

## Thandiwe's Tokoloshe

by Nick Wood

Thandiwe knew it was *her* Rainbow the minute she saw it, through the window of their sleeping room—just the other side of their neighbour's shiny corrugated roof, where kind Mrs Motlala lived.

But it was the rainbow Thandiwe was watching.

The rainbow was huge, bright and fresh in the early morning sun, hovering against dark clouds and dropping with a splash of colour into the nearby field. Not far, just the other side of the wire fences. Mamma had told her it was homework time, especially as she was due to start a new school next year—a bigger, older and smarter school.

But it was a *Saturday* after all.

She wiggled her bum to get a better position on their lumpy bed, her science book sliding off her lap.

It was quiet, so she listened hard.

Mamma's snores could be heard through the open door into the main room. Thandiwe smiled—Mamma was thin from a long and strange illness, but was getting better, so it was good to hear her sleeping. She had always found that old brown couch very comfy; so much so, she seemed to be using it more and more.

Thandiwe had started to miss Mamma's presence in their bed though—although it was also guiltily good *not* to have Mandla screaming so nearby at night.

Come to think of it, there were no baby cries either. Thandiwe peeked through the door. Mandla lay check-blanket swaddled, sleeping soundly too on Mamma's lap, his rapidly lengthening legs hanging off onto the sagging couch; he was going to be a big boy in time.

Time—and homework. Seven colours, her science book said; that's how many colours in a rainbow.

Thandiwe looked closely through the window; seven didn't look right, it could be more, it could be less. And what was the difference between indigo and violet anyway?

And what, too, was that other story—Miss Mabuso had told them it only the other day, Monday, reading day—a Rainbow drops into a pot of gold at the end; with a funny creature guardian it called a leprechaun? She wished they'd been shown a picture, because she couldn't imagine it from Miss's description, but the teachers were all trying hard to move them away from pictures.

She sighed sadly, remembering her grandmother's colourful tales, embellished with rich descriptions that had burnt into her brain. She missed her *Gogo*, she'd always cooked them the best *mielie pap*—and she'd had a hacking laugh that tore happy holes into the world.

Thandiwe had shared just one of her *Gogo*'s stories at school—Wednesday, oral story day—and remembered the biting comment that had come back from Miss Mabuso: 'Old people's tales; not fit for today's world.'

But then, Miss Mabuso never laughed.

It's all going to be letters and numbers from now and into high school; where bigger bullying children may also be waiting. She shivered, despite the sun outside.

Thandiwe thought of the pot of gold instead. It would be like a *potjie*; a large black cooking pot.

And she'd seen pictures of gold before; bright, yellow-shiny and very expensive. Now *that* would be worth more than any amount of homework—she had always been acutely aware of her mother's pain when shopping, as she'd scratched frantically in her bag, Mandla crying on her back at Pick 'N Pay check-outs.

The story of gold at the end of the Rainbow might just be a childish story, perhaps—but, being a *White* story, there was a chance it might even be true.

If she was quick, she could be back, before either Mamma or Mandla woke.

The scramble over the sagging fence was a messy one; she would need to come back in time to clean her skirt too.

She stood up in the field littered with bags, bottles and Pick 'N Pay trollies.

Her stupid Rainbow had moved!

There was a tall line of blue-gum trees she hadn't noticed from the window and the Rainbow dropped with a blur into green branches. With a sigh, she walked briskly towards the trees.

At least she was a good climber—if the pot was hanging from a branch, she'd be up there quicker than Mamma responding to Mandla's cries for milk.

By the time she reached the trees, Thandiwe could see through them, just a thin barrier to yellow grasslands stretching far beyond. The Rainbow seemed to have danced away into the distance.

Thandiwe sighed again, more heavily this time. How on Earth was she going to get there now?

There was a swift movement out of the corner of her eye and she turned to see a large yellow-brown animal bounding out of the long grass towards her.

She almost fainted with fear.

It was a lion, thundering to a halt in front of her. Large and smelling like wet sacking with a huge shocking black mane, it stood stiffly, pawing at the ground. But weren't the Cape Lions extinct? Cape Town itself wasn't so far off either. Still, even though her science book said they were extinct—here, one definitely was—a stinky male Cape Lion.

The lion crooked his left front paw and bent his back, as if offering her a place to ride. Thandiwe braced herself and looked into his bright yellow eyes. Despite her trembling knees, she held the lion's freakishly steady gaze.

A part of her knew she shouldn't, but how else would she be able to get to her Rainbow? Tentatively, she took a fistful of musty mane and swung her legs over onto his back, grateful she was wearing track-suit pants. She had a strange, dizzying sense that she was not the first girl to ride a lion.

His back was rippling with muscles and she clutched hard onto his mane. Up close he didn't smell *too* bad, she thought, perhaps a

little like her stale school socks before Gogo—and now Mamma—had washed them.

The lion galloped off and Thandiwe buried her head into his mane, grassland whipping past her. She was sore and bruised by the time he eventually slowed, heading down a bumpy slope where riverine trees stood, eclipsed by a massive, shimmering rainbow dropping down, down, down...

And the Rainbow did indeed pour into a huge glistening black pot—up so close, she realised there were maybe more than a *million* possible colours, if only she had a label for them all.

Were the books wrong, then?

Thandiwe climbed off: 'Thank you.'

The lion turned his head and looked at her. She stepped back nervously, realising some distance was safest, however helpful a lion might seem.

But she wasn't quick enough. He struck, a quick slash of his right paw snaking across her shins. She screamed and clutched at her legs.

But the lion just turned and, with a breath of wind, was gone.

Thandiwe pulled her torn trouser-legs up and wiped a few drops of blood from her shins. There was a thin shallow scratch scouring the surface of both her shins, perhaps just a warning? She pulled her track-suit pants back down and looked up.

*Mangalisayo!*

She could almost hear her Rainbow humming above her, pouring its multitude of colours into that big black nearby pot, with a surging hiss. It was all *finally* in her reach.

No—who was this? A small ochre-furred creature with wide body, large eyes and long tail, thick moustache and monkey hands and feet stepped from behind the pot. He was not wearing any clothes apart from a leather pouch on his left hip, so she could see it was a *he*.

Most definitely.

With a sudden chill through her body, she recognised it from her Gogo's old kitchen stories.

It couldn't be a leprechaun; surely it had to be a *tokoloshe*?

'I'll let you have a look into the pot, little girl.' He stepped aside to let her pass, grinning.

Thandiwe looked at the tokoloshe and smiled, despite the terror surging within her. She couldn't let him know she recognised him; it would only alert him that she *knew* he couldn't be trusted.

She kept smiling as she moved forward as carelessly as she could, trying not to look at his daggered teeth and bracing her burning legs beneath her pants.

Without warning, he leaped forward to grab at her with his lightning quick monkey hands.

But he wasn't *quite* quick enough.

Thandiwe ducked underneath his grasp and snapped the pouch from his waist. Two quick steps back and she had the stone from the pouch into her palm and then her mouth.

The stone burnt on her tongue but the tokoloshe flailed wildly at thin air, lurching away: 'I'll get you, little girl.'

She smiled, knowing she was invisible. Her Gogo was right, though, the tokoloshe was not *too* clever—just as long as you kept your wits about you.

She was glad she'd enjoyed Gogo's stories so much.

This felt like no story though.

The tokoloshe was smart enough to lurch back to the pot, poking the air in front of him, nose tilted to sniff the breeze. His nails were clawed and sharp.

With a shiver, Thandiwe paced quietly around to the far side of the pot, finding she was *just* tall enough on tip toes in Bata Toughee school shoes to peer inside.

At last...

The huge *potjie* was empty. The Rainbow poured in, disappearing into black nothingness. She rocked back onto her heels with crushed disappointment.

A tall robed person with wings and a glowing head stood there, looking at her.

The tokoloshe was gone.

'What is wrong, Thandiwe?'

'There's nothing in there,' she said, spitting the stone into her hand.

'Nothing?' said the glowing person, 'But within *you*, you have gained courage worth more than any gold.'

'Can I sell it or eat it?' she asked.

'No,' the winged person said, looked puzzled.

'*Hamba bhebha*, then!'

They looked even more puzzled.

She tutted; it was obviously a *White* winged-person, so she gave the direct English translation.

'Fuck off!'

They vanished.

She certainly didn't need anyone else to tell her she was good inside.

Thandiwe looked at the slippery stone in her palm. It could perhaps make a neat paper-weight for Mamma's hospital notes, perhaps?

She looked up.

There was no Rainbow, nor any pot.

The lion was standing in front of her, stretching its paws and offering her his back.

Thandiwe looked into his eyes, knowing he was a dumb but dangerous beast. 'I get it,' she said, 'Be careful whom you trust. You *hambha bheba* too, then.'

The lion did not even bother to run, turning on its paws and disappearing in a puff of disbelief.

Thandiwe braced herself for a long walk.

She could feel changes in her body and knew with peculiar certainty she was no longer a child.

Sighing, she clutched the warm stone in her right palm and began her walk across a field littered with burnt out tyres, bags and bottles.

It no longer mattered if she would be late; only that she got home at all.

Come to think of it, the stone could always be a weapon too, if necessary.

Big school no longer felt so big.

Thandiwe walked home, step by step, pants torn and with burning shins.

It was night time when she finally got home, the darkness heavy on her shoulders.

Gogo waited for her on the other side of their sagging fence, holding Mandla in her arms.

He was still sleeping.

'Where's Mamma, Gogo?' Thandiwe asked; cold in her sweat from the long walk.

'Gone to the shades, child.'

Thandiwe clambered over the fence and her grandmother handed her the baby. Thandiwe could see her Gogo's old and craggy face, fuzzy and vague in death; she was careful not to touch hands as she took Mandla.

'You remember the ceremonies needed; my special *intombi*?'

Thandiwe nodded; holding back the burn in her eyes. Mandla was *mielie*-sack heavy and opened his mouth to scream. Thandiwe loosened her clutch and his screaming wail dropped to a whimper.

She gave her Gogo a stiff smile and went inside.

Mamma's body lay at a rigid and crooked angle on the couch, legs hanging onto the floor. Thandiwe could not look any more, so she draped Mandla's check blanket over Mamma as much as she could. She was panting with the baby under her arm; he was starting to whimper loudly, threatening to scream.

Thandiwe stepped over her mother's calloused feet sticking out from under the blanket, trying not to look directly through her blurred and burning eyes. She opened the door slowly, suspecting even more was wrong.

The shadows outside were full of menace and she heard a throaty chuckle, catching a glint of green slitted eyes.

The tokoloshe was waiting for her.

Why had he followed her all this way, so far from water?

Mandla began to cry, so Thandiwe stepped with him into the night shadows, hissing: '*Hamba bhebha!*'

The shadows were empty as she knocked on their neighbour's door, holding her now screaming brother as gently as she could on her hip.

Mrs Motlala held Thandiwe close and pulled them both into the warm light of the living room.

Outside, was that only the sound of wind?

**Ends**