From Kaffir Boy by Mark Mathabane

I was returning home from playing soccer when a neighbour accosted me by the gate and told me that there had been a bloody fight at my home.

“Your mother and father have been at it again,” the neighbour, a woman, said.

“And your mother left.”

I was stunned.

“Was she hurt badly?”

“A little bit,” the woman said, “But she’ll be all right. We took her to your grandma’s place.”

I became hot with anger. . . .

I ran, without stopping, all the way to the other end of the township where Granny lived. There I found my mother, her face swollen and bruised and her eyes puffed up to the point where she could scarcely see.

“What happened, Mama?” I asked, fighting to hold back the tears at the sight of her disfigured face.

“Nothing, child, nothing,” she mumbled, almost apologetically, between swollen lips. “Your papa simply lost his temper, that’s all.”

“But why did he beat you up like this, Mama?” Tears came down my face. “He’s never beaten you like this before.” . . .

“Your father and I fought because I took you to school this morning,” my mother began. “He had told me not to, and when I told him that I had, he became very upset. He was drunk. We started arguing, and one thing led to another.”

“Why doesn’t he want me to go to school?”

“He says he doesn’t have money to waste paying for you to get what he calls a useless white man’s education,” my mother replied. “But I told him that if he won’t pay for your schooling, I would try and look for a job and pay, but he didn’t want to hear that. . . . When I asked him why shouldn’t I take you to school, seeing that you were now of age, he replied that he doesn’t believe in schools. I told him that school would keep you
off the streets and out of trouble, but still he was belligerent.”

“Is that why he beat you up?”

“Yes, he said I disobeyed his orders.” . . .

“Why do you want me to go to school, Mama” I asked, hoping that she might, somehow, clear up some of the confusion that was building in my mind.

“I want you to have a future, child,” my mother said. “And, contrary to what your father says, school is the only means to a future. I don’t want you growing up to be like your father.”

The latter statement hit me like a bolt of lightning. It just about shattered every defense mechanism and every pretext I had against going to school. . . .

“. . . I want you to go to school, because I believe that an education is the key you need to open a new world and a new life for yourself, a world and life different from that of either your father’s or mine. It is the only key that can do that, and only those who seek it earnestly and perseveringly will get anywhere in the white man’s world. Education will open doors where none seem to exist. It’ll make people talk to you, listen to you and help you; people who otherwise wouldn’t bother. It will make you soar, like a bird lilt tog up into the endless blue sky, and leave poverty, hunger and suffering behind. It’ll teach you to learn to embrace what’s good and shun what’s bad and evil. Above all, it’ll make you a somebody in this world. It’ll make you grow up to be a good and proud person. That’s why I want you to go to school, child, so that education can do all that, and more, for you.”

A long, awkward silence followed, during which I reflected upon the significance of my mother’s lengthy speech. I looked at my mother; she looked at me.

Finally, I asked, “How come you know so much about school, Mama? You didn’t go to school, did you?”

“No, child,” my mother replied. “Just like your father, I never went to school.” For the second time that evening, a mere statement of fact had a thunderous impact on me. All the confusion I had about school seemed to leave my mind, like darkness giving way to light. And what had previously been a dark, yawning void in my mind was suddenly transformed into a beacon of light that began to grow larger and larger, until it had swallowed up, blotted out, all the blackness. That beacon of light seemed to reveal things and facts, which, though they must have always existed in me, I hadn’t been aware of up until now.

“But unlike your father,” my mother went on, “I’ve always wanted to go to school, but couldn’t because my father, under the sway of tribal traditions, thought it unnecessary to
educate females. That’s why I so much want you to go, child, for if you do, I know that someday I too would come to go, old as I would be then. Promise me, therefore, that no matter what, you’ll go back to school. And I, in turn, promise that I’ll do everything in my power to keep you there.”

With tears streaming down my cheeks and falling upon my mother’s bosom, I promised her that I would go to school “forever.” That night, at seven and a half years of my life, the battle lines in the family were drawn. My mother on the one side, illiterate but determined to have me drink, for better or for worse, from the well of knowledge. On the other side, my father, he too illiterate, yet determined to have me drink from the well of ignorance. Scarcely aware of the magnitude of the decision I was making or, rather, the decision which was being emotionally thrust upon me, I chose to fight on my mother’s side.