the wrong way.

In the toolshed, Mr. Campbell’s tools hung on a peg board. Evan handed the pliers, a hammer, and wire cutters down to Blessing, who took them, warm and heavy, into his arms.

Evan climbed onto a stool and dropped down a roll of wire, a bundle of used bicycle inner tubes, and a handful of nails, raising clouds of dust from the toolshed floor.

Outside on the grass, Evan held a brand-new nail over the hole where the old nail had rusted away and fallen out of the bamboo. He raised the hammer and pounded. The rotten bamboo split with a cracking sound.

“Let’s try these instead.” Blessing wove the inner tubes in and out, tying the tires to the bamboo. “There,” he proclaimed. “We don’t need nails.”

“Pretty good,” Evan admitted.

They stood up to look at their work.

“Just like the Queen Elizabeth,” joked Evan.

Blessing laughed. “It’s not exactly an ocean liner. But let’s name it.”
“How about the *African Queen*?” said Evan. “I read that book in English class.”

“Or *African King*. After the Reverend King.”

“That wouldn’t work,” Evan declared. “That’s not how it was in the book. It has to be *Queen*.”

Heat bloomed in Blessing’s chest. “Okay,” he said, to get rid of the feeling. “*Queen*, then.”

But secretly, he would go right on calling the raft the *African King*. 