

The tragic story of how a white girl being born black tore a family apart

By Catherine O' Brien
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Although both Sandra Laing's parents were white South Africans, she looked black

Sandra Laing had been doing her math classwork quietly when a boy was sent to fetch her from her classroom. In the principal's office, two khaki-uniformed officers were waiting.

'I'm afraid you're going to have to leave us,' the principal told her. He offered no explanation, and nor did the police officers who escorted her off the premises.

It was March 10, 1966.

And through a quirk of genetics, ten-year-old Sandra was about to become another potent symbol of a nation built on race and prejudice.

Her parents, Abraham and Sannie Laing, were white - indeed, as members of the Nationalist Party, they were fervent supporters of South Africa's apartheid regime - and yet their daughter undeniably looked black, with her brown skin and tightly curled hair.

Her African features were almost certainly a throwback to an unknown ancestor whose DNA, having lain dormant for generations, had emerged in her. But when Sandra was a schoolgirl, this aspect of genetics was unknown and there was no such thing as a DNA test.

There was only the cruel and relentless gossip suggesting that her mother had had an affair with a black man.

For four years, teachers and the parents of other pupils at her all-white primary school had fought to have her expelled on the grounds that she was of mixed race. Finally, they had succeeded.

Her two brothers still refuse to see her

The story of Sandra Laing - of how she was reclassified as 'coloured' by the government and how her parents, insisting that she was their biological child, took their battle to keep her 'white' all the way to the Supreme Court - caused an international furor.

As a confused teenager she eloped with a black man, causing her parents to disown her. Although reunited with her mother, she was never reconciled with her father and to this day, her two brothers refuse to see her.

Now 53, Sandra is the daughter of shopkeepers from the Eastern Transvaal (since renamed Mpumalanga). Abraham Laing and his wife, Sannie, could see from the moment she was born that her skin was darker than their own and that of her elder brother Leon, yet they refused to acknowledge what was in front of them.

'My father told me I was white. He thought of me as his white little girl,' Sandra says.

Both Sannie, who is of Dutch descent, and Abraham, whose family originated from Germany, could trace back their white ancestry through several generations.

As Afrikaners, they had been indoctrinated in the belief that to be white was pure and that people of mixed race were unstable and less intelligent.

They kept Sandra out of the sun and, in their rural community, no one drew attention to her toffee-coloured complexion until she started school.



Sandra and her mother

Sandra remembers, early in her first year at primary school, a group of girls began teasing her incessantly. They called her 'Blackie' and 'Frizzhead' and refused to use the water fountain after she'd drunk from it.

In the communal showers, her tormentors would say: 'Look, she's dirty all over!'

Her mother told her not to worry about it, but still Sannie sent off for a bottle of hair straightener which burned like battery acid. Patches of Sandra's hair fell out, and when it grew back, it was as curly as ever.

The rumors that Sannie must have slept with a black man were rife and, consequently, the entire family were shunned at church and on the streets.

Local parents began to take their children out of the school, and the principal wrote to the education authorities declaring himself certain that Sandra was of mixed blood.

'It was illegal to even kiss a member of another race'

For Abraham, the idea that his wife might have consorted with a black man was unthinkable (under South Africa's Immorality Acts, it was illegal to have sex with, or even kiss, a member of another race).

Unpleasant, but far more bearable was the suggestion that he or his wife had a non-white branch near the root of their family tree.

'If her appearance is due to some "coloured blood" in either of us, then it must be very far back among our forebears, and neither of us is aware of it,' he declared.

Such an argument turns out to be entirely conceivable. According to research published in the early 1970s, about 8% of the genes of any modern Afrikaner are non-white. This is traced back to early Dutch and German settlers in South Africa – predominantly men – encountered women

who were of black African descent. Due to the fact that few European women were in the country at the time, these men turned to African women, whom they interacted with through trading and as workers.

More recent studies put the number slightly higher, at 11%. Of the 25,000 or so genes that determine inheritable characteristics, only a tiny fraction have to do with skin colour, hair texture and other visible markers of race.

Abraham and Sannie could not call upon such scientific evidence. Back then, no paternity test could prove beyond doubt that Abraham was Sandra's father. But a blood test that could rule out paternity was available. He underwent it willingly, and the test established that he was, indeed, potentially Sandra's father.

Both he and Sannie signed an affidavit swearing that they were Sandra's biological parents.

Sandra offers up her own evidence - photographs of herself with her baby brother, Adriaan, taken when Sandra was 11 and Adriaan was a year old.

The likeness is startling. Adriaan's baby hair is the same froth of tight curls, but his skin just light enough for him to have escaped Sandra's fate.

For 18 months, the Laings battled against their daughter's reclassification - at first losing their case in the Supreme Court, and then, to their relief, receiving a letter from the Home Affairs minister to say the decision had been reversed.

Although Sandra was officially 'white' again, nine schools refused to take her.

Isolated in society by white society, the conversations she enjoyed most were with black Africans.

'I could talk more easily to black people than white,' she says. 'I just felt more comfortable with them.'



Sandra with her mother and brother Adriaan

Sandra worked with her mother in the family's general store. She liked chatting with the customers, especially Petrus Zwane, a Swazi vegetable seller.

'Everyone liked Petrus - even my father,' Sandra says.

Sandra and Petrus fell in love, but then her parents found out. 'My mother said my father would kill me,' says Sandra.

'He was mad. He shouted: "White people don't get involved with black people. I try to get you in a good school and now you're busy with *kaffirs!*"'

The affair created an unbridgeable chasm between Abraham and his daughter. Within a year, convinced that her father no longer loved her, Sandra eloped with Petrus and moved with him to Swaziland.

She settled well with Petrus. 'I was happy. I felt at home. They were like my own people,' she says.

Sandra kept in occasional phone contact with her mother, and when, a year later, aged 16, she gave birth to her first child, Henry, she rang Sannie. 'She said I must bring him, but that I should come in the middle of the day so my father wouldn't know.'

'My mother said I should not make contact again'

'As I was about to leave, my mother said they were thinking of moving. She said I must look after myself, and also that I should not make contact with her again,' says Sandra. 'I was sad, but I knew it was my father's idea, not hers.' Two years later, Sandra returned to her parents' shop to find it empty. No one could give her a forwarding address for her parents.

In 1988, Sandra felt strong enough to reignite the search for her own mother and father. She traced a cousin, Susanna, who told her that her father had died of throat cancer a year earlier.

'I felt sad and shocked. I had wanted to ask him for forgiveness before he died,' says Sandra.

Susanna also gave Sandra her mother's phone number. She called, and they spoke for the first time in 16 years.

'She was surprised to hear from me. She kept asking where I was staying and if I was OK.'

'You mustn't ask for any more money'

“I didn't ask her where she was, but I did ask why they didn't let me know my father had died. She said that they didn't know where to find me.' A few weeks later, Sandra received a letter and £150 from her mother, but no return address.”

'You mustn't ask for any more money. There isn't more ... You must stay well and look out for yourself,' Sannie wrote. 'Many regards from Mamma.'

With the end of apartheid in 1990, Sandra felt her life was, at last, on an even keel, but that her lasting happiness depended on receiving forgiveness from her mother for having abandoned her.

After exhaustive inquiries, Sannie was traced to a retirement village outside Pretoria, less than an hour's drive from Sandra's home.

In January 2000, Sandra stood at the entrance to a visiting room twisting a white handkerchief in her hands.

An inner door opened and a nurse appeared, pushing an old woman in a wheelchair.

Sannie sat with her eyes downcast. 'I was afraid she was still mad at me,' says Sandra. 'But Ma looked up and I saw that she still loved me.'

It was a joyful reunion, but the aftermath was marred by the fury of Sandra's brothers.

Sannie, then aged 80, had suffered three strokes and Adriaan was convinced the shock of seeing Sandra could kill her. He and Leon still had a lot of anger at Sandra.

In an angry phone call, Leon told Sandra she had broken their parents' hearts.

No one told her that her mother had died

Despite their objections, Sandra returned to see Sannie several times. The last occasion was in July 2001, a month before her death.

No one told her that her mother had died until after the funeral, and Sandra is convinced that was because her brothers didn't want her there.

Sandra has accomplished a great deal against all odds. Throughout her life, despite her many flawed choices, she has served her nation as a symbol of all that was irrational and inhumane about apartheid.

Today, the skin that caused her so much trouble as a child remains unlined and unblemished.

The best thing that happened recently was when Leon called her to see how she and her family were doing.

'It was nice,' she says. 'We just talked like brother and sister.'

Sandra still hopes that, one day, they will meet. 'I'll ask him to forgive me,' she says.

She remains the one prepared to carry the blame for a family tragedy that was far beyond her control.