



Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014)

Nadine Gordimer was born in Springs (in the province of Transvaal). Her mother was British and her father a Jewish immigrant. She wrote a large number of short stories, novels and essays, and they primarily concern life in South Africa. Quite a number of her publications were banned by the Board of Censors during the apartheid era because of her openly critical approach to racial politics during this time. Today she is considered one of the most famous South African writers, and one of the pinnacles of her career was in 1991 when she received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

PRE-READING

1. What does Umkhonto weSizwe mean and what was it?
2. What was Nelson Mandela's connection to Umkhonto weSizwe?

Comrades

BY NADINE GORDIMER (1991)

gadget dims
device apparat
enclave enklave (et landområde, der er helt omgivet af et andet område og adskilt af fx sprog, religion eller kultur)
tended velplejet
flowerbed blomsterbed
loosening into dispersion (her) ved at gå i opløsning
convenient bejligt
generic fællesbetegnelse
leftist venstreorienteret
secular verdslig (ikke-religiøs)
liberal liberal, fritænker
slight let
slim slank
draw courage hente mod
tilt hældning
freckled fregnet
glance at kaste et blik på

AS MRS. HATTIE TELFORD PRESSED THE ELECTRONIC GADGET that deactivates the alarm device in her car a group of youngsters came up behind her. Black. But no need to be afraid; this was not a city street. This was a non-racial enclave of learning, a place where tended flowerbeds and trees bearing botanical identification plates civilized the wild reminder of campus guards and dogs. The youngsters, like her, were part of the crowd loosening into dispersion after a university conference on People's Education. They were the people to be educated; she was one of the committee of white and black activists (convenient generic for revolutionaries, leftists secular and Christian, fellow-travellers and liberals) up on the platform.

Comrade ... She was settling in the driver's seat when one so slight and slim he seemed a figure in profile came up to her window. He drew courage from the friendly lift of the woman's eyebrows above blue eyes, the tilt of her freckled white face: Comrade, are you going to town?

No, she was going in the opposite direction, home ... but quickly, in the spirit of the hall where these young people had been somewhere, somehow present with her (ah no, she with them) stamping and singing Freedom songs, she would take them to the bus station their spokesman named. Climb aboard!

The others got in the back, the spokesman beside her. She saw the nervous white of his eyes as he glanced at and away from her. She

searched for talk to set them at ease. Questions, of course. Older people always start with questioning young ones. Did they come from Soweto?

They came from Harrismith, Phoneng Location.

She made the calculation: about two hundred kilometres distant.

5 How did they get here? Who told them about the conference?

We are Youth Congress in Phoneng.

A delegation. They had come by bus; one of the groups and stragglers who kept arriving long after the conference had started. They had missed, then, the free lunch?

10 At the back, no one seemed even to be breathing. The spokesman must have had some silent communication with them, some obligation to speak for them created by the journey or by other shared experience in the mysterious bonds of the young these young. We are hungry. And from the back seats was drawn an assent like the suction of air in a com-
15 pressing silence.

She was silent in response, for the beat of a breath or two. These large gatherings both excited and left her overexposed, open and vulnerable to the rub and twitch of the mass shuffling across rows of seats and lopping up the aisles, babies' fudge-brown soft legs waving as their napkins
20 are changed on mothers' laps, little girls with plaited loops on their heads listening like old crones, heavy women swaying to chants, men with fierce, unreadably black faces breaking into harmony tender and deep as they sing to God for his protection of Umkhonto weSizwe, as people on both sides have always, everywhere, claimed divine protection for their
25 soldiers, their wars. At the end of a day like this she wanted a drink, she wanted the depraved luxury of solitude and quiet in which she would be restored (enriched, oh yes! by the day) to the familiar limits of her own being.

Hungry. Not for iced whisky and feet up. It seemed she had scarcely
30 hesitated: Look, I live nearby, come back to my house and have something to eat. Then I'll run you into town.-

- That will be very nice. We can be glad for that. And at the back the tight vacuum relaxed.

They followed her in through the gate, shrinking away from the dog
35 she assured them he was harmless but he was large, with a fancy collar by which she held him. She trooped them in through the kitchen because that was the way she always entered her house, something she would not have done if they had been adult, her black friends whose sophistication might lead them to believe the choice of entrance was an unthinking
40 historical slight. As she was going to feed them, she took them not into her living-room with its sofas and flowers but into her dining-room, so that they could sit at table right away. It was a room in confident taste that could afford to be spare: bare floorboards, matching golden wooden ceiling, antique brass chandelier, reed blinds instead of stuffy curtains.

to set at ease berolige

straggler efternøler, som kommer for sent

bond tæt forbindelse

assent samtykke

suction ind sugning

beat of breath åndedrag

overexposed overeksponeret

vulnerable sårbar

rub and twitch gnidning og trækning

shuffle sjoske

lope springe

aisle midtergang

fudge-brown karamelfarvet

plaited loop ternet sløjfe

crone gammel kone

chant ensformig sang, taktfast kor

fierce barsk

tender her: blød

divine guddommelig

depraved fordærvet, depraveret

solitude ensomhed

restore gendannet

scarcely knap nok

fancy smart

collar halsbånd

troop traske i en lang række

sophistication forfinethed, kræsenhed

slight tilsidesættelse,

for nærmelse

confident sikker

spare enkel

brass chandelier lysekrone

reed blinds gardiner af rør (plante)

release slippe fri fra
matrix oprindelse, form
grain årer (træ)
maid tjenestepige
wait on opvarte, betjene
exchange (sb.) udveksling
dole out fordele
urge tilskynde, opfordre
Ekskuus undskyld mig
 (Afrikaans)
rural landlig
delicate acknowledgement
 fin anerkendelse, tak
carbohydrate kulhydrat
distressed fortvivlet, ulyk-
 kelig
inadequacy utilstrække-
 lighed
copper kobber
grape leaves vindrueblade
peach fersken
edible spiselig
still life stilleben (kunstud-
 tryk)
literacy det at kunne læse
 og skrive, (her) kunnen,
 kompetence
pompous højtravende
chairman formand
branch afdeling
expel bortvise

An African wooden sculpture represented a lion marvellously released from its matrix in the grain of a Mukwa tree-trunk. She pulled up the chairs and left the four young men while she went back to the kitchen to make coffee and see what there was in the refrigerator for sandwiches.

5 They had greeted the maid, in the language she and they shared, on their way through the kitchen, but when the maid and the lady of the house had finished preparing cold meat and bread, and the coffee was ready, she suddenly did not want them to see that the maid waited on her. She herself carried the heavy tray into the dining-room.

10 They are sitting round the table, silent, and there is no impression that they stopped an undertone exchange when they heard her approaching. She doles out plates, cups. They stare at the food but their eyes seem focused on something she can't see; something that overwhelms. She urges them Just cold meat, I'm afraid, but there's chutney if you like it ...
 15 milk everybody? ... is the coffee too strong, I have a heavy hand, I know. Would anyone like to add some hot water

They eat. When she tries to talk to one of the others, he says Ekskuus? And she realizes he doesn't understand English, of the white man's languages knows perhaps only a little of that of the Afrikaners in the rural
 20 town he comes from. Another gives his name, as if in some delicate acknowledgement of the food. I'm Shadrack Nsutsha. – She repeats the surname to get it right. But he does not speak again. There is an urgent exchange of eye-language, and the spokesman holds out the emptied sugar-bowl to her. Please. She hurries to the kitchen and brings it back
 25 refilled. They need carbohydrate, they are hungry, they are young, they need it, they burn it up. She is distressed at the inadequacy of the meal and then notices the fruit bowl, her big copper fruit bowl, filled with apples and bananas and perhaps there is a peach or two under the grape leaves with which she likes to complete an edible still life. Have some
 30 fruit. Help yourselves.

They are stacking their plates and cups, not knowing what they are expected to do with them in this room which is a room where apparently people only eat, do not cook, do not sleep. While they finish the bananas and apples (Shadrack Nsutsha had seen the single peach and
 35 quickly got there first) she talks to the spokesman, whose name she has asked for: Dumile. Are you still at school, Dumile? Of course he is not at school they are not at school; youngsters their age have not been at school for several years, they are the children growing into young men and women for whom school is a battleground, a place of boycotts and
 40 demonstrations, the literacy of political rhetoric, the education of revolt against having to live the life their parents live. They have pompous titles of responsibility beyond childhood: he is chairman of his branch of the Youth Congress, he was expelled two years ago for leading a boycott? Throwing stones at the police? Maybe burning the school down? He calls

it all quietly, abstractly, doesn't know many ordinary, concrete words but knows these euphemisms 'political activity'. No school for two years? No. So what have you been able to do with yourself, all that time?

She isn't giving him a chance to eat his apple. He swallows a large bite, shaking his head on its thin, little-boy neck. I was inside. Detained from this June for six months.

She looks round the others. And you?-

Shadrack seems to nod slightly. The other two look at her. She should know, she should have known, it's a common enough answer from youths like them, their colour. They're not going to be saying they've been selected for the 1st Eleven at cricket or that they're off on a student tour to Europe in the school holidays.

The spokesman, Dumile, tells her he wants to study by correspondence, 'get his matric' that he was preparing for two years ago; two years ago when he was still a child, when he didn't have the hair that is now appearing on his face, making him a man, taking away the childhood. In the hesitations, the silences of the table, where there is nervously spilt coffee among plates of banana skins, there grows the certainty that he will never get the papers filled in for the correspondence college, he will never get the two years back. She looks at them all and cannot believe what she knows: that they, suddenly here in her house, will carry the AK-47s they only sing about, now, miming death as they sing. They will have a career of wiring explosives to the undersides of vehicles, they will go away and come back through the bush to dig holes not to plant trees to shade home, but to plant land-mines. She can see they have been terribly harmed but cannot believe they could harm. They are wiping their fruit-sticky hands furtively palm against palm.

She breaks the silence; says something, anything

How d'you like my lion? Isn't he beautiful? He's made by a Zimbabwian artist, I think the name's Dube.

But the foolish interruption becomes revelation. Dumile, in his gaze distant, lingering, speechless this time reveals what has overwhelmed them. In this room, the space, the expensive antique chandelier, the consciously simple choice of reed blinds, the carved lion: all are on the same level of impact, phenomena undifferentiated, undecipherable. Only the food that fed their hunger was real.

euphemism eufemisme, omskrivning af et ord, så det lyder pænere

detained tilbageholdt, fængslet

correspondence college skole hvor man kan tage en uddannelse via et brev-kursus

1st Eleven at cricket førsteholdet i cricket

matric afsluttende ungdoms-eksamen (ca. 2.g-niveau)

AK-47 automatisk stormgevær

wire installere

explosives sprængstof

vehicle køretøj

harm skade, gøre fortræd

furtively stjælt, i smug

revelation åbenbaring, afsløring

gaze vedholdende blik

linger dvæle

consciously bevidst

impact påvirkning

phenomenon, phenomena (pl.) fænomen

undifferentiated unuanceret, kan ikke skelnes

undecipherable ikke til at dechiffrere eller tyde

QUESTIONS

1. What is the setting?
2. What is the situation at the opening of the short story?
3. What is the point of view?
4. Who are the characters?
5. Describe Mrs. Hattie Telford, her social background and where she lives.
6. What is Mrs. Hattie Telford's impression of the conference?
7. Give examples of the differences in everyday life between Mrs. Hattie Telford and the group of boys.
8. Describe Dumile's background and explain briefly what it represents.
9. Find examples in the short story which describe the atmosphere.
10. How can you tell that the story takes place around the time that apartheid was abolished?
11. Comment on the following quotes:
 - a. "... her black friends whose sophistication might lead them to believe the choice of entrance was an unthinkable slight." (p. 99, ll. 38-40)
 - b. "... but when the maid and the lady of the house had finished preparing cold meat and bread, and the coffee was ready, she suddenly did not want them to see that the maid waited on her." (p. 100, ll. 6-8)
12. Translate the last sentences from "In this room..." and explain the meaning of the ending (p. 101, ll. 33-36).
13. What is the message of this story?

CONTEXT

1. Compare the descriptions of black people's fight for freedom in *The Silver Bell*, p. 111, and *Comrades*, p. 98. In both short stories the central characters are white females. Comment on their behaviour and reactions to South Africa's transition.

WRITE ABOUT IT

1. Imagine you are Mrs. Hattie Telford. Write an update about the encounter with the political activists on Facebook (100 words) or Twitter (140 characters) just after they have left. Focus on her thoughts about the two worlds meeting.
2. Mrs. Hattie Telford's brother e-mails his sister to complain about the group of boys visiting his sister's home after the conference. Write this e-mail in 150 words. Include the brother's racial prejudice against the boys.

3. Write a speech (in 300 words) delivered by Dumile to young political activists and begin with the words, 'Dear comrades, compatriots and friends. We are gathered here today because we want equality in South Africa. We ...'

In your speech you should make use of as many rhetorical devices as possible, e.g. contrast, repetition, parallel constructions, etc.

Affirmative Action

1. What is affirmative action officially called in South Africa?
2. In pairs, find one or two articles on the internet (.co.za/.gov.za) informing you of the principles of affirmative action in South Africa. Good search words would be *South Africa*, *affirmative action* and *economic empowerment*. Write down in your own words what the law wants to achieve.
3. Taking affirmative action as your starting point, discuss in groups the conditions under which it would be acceptable not to treat people as equals in a democratic country.

WRITE ABOUT IT

1. Write an article for the fictional "Politics Today" (a magazine for youngsters interested in learning more about politics in Africa) in which you account for the different views on Black economic empowerment in South Africa today. In your article (300-400 words) you must include one or two internet sources you have used in your research.

Usually writing an article implies using

- a headline – the title of the article
- a byline – the name of the writer – use italics
- a lead – where you put in the most important facts very briefly
- a body text – where you have sub-headlines.

2. Write an article in which you discuss the possibility of creating a community/society with some sense of unity following a long period of time with suppression of black people. The issue must be dealt with from both a black person's perspective and from a white person's.