

“Poinsettias”

by Beverley Naidoo

Marika thrust the glass jar up to Veronica's face.

'See this one Nicky!' she declared. 'Caught it last week!' Veronica stared at the coiled brown shape slithering inside the greenish liquid. She felt sick.

'You should have seen how blinking quick I was man! This sort are poisonous!'

Marika's eyes pinned her down, watching for a reaction. She didn't know which were worse, Marika's or those of the dead creature in the jar.

'Where did you find it?'

Her voice did not betray her and Marika began her dramatic tale about tracking the snake in the bougainvillea next to the hen-run.

It was a valuable addition to her collection. Rows of bottles, all with the same green liquid, lined the shelf above her bed. Spiders and insects of various shapes and sizes floated safely, serenely, inside. Marika carefully replaced the snake next to another prize item - a one-legged chameleon, its colours dulled and fixed. Veronica remembered it alive. It had been the farm children's pet briefly until they had tired of capturing flies for it. She had even helped one whole Saturday, prowling around the cow-shed, sneaking up and snapping the over-fed blue-buzzers in cigarette tins. The next morning Marika and her brothers had decided to let the creature go free and get its own dinner. But when they had come to release the catch of the splintering old wood-and-wire hutch, the chameleon lay stiff and still. The three boys had wanted to make a special grave down in the donga -but in the end Marika had persuaded them to let her preserve it.

The farm, a small-holding owned by Marika's parents, lay against a mountain in the middle of the Magaliesberg. As well as growing fruit and vegetables and keeping a few animals, the van Reenens let out a small cottage on the farm, mostly to city visitors. It was near enough to Johannesburg for Mr and Mrs Martin with their only child Veronica to get away from the ever-increasing hustle for short breaks. They were regulars, coming two or three times a year. In fact Mr Martin had been visiting since he was a child, when Marika's mother herself had been a small girl on the same farm. Veronica's own memories of the place stretched back for as long as she could remember. For years she and Marika had played 'house' in the donga behind the farmhouse. They had used larger stones for the walls, shifting around smaller stones as the furniture. In the past Veronica used to bring all her dolls, despite her mother's protests. Sensing Marika's envy, she had enjoyed saying which dolls could be played with. But since Marika's tenth birthday things were different.

Veronica had been taken by surprise. She had been sitting with the farm children on the wall of the stoep, dangling her legs and kicking the brickwork with her heels like the others. Marika had been telling her about the disco which had been her birthday treat when Veronica had suggested that they go to the donga.

'Hey the girls are going to play dollies!' Marika's twin brother Piet had sneered. Slipping off the wall, six-year-old Dirk had rolled on the ground, kicking his legs in the air and cooing.

'Gaga gaga! Mommy! Mommy! Change my nappy!'

Veronica had glared at him and he had pulled a face at her. She had fought to hold back her tears. Only Anton, the oldest, had not joined in, but called the others to leave the girls alone to their sissy games. Marika had reacted furiously.

'I'm not a sissy!' she had screamed after them. Leaving Veronica alone on the stoep, she had gone inside the house, slamming the door behind her.

When Veronica returned to the farm a few months later, Marika had begun her bottle collection. Veronica had also left her dolls at home, except for the eyelid-clicking, brown-eyed Margaret. But this time the porcelain head with brown painted curls remained tucked under the bedclothes and was spoken to only at night. She became Veronica's personal counsellor on the farm - a pale replica of Veronica's personal counsellor in town.

Back home in Johannesburg it was Rebecca, their maid, to whom Veronica confided. She was a far better listener than Margaret because she made sympathetic noises. With Veronica's mother often helping out at her father's office, or busy with Mothers' Union meetings, they spent a lot of time together. Whether she was cooking, washing, ironing or dusting, Rebecca was always prepared to chat. But she never came to the farm with them. Instead she went to visit her own children, living with their grandmother, a five-hour bus ride away.

Sharing secrets with Rebecca was fun, especially when Rebecca had let her visit her dim, tiny room in the servants' quarters at the top of their block of flats. It had started with her desperate desire to see the bedspread which Rebecca had been patiently embroidering for months on 'babysitting' nights when Veronica's parents went out. Although Veronica didn't think she needed to be 'babysat', she liked Rebecca's company. Together they would sit and talk at the table in the Martin's kitchen until it was her bed-time. She had watched the bedspread growing and, when it was finally completed, had begged and nagged to see how it looked on the bed. But before she could be taken, Rebecca had made her promise, 'Remember, you are not to tell your ma or pa!'

Because it had been a secret, everything had stayed fixed in her mind like a picture. The splendid bedcover draped over an old iron bed raised up high on bricks. A curtain across one corner of the room. Rebecca's cupboard. An orange crate table next to the bed, on which stood a photo of Rebecca's four children. Veronica had studied their smiling black faces to see if they looked like their mother, trying to match the faces to the names she asked Rebecca to repeat. The only one whose name she always remembered was Selo, the oldest, because he was exactly her age and his name was shorter than the others.

'Is this Selo?' she had asked, picking out the tallest of the children, who had a cheerful, cheeky grin.

'Oh yes, that's Selo! Always getting into trouble!' Rebecca had laughed, adding, 'But he's a good boy.'

Yet here on the farm there was no Rebecca. So it was to Margaret that Veronica confided about the snake's awful eyes. Of course if it was Rebecca, she would make some sounds to show how disgusted she was. Then they would laugh together at how stupid it was to keep all those dead creatures in jars.

But there was something even more important she needed to talk to Rebecca about. It was something

Marika had said after she had put the snake back on the shelf. She had hinted strongly that her brothers had made up a test which Veronica would have to pass before she could go on playing with them. Marika herself had carried out a dare set by the boys. She would not say what it had been, it was so terrible. She was equally mysterious about Veronica's dare.

'I'm not allowed to tell . . . but you know our neighbour Jan Venter . . .?'

Marika had stopped and ominously refused to say anything more.

Big and burly - known for his flaming red beard, moustache and temper - children, and even adults, usually kept clear of Meneer Venter when possible. Veronica had seen him only once, when he had called to see Mr van Reenen to insist Marika's father mend the fence between them. He ran one of the biggest orange estates in the area and everyone knew that he threatened to shoot any trespasser on his land like he shot baboons. That was not to be taken lightly. Jan Venter was known to be 'fond of the bottle' and there had been talk about the disappearance of Mrs Venter a few years ago. Some people said she had just had enough of his temper and gone back to her own people in another part of the country. The rumour amongst the local children was that he had murdered his wife and buried her in front of his house - under a poinsettia bush which now had brighter than usual red flowers.

The next morning, instead of darting off early to look for Marika, Veronica hung back and waited for her parents before going to the farmhouse for breakfast. Marika and her family ate in the kitchen but the Martins were served their meals in the dining-room, beneath a pair of massive kudu horns and heavily framed photographs of Marika's grandparents. Mrs van Reenen followed behind the servant who carried the plates of steaming porridge.

'Still no sign of rain, but it'll be a nice day again for you all!'

She smiled and stopped to pass on some of the local news, including talk of a leopard seen again on the mountain behind the farm.

Today Veronica took her time. When she came to her last piece of toast, she chewed it slowly. She was trying to think of a good reason to stay with her parents who were pouring second cups of coffee, when her mother said, 'You can be excused, Veronica dear. You can go off and play. You won't go near the mountain, will you?'

She nodded, pursing her lips together and got up. Her father ruffled her hair as she passed.

'Have a good day Ronnie!'

He only called her that when he was relaxed. She just hoped Marika's brothers didn't ever hear it. Their jokes about 'Nicky' were bad enough.

Hoping the van Reenen children might still be at breakfast in the kitchen, Veronica headed for the opposite door, to the stoep. But they were already there on the wall, legs swinging, waiting. Anton, the oldest, was direct.

'We've made a new rule. Girls have to do a dare before they join our gang.'

Veronica stood rooted to the concrete floor. All the children except Anton were grinning. Dead-pan, he went on to explain that she had to climb through the barbed-wire fence into the neighbouring Venter estate and make her way across to the front of Jan Venter's farmhouse.

'You've got to get one of his poinsettia flowers. We don't have any this side, so you can't cheat!'

They would accompany her as far as the fence and wait for her to return.

There was no way out. If she wasn't part of the gang, there would be no one to play with. As they marched across the donga Veronica glanced at the spot where they used to play 'house' in the shade of the thorn trees. The stones were still there. It was like

another world. Inside she felt cold and shivery even though her feet and arms were moving swiftly in step with the others and the sun's heat was already enveloping them. As they trudged in silence along the edge of the mealie field, nearing the wire fence, Dirk suddenly broke out into a jingle.

'Nicky, Nicky, looks so sickly!'

He was told sharply to shut up by the others.

'A dare is not a game! It's a serious thing you idiot,' Marika snapped.

At the fence Anton and Piet parted the barbed wire for Veronica to slip through. Anton pointed.

'The farmhouse is that way. At the end of the orange trees follow the road.'

Veronica cast a quick glimpse back at the group. They all had solemn faces except for Dirk who couldn't hide his little grin. She was already far down the line of orange trees when she heard Marika's voice ringing faintly behind her.

'Good luck, hey Nicky!'

Sounds of laughter seemed to follow.

For as far as she could see ahead there were only straight rows of trees, the deep green leaves and bright orange fruit silently glinting in the sunlight. They were not good cover. With her shadow darting from one tree's patch of shade to the next, her mind began searching wildly for what to say if she was caught. Could she pretend she was lost... or that she had a dog which had got lost? Or that she had come to warn Meneer Venter about the leopard on the mountain? Veronica could not imagine the big burly man with the flaming beard believing any of her stories. She almost wished the dare had been for her to go up the mountain instead.

Her mouth was dry, her body wet and sticky, her legs sprinting heavily. Sucking in small quick breaths, she jerked to a halt. The moments of rest brought a terrible panic. What on earth was she doing here, alone in the middle of Jan Venter's oranges? This dare was too dangerous. She should run back and tell the others it was unfair. She bet they wouldn't do it! Then she remembered Marika saying her own dare was too terrible to talk about. Perhaps she had just said that to frighten her . . . But if she went back now, that would be the end of their friendship. Whatever could she do by herself on the farm? It wasn't worth thinking about. Lips pressed together, her eyes intently scoured the bushes ahead.

At last she could see she was coming to a dirt road. Peering from behind a tree, she studied how to make her way up it. On either side was a line of tall grey bluegums leading to a cluster of white-washed buildings. The furthest one seemed to be the main house. There was no poinsettia in sight, so the front had to be around one of the other sides. Behind the bluegums on the far side of the road, set a little back, were some huts - servants' quarters. Usually she hardly took any notice of these kind of buildings. They were just there, part of what you found on a farm. But now she was forced to scan the area around the huts very closely. Although there were some open doorways, they were too dark to see inside. No one seemed to be around, either on the road or in the workers' compound, but it would be safer to stay on the side where she was for as long as possible. A few large avocado trees would provide thick cover for a short stretch - and then she would have to trust to the bluegums and to fortune.

At last, in line with the main house, she crossed the road. Her shoes smacking against the sand pounded as loudly as her heart. Facing her was a door, leading to a backyard. She ducked down to creep past a window. A few paces more and she had reached the side of the raised stoep. On tip-toe she stretched to look. Still no one! Through the wooden railings she glimpsed a spray of pointed red flowers. The poinsettia was just around the corner! Making a final dash to the bush, she ripped off a flower at the stem. Milky white stuff spurted out on to her fingers. Not bothering to wipe off the stickiness, she turned to run. But a door banging and fearsome shouting forced her to cower back next to the poinsettia bush and freeze. 'Jou bliksem! Ek sal jou moer!'

It could only be Jan Venter. Veronica's Afrikaans was not very good despite the lessons at school. But she knew Meneer Venter was swearing and that 'moer' was 'murder'. Who was he going to murder now? Was she not perhaps already standing on his wife?

The commotion got worse. She could hear sounds of running and other people coming outside. An elderly woman in housemaid's uniform hurried down steps from the stoep close by to Veronica, without noticing her huddled against the wall. She was moaning softly to herself. Meneer Venter was shouting about people who stole from him. Everyone would see now what he did to thieves.

Veronica was trembling but she had to find out what was happening. She stretched forward to see around the corner. A small number of servants stood at a short distance from the massive figure - his face just a shade lighter than his blazing beard and hair. In front of him stood a black child with thin spindly legs, wearing a pair of torn khaki shorts, his eyes fixed on the ground. The man grabbed the boy's ear and jerked his head upwards, with his other hand forcing an orange into the boy's face.

'Kyk hierso! Look at this! I'll teach you a lesson you'll never forget!'

'Please Baas, this boy has learnt his lesson. He won't do it again Baas. I will speak to him Baas!'

It was the old housemaid, her hands together as if in a prayer, pleading, moving nearer to Meneer Venter. His arm swept out, dismissing her.

'He must learn a proper lesson. Talking is not good enough!'

The old woman was insistent. 'He's only a child my Baas. Once the Baas was also a child!'

Meneer Venter turned on her now. 'You go too far now Lettie. Watch out or I'll give you a lesson too!'

The old woman covered her face with her hands, shaking her head.

Meneer Venter shouted instructions to a couple of servants who disappeared through the side door. One came back with a wooden chair and the other with a cane. For a moment after his ear had been released, the boy looked around wildly. In the second that Veronica glimpsed his eyes, she almost called out. He looked like Selo, Rebecca's son, in the photograph! It couldn't be him, could it? Rebecca's family lived far away. But Rebecca had said Selo was always getting into trouble.

The boy was ordered to lean over the chair. One of

the male workers was ordered to stand in front and hold him down. Meneer Venter took the cane. Veronica did not look after the first two strikes. The boy's cries pierced her ears. She was shivering all over. Her stomach heaved.

When the cries reduced to a soft whimpering, Veronica looked up. To her horror Meneer Venter was walking in her direction in a slow swagger. There was no time and no where to run. Standing transfixed, she dropped the flower in her hand. His eyes were odd, glazed, as if not seeing anything. Then, as he drew close, they flickered.

'Jy is 'n van Reenen, ne? Tell your father I'm satisfied with the fence.'

Before Veronica could even think what to say, he patted her hair lightly and walked on, up the steps and into the house. He had thought she was Marika.

Guiltily, Veronica looked down at the fallen poinsettia. She was aware of the old woman gently holding the boy, making soothing noises. The small assembly of servants were talking quietly amongst themselves. Hastily she picked up the blood-red flower. The milky oozing had stopped and sealed up the stem. Grabbing a branch above her, she snapped off four more stems, careless of the sticky sap. A flower each. Sprinting down the road, she passed the old woman and the boy who had begun making their way painfully towards the huts behind the bluegums. No sounds followed as she entered the orange trees. She stopped running. She could walk the rest of the way now and give herself time to regain her breath. Then she could present each flower quite calmly. She might even take the gang some oranges.

➤ **Background**

Beverly Naidoo grew up in South Africa under the apartheid system. An active resister to apartheid, she lived in her home country until departing to study at the University of York in England. There she began writing in exile and in 1985 published her first children's book, the award-winning *Journey to Jo'burg*, which was dedicated to her nanny's two daughters who died from diphtheria because only white people were inoculated at the time. *Journey To Jo'burg* was banned in South Africa until 1991.

Beverly Naidoo has taught primary and secondary school in London and worked as an Advisor for English and Cultural Diversity in Dorset. She has a Ph.D. in exploring issues of racism with young people through literature and works tirelessly to promote children's entitlement to grow up free from racism and injustice. Her newest novel is *The Other Side Of Truth*, for which she won an Arts Council of England Writer's Award in 1999 for work-in-progress as well as the Smarties Silver Medal in 2000 and the Library Association's prestigious Carnegie Medal.

Books:

- [Out of Bounds](#)
- [Journey to Jo'burg](#)
- [The Other Side of Truth](#)
- [No Turning Back](#)
- [Chain of Fire](#)

➤ **The author's words**

I grew up in apartheid South Africa, accepting the world as presented to me in my whites-only school and community. When my older brother began to question our deeply racialised and racist existence, I initially dismissed his challenges. When I entered university, the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party and most organisations that opposed apartheid had been banned. Nelson Mandela and various activists had gone ‘underground’. The University of the Witwatersrand had been ordered to close its doors to black students. Somehow, a few black students had managed to get special permission to complete courses. A friend introduced me to a small group of black and white students who met on the lawn outside the library to debate intensely what was happening in the country. Gradually I shed my blinkers.

It was not a time for sitting on the fence. Choices had to be made. Two years later, detention without trial and solitary confinement made me understand more fully how the country felt like a vast prison for most of its people. After I left South Africa the following year in 1965, I had to deal with my sense of disconnection. I was physically in England but my head was in South Africa, imagining my brother and others locked away in prison. The resistance had, for the time being, been smashed. I immersed myself in literature from the African continent, some of it banned back home. Apartheid aimed to segregate us, physically, intellectually, emotionally. But here were writers inviting me to cross boundaries into their particular worlds, inviting me to engage with them.

I began writing in exile fifteen years later. In retrospect I can see that all my writing has involved journeys of one kind or another. My first small novel *Journey to Jo'burg* arose out of a question: How could I show my children, born in exile, as well as other readers, young and old, something of the terrible reality of a system that forced millions of black children to live apart from their parents? Although the book was banned in South Africa until the year after Nelson Mandela's release from jail, it travelled in English, and in translation, around the world. Almost everywhere, the most common question that it has stirred in readers has been: ‘*Is your story true?*’ Except amongst young Palestinians who, tragically, identify their current lives with the young black South Africans who pitted themselves against apartheid's mighty tanks. Instead they ask me unanswerable questions like: ‘*Is justice sleeping or is it a dream? If justice is sleeping, who will wake justice up?*’

Much of my writing involves engagement with reality that leads me on to imagined experience. I tend to do a lot of research after which I have to release myself from all my documentation in order to give myself space to allow the material to be transformed. Each time there is an aesthetic quest to find the shape and form that illuminate the moral dilemmas, the questions at the core. It is this aesthetic, creative quest that creates space for my imagination. When writing, I make a journey across the fence into the lives of characters at very particular points in time and place. I frequently take myself into the lives and perspectives of children and adults that I wasn't – and in the South African context the most pressing challenge has been for me to cross our racialised borders.

My concern with this theme of crossing boundaries, especially of racialised identities, led me out of fiction writing for three years into trying to look dispassionately at the potential impact of literature in this area. I undertook a doctoral research project in which a class of white British 13 year olds read literature for a year that challenged them to imagine themselves into very different situations and identities. I wanted to see from their responses what evidence I could find of empathy, of changing perceptions and, ultimately, of any critical thinking about their own society. Would engaging in fictional witness, encourage greater awareness in relation to their own context? My findings were both illuminating and sobering. I wrote about the experience in a book called *Through Whose Eyes? Exploring racism: reader, text and context*.

Fortunately, three years studying the ‘filters’ that readers bring to texts did not diminish my own drive to continue writing fiction. Stories are a way of making sense, first of all for myself, and then for others. I believe that if a writer can find the truths in a specific human situation, the meaning will carry across time, place, at least to some readers if not to all.

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