AHMED'S BICYCLE SHOP

BY

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The morning sun splayed across the orange African sky as silent throngs of cyclists rolled along dirt roads into a spotless metropolis of bleached low-rise buildings and boulevards flanked by purple-blossomed Jacaranda trees. There in Salisbury they scrubbed floors, washed dishes, and swept streets until dusk, when they retraced their tracks and disappeared into the bush-dotted countryside to sleep. Many of them got their wheels from Ahmed's bicycle shop.

As far as I knew, in 1960 I was the only American teenager in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), a British colony subject to white minority rule. My father had joined the American foreign service and uprooted his family of six to this strange land, where the Rhodesian government promised him a house and schooling for his children.

I was a skinny kid with straw hair and glazed, sky-blue eyes, who felt most at ease in the company of my own thoughts. I grew up in rural Florida next to a swamp, where I wandered barefoot amongst the prickly palms and Spanish moss, seeking solace from a world that already felt too harsh, and scouting for some warm marsh, real or imaginary, where I could feel safe and at home. When I wasn't roaming in the swamp, I was in the back yard tinkering with bicycle parts and an old lawnmower motor, trying to build a crude motorbike for the next chapter in my childhood wandering.

Now and then in the swamp I ran across a fellow traveler—a half-naked black girl moving ghost-like

along the path, her fist in her mouth and eyes looking nowhere. I didn't pity her, nor did I decry the world's inequities for her plight. I just caught a glimpse of her lost gaze, and could have mistaken it for my own.

Landing at Salisbury airport, we were met by Mr. Holmes, a state functionary charged with getting us settled. A stout man with a flushed face and a bushy mustache, he wore khaki shorts and a tan pith helmet. Nearby stood a shiny limousine with its trunk open to receive our luggage. Soon we were loaded up and headed for our new home.

Expecting modest quarters befitting a civil servant, we were astonished to find ourselves driven up a long, tree-lined driveway to an elegant, sprawling mansion perched on a hill at the edge of town. It had a wrap-around porch and French doors opening onto terraced gardens and manicured lawns.

"This place is known as the 'Ranche House,' formerly occupied by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court," said Mr. Holmes, surveying our brood, which included my parents and me, my older brother Steve, my three-year-old sister Ruth, and my infant brother Michael. "With a suitable staff of servants you should be comfortable here."

"Impressive," said my father, a tall, square-jawed man of modest manner who shunned ostentation. He had come to Rhodesia to be of service, not to be served. "But tell me, why is this house not occupied by some high state official?"

"Fair question." The man squinted his eyes and lowered his voice, speaking in strictest confidence. "The neighborhood is no longer what it used to be. Mind you, it's not black. But it's not white either. Mostly somewhere in between—Indian, Syrian, Lebanese, and others."

We looked on in silence.

"Not to worry," Mr. Holmes hastened to add. "The area is perfectly safe. No place in Salisbury is unsafe for whites. But if I may—a word of advice. For shopping, services, and entertainment, I would suggest that you go downtown, where you will be more at home with our own kind."

"Our own kind?" said my father.

"Mr. McVoy, you may, or may not agree with the policies of the Rhodesian government," said Mr. Holmes. "But remember that you and your family are guests in our country, and are expected to

conduct yourselves with discretion."

Despite its pretentious appearance, our new home had its charm. The "U" shaped structure wrapped around an enchanting, vine-draped courtyard where we ate and spent much of our time, eschewing the formal living and dining rooms. Lizards roamed free on the floors and walls, tolerated for their ability to control the bugs, much like spiders did in our Florida home.

Contrary to our staunch family tradition of doing for ourselves, we bowed to local custom and employed a staff of live-in servants: a cook, maid, houseboy, and gardener. I found their presence disconcerting, but didn't say so. I was the loner child, set apart from the rest of the family. My father pursued his work, my mother cared for the little ones, and my brother Steve took courses at the local university.

It was hard to muster the indifference expected in the master-servant relationship. The houseboy was about my age, and when he came to clear the table in the courtyard, I greeted him with friendly chatter.

"Hello Benjamin," I said. "So what's going on today?"

"Yes, Master," was all he said as he stood there with watery eyes and gleaming teeth.

In the hallway I ran across Sarah, the maid, on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor. I was startled to see her there. Why did she have to clean the floor when all I did was walk on it? I wanted to rush over, lift her to her feet, and brush off her soiled smock. It looked so wrong to me, such down and dirty work for the poor woman.

In the backyard was a private tennis court enclosed within a tall chain-link fence. Through the crisscrosses of the fence I could see the servants' quarters, a windowless block of crudely laid cement with a dark opening for a door. Leaning with tiny fingers clutching the chain links was a little girl—perhaps a daughter of the help. Her vacant gaze seemed familiar—much like the swamp girl in Florida, and myself as well. We both had the same faraway eyes as we wandered aimlessly in the marsh.

There was no school for white boys in the neighborhood, so I was assigned to one on the other side of town. Churchill's School for Boys was housed in white-washed masonry; its classrooms stood in a row like soldiers. Each room was packed with chunky oak chairs with desks attached. The desktops

chaffed my elbows with their gouged dirty words and primitive depictions of genitalia. Underneath, my knees grated against stalactites of petrified chewing gum. At the front of each room stood a giant chalkboard on which the teacher wrote, and students copied, a course outline to be reiterated at the final exam.

Students addressed the teachers military style, with "Sir" at the beginning and end of each sentence. "Sir! May I go to the loo, Sir!" We wore uniforms consisting of shorts and knee socks, blazer and tie, and a flat-brimmed straw boater hat, all bearing the school colors in stripes of purple and gray. Uniforms were mandatory, not just at school but in any public place, day or night, even weekends. Compliance was policed by prefects—upperclassmen who got extra points for turning you in.

"Hey Yank," the boys called out to me in the hallway. I was the only American, thrust into a role of high visibility. If I belched without putting my hand to my mouth, they assumed all white boys did the same in the United States. I missed the anonymity and solitude of the Florida swamp, where amongst the alligators and snakes, all I represented was the human race.

Churchill was nearly an hour from home by bicycle, my only means of transport. A long ride, but it was the high point of my school life. The sunny, dry weather made it imperative to do things outside. I had brought with me a turquoise blue, ten-speed Japanese bike, and enjoyed shifting up and down according to the terrain—and my mood—as I weaved among the throngs of utilitarian cycles with their thick tires, hard leather seats, and push-rod brakes. I rode with a sense of freedom, assuming my fellow travelers felt the same way.

Then I passed work crews digging ditches along the road. Strong glistening arms pushed shovels in unison, while straw bosses barked commands as if lashing a race horse to go faster in the home stretch. They were bound to the dirt and had nowhere else to go, and I wondered what had I done, in my fifteen years, not to be one of them.

Once I ran across a car stalled at the side of the road. The driver jumped out and shouted "You! Boys!" at the riders approaching from behind. They promptly stopped, lay down their bicycles, and gave the car a push. They'll get a good tip, I thought, but there was no such exchange. The engine

snorted and the car vanished in the dust without a wave of thanks. None of the men looked surprised.

Feeling like a red-white-and-blue butterfly pinned to a cork board at school, I coveted my carefree commute on two wheels. So I was dismayed when the first week my vehicle broke down. I heard a high-pitched screech of metal on metal—worn-out brake pads. Remembering the caveat to shop downtown with my own kind, I headed that way, but en route I spied something that made me drag my foot to a stop.

Just off the busy main street, on a gravel lane, stood a sagging shack made of dusty, whitewashed wood. It had an open front and dirt floor, and a bicycle wheel lashed to a faded green sign that read "Ahmed's." I parked my bike and went in.

Entering from the sunny street, it was dark inside. But before long I could see a row of bicycles sitting upright on their stands, all serious work horses like the ones that were all over the streets. Behind the bikes was a dusty old motorcycle, a shop-worn relic that had been there a while. To the right was an opening to a small yard, strewn with scavenged bicycle parts. Weeds sprouted from the rusty carcasses of junked motorcycles. It was like in my backyard in Florida, where I was surrounded by sprockets and wheels awaiting assembly into some kind of vehicle for my next exploration. I knew there was something here for me.

In the back of the shop, leaning against a makeshift plywood counter, stood a portly man in his late twenties with a cherubic face and thin mustache. His large brown eyes smiled at me. Stepping forward, he extended his hand.

"My name is Ahmed. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Cullen," I replied, surprised at his formality. "Do you carry brake pads for the bicycle out there?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "But nobody has parts for that machine."

"I was afraid of that." I turned to leave.

"Don't go," he said quickly. He reached into a box on the floor beside him, pulled out a fistful of small chunks of rubber with chrome backings, and spread them briskly on the counter. "These pads are the best I can do. They might work."

"Might work?"

"In this country things don't always go together. We make them

fit as best we can."

I expected him to add, "You're not in America, Yank, so get used to it." Instead he invited me to sit down with him on a stool behind the counter.

"Smoke?" he asked with twinkling eyes, pulling out a trim, yellow and white paper box bearing the name "Matinee." The top hinged up like a cigarette case, exposing a swatch of gold-colored foil, folded back to display crisp white cylinders lined up in a row.

Smoking was a way of life in Rhodesia, where tobacco was a major crop and cigarettes were tasty and cheap. Filtered Matinee were top of the line, selling for three shillings six pence (about fifty cents) for a box of fifty. At the bottom end was unfiltered "Star," the black man's weed, which cost "tupence" (about two cents) for a box of four. If a Churchill Prefect had spotted me at Ahmed's with a cigarette in my mouth, he might have overlooked the smoke when he spied the school uniform I wasn't wearing.

I nodded and plucked a filtered Matinee out of the box.

"Where do you come from?" I asked.

"I am from Syria. Very poor there. People starving. I came here hoping for a better life."

"I'm from Florida. We lived in the woods by a swamp, and I liked it there. But my Dad wanted to see the world."

We chatted freely, and the brake pads fit. I had made my first friend.

After that, I often stopped at Ahmed's on my way home from school. His shop was my sanctuary, a welcome respite from school and unrelenting exposure as The Yank. With Ahmed I felt no judgment and no intrusion. Sitting behind the counter facing the sunny, dusty lane, we talked and smoked. I brought my own pack as well, and the offering of a smoke—holding out an opened box with the foil wrapper folded back—became a ritual that reaffirmed our friendship. I didn't tell anyone about my liaison on the wrong side of the tracks, unsure of what the consequences might be.

Elsewhere, friendship was hard to find. At school the boys continued to call out "Hey Yank" and then snickered and walked past. It was a long time before I finally heard a different greeting.

"Hey Mac," said a voice behind me. "I'm Larry." I turned to find a stocky, muscular boy with dark wavy hair and an overbite smile.

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Mac was short for McVoy. Larry was a farm boy whose warmth more than made up for his lack of intellect. His family owned a tobacco farm where he would go to work after graduation, which should have been a year ago.

"I tell you Mac, you gotta watch your step around here. For bugger-all you can get The Cane." He leaned over close to my ear. "Headmaster—we call him Buzzard 'cause he looks like one—whacks you on the bum with a long stick... hell, it's more like a whip if you ask me." Raising his right hand to count on his fingers, he went on. "Late for school gets you two cuts. Three cuts if you don't do your lessons. Six is the most you can get. Don't mind your tongue with a teacher, or get caught in town without your purple and grays. Six is bloody hell, like it never stops. You wanna die."

"That bad, huh?" I said, a cramp grabbing my stomach.

"Not half," he went on. "Some blokes stuff newspaper in their pants, but if Buzzard finds out, he makes you bend over with your head under a table. Every cut jerks your back up so your head bangs against the table. Bloody hell, Mac," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Bloody hell."

The next time I was at Ahmed's, I told him what Larry had said.

"Oh yes, the flogging," said Ahmed. "It happens all over." He took a deep drag on his cigarette and slowly let it out, staring at the countertop. "The blacks get flogged more than anyone, some with canes more like a club."

My mind flashed on Benjamin, the houseboy. He brandished a smile, and then turned to show zebra-like stripes across his back. I wondered about the girl behind the tennis court fence. She's young and fragile, I thought, but still not exempt. And neither was I.

"I'm done for," I said to myself. "Never was much for rules."

Before long, I arrived at school fifteen minutes late, and was ambushed at the bike rack by a prefect. I asked what he was doing outside after the bell had rung, but he just glared at me, grabbed my arm with a pinching tight grip, and ushered me in to the headmaster.

The office was small and plain, furnished only with an oak desk, a couple of metal file cabinets, and a table on the side—the one Larry told me about. Standing behind his desk, the man they called Buzzard loomed tall and menacing.

His craggy face, pointy nose, and protruding Adam's apple, made him a ringer for the creepy scavenger that was his namesake. Leaning against the table close at hand was a slender, polished wood cane nearly three feet long.

For a moment I saw the headmaster—the highest ranking official in the school—as nothing more than a common thug, waiting for a victim to be brought in, then beating the crap out of him until the next one arrived. He impaled me with his steely gaze, which felt like punishment already. Slowly he stepped over and picked up his cane, and motioned me to bend over. My mind rushed back to Florida, where the swamp girl and I roamed blissfully, dampening life's jagged intrusions. Now, more than ever, I needed to be there.

The first stroke burned through me like a brush fire. The high octave throb raced down my legs and up my back, and stayed there sizzling. Worse than the pain was the panic that it would come again. The second stroke laid sharply into what felt like an open wound left by the first. I was as wretched as the houseboy, and the girl behind the fence, and just as powerless.

On the way back to my classroom, I passed a woman on her hands and knees scrubbing the hallway floor. This time I didn't mind so much, being more concerned with the sting that lingered in my pants. At least she wasn't out slogging in the dirt like the gangs of ditch diggers I saw along the roads.

Grueling as it was, my encounter with the headmaster was not my last. Somehow I was always getting into trouble, suffering two or three cuts a week due to tardiness, coming into class empty handed, and other misdemeanors. One time I forgot my tie, and tried to get by with a mock-up. I penned some stripes onto a piece of paper, and tucked it under the front of my collar.

"Bloody clever, Yank," said the prefect, sending me up anyway.

As the floggings continued, the headmaster's countenance began to change. What I had first assumed to be a look of sadistic glee, slowly settled into resignation, and finally distaste. If only the cycle could be broken, and we could go our separate ways.

"Ahmed, I'm not a troublemaker," I said through the smoke drifting over the counter. I was sitting on my usual stool in full uniform, having just come from school.

"Why won't they leave me alone?"

"You offend them," he said gently.

"But I try like hell to stay out of arguments."

"You don't follow their rules," he said, as a truck rumbled past on the main road. It drowned out Ahmed's words, but I wasn't listening anyway.

"In America they left me alone."

"Let me tell you something." Ahmed got up from his stool, walked around to the front of the counter, and leaned over into my face. "The authorities know me as Ahmed the shopkeeper. I own a small stand in a run-down part of town where I sell bicycles to the black laborers so they can get to work. I don't offend anyone, so they leave me alone."

"But surely you take business away from the shops down town."

"Oh no. They don't want a black man walking in the door, even if he has money to buy something. So I let them in. I have no quarrel with these people. Without them I have no living."

"Don't offend anyone," I parroted, brushing a fallen cigarette ash off the counter top with the back of my hand. "That simple, is it?"

"That, and friends in high places," said Ahmed with a sly grin. "I help them out, and they do the same for me."

This made me wonder. Did he think I was one of those friends? I did live in the biggest house on the hill, and was the son of an American attaché. I could buy gasoline at a tax-free government filling station. My diplomatic passport ushered me through customs with no questions asked, and I was immune from arrest anywhere in the country. Had I thought of it, I might have claimed immunity from The Cane. But even with all that, I really couldn't help anyone, not even myself.

"I have no strings to pull," I said.

"Of course not. You're still a schoolboy."

Relieved that Ahmed was not hitting me up for a favors, I went on with my own problems.

"So what can I do?"

"Don't offend the authorities at school, and they leave you alone."

"How do I do that?"

"Like I keep telling you; follow the rules."

"I'm not good at that. In America I missed homework and

other things. But they didn't seem to mind so much."

"How hard are you trying?"

"But what about that stupid school uniform rule?" I went on, not hearing him again. "I'm supposed to be wearing mine all the time, even in your shop. God knows I'm not a dandy, but I can't stand wearing the same as everyone else. Purple and gray stripes? I feel like a clown." Standing up, I did a half-hearted jig. "And these silly shorts are for kids."

Ahmed shook his head. "I'm just telling you..."

"OK. OK." I blew a smoke ring towards the alleyway. "I'll try harder at school, but forget about wearing these awful rags all the time."

That was the first time Ahmed spoke about race. At Churchill nobody talked about it openly, but now and then there were whisperings about attacks against white-owned farms by bands of renegade blacks. I had just overheard something about an incident in a nearby province where Larry's family had their farm.

"Aren't you afraid?" I asked my plowboy pal.

"Naw, the bloody Kaffirs don't scare me," he said quickly. "They're too stupid to know how to fight. A good kick in the balls and they crawl away."

A chill raced up my back and froze my jaw tight. Never had I heard such brutal talk, and from someone I called my friend. I imagined Benjamin, the houseboy, keeling over face down into the dirt. Chest pounding, I doubled my fists to tear the miserable hayseed apart. But instead I just glared at him. We had both leaped into different skins. Larry was not the gentle soul I knew, and I was not the guy who always tried like hell to stay out of arguments. It was a danger zone, and I had to get us both out of it.

"I'll be sixteen next week," I said. "Can't wait to get my driver's license."

"Jolly good, Mac." he replied. "When I work at the farm, my Pa's gonna to give me his old pickup truck." In an instant, the ugly intent vanished, and he was dreaming out loud about his first set of wheels.

It was true, I had been waiting all my life for the day I would be old enough to drive. At last I could pick up on what I started in Florida, building my own motorbike. Now I could buy one. Cycling was one thing, but motorized, I could go anywhere.

"Those little red Mopeds around town," I asked Ahmed,

"what do you think of them?"

"Very dangerous," he scowled. "You need weight, something that can move with the traffic." He pointed over the counter to a large black motorcycle standing next to the bicycles. "Matchless 500 cc, single cylinder—police bike," he said. "This is a strong machine. If you like, I make you special price—seventy-five pounds."

The Matchless had a dented gas tank, cracked seat and worn rubber footrests. But it looked like a dream machine to me. And at a price I could afford—about 200 American dollars.

"I'll take it," I declared. "Will you hold the bike for a couple of days? I have to tell my folks and get the money."

"Of course." He spread his arms grandly towards me. "Anything for my American friend."

That evening at the Ranche House, we finished dinner in the courtyard, and the others drifted inside, leaving my father and me alone with the lizards. Seeing my chance, I told him about the Matchless.

"Very dangerous," my father scowled. "Do you know how much those hulks weigh? You're just a skinny kid. How will you keep it from tipping over when you're stopped at a red light? You should get a Moped."

"But Dad," I pleaded, "Those little Mopeds are death traps. Everyone knows the bigger the bike, the safer it is. Just ask Ahmed."

"Who's Ahmed?"

I didn't want to let on that he was my friend, so I said as little as possible.

"Some guy who's selling the Matchless."

"Some guy who'll say anything to make a sale," said my father, tossing his napkin on the table like a Royal Flush.

"Come on, Dad," I pleaded, as he got up and started to leave. "I spend half my life puffing back and forth to school on that old bicycle." That ploy won him over—or wore him down. No matter that the ride was the high point of my day.

I leapt from the table and hurried to the front porch, keen to savor my victory. There my thoughts were preempted by a magnificent African sunset. The Ranche House was perched on a hill that overlooked Salisbury to the east, but the house itself faced west, away from town as if turning its

back upon that enclave of exclusivity. From the front porch I looked west across vast pristine savanna, habitat of the people long before any settlers arrived. Fingers of orange reached down from the sky and touched the terrain with such tenderness as to say; one day this land will have its champions.

The next morning, cash in hand, I dashed down to Ahmed's. I burst into the shop high as a cloud, only to find that the Matchless was gone.

"Where's my bike?" I asked.

"Oh, the Matchless? It was sold."

My stomach dropped. Ahmed had been my shelter in a place where I was over-exposed and under-protected. Now he too was one of its hazards. I cast about for an explanation. Perhaps one of his friends in high places wanted the Matchless for his son. Might Ahmed have been forced to sacrifice our friendship to appease the powers that be? I didn't want to consider the obvious: that someone had offered him more money.

My Syrian comrade was an enigma. He seldom talked about himself, and I, being less than forthcoming myself, never asked. Just the other day a man showed up in the alleyway. Ahmed excused himself and walked out to greet him. Their words were muffled, but I could see Ahmed wringing his hands and rocking from one foot to another. When the man left, Ahmed returned to his stool shaking, beads of sweat behind his ears.

"Where were we?" was all he said.

I wondered what Ahmed was up to. Perhaps he was trafficking in illegal arms on the black market, or worse, drugs and prostitution. Better I didn't know.

I waited for his kind, soft voice to somehow make it right. But nothing. So with tight fists and flushed face, I turned and stepped out to the sun-parched lane, anxious to get away before I said something I would regret.

Ahmed ran after me. "Wait!" he called out. "I have something else. You'll like it better."

I stopped and turned to look back. "Oh yeah, what?"

He beckoned me to the yard behind the shop. "Just got this in. BSA Golden Flash, 650 cc twin cylinder. Better bike all around. You can have it for the same seventy-five pounds."

Like the Matchless, it was a retired police motorcycle, but this

one had no dents on the gas tank, no cracks in the leather seat, and there was still lots of rubber on the footrests. The missed Matchless vanished from my teenage mind, replaced by this dazzling BSA!

But then I remembered: this man had betrayed me once. Could he be trusted now? I looked at Ahmed with dark, accusing eyes.

Ahmed stepped over in front of me. "Listen here, this is a great bike," he said in a low, earnest tone, looking me straight on. "You have my promise, as long as you own this machine, it will always start on the first kick. I'm telling you, my friend, always the first kick."

"Fat chance," I spat back at him. "You always complain that those ex-police beasts are hard to rouse. First kick every time?"

Ahmed didn't answer. He just stood there facing me without a blink. I wanted to believe he was still my friend. Looking down, I reached into my pocket for my handful of cash, and handed it to him.

Grabbing the handle bars with both fists, I climbed onto the BSA and stood straight-legged with my right foot on the starter lever. My body weight plunged the lever towards the ground, and just as Ahmed had promised, the engine roared to life. Aiming down the alleyway, I gunned the throttle and popped the clutch. With a throaty rumble between my legs, the ungainly hunk of steel leapt forward like a gazelle, kicking up dust and scattering gravel that tinkled against the thin walls of Ahmed's Bicycle Shop. The wind was on my cheeks like never before.

The next day I motored to school, cruising in the car lane where the sea of cyclists was just a blur in the dual rearview mirrors of sparkling chrome. Arriving at the school bicycle rack, I parked my prize and had just stepped back for another admiring gaze when a prefect blocked my view.

"Hey Yank, the headmaster wants you in his office."

"Can't be," I said. "I'm ten minutes early."

"Just come with me," he said with a sly smile, his envy no doubt adding sweetness to his mission.

"McVoy, you were seen on the street without your uniform," said the headmaster in a low growl. Without saying more, he reached for his cane and motioned for me to bend over.

This time it would be six for sure. I recalled Larry's words, "Six

is bloody hell, like it never stops. You wanna die." Two or three cuts were bad enough, but my God, I never thought this could happen to me. In my mind, I tried to escape to the swamp, but blissful illusions of solitude didn't help me. Feeling fearfully alone, I closed my eyes and cast about for help. As I did, I felt the presence of others around me. First Benjamin, then Sarah, and then the girl behind the fence. After them came the ditch diggers and cyclists along the road. Their faces paraded before my mind's eye. We're all in this together, I thought. Nobody is safe.

Like a lightning bolt piercing a sunny sky, The Cane was the assault that enforced the lopsided social order around this placid countryside. Severe pain and the fear of more, or even worse—worse than might happen in the office of the headmaster of a school for the children of the ruling class.

The ominous bird man hovered over me and raised his cane to strike. I cringed into the floor and held my breath. But after a moment nothing had come down.

"I say, McVoy," he said in a nearly casual tone, "do you have corporal punishment in America?"

"No Sir. We don't, Sir," I answered, breathing again but still bending over. I was speaking of my own school in Florida, having no clue about the rest of the country.

"You don't say. Why not?"

Once again, Ahmed's voice was in my ear. If ever there was a time not to offend, this was it. But a certain answer was on its way from my mind to my mouth, and before I could intervene, out it came.

"Because, Sir, it's considered barbaric, Sir."

The headmaster gasped. I braced myself for a cut that would come out the other side. Nothing came.

"Young man, listen to me," he said. "The headmaster's duty is to maintain discipline. It's not an easy job, and I tell you, most chaps your age need The Cane."

"Yes Sir. I understand, Sir." All I could do was keep the Sirs coming. Any moment the talking would stop and the thrashing would begin. But then he spoke again.

"I said most chaps need The Cane, but not all." He lowered his weapon and set it back against the table. "Go back to your classroom," he sighed, "and please try to do better next time."

My new wheels gave me a

fresh sense of freedom, and spun out another chapter in my childhood wandering. I rode all over Southern Rhodesia: up and down the bare stone face of Mount Dombashawa, and through the jungle basin of the Zambezi River. I rolled along the beaches of Mozambique, through the Copper Belt region of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), and on the Great North Road in Nyasaland (now Malawe). Ahmed's promise held true. The BSA always started on the first kick.

As I rode, an ethereal jet stream followed me and imprinted the course of my explorations from beginning to end. The path of my journey drew a divine portrait of this land, which was both celebrating its humble majesty and struggling to find its voice. As the miles ticked by on the odometer, I neared the end of the search that had begun in the Florida swamp. I felt safe and at home, and breathed a quiet sigh.

My travels showed me freedom of the wind-in-your-face kind. The speak-your-truth kind was another matter. Far from being emboldened by my triumph with the headmaster, I chose instead quiet obedience. My invisible liaison with the houseboy, the maid, and the girl behind the fence found no voice. I simply held my breath, waiting to return to the land of the free. Until then, my sympathies would remain unsoiled. Or so I thought.

Two years had passed when I left for America. A boat took me up the West Coast of Africa and through the Suez Canal to dock in Venice, where I checked into a small, back-street hotel. In the hallway, I came across a woman on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor. I was startled to see her there, and wanted to rush over, lift her to her feet, and brush off her soiled smock. It looked so wrong to me: such down and dirty work for a white woman.