

Alexandra Stein

## Where The Heart Is

I remember ... but it's not a memory you see. That's the point. I remember practically nothing. Because memory is consciousness and most of my nostalgia is unconscious. Some other part of the brain that doesn't yet form pictures, but does hold smell and sound and temperature. It's at a cellular level. An early osmosis built the texture of Africa into my body. Because I was planted there. Conceived, granted, in Paris, but pushed out of my mother's body in a thatched-roof cottage in Johannesburg where I learn to run in bare feet, suck down mealie pap and chew on hard, salty sticks of biltong.

The carbon particles of the surrounding atmosphere penetrate my being and, atomic brick by atomic brick, interlock to grow me: a blond-haired, dimpled cherub with an ice-cream stained face and drooping *broekies*.

Then we move to England. Six weeks on the Windsor Castle during which my mother strips us children to our *broekies*, paints zebra stripes over our whitening bodies and attaches ears and tails: this is her parting cry for Africa and it wins us second prize in the ship's fancy dress contest. Then there are months in a boarding house in Muswell Hill. Grey rain and colorless cold. The currency of language converts *broekies* to knickers, which I wear, still drooping. Now a four-year old, locked in mauve-flocked wallpaper corridors, or learning the foetal position that will serve me for years to come: crouching like a lost frog to toast myself in front of the dusty white grid of a gas fire. Heat becomes my number one priority, driven by this cellular instinct.

There are no more breakfasts of sweet mealie meal, boiled and served lapped with milk and crusted with sprinkled sugar settling over the cooling, gummy membrane that covers soft corn pap beneath. Now a faceless landlady serves warmed-over greasy English breakfasts, handed to me by an oven-gloved hand.

“Not fucking kippers again, Ma!” I cry out, my culturally Bohemian cells oblivious to the house standards of decent English. Shortly after this outburst we are made to understand we are no longer welcome - the language is too much, along with the inability of all four children to distinguish between outdoor and indoor games (now that the outdoors is no longer a natural grassy extension of the house, but a permanently damp pavement, four feet wide and busy with umbrella'd foot traffic). Our chief amusement, therefore, is to slide down the stairs on the landlady's tea-trays. Ma is not used to restricting us, leaving the landlady with no option but to throw all of us out.

We move to grandpa's house in Camden Town. Here begins my life-long acquaintance with large wooden kitchen tables around which talking and cups of tea, dramas and creativity, spiral in the simplest stage setting of all. Now a layer of England finds its way into my body structure. Eventually I will learn to love a good fry-up in the morning, not to mention kippers, which, decades later, I yearn for in the kipperless plains of the midwestern United States. In my eleven short years in England Harold Pinter's language will become almost as familiar to me as those early sounds of Africa, sounds that rose from the belly with a laugh or a cry and rhymed for me with the heavy stamp of the gumboot dance.

Robyn arrives when we are both nine years old. There is a dark memory of our first meeting in this cold country. My father has been friends with Ruth, her mother, since their

teenage years; they have been activists together, comrades in the South African Communist Party and friends of the African National Congress, the first of which my father has since bailed out of, though he regularly gives money to the latter.

We pile into a car: Sylvester and Ruth in the front, my elder sister Hatty, myself, Robyn and her elder sister Gillian squeezed into the back seat. The dark memory starts with these three: they all have mahogany hair and dark Jewish complexions - Ruth's parents were Lithuanian socialists and she is a tough, intelligent woman, which attributes have been passed on to her daughters.

We drive to a forest outside of London - perhaps Epping Forest, I no longer remember. It's dark in the forest, and damp. Hatty and I are suspicious. Why is Dad taking us out with these two sullen girls? Damned if we will be friends with them. We don't exactly hit it off.

Now I realize they must, indeed, have been dark. How little children know - or are told. Now I understand that Ruth must have just been through her 117 days in jail: solitary and maddening confinement in Johannesburg's Marshall Square Prison. After her first ninety days of being held without charge, she was released, then picked up again as she left the jail, to start over - a little trick of the legal system that allowed indefinite incarceration of activists without charges or trial.

Ruth had begun talking to insects in her cell, this I know now. The girls have watched the arrest of their mother, said goodbye to their father, who has left the country to run the armed underground resistance, and been taken in by the aforementioned grandparents. After Ruth's final discharge from her isolated cell she has been given an exit-permit. This allows her and the girls into England though none of them have passports. Ruth remains a stateless person for the

rest of her too-short life. The community of South African friendship and comradeship, and the mothering of Ruth has brought these two girls into this gloomy forest with us.

No wonder I don't remember green. Only a forced closeness with these little women.

In a year or two we become best friends, nonetheless. It is as if history refused us any other way. It glued us together with memory. Granted I knew little of Robyn's history or even her present, and likewise she of mine, but, Good God, what could the English girls make of us? That cellular stuff joined Robyn and I, as it also joined each of our other sisters. We try to swim in these currents of history: struggle in the undertow that sucked us from the African sun into the strangeness of grey London concrete. Perhaps I had no idea of history, but history had me.

Robyn and I turn to each other - what do we find? I find in her that tough strength of her mother, I find a separateness, the looking out on to the world of an outsider, an exile, who sees the absurdity of parochialism; this, even as a child. We knew a wide world. We knew difference. We knew the fantastic mixing of cultures that galvanized the movement in South Africa: Indian trade union leaders; African lawyers (yes, including the mythical Mandela); Jewish activists; and numbers of writers, artists and musicians, even Afrikaners who fought bitterly against their grasping roots and sacrificed the sanction of their families to join the movement.

The sedate, settled history of England will have to grow to include us: to each other we have little explaining to do. Perhaps that is the gift of a shared history - we do not need to explain. In our bodies we carry a part of each other's past.

But perhaps there is another secret of childhood? The very fact that we *do not know*, that we do not understand, really, what is happening: either to ourselves or to each other. And so we live these things in a fog of unexplained sensation: the sensations of loss, of fear, of strangeness and loneliness. Inside this fog, Robyn and I hold on to each other. I can't help her explain it, but

I can be with her and share laughter, adventure, a bright world that exists within the circle of our friendship. I think that we love each other. Although I know too there is a vast distance between us, and now I believe this distance to be the *not-knowing*, the parts of our experience that were not shared, and not understood. Sympathy there is. But sympathy comes from the outside, with a degree of curiosity. When Hatty goes mad Robyn comforts and sympathizes but does not live the wild scenes in the kitchen. Likewise, I know nothing of her parents' daily lives as exiled political leaders. But we sympathize and in this part of our lives remains distance.

In London we become very young hippies. I braid my mousy blond hair while it is still wet from washing. After it dries the braids are undone and a pale halo drifts around my round face, accentuating my heavy-lidded blue eyes and full, sulky mouth. Men are becoming interested in me - at twelve this is a strange surprise. Beautiful Robyn with her naturally frizzy hair, a rich, deep brown, that later she mixes with henna - she has the sharp bones of her mother (almost nothing of her father, who is paler and chubby, a teddy bear of a man, also the leader of Umkhonto We Sizwe, the ANC's army). Robyn's beauty is fierce and spoken of by the grown-ups around us. Robyn accepts the attention of men as if it is nothing new - and perhaps it isn't. We stake a claim to North London by traveling its Tube line - me in bare feet, Robyn in zip-up knee-length boots and heavy wool tights, that, by the wearing of them, she makes fashionable.

At this age, also, I start to long for a place in the world of politics. 1968 is approaching and I can feel the world seething around me. I want in. In a desperate way I want to be included, but I can find no way in. Robyn, meanwhile, is angrier and angrier. I don't know that her parents are constantly traveling to Africa, busy all the time with the struggle. I don't know what words they use with her when she is in trouble at school. But every once in a while her father Joe comes to our house on Sunday nights for the weekly game of poker in my father's study. Cigar

smoke and tea accompany the low-stakes gambling in the basement while the wives (the Portuguese-Mozambican Suzette, French-Madagascan Monique, Jewish Bernice and my English mother Jenny) sit upstairs with cigarette smoke and tea and gossip. Of course Ruth never comes. She is not a wife. She has not taken her husband's name - she is Ruth First and she has much to do and no time to sit with the wives, even though Joe from time to time relaxes at the poker table. She is teaching and writing books and struggling within the SACP for a more imaginative interpretation of events and history. Of course, then, I didn't know they were any different from anyone else. When Joe didn't come for poker, I didn't think to wonder where he was. I didn't imagine for a moment the life that happened outside of my view.

Robyn finds Phillip - a young Irish man (fifteen? or sixteen?) who has already left school. He lives with his mother in the Angel, in a two-room basement flat with an outside toilet - a brick outhouse in the backyard. Phillip's mother and sister share a bed in the bedroom and Phillip sleeps on a couch in the living room. Phillip's mother makes us welcome when we visit and we drink tea at the enameled metal table in the kitchen. The kitchen sink serves as bathroom, with toothbrushes stored in a glass by the dishes. Phillip's mother works as a playground lady, she has curly black hair, and the round pasty-soft look of someone who eats too much white bread and sugar.

Phillip has long black hair. He is small and skinny - he was three months premature he tells us, explaining his diminutive build. Now Robyn and I are thirteen. Sometimes Robyn spends the afternoon with Phillip, sharing his couch and then I understand I am to leave them. I take the tube back to Camden Town on my own. After a while I realize they are sleeping together. It seems normal. Phillip is a nice chap. We spend a lot of time together, the three of

us, in and out of cafes drinking tea, playing in the park together, walking along the canal, starting, now, to get high once in a while.

Robyn holds Phillip's hand and goes with him deeper and deeper into London's underground, while her parents struggle to keep the revolution from dying in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre. I hide myself in books. I see less of Robyn after she's expelled from school - we meet on the weekends still, but now I'm bitterly lonely at school and every lunchtime I return to the empty classroom, hide behind a book cupboard and read through the works of D.H. Lawrence and Herman Hesse. I try Dostoevsky and appreciate his unrelenting grasp on life, but cannot penetrate the darkness of his topics. I immerse myself in the words and emotions of adult life.

Robyn begins to take pills and other things which she does not tell me about. I suffer the insanity of a family that is collapsing around my ears. I make a Laurentian escape, falling in love with a remarkably handsome Parisian and running away at the age of fifteen to live with him. Kings Cross becomes the center of Robyn's world for the next fifteen years - here she finds heroin and a world where, to her relief, her history is erased.

At seventeen I leave Paris for the open skies of California. Later I spend ten silent years lost in a secret Marxist cult where I accept simple answers to complex questions.

Later we find each other again, Robyn and I, but it is a long time until that common ground of history reclaims us. This history finally pulls open a blood-red curtain and with a flourish reveals to us the great stage of our lives.

Robyn goes to Southern Africa to attend funerals. First her mother's - she has opened a letter-bomb sent to her by the South African Security Police and been blown to bits in her

university office. Then, more than a decade later, Robyn's father dies and she returns for his state funeral and his burial in Soweto. As for my parents, their small role is honored as they are officially named as Veterans Of The Struggle.

Robyn and I are friends again. Our futures lie ahead of us, more steadily now as we each emerge from our years of darkness. The door to our home has opened. Perhaps I will go back someday.