

Judith Stone's autobiography of Sandra Laing: 'When She Was White'

Sandra Laing was ten when the police took her away. Not long after the teacher led morning prayers the principal sent a boy to say that Sandra was wanted immediately. She sat quietly doing sums, one of the few classroom tasks that brought her peace or pleasure. She liked the tidiness and predictability of numbers.

The other children, sitting in pairs, giggled and whispered as Sandra rose from the little two-person desk she shared with no one and left without looking at them. The air was mild, with the hint of bite that marks a South African summer easing into autumn. Sandra crossed a central courtyard to an administrative wing of Piet Retief Laerskool Primary, a public elementary school for white children, most of them Afrikaners, descendants of the nation's first white settlers. A secretary pointed Sandra toward the door of Principal J P Schwartz's office. She knocked and entered.

The principal sat at his desk as usual, but behind him stood two khaki-uniformed policemen, a thin one and a wide one, their arms crossed. The sight of them sped the little girl's heart. "Sandra," Schwartz said in Afrikaans: Ek is bevrees jy sal ons moetverlaat. I'm afraid you're going to have to leave us. Go with these officers to fetch your things. They will take you home." She wondered what she could have done that was bad enough to get her expelled. She hadn't socked anyone in donkey's years, or accused the other children of stealing her sweets, or complained of being called ugly names. Was it because she wet her bed and vomited nearly every night? Could the cops toss you in the chokey <prison> for that? "Why must I leave?" she asked Schwartz, surprised at the sound of her own voice. Usually when he summoned her, she'd look at the floor and pretend to be a tree, but the appearance of policemen suggested discipline of a disturbing new order and made her bold. "You will have to ask your father," the principal said. "Now please go with these gentlemen."

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