

Thebedi

by Nadine Gordimer

and Paulus

- Country Lovers

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- *Talk about love between youngsters who come from two different races. Which problems do you think it might cause?*
- *Talk about what you know about apartheid as it used to exist in South Africa.*

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Your teacher has a more difficult version of Country Lovers. *Michael*

This story takes place in the countryside in South Africa during the time of apartheid. Paulus is a white boy, Thebedi is a black girl.

🔊 The farm children, black and white, play together when they are small; but once the white children go away to school they soon don't play together any more, even in the holidays. By the age of twelve or thirteen, the black children begin to call their white, old playmates *missus* and *baasie* - little master.

Paulus Eysendyck did not see Thebedi like a black girl. She wore his sisters' old clothes in the kraal, but he still brought her a present from boarding school the first time he came back for holiday. And she gave him, before he went back to school, a bracelet she had made for him.

When he was fifteen and six feet tall, he went to school dances with the girls from the 'sister' school in the same town. He teased and flirted and fondled these girls who were the daughters of rich farmers like his father. At a wedding he went to on a nearby farm, he met a girl who had let him do with her in a locked storeroom what people do when they make love. But he still brought home from a shop in town a red plastic belt and gilt hoop ear-rings for the black girl, Thebedi.

In the holidays, they came together, the white boy and the black girl. They met at the river-bed. They did not arrange it, but it happened. He told her traveller's tales: about school, about the punishments at school. He told her about the town of Middleburg, which she had never seen. She had nothing to tell, but she asked many questions, like any good listener.

She laughed a lot at what he told her, sometimes dropping her face on her knees. She put on her pair of shoes - thickly blanco-ed against the farm dust - when he was on the farm, but these were taken off when they sat by the river-bed.

One summer afternoon when it was very hot, she waded into the water, her

dress tucked into the legs of her pants. The schoolgirls, Paulus went swimming with in the town, wore bikinis but they never made him feel what he felt now with Thebedi. She came out of the water and sat beside him, the drops of water running off her dark legs.

They were not afraid of one another, they had always known each other; he did with her what he had done that time in the storeroom at the wedding, and this time it was so lovely, so lovely, he was surprised ... and she was surprised by it, too. He looked into her dark face, with her big dark eyes, shiny as soft water.

Now he did not tell her about school or town any more. She did not ask questions any longer. He told her, each time they met, when they would meet again.

Paulus was a popular boy at school. He played soccer, and dated a pretty blond from the 'sister' school.

In the holidays he took the girls to dances and the drive-in cinema. His sisters were married now, and his parents often left him alone in charge of the farm for the weekend.

When Thebedi saw the farmer and his wife drive away on a Saturday afternoon, she knew that she must come up to the house. The sitting-room curtains were drawn and the TV-set silent.

The door of the parents' bedroom was locked and the girls' rooms were empty. It was in one of these that she and the farmer's son stayed together whole nights - almost. She had to get away before the house servants, who knew her, came in at dawn.

When she was eighteen and the

farmer's son nineteen and working with his father on the farm, a young man Njabulo asked her father for her. Njabulo's parents met with hers and they agreed on the money he was to pay. He had no cows to offer; he was a labourer on the Eysendyck farm, but he was a bright youngster and the marriage was agreed. Thebedi did not tell Paulus that her parents had arranged for her to marry. She did not tell him, either, that she was going to have a baby. He left for college.

Two months after her marriage to Njabulo, she had a daughter. This was not unusual and it was not a problem. But the baby was very light and did not quickly grow darker as most African babies do. Its eyes were grey with yellowish flecks. Thebedi's and Njabulo's were black.

Njabulo said nothing. He bought from the Indian store everything Thebedi's baby needed.

When the baby was two weeks old Paulus Eysendyck arrived home from college for the holidays. He heard from his mother that the girl Thebedi had had a baby.

For the first time since he was a small boy he came right into the kraal. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. Thebedi



appeared, coming slowly from the hut Njabulo had built in white man's style. He went into her home. He said, "I want to see. Show me."

She showed him the pale, plump tiny face with the fine straight hair and the grey eyes with yellowish flecks. He looked with anger and self-pity. He said, "You haven't been near the house with it?"

She shook her head.

"Never?"

Again she shook her head.

"Don't take it out. Stay inside. Can't you take it away somewhere? You must give it to someone!"

She moved to the door with him.

He said, "I'll see what I will do. I don't know." And then he said, "I feel like killing myself."

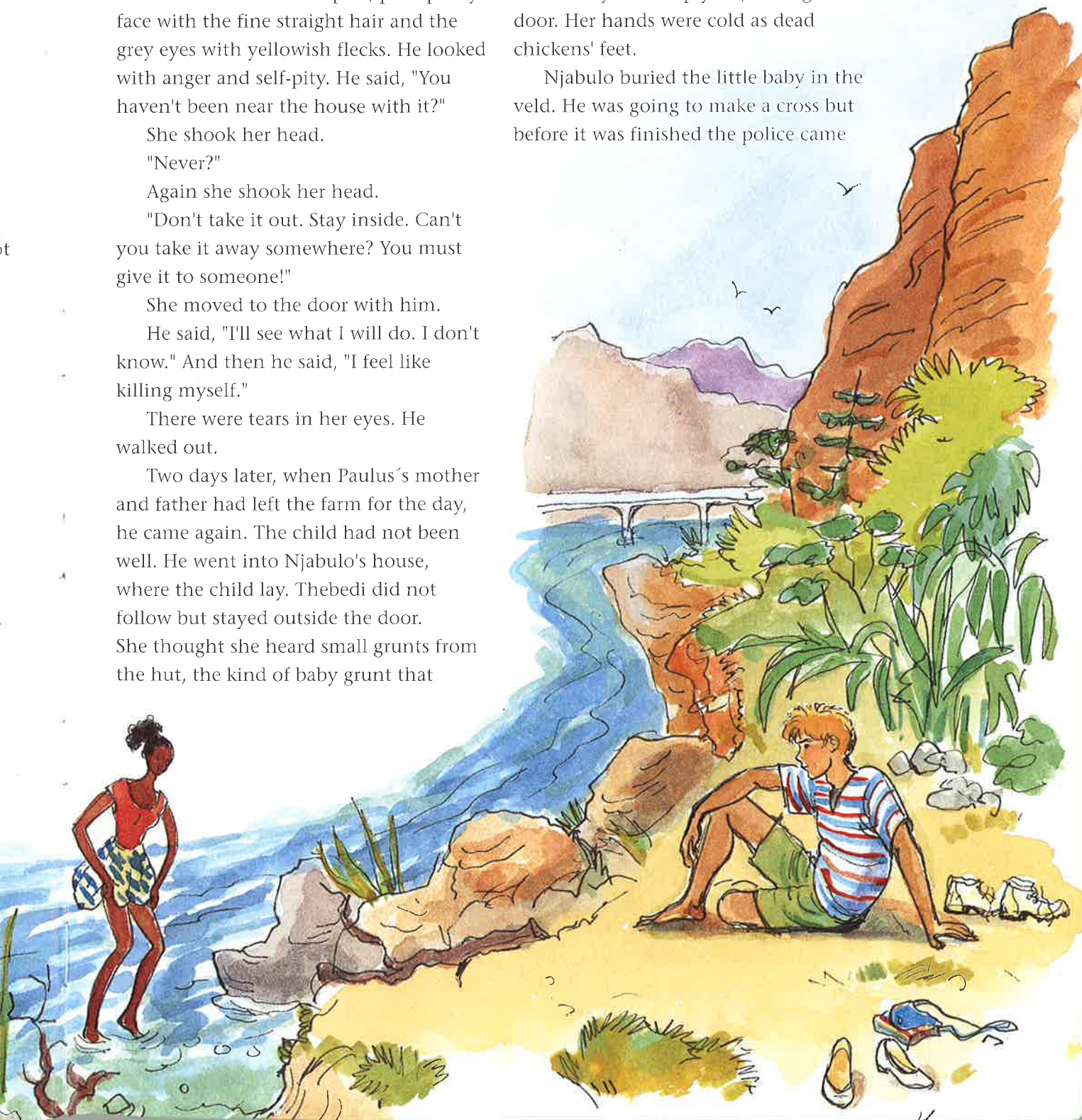
There were tears in her eyes. He walked out.

Two days later, when Paulus's mother and father had left the farm for the day, he came again. The child had not been well. He went into Njabulo's house, where the child lay. Thebedi did not follow but stayed outside the door. She thought she heard small grunts from the hut, the kind of baby grunt that

comes from a full stomach, a deep sleep. He came out and walked away out of sight, towards his father's house.

The baby died that night. Thebedi did not cry but simply sat, staring at the door. Her hands were cold as dead chickens' feet.

Njabulo buried the little baby in the veld. He was going to make a cross but before it was finished the police came



Fact File

Nadine Gordimer, born 1923, is a South African novelist. During the apartheid system, she was a world famous opponent of Apartheid and censorship. Her novels contain characters from different racial backgrounds. Some of her best known works are *The Lying Day* 1953, *A Soldiers Embrace* 1980, and *July's People* 1991. She was awarded with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991.



and dug up the grave and took away the dead baby. Someone had reported that the baby was almost white, that, strong and healthy, it had died suddenly after a visit by the farmer's son. Tests showed that it was not death by natural causes.

Paulus was charged with murder, and Thebedi went for the first time to the country town where he had been to school. She said she had seen him poison the baby, and that he would shoot her if she told anyone. She cried all the time she was saying this. She was wearing the gilt hoop earrings.

A year later at the trial itself, she came to Court with a newborn baby on her back. She wore gilt hoop earrings; she was calm; she said she had not seen what the white man did in the house.

Paulus Eysendyck said he had visited the hut but had not poisoned the child. There was no proof that the child was

Paulus Eysendyck's. The Court could not accept the girl's evidence. The verdict on the accused was 'not guilty'.

The young white man left the Court with his mother's raincoat over his face.

Interviewed by the Sunday papers, who spelled her name in a variety of ways, the black girl, speaking in her own language, said, "It was a thing of our childhood, we don't see each other any more."

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- *Talk about the story. Try to see it from the point of view from Thebedi as well as Paulus and Njabulo. What do you think about the three young people?*

Fact File

Valentine's Day

You probably remember that Valentine's Day is on February 14th when people send a Valentine card to their loved ones. Did you also know that Valentine's Day used to be a feast day to honour the Christian saint, Saint Valentine, who was martyred by the roman Emperor Claudius II?

Saint Valentine was beheaded because he continued to marry young people after Claudius had forbidden it. Claudius apparently thought that young, married soldiers were not as good as single soldiers.

Through the centuries the modern Saint Valentine's Day became a day dedicated to lovers, a time to exchange sentimental greeting cards full of love words.

