

Stage 1: November 26th, 1955: Sandra Laing is born to white parents Abraham and Sannie Laing. Abraham and Sannie are shopkeepers. They run separate grocery stores. Abraham's is in the tiny settlement of Panbult in what used to be called the Eastern Tansvaal (now Mpumalanga) and Sannie looks after the one opposite the family home 12 miles away in Brereton Park described as lying on a 'isolated crossroads on the crest of a gentle hill.' Sandra has one brother Leon aged six.

Stage 2: 1955-January 1962: Sandra enjoys a relatively idyllic childhood. Her appearance does not cause many controversies mainly due to the isolated life she lives in Brereton Park. Her playmates apart from Leon are all black children from the nearby township of Driefontein. She grows up speaking several languages including Afrikaans and Zulu. Highlights in her life include getting stranded in various trees around the family's yard, tormenting insects such as a the centipedes called 'shongololo' which curl into balls when prodded, playing a Zulu pick-up-pebble game akin to Jacks, and sitting on the stoep (porch) of the house with her paternal grandfather Alfred watching the world go by. One treasured scent of her childhood was that of the blossoms of the yesterday-today-tomorrow tree – so called because its flowers went through three distinct changes in colour. One adventure involved Sandra copying her brother by starting a fire. It ran out of control and had to be put out by Sannie and a number of the shop's customers. Her father did not punish her as she had only emulated her brother saying that she didn't know that "little girls shouldn't light fires."

Stage 3: January-March 1962: Sandra's first term as a boarder at the white-only Piet Retief Primary. School life was ordinarily highly regimented in those days with 5.30am wake-up calls, bed and clothes inspections, refectory eating preceded by Bible readings and the routine separation of boys and girls during games and periods of play. Every Sunday the children attend Dutch Reform Church services. Sandra's time is made miserable by a campaign of bullying carried on by some of the girls who accuse her of not being white. She is nick-named 'prickly pear' in cruel reference to her curly hair. Sandra attempts to get help from the teacher who runs her hostel Mr Van Tonder, but he denies she is being bullied and even sides with the bullies.

During the holidays Sandra tells her mother about the bullying and how miserable she is. On one awful occasion Sannie sends off for a bottle of hair-straightener. It proves highly acid and burns Sandra's scalp.

Stage 4: 1962-65: The tormenting of Sandra carries on. Van Tonder too becomes even more abusive – encouraging Sandra's few friends to abandon her and calling her a trouble-maker for complaining about the bullying. Sandra becomes anxious and starts to wet her bed and also vomit – all of which is then called attention-seeking by Van Tonder. Meanwhile, behind the scenes the school's head teacher Principal Schwartz is at the centre of a campaign questioning Sandra's 'white' race designation and pushing to have her expelled from the school. In 1963 an offer is made to Abraham Laing that the government will foot the bill for sending Sandra to a private mixed-race school in Pretoria catering to the children of diplomats. Abraham refuses.

December 2 1965: The Department of the Interior decide to investigate Sandra's case. She is 'inspected' at her school and the official reports that 'obviously, and at first glance, Sandra, is a non-white and would never be accepted as white'. This

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triggers an official review of her racial classification and despite Abraham's appealing direct to the deputy minister, her race is changed to 'coloured' on February 2nd 1966. Abraham begins appeal proceedings but Principal Schwartz jump the gun returning Sandra to her parents' home.

1966-67: The standard appeal process would have involved Sandra having to undergo a series of tests in public designed to determine the colour of her skin and the characteristics of her hair. He avoids this humiliation of her, by going to the Supreme Court and arguing that the decision about Sandra is invalid because it was not administered properly. The appeal fails.

July 25 1967: The decision is reversed: Sandra is white again! This is in large part due to the recent introduction of identity cards throughout South Africa and a desire to sort out all cases of racial classification then in dispute. The decision is taken to base people's race on their parent's classification rather their own appearance. Sandra's change in fortune excites a lot of press interest and there are plenty that feel the Government has behaved in a traitorous manner by altering Sandra's race back to white.