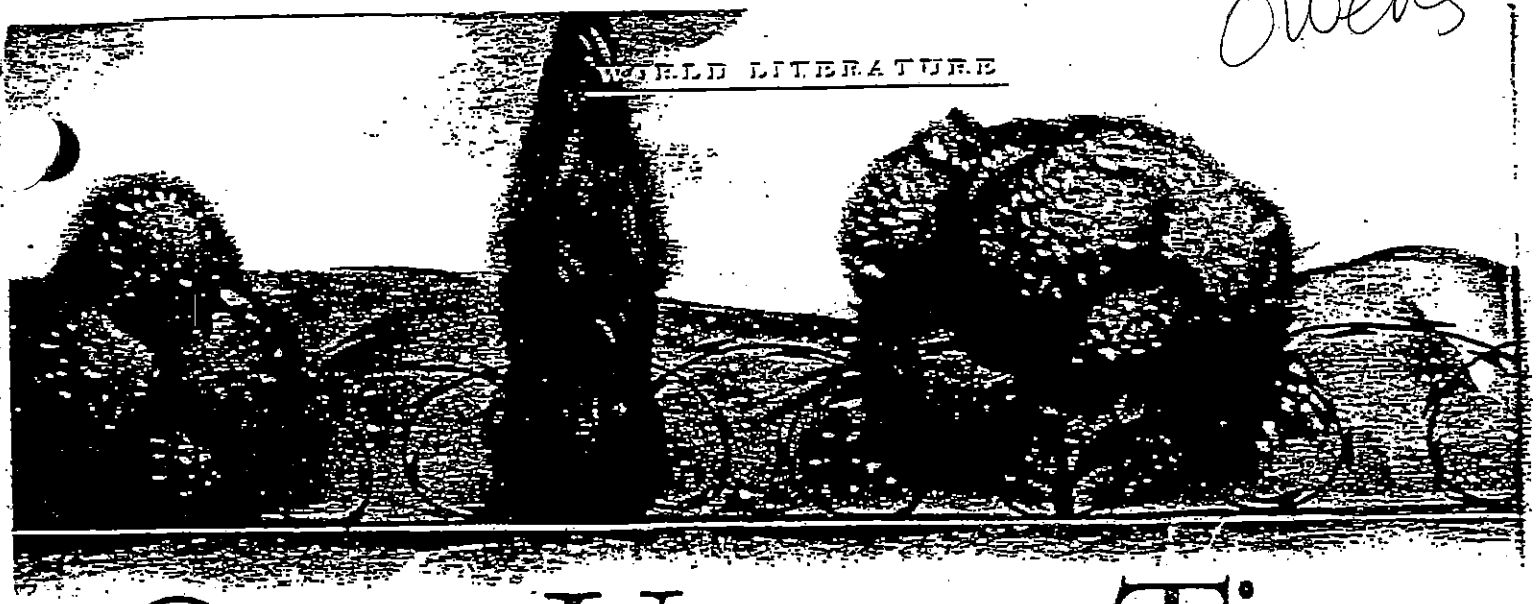

Once Upon a Time

by

Nadine Gordimer

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 him a postcard saying I don't accept that I "ought" to write anything.

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

A voice in the echo chamber of the subconscious?

A sound.

A creaking of the kind made by the weight carried by one foot after another along a wooden floor. I listened. I felt the apertures of my ears distend 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 my pillow, but I have the same fears as people who do take these precautions, and my windowpanes are thin as rime, 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.

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 — but the arrhythmia 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 when I sleep is built on undermined ground; far beneath my bed, the floor, the house's foundations. the stopes 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 Tsonga 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 interred 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.

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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 itinerant 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 inscribed in a medical benefit society, their pet dog was licensed, they were insured against fire, flood damage, and theft, and they 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 owner was no racist.

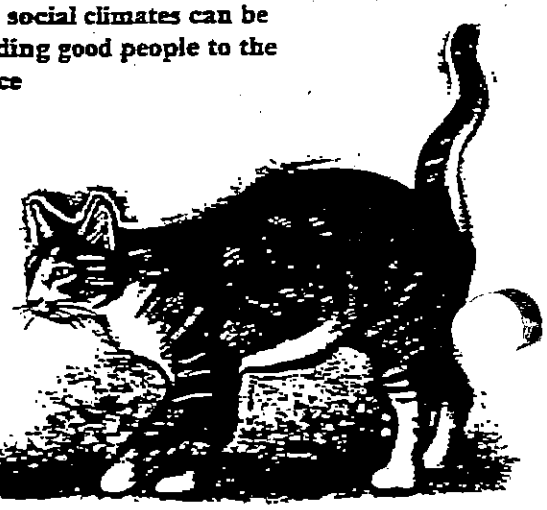
It was not possible to insure the house, the swimming pool, or the car against riot damage. There were riots, but these were outside the city, where people of another color were quartered. These people were not allowed into the suburb except as reliable housemaids and gardeners, so there was nothing to fear, the husband told the wife. Yet she was afraid that someday 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 hear-

Few people were surprised when the acclaimed South African novelist Nadine Gordimer won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1991, but it seemed particularly appropriate for her to win it now, as South Africa takes its first historic steps toward abolishing apartheid. Gordimer's opposition to apartheid is well-known, although, as she points out, she does not write about apartheid with a capital *A*. In her novels and short stories, she writes about ordinary South African people, whose lives happen to be twisted by a society where blacks and whites cannot live as equals.

Did Nadine Gordimer's books help to bring down apartheid? In her opinion, they didn't change any minds in South Africa (several of her books were banned there), but as people in other countries read her work, world opinion increasingly pressed South Africa to change its ways. Gordimer maintains that she is not by nature a "political" person, but that, living in a fiercely polarized society such as hers, one cannot avoid politics. As you'll see in "Once Upon a Time," she cannot even write a "children's story" without seeing the political shadows surrounding her characters' lives. (Indeed, from the start, the narrator lets you know that this won't be much of a fairy tale.) Intent on the political subtext, she spends little time describing the characters, and her prose is almost deadpan in its dry, precise tone. Narrative and dialogue blend together in a stream of consciousness, a technique used by three of her favorite writers: Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf.

The moral of the story hits you over the head — but it's supposed to. As Gordimer's novels and stories tell us time and time again, social climates can be powerful forces, binding good people to the stupidity and injustice around them. Part of the job of being a writer is to see things as they are, and report them unflinchingly. Nadine Gordimer has certainly always accepted that challenge.

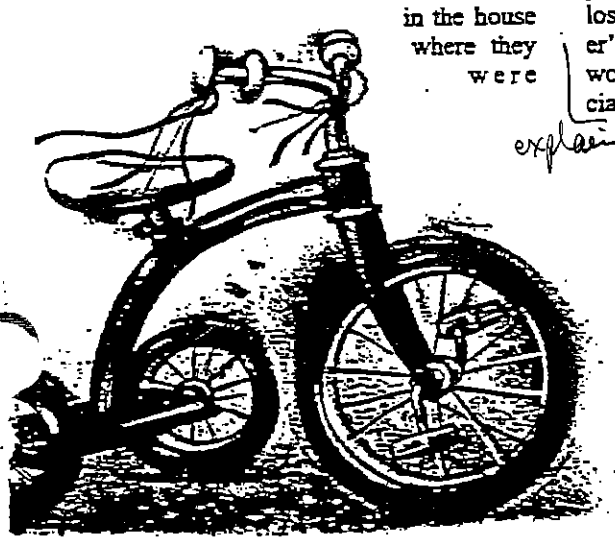
— Holly Hugh



ing 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 implored 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 the alarm keening 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 aroused 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 audaciously to drink the whisky in the cabinets or patio bars. Insurance companies paid no compensation for single malt, 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.



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 importuned for a job: weeding or painting a roof; anything, *baas*,[1] 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 and 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, spoiled 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*,[2] who would come and tie her up and shut her up 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 a 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 Spaceman outfit and a book of fairy tales.

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

[1] *baas*: master.

[2] *tsotsis*: hoodlums

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.

When the man and wife and little boy took the pet dog for a 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 aesthetics of prison architecture with the Spanish Villa style (spikes painted pink) and with the plaster urns of neo-classical façades (twelve-inch pikes finned with 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 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. 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 the 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 tale 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 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 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. ■

1. What is ironic about the "fairy tale" details of this story? What other details do you find ironic?

2. Frederick Douglass wrote: "No man can put a chain around the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck." Does this apply to "Once Upon a Time"?