Naledi and Tiro were worried. Their baby sister, Dineo, was ill, very ill. For three days now, Nono, their granny, had been trying to cool her fever with damp cloths placed on her little head and body. Mmangwane, their aunt, made her take sips of water, but still their sister lay hot and restless, crying softly at times.

"Can't we take Dineo to the hospital?" Naledi begged, but Nono said Dineo was much too sick to be carried that far. The only hospital was many kilometers away, and Naledi also knew they had no money to pay a doctor to visit them. No one in the village had that much money. "If only Mma was here," Naledi wished over and over as she and Tiro walked down to the village tap with their empty buckets. She tightly clutched the coins in her hand.

Each morning the children had to pass the place of graves on their way to buy the day's water, and only last week another baby in the village had died. It was always scary seeing the little graves, but especially this fresh one now.

As they came nearer, Naledi fixed her eyes on the ground ahead, trying not to look, trying not to think. But it was no use. She just couldn't stop herself thinking of her own little sister being lowered into a hole in the ground.

Finally Naledi could stand it no longer. When they had returned with the water, she called Tiro to the back of the house and spoke bluntly.

"We must get Mma, or Dineo is going to die!"

"But how?" Tiro was bewildered.

Their mother worked and lived in Johannesburg, more than 300 kilometers away.

"We can get to the big road and walk," Naledi replied calmly.

It was school vacation now, but during the term it took the children more than an hour to walk to school each day, so they were used to walking. Naledi wasn't going to let herself think how much longer it would take to get to Johannesburg.

Tiro, however, was not so sure.

"But Nono doesn't want us to worry Mma and I know she won't let us go!"
"That's just it," Naledi retorted quickly. "Nono and Mmangwane keep saying Dineo will be better soon. You heard them talking last night. They say they don't want to send Mma a telegram and frighten her. But what if they wait and it's too late?"

Tiro thought for a moment.

"Can't we send Mma a telegram?"

"How can we if we haven't the money? And if we borrow some, Nono will hear about it and be very cross with us."

It was clear that Naledi had made up her mind—and Tiro knew his sister. She was four years older than him, already thirteen, and once she had decided something, that was that.

So Tiro gave up reasoning.

The children went to find Naledi's friend Poleng, and explained. Poleng was very surprised but agreed to help. She would tell Nono once the children had gone and she also promised to help their granny by bringing the water and doing the other jobs.

"How will you eat on the way?" Poleng asked.

Tiro looked worried, but Naledi was confident.

"Oh, we'll find something."

Poleng told them to wait and ran into her house, returning soon with a couple of sweet potatoes and a bottle of water. The children thanked her. She was indeed a good friend.

Before they could go, Naledi had to get the last letter Mma had sent, so they would know where to look for her in the big city. Slipping into the house, Naledi took the letter quietly from the tin without Nono or Mmangwane noticing. Both were busy with Dineo as Naledi slipped out again.

**The Road**

The children walked quickly away from the village. The road was really just a track made by car tires—two lines of dusty red earth leading out across the flat, dry grassland.

Once at the big tar road, they turned in the direction of the early morning sun, for that was the way to Johannesburg. The steel railway line glinted alongside the road.

"If only we had some money to buy tickets for the train. We don't have even one cent." Tiro sighed.
"Never mind. We'll get there somehow!" Naledi was still confident as they set off eastward.

The tar road burned their feet.

"Let's walk at the side," Tiro suggested.

The grass was dry and scratchy, but they were used to it. Now and again, a car or a truck roared by, and then the road was quiet again and they were alone. Naledi began to sing the words of her favorite tune and Tiro was soon joining in.

On they walked.

"Can't we stop and eat?" Tiro was beginning to feel sharp stabs of hunger. But Naledi wanted to go on until they reached the top of the long, low hill ahead.

Their legs slowed down as they began the walk uphill, their bodies feeling heavy. At last they came to the top and flopped down to rest.

Hungryly they ate their sweet potatoes and drank the water. The air was hot and still. Some birds skimmed lightly across the sky as they gazed down at the long road ahead. It stretched into the distance, between fenced off fields and dry grass, up to another far-off hill.

"Come on! We must get on," Naledi insisted, pulling herself up quickly.

She could tell that Tiro was already tired, but they couldn't afford to stop for long. The sun had already passed its midday position, and they didn't seem to have traveled very far.

On they walked, steadily, singing to break the silence.

But in the middle of the afternoon, when the road led to a small town, they stopped singing and began to walk a little faster. They were afraid a policeman might stop them because they were strangers.