

Name: _____ Class: _____

Once Upon a Time

By Nadine Gordimer
1991

Nadine Gordimer is a South African writer who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1991. This story takes place during the end of the apartheid era in South Africa. Apartheid was an official system of racial segregation enforced by the ruling government from 1948 to 1994. Throughout the 1990s, after decades of oppression, many black South Africans protested against apartheid and retaliated against white South Africans who had benefited from it.

[1] Someone has written to ask me to contribute to an anthology of stories for children. I reply that I don't write children's stories; and he writes back that at a recent congress/book fair/seminar a certain novelist said every writer ought to write at least one story for children. I think of sending a postcard saying I don't accept that I "ought" to write anything.

And then last night I woke up — or rather was awakened without knowing what had roused me.

A voice in the echo-chamber of the subconscious?¹

A sound.

[5] A creaking of the kind made by the weight carried by one foot after another along a wooden floor. I listened. I felt the apertures² of my ears distend³ with concentration. Again: the creaking. I was waiting for it; waiting to hear if it indicated that feet were moving from room to room, coming up the passage — to my door. I have no burglar bars, no gun under the pillow, but I have the same fears as people who do take these precautions, and my windowpanes are thin as rime,⁴ could shatter like a wineglass. A woman was murdered (how do they put it) in broad daylight in a house two blocks away, last year, and the fierce dogs who guarded an old widower and his collection of antique clocks were strangled before he was knifed by a casual laborer he had dismissed without pay.



"Barbed wire in Beirut" by Eusebius@Commons is licensed under CC BY 2.0

-
1. **Subconscious (noun):** a part of the mind we are not aware of but which we can gain access to by redirecting our attention
 2. **Aperture (noun):** a circular opening, often in relation to optical devices that deal with vision or photography through light manipulation
 3. **Distend (verb):** to expand, swell, or inflate
 4. Rime is a frost formed when fog droplets freeze onto solid objects.

I was staring at the door, making it out in my mind rather than seeing it, in the dark. I lay quite still — a victim already — the arrhythmia⁵ of my heart was fleeing, knocking this way and that against its body-cage. How finely tuned the senses are, just out of rest, sleep! I could never listen intently as that in the distractions of the day, I was reading every faintest sound, identifying and classifying its possible threat.

But I learned that I was to be neither threatened nor spared. There was no human weight pressing on the boards, the creaking was a buckling, an epicenter of stress. I was in it. The house that surrounds me while I sleep is built on undermined ground; far beneath my bed, the floor, the house's foundations, the stopes⁶ and passages of gold mines have hollowed the rock, and when some face trembles, detaches and falls, three thousand feet below, the whole house shifts slightly, bringing uneasy strain to the balance and counterbalance of brick, cement, wood and glass that hold it as a structure around me. The misbeats of my heart tailed off like the last muffled flourishes on one of the wooden xylophones made by the Chopi and Tsonga⁷ migrant miners who might have been down there, under me in the earth at that moment. The stope where the fall was could have been disused, dripping water from its ruptured veins; or men might now be interred⁸ there in the most profound of tombs.

I couldn't find a position in which my mind would let go of my body — release me to sleep again. So I began to tell myself a story, a bedtime story.

In a house, in a suburb, in a city, there were a man and his wife who loved each other very much and were living happily ever after. They had a little boy, and they loved him very much. They had a cat and a dog that the little boy loved very much. They had a car and a caravan trailer for holidays, and a swimming-pool which was fenced so that the little boy and his playmates would not fall in and drown. They had a housemaid who was absolutely trustworthy and an itinerant⁹ gardener who was highly recommended by the neighbors. For when they began to live happily ever after they were warned, by that wise old witch, the husband's mother, not to take on anyone off the street. They were inscribed¹⁰ in a medical benefit society, their pet dog was licensed, they were insured against fire, flood damage and theft, and subscribed to the local Neighborhood Watch, which supplied them with a plaque for their gates lettered YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED over the silhouette of a would-be intruder. He was masked; it could not be said if he was black or white, and therefore proved the property owner was no racist.

-
5. **Arrhythmia** (*noun*): any variation from the normal rhythm of the heartbeat
 6. A stope is a step-like excavation made in a mine to extract ore or mineral deposits.
 7. Chopi and Tsonga are two peoples from Mozambique, a country to the northeast of South Africa.
 8. **Inter** (*verb*): to place in a grave or tomb
 9. **Itinerant** (*adj.*): working for a short time in various places; a casual laborer
 10. **Inscribe** (*verb*): to enroll or list

[10] It was not possible to insure the house, the swimming pool or the car against riot damage. There were riots, but these were outside the city, where people of another color were quartered. These people were not allowed into the suburb except as reliable housemaids and gardeners, so there was nothing to fear, the husband told the wife. Yet she was afraid that some day such people might come up the street and tear off the plaque YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED and open the gates and stream in... Nonsense, my dear, said the husband, there are police and soldiers and tear-gas and guns to keep them away. But to please her — for he loved her very much and buses were being burned, cars stoned, and schoolchildren shot by the police in those quarters out of sight and hearing of the suburb — he had electronically controlled gates fitted. Anyone who pulled off the sign YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED and tried to open the gates would have to announce his intentions by pressing a button and speaking into a receiver relayed to the house. The little boy was fascinated by the device and used it as a walkie-talkie in cops and robbers play with his small friends.

The riots were suppressed, but there were many burglaries in the suburb and somebody's trusted housemaid was tied up and shut in a cupboard by thieves while she was in charge of her employers' house. The trusted housemaid of the man and wife and little boy was so upset by this misfortune befalling a friend left, as she herself often was, with responsibility for the possessions of the man and his wife and the little boy that she implored¹¹ her employers to have burglar bars attached to the doors and windows of the house, and an alarm system installed. The wife said, She is right, let us take heed of her advice. So from every window and door in the house where they were living happily ever after they now saw the trees and sky through bars, and when the little boy's pet cat tried to climb in by the fanlight to keep him company in his little bed at night, as it customarily had done, it set off the alarm keening¹² through the house.

The alarm was often answered — it seemed — by other burglar alarms, in other houses, that had been triggered by pet cats or nibbling mice. The alarms called to one another across the gardens in shrills and bleats and wails that everyone soon became accustomed to, so that the din roused the inhabitants of the suburb no more than the croak of frogs and musical grating of cicadas' legs. Under cover of the electronic harpies' discourse intruders sawed the iron bars and broke into homes, taking away hi-fi equipment, television sets, cassette players, cameras and radios, jewelry and clothing, and sometimes were hungry enough to devour everything in the refrigerator or paused audaciously¹³ to drink the whiskey in the cabinets or patio bars. Insurance companies paid no compensation for single malt,¹⁴ a loss made keener by the property owner's knowledge that the thieves wouldn't even have been able to appreciate what it was they were drinking.

11. **Implore** (*verb*): to ask earnestly
12. loudly emitting a sharp noise
13. **Audacious** (*adj.*): bold, daring
14. Single malt is an expensive type of liquor.

Then the time came when many of the people who were not trusted housemaids and gardeners hung about the suburb because they were unemployed. Some importuned¹⁵ for a job: weeding or painting a roof; anything, baas,¹⁶ madam. But the man and his wife remembered the warning about taking on anyone off the street. Some drank liquor and fouled the street with discarded bottles. Some begged, waiting for the man or his wife to drive the car out of the electronically operated gates. They sat about with their feet in the gutters, under the jacaranda trees that made a green tunnel of the street—for it was a beautiful suburb, spoilt only by their presence — and sometimes they fell asleep lying right before the gates in the midday sun. The wife could never see anyone go hungry. She sent the trusted housemaid out with bread and tea, but the trusted housemaid said these were loafers and tsotsis,¹⁷ who would come and tie her and shut her in a cupboard. The husband said, She's right. Take heed of her advice. You only encourage them with your bread and tea. They are looking for their chance... And he brought the little boy's tricycle from the garden into the house every night, because if the house was surely secure, once locked and with the alarm set, someone might still be able to climb over the wall or the electronically closed gates into the garden.

You are right, said the wife, then the wall should be higher. And the wise old witch, the husband's mother, paid for the extra bricks as her Christmas present to her son and his wife — the little boy got a Space Man outfit and a book of fairy tales.

- [15] But every week there were more reports of intrusion: in broad daylight and the dead of night, in the early hours of the morning, and even in the lovely summer twilight — a certain family was at dinner while the bedrooms were being ransacked upstairs. The man and his wife, talking of the latest armed robbery in the suburb, were distracted by the sight of the little boy's pet cat effortlessly arriving over the seven-foot wall, descending first with a rapid bracing of extended forepaws down on the sheer vertical surface, and then a graceful launch, landing with swishing tail within the property. The whitewashed wall was marked with the cat's comings and goings; and on the street side of the wall there were larger red-earth smudges that could have been made by the kind of broken running shoes, seen on the feet of unemployed loiterers, that had no innocent destination.

15. to ask for or do persistently

16. boss

17. "Tsotsi" is a South African word meaning "hooligan" or "troublemaker."

When the man and wife and little boy took the pet dog for its walk round the neighborhood streets they no longer paused to admire this show of roses or that perfect lawn; these were hidden behind an array of different varieties of security fences, walls and devices. The man, wife, little boy and dog passed a remarkable choice: there was the low-cost option of pieces of broken glass embedded in cement along the top of walls, there were iron grilles ending in lance-points, there were attempts at reconciling the aesthetics¹⁸ of prison architecture with the Spanish Villa style (spikes painted pink) and with the plaster urns of neoclassical¹⁹ facades (twelve-inch pikes²⁰ finned like zigzags of lightning and painted pure white). Some walls had a small board affixed, giving the name and telephone number of the firm responsible for the installation of the devices. While the little boy and the pet dog raced ahead, the husband and wife found themselves comparing the possible effectiveness of each style against its appearance; and after several weeks when they paused before this barricade or that without needing to speak, both came out with the conclusion that only one was worth considering. It was the ugliest but the most honest in its suggestion of the pure concentration-camp style, no frills, all evident efficacy.²¹ Placed the length of walls, it consisted of a continuous coil of stiff and shining metal serrated into jagged blades, so that there would be no way of climbing over it and no way through its tunnel without getting entangled in its fangs. There would be no way out, only a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier, a deeper and sharper hooking and tearing of flesh. The wife shuddered to look at it. You're right, said the husband, anyone would think twice... And they took heed of the advice on a small board fixed to the wall: Consult DRAGON'S TEETH The People For Total Security.

Next day a gang of workmen came and stretched the razor-bladed coils all round the walls of the house where the husband and wife and little boy and pet dog and cat were living happily ever after. The sunlight flashed and slashed, off the serrations, the cornice of razor thorns encircled the home, shining. The husband said, Never mind. It will weather. The wife said, You're wrong. They guarantee it's rust-proof. And she waited until the little boy had run off to play before she said, I hope the cat will take heed... The husband said, Don't worry, my dear, cats always look before they leap. And it was true that from that day on the cat slept in the little boy's bed and kept to the garden, never risking a try at breaching security.

One evening, the mother read the little boy to sleep with a fairy story from the book the wise old witch had given him at Christmas. Next day he pretended to be the Prince who braves the terrible thicket of thorns to enter the palace and kiss the Sleeping Beauty back to life: he dragged a ladder to the wall, the shining coiled tunnel was just wide enough for his little body to creep in, and with the first fixing of its razor-teeth in his knees and hands and head he screamed and struggled deeper into its tangle. The trusted housemaid and the itinerant gardener, whose "day" it was, came running, the first to see and to scream with him, and the itinerant gardener tore his hands trying to get at the little boy. Then the man and his wife burst wildly into the garden and for some reason (the cat, probably) the alarm set up wailing against the screams while the bleeding mass of the little boy was hacked out of the security coil with saws, wire-cutters, choppers, and they carried it — the man, the wife, the hysterical trusted housemaid and the weeping gardener — into the house.

"Once Upon a Time" by Nadine Gordimer. Reprinted by permission of Russell & Volkening as agents for the author. Copyright © 1991 by Felix Licensing, B.V.

-
18. **Aesthetic (noun):** style particular to a person, group, or culture
 19. **Neoclassical (adj.):** relating to the late 18th- and early 19th- century style in architecture and art based on imitations of surviving classical (often ancient Hellenic/Greek or Roman) models
 20. Pikes are medieval weapons resembling spikes.
 21. **Efficacy (noun):** the ability to produce a desired or intended result

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: What does the phrase “pure concentration-camp style” suggest about the wall in paragraph 16?
 - A. The wall will lead to a violent and inhumane result.
 - B. No one can get past the wall under any circumstances.
 - C. The South Africans borrowed the idea of the wall from the Germans in WWII.
 - D. The wall is intended to injure and destroy the most innocent and weak individuals.

2. PART B: Which phrase best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. “And they took heed of the advice on a small board fixed to the wall: Consult DRAGON’S TEETH The People For Total Security” (Paragraph 16)
 - B. “There would be no way out, only a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier, a deeper and sharper hooking and tearing of flesh” (Paragraph 16)
 - C. “Next day a gang of workmen came and stretched the razor-bladed coils all round the walls of the house.” (Paragraph 17)
 - D. “The sunlight flashed and slashed, off the serrations, the cornice of razor thorns encircled the home, shining.” (Paragraph 17)

3. Which statement best identifies a theme of the story?
 - A. Fear and paranoia can only be useful if contained to safe levels, otherwise they can lead to hurting other people.
 - B. Though families act with best intentions, fear can drive individuals to hurt the people they intend to protect.
 - C. Families can remain loyal to each other despite all of the adversity that they face in the outside world.
 - D. Families can never truly protect the people that they love from the cruelty of the world.

4. PART A: How is the narrator’s introduction in paragraphs 1-8 important to the passage as a whole?
 - A. The narrator’s introduction introduces the setting and contrasts the innocence of children’s books and bedtime stories with the tragedy that can result from fear.
 - B. The narrator’s introduction normalizes fear, but foreshadows that individuals can overreact to fear through the metaphor of bedtime stories.
 - C. The narrator’s introduction reveals the narrator’s role in the story and describes the character’s motivations for the rest of the story.
 - D. The narrator’s introduction explains the theme of children’s stories and how it will influence the rest of the plot.

5. PART B: Which TWO sentences from the story's introduction best support your answer to Part A?
- A. "I reply that I don't write children's stories" (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "And then last night I woke up — or rather was awakened without knowing what had roused me." (Paragraph 2)
 - C. "A voice in the echo-chamber of the subconscious?" (Paragraph 3)
 - D. "I have no burglar bars, no gun under the pillow, but I have the same fears as people who do take these precautions" (Paragraph 5)
 - E. "I learned that I was to be neither threatened nor spared." (Paragraph 7)
 - F. "I couldn't find a position in which my mind would let go of my body — release me to sleep again. So I began to tell myself a story, a bedtime story." (Paragraph 8)

6. Provide evidence from the text that shows that the family is white. What is the effect of the author never explicitly stating the family's race?

7. How is the vivid imagery in the last scene of the story important to the development of the story's themes?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Have you ever lived through a time of extreme fear? What were you afraid of and how did you cope with that fear?
2. Do you think that the family acted wisely in the story? If you faced the same fears, what would you have done differently?
3. In your opinion, what drives people to fear those who are not like them? How does a society create trust? How is building trust even more complicated if influenced by decades of distrust, as in South Africa?
4. How does this text help readers better understand the emotional impact of Apartheid? What are the effects of the class separation as seen in the division of neighborhoods in this story?