

Assignment: An incident that changed the way
I look at something ordinary.

Not After Dark

Last term, on an ordinary Wednesday, I found out something about my own country that I did not know. I found it out in ^{pleasance} ~~the car park~~ from a girl in my own class while I was waiting for my mother to fetch me after hockey, and while that girl was drinking her rooibos and having a bran muffin that had been put out for the boarders. Which I think says quite a bit about me.

It was almost ^{completely} dark by 5 o'clock. Winter in Johannesburg is the kind of dry cold that gets behind your knees, and about eight of us were standing in our blazers over our hockey skirts waiting for lifts, because somebody's mother is always late. I had a Steri-Stumpie in my pocket that had gone warm. There was smoke in the air from a veld fire somewhere out past the Wilds, and everything smelled slightly burnt.

I was bored, so I whistled.

It was not even a proper tune; it was the penny whistle part of "Special Star" by Mango Groove, which is the part that everyone everybody in the country can do. I got about two bars in, when suddenly there was a hand over my mouth. Cold fingers clamped

hard enough that I felt my own teeth. I went backwards into the tea table with the bran muffins and let out an undignified squeal.

It was Thandi*, who sits two rows in front of me in History.

(* permission to write this was given on condition that I change her name.)

"Don't," she said, "Not after dark."

"It's Mango Grove," I said, as if that settled it.

"I don't care whose it is," she said. "I'm not joking."

And then she told me the story ~~which I am sure will stay with me forever~~ that I shall remember for a lifetime.

Her uncle walked home one night about twenty years' ago, whistling, in a good mood. When he got home, the envelope with his month's wages in it was gone out of a pocket that was still buttoned. He believed his whistling had called the "Tokoloshe" and nobody in her family has whistled after dark since then. Not in the country, not on a farm and not in a flat in Yeaville with the windows shut.

A 'tokoloshe' is a small creature in Zulu and Xhosa folklore, about knee-height, mischievous and unfriendly. During my library visit to do research during break-time, I read that it is a water spirit that is called upon by somebody who wishes you harm. Thandi says the encyclopaedia does not know

Very much about it. In her family, whistling after sunset calls it, and there is no exception for the fact that you were only standing in a car park in Parktown being bored.

~~During my library research at break time I also discovered that in~~ In the 1950's, on the street corners in Johannesburg, the penny whistle was a warning. Boys playing dice games kept whistles in their pockets, and when the police van came around the corner they would sweep up the coins and start playing, so that their group of gamblers turned into a band before the police got out. The van was called the "kwela-kwela" ~~from~~ and the music ended up being named after the van, Kwela. That's where the penny whistle in "Special Star" comes from in the first place, which I didn't know when I was whistling it.

So a whistle in ^{South Africa} ~~this country~~ has been a warning for a very long time, and I was standing in the dark doing it for fun.

We are told frequently that this is a new country and that we must get to know each other properly. I have been at Roodepan since Lower V and I have sat two rows behind Thandi for two years and ^{She has} ~~I have~~ borrowed her my ruler. And I did not know one single thing about what her family is careful not to do

Every Sunday night my parents watch the Truth Commission on Television, where people stand up and say out loud the things that everybody around them already knew and nobody had the courage to say before. I am not comparing myself to that, I am only saying that finding out is not always a big historical event. Sometimes it is a girl in your class putting her hand ~~over~~ over your mouth.

At home, my nanny Elsie has bricks under the legs of her bed, and I always assumed it was for the damp.

I have not whistled after dark since that Wednesday, not even in the car. I do not know whether I believe in the Tokoloshe.

But I think there is a difference between a story being true and a story being ~~imp~~ that means something, and I don't want to whistle badly enough to find out which one this is.

16/20

A GENUINE AND THOUGHTFUL PIECE, AND YOUR EAR FOR DIALOGUE IS IMPROVING. YOU LOSE CONTROL OF YOUR SENTENCES IN THE SECOND HALF AND THERE ARE A FEW PLACES WHERE YOU TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK INSTEAD OF SHOWING ME. PLEASE INDICATE YOUR LIBRARY SOURCES NEXT TIME.