BEYOND THE BAOBAB ::

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A Memoir

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For Douglas

&

For Peter

Of course we couldn't all come over on the Mayflower . . . but I got here as soon as I could.
:: Anton Cermak

Wisdom is like a baobab tree; no one individual can embrace it.
:: African proverb

THAT JULY DAY ::

To be a person is to have a story to tell.
:: Isak Dinesen

WHEN I VENTURED OUT THAT JULY DAY, the first thing that struck me was the heat.

People say, as an African, I should be used to heat. But I had never known anything like this. In South Africa, it is a dry heat. It is a heat that makes the buildings seem to shimmer, and the roads appear wet from a kind of mirage. There is a stillness to that heat, a drawing in on yourself to hold it at bay. Sounds seem to come from far off; there might be just the buzzing of a fly nearby. And the heat is entirely driven by the sun, baking down on the powdery, dry soil. When you step into the shade, the temperature drops immediately, and your pupils don't adjust quickly enough to avoid a momentary blindness. On the Highveld, around Johannesburg, you can almost set your clock by the 4 p.m. thunderstorm that cools things off for the evening. In Cape Town,

the summer South Easter blows away the city smog and, though the wind tries the nerves with its relentlessness, it is called "The Cape Doctor" for good reason. Durban, on the East Coast, has the most humidity, but nothing like the opaque heat of that July day. It gripped me as I stepped outside. It instantly made my sandals stick to my feet and my skin prickle with moisture.

When I went out on that day, the voices were a wall of sound.

Throngs of people, not as oppressed by the humid heat as I was, were out enjoying the summer day. I listened to the speech around me, and I heard a foreign language. Except it was not foreign; it was American. I was walking down Prince Street in Old Town, Alexandria, Virginia. But the voices sounded strange to me, as if I couldn't speak the language. Not quite Babel, but close. It wasn't so much the words, although that was a part of it. It was the rhythms and inflections. The sentences turned up at the ends.

I went into a stationery shop; I already had so much to write about. I asked the shop attendant to put my purchases into a packet. He looked at me questioningly, groping for a meaning. A bag. A bag was what I wanted. The more conscious I became of language, the more it seemed to splinter into a thousand possibilities like all the threads that make up English. American English and African English have the same source, after all. But any amateur Henry Higgins can clearly pick up countless English dialects in America, the musical drawl of the southern states to the flattened twang of New York; in Africa, the heavy, weighted consonants from Afrikaans to the shortened vowels from the black languages. So, it was not just the rhythms and inflections that

sounded foreign to me on that July day, it was also the dialect.

The *pronunciation* is the easy part. It's not that hard to learn to pronounce the words; to learn to say "loo-tenant" rather than "leff-tenant," "bro-CHURE" instead of "BRO-chure," "aluminum" in place of "aluminium," "skedule" not "shedule" or to ask for a bag instead of a packet. The *accent* is much more intricate because it's a part of you, like a gesture or a walk, and it's bound up with the timbre of your voice. I was expecting the obvious distinction of the American "a." Americans "cann't" do something, and the English "cahn't" do it. But I learned that the "o" is distinct too. Americans buy fresh "prohduce" from a grocery store, whereas I buy fresh "prodduce." And, for me, Bach is not a "Baroke" composer, but a "Barock" one. In America, I heard the suggestion of a Northern Irish accent. In South Africa, English sometimes still has remnants of the old-fashioned, 19th century language that our ancestors brought from Britain. But, more often, the English there takes on the heavier overtones of the other ten official languages from Afrikaans to Zulu.

When I ventured out into the wall of sound that July, the seasons were upside-down.

In Africa, the seasons blend into one another, as day does into night there are no long-drawn-out twilights there. In March, the trees turn subtly in the autumn, and Cape Town has a chill, damp winter in July. In Johannesburg, the sun shines brightly through the winter and, though temperatures dip below freezing at night, the days are warm. Spring comes to Johannesburg in October with a purple canopy of jacaranda trees, and in Namaqualand, north of Cape Town, the semi-desert is transformed, briefly, into a carpet

of absurdly bright colors as the wildflowers bloom in late winter and early spring late August and early September. Time is measured there in months rather than seasons.

On that hot, July day, it was hard to imagine any other season. When I had heard Americans say, "In the winter I did such-and-such" or, "next summer we're going to . . ." it seemed like a quaint turn of phrase. I didn't realize, then, how the cycle of life is measured by the clearly demarcated seasons. Suddenly, the rejuvenation of spring coinciding with Easter made sense. I came to learn that the long, slow, lazy days of summer were neatly bracketed by Memorial Day in May and Labor Day in September. My own summer holidays in Africa had always centered around Christmas, but now all the Dickensian images of carolers and freezing snow and steaming Christmas dinners would come to life in a northern hemisphere winter.

When I walked out onto Prince Street that summer day, my internal compass was awry.

As people came towards me on the sidewalk, I wanted to step left instead of right. It was a precursor to learning to drive on the other side, banging my left hand on the driver's window as I instinctively reached to change gears. I would pull out into traffic, having carefully ascertained that nobody was coming on my right, and there would be a wildly gesticulating driver screeching to a halt inches from my left, because I was inadvertently turning onto the wrong side of the road in front of him. I trained myself to look left and right, and left and right again, before I dared to walk across the street. My orientation was still set for the southern hemisphere that July, and when I went into Washington D.C. I couldn't tell

where north was. The night sky was disorienting, too. The Southern Cross was not where it should have been. And bathwater ran out of the plug anti-clockwise . . . or clockwise . . . anyway, the opposite direction from the southern hemisphere.

When I ventured out that day, it was like Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* in reverse.

There was a confidence, an openness, a frankness in the people around me that was disarming and baffling. A perfect stranger happily embarked on her life story — yet that, it seemed, was that. The promising start came to nothing. It began with a crescendo and the rest was diminuendo. I had been used to exactly the opposite trajectory, where friendships grew, gradually, over years and cups of tea. One of my oldest friends has translucent, light blue eyes, and a whispering, silvery voice that surprises you when it turns into a belly laugh. She is funny and fey, and intuitive and kind, and she has such empathy that I feel as if I'm talking to my soul — and I left her behind, in a cold, dry, wintry Johannesburg that July.

When I ventured out on that July day, it was my first day as an immigrant in America.

I had come from everything that was familiar to everything that was not. I hadn't yet understood how difficult it would be to make new friends. I hadn't yet found where I would live or work or play. I didn't yet know I had to turn the light switch up for on. I hadn't yet found out if I could feel patriotic. I didn't yet know if this could feel like home, when I ventured out that day.

CAPE OF GOOD HOPE ::

There is something about the city they left long ago
– which suggests that they have never gotten over it.
:: Stephen Watson

"SO, WHERE ARE YOU FROM?"

It's one of the stock questions between strangers. And, because I've now lived in Maryland longer than I've lived in any other place, my stock reply is, "Baltimore." Invariably, the quizzical response will be, "But you're not *originally* from Baltimore." True enough. The accent is a dead giveaway. I'm from Cape Town. But even that is not the full story.

I was born in a place called Bloemfontein. The name literally means "flower fountain" but it's actually a rather drab little city in the heart of South Africa. Its claim to fame is that it is the Judicial Capital of the country. (For reasons best known to itself, the government is divided between three different capitals, the others being the Administrative Capital in Pretoria and the Legislative Capital in Cape Town.) Bloemfontein's

other claim to fame is that J.R.R. Tolkien was born there. Like Tolkien's father, mine was a banker and, like him too, I left the city as a very young child. There, the similarities between Tolkien and me end. He was taken back to England to become famous, and I was taken to Namibia, where my father was to open a new bank in Windhoek.

Namibia is exquisitely desolate. The massive sand dunes of the Kalahari Desert hum and sing in the wind and, when the wind is truly fierce, the dunes move, changing the landscape entirely. A particularly beautiful dancer from the Cape Town Ballet Company went for a walk when the company was on tour in Namibia once, and he was, tragically, never seen again. In the mountains around Windhoek the air is filled with fine mica dust, which is agonizing for the sinuses of a small girl.

The curious thing about Namibia is that it was once a German protectorate, and it had still, when we lived there, a strongly Continental feel to it. The towns of Windhoek (*Windy Corner*), Swakopmund (*Mouth of the Swakop*), Walvis Bay (*Whale Bay*) — these are all German names. On the way to our house in the suburb of Klein Windhoek (*Small Windhoek*) there were a couple of German castles, where some of the well-to-do residents lived. There was a German school, where my mother taught English. Although the boys were unruly students, my mother was captivated during the annual school dance by the courteous way they bowed to my father, clicked their heels, and asked him if they might dance with his wife. One of my earliest memories is of playing with a German girl who could speak as little English as I could speak German, and yet managing to find a way to communicate and play

happily. I attended a small church school with fifteen pupils in each grade, I blossomed in my ballet classes, I loved the German carnival every May. I loved it all. And when I was nine years old, I had to leave it all. I looked out of the window of the Continental Hotel on our last night there, and wept with all the sorrow of a child feeling that her life was coming to an end.

My father's bank had transferred him to another town, this time in the goldfields, a two-hour drive north of Bloemfontein. The mining town was called Welkom, which means "welcome" in Afrikaans. It felt anything but to me. The huge school was overrun with what my mother disdainfully referred to as "goms," an untranslatable expression meaning, roughly, "lowlifes." I was ostracized because my father wasn't a miner. My grades plummeted from the 90s to the 60s. I was a miserable misfit.

Dry, flat and soulless as the place seemed to me, there were few redeeming features. One was that, although the town was dusty and landlocked, there was a body of water on the outskirts that attracted of all strange things flamingoes, and I will never forget their shocking pink color against the drab backdrop. Another is that I would stop whatever I was doing to listen, entranced, when the black miners passed by our house with their guitars, strumming out a rhythm long before Paul Simon discovered it for his *Graceland* album. The most important redeeming feature of Welkom was that I made a lifelong friend, who astonished me many years later by arriving at my side, unannounced, to be with me for my mother's funeral.

By the time I got to high school, my sister, who was ten years older than me, and my brother,

seven years older, were living in Cape Town, and I began to visit them for vacations. At first, I did all the typical things, like taking the cable car up Table Mountain and visiting the old castle that had been built by the first Dutch settlers in the 1600s. I fell instantly in love with the city. It became more and more difficult to leave it each time, and I felt like one of Chekhov's Three Sisters yearning for Moscow. I dreamed of living in Cape Town, and discovered the value of a rich fantasy life; if you dream and fantasize and imagine enough, sometimes it — or an approximation of it, at least — will come to pass. I doggedly got through my high school years in Welkom, and then, like some wonderful consolation prize, I was given a coveted place in the drama school at the University of Cape Town. They say that you are not a true Capetonian until you have lived there for ten years, but I felt like one from the very first moment.

It's hard to describe the beauty of Cape Town, dominated as it is by Table Mountain. It is flanked on the right by Lion's Head and by Devil's Peak on the left, with the spine of the Constantiaberg running behind it down to Cape Point, where the cold currents of the Atlantic meet the warm currents of the Indian Ocean. The city has two bays; Table Bay with the dock yards in the lee of the mountain, and False Bay with its expansive, white beaches on the southern side of the mountain. The beauty infects you. The light, when the days are still and clear, is so intense it makes the mountain look like a cutout. And when the fierce South Easter blows — this Cape of Storms is the setting for the legendary Flying Dutchman — it's as if the city becomes a living creature. Thick clouds pour over the mountain, like a tablecloth.

One doesn't merely live *in* the city, one becomes *of* the city, and one's attachment is palpable. The late South African writer, Stephen Watson, might have been speaking for me when he wrote, "There is something about Cape Town . . . which induces a homesickness the pure force of which is almost intimidating in its longing."

When I go back to visit Africa, Cape Town is even more beautiful than I remember, and it is so wondrous to reconnect with dear and irreplaceable friends that I find myself wondering if it wouldn't be possible, after all, to return to live there. It is so comfortingly familiar, and I know my way around instinctively in the way I know my own body. Every sound and smell triggers a memory; that was the beach where I tried to gather phosphorus one night, this is the cathedral where we gathered to protest police brutality, there is the hall where I heard my first live symphony concert.

The pull of Cape Town was so strong that although I spent my last African years in Johannesburg now a truly vibrant city with a feel to it that I imagine somewhere like Kinshasa or Nairobi might have in my soul I remained a Capetonian. Even now, when I am spiritually and geographically half a world away, and in spite of the passion with which I have become an American, a part of me still yearns for that Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa.

NO. 8 CHAPMAN STREET ::

Cradle the pieces carefully, or events will scatter
like marbles on a wooden floor.
:: Ann-Marie McDonald

THERE WAS THE PUNGENT SMELL of olive oil being warmed in a teaspoon, blackened underneath from the flame of the match. I watched my mother roll a swab of cotton in the warmed oil before testing the heat on the back of her hand, and then pressing the swab gently into my ear to try to sooth the screaming pain of a middle ear infection. The warmed oil gave only the slightest relief; the pain didn't go away until the goo exploded through my ruptured eardrum to make a fascinating splotch on my pillowslip. I was two. My mother could tell when an ear infection was coming on because I would tilt my head to the side and stamp the corresponding foot as if trying to dislodge the pain, and the scene with the warmed oil played out many times in my bedroom at No. 8 Chapman Street in Windhoek.

Before my memory caught up with me with me there, I had already lived in two other places. Being a nomad is nothing new; my ancestors left England in 1815 to make their way to Africa and, even in my own lifetime, I have lived, on last count, in more than 25 places. But that house in Windhoek left a lasting legacy. For one thing, I now have tinnitus in my right ear. Also, the house became the template for every home in every book I read, even long after I stopped living in it. Mary Lennox from *The Secret Garden* lived in an enlarged and embellished version of my house, and so did Jo Marsh, Jane Eyre, Scout Finch and all the rest. And it was there that I began to perfect the fantasy life that can have me spinning off outside my body in a split second to this day.

I should have been a lonely child because I was solitary. My two siblings had gone away to boarding school, and my mother was too tied up with her own goings-on to have much time left over for me. Still, apart from some long minutes spent staring at the second hand on the clock in the entrance hall, willing it to move so that it was time for my mother to come home, I was quite content on my own because I wasn't really alone. I had Dick. I wish I could say that I had come up with a more inventive name for my imaginary friend, but Dick it was, and we were great companions for years.

My room was the one on the front corner, and Dick and I spent a good deal of time walking back and forth by the front window, with me gradually bending my knees more and more until my head was below the level of the windowsill, then reversing the procedure until my head gradually got higher and higher. This was to impress upon

the non-existent passers-by on our out-of-the-way dirt road that I had a staircase in my bedroom. Dick was a pleasant-faced boy, with straight, blonde hair. He always wore short pants and a short-sleeved shirt, and he never got any older. I relied on him for friendship during long stretches of my childhood, but he was instantly forgotten when my siblings came home from boarding school for the holidays.

There was an enormous verandah along the front of our house. It opened out through four folding glass doors from the living room and, when the doors were closed, there were heavy curtains that could be drawn across them. This arrangement was the perfect setup for a stage. Like many parents, ours patiently sat through long, whispered backstage arrangements interspersed with short theatrical presentations. My star turn, as the youngest, was to lie on the cold concrete of the verandah, with a black rubber dagger gripped in my armpit, impersonating a dead body for the duration of my siblings' enactment of a masterpiece called *The Thirty Nine Steps*. I was so excited to have them home, I would have done anything. There was nothing I loved more than to creep into my sister's bed in the morning and inhale her warm, sweet, buttery smell. I even acquiesced eagerly to a favorite trick of hers rolling me up tightly in an eiderdown and then unrolling it with a swift, whipping jerk across the living room carpet, after which episodes I would stagger about like a drunken wheelbarrow.

The desert nights were so hot in summer that I had to press different parts of my body against the iron bedstead for relief. The nights held other unwelcome dynamics. Once, I opened my eyes

to see a huge, white dog about to pounce down onto me. I ran, screaming like a banshee, into my parents' room — right past the white snake I thought I glimpsed coiled up next to my mother's bed — to fly into her arms, my heart hammering. What I had really seen was just the moon making dancing patterns through the trees on the wall next to my bed but, from that moment, there were fierce dogs on top of the curtain pelmet, under the bed, in the closets, on top of the door, everywhere, and no amount of being taken soothingly by the hand for an inspection of the room before bedtime could convince me otherwise. There was nothing for it but a blue night-light next to my bed to keep the phantoms at bay.

I learned about death in that house. One of the many cats we owned (or who owned us, depending on your view of the feline temperament) was a white cat called Blondie. When she died, I was inconsolable. My brother was home from boarding school at the time, and he assured me that Blondie would go to heaven and be fine. He took me to the back yard, which was barren except for an inexplicable cluster of fruit trees that magically grew both oranges and lemons simultaneously, and carefully placed Blondie's inert body on the corner of a box near the outhouses. Then he took me for a long walk around the grounds until, eventually, we circled back to the box where he had placed Blondie. To this day, I don't know how he orchestrated this, but I was hugely comforted to see that she was gone — up to heaven, I supposed.

I also learned about separation. There was the endless cycle of my siblings coming home and leaving again for boarding school. And, when

I was four, my mother took me away with her to Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, where my sister and brother were at school. At the time, I had no idea why we had gone away for this six-month sojourn. With hindsight, I came to understand that she'd had a love affair with a man called Jack, who used to come to the house at odd times during the day when my father was at work. Jack arrived at our front door one day with a plastic white and brown dog, which he proffered to me. As I reached out to take it, with the words, "Thank you" forming on my lips, he snatched it away and hid it behind his back, with the stern injunction, "Say, 'thank you!'" No surprise: I didn't take to Jack. All the more so because, even at four, I instinctively understood that he ruptured our family.

Before we went away, my father and I had been inseparable. Because I was so much the youngest, he threw himself wholeheartedly into raising me and did everything, apparently, short of breast-feeding me. Whenever he left for work, I became so distraught that my mother had to come up with a complicated series of distraction tactics so that he could slip away quietly. When he returned home, my mother would hear his car on the driveway and say to me, "There he is!" and I would fly to the door, flinging my arms around his knees as if he had been gone for eight years instead of just eight hours.

When my parents affected an impaired reconciliation and my mother and I returned from Grahamstown to Chapman Street, it was as if my father was a stranger to me. I was painfully shy of him. He had bought a new record player while we were away, and was eager to show it to me on

the first day. I obediently sat and listened with my ear next to the slowly circulating LP. When he gently tried to explain to me that the sound actually came out of the speaker below, I was so paralyzed with timidity that I could only bring myself to change my position by infinitesimal degrees. By those same degrees, I became less shy of him again over time, although I now had an inkling that life could sometimes be unsettling.

When we were driving away from our house one day, there was a girl hanging on her front gate as we passed. My extroverted father said to his introverted daughter, "Give her a smile!" I dutifully stretched my lips into the required position. This may have been the same girl with whom I later had an unlikely play date, given that she couldn't speak a word of English and I couldn't speak any German. In any event, that was one of my first, shaky forays into the bewildering territory of friendship with someone other than Dick or my siblings.

It gradually became less daunting once I started going to school, and I latched onto some of the more outgoing girls. One of these was Susan, who had the great good fortune to have parents who lived on a farm. It was a chicken farm, and not only were we allowed to collect the warm, fragrant eggs, which often had mesmerizing bits of feather stuck to them, we were also allowed to jump and play on the towering stacks of chicken feed in the barn. I would have been endlessly contented with these activities, but Susan got bored one day, and suggested that we should go for a walk along the dry riverbed across the road from the farm. Amongst the rocks in the riverbed, under the thorn trees, we imagined a house, and

we became so absorbed in our play that we were at first unaware that a group of men had gathered at the top of the riverbed by the road — our only way of getting back to the farm.

The two predominant tribes in Namibia were the Ovambo, who were tall with very dark skin that had a striking sheen to it, and the Herero, whose women wore fantastically colored, full-skirted dresses and turbans that mirrored the style of the 19th century colonial European women. The men at the top of the riverbed, it seemed to me, were Ovambo, and as they sat and chatted amongst themselves, we hatched the idea that they somehow imperiled our lives. Fortunately, Susan had a brainwave. She had a package of Rolos — by now slightly melted — in the back pocket of her shorts, and she suggested that, if we offered them to these casually chatting men, we might be able to escape with our lives. We tentatively approached, with the Rolos held out in front of us like a peace offering. The men seemed slightly taken aback to see us and bemused by the proffered Rolos, but they took one each graciously enough. We walked past them on stiff legs until we got across the road, then we broke into a swift trot back to the farm.

You only had to drive a short way out of Windhoek to feel you were in another world. In the jagged mountains that surrounded the city, there were Bushmen caves with blurred rock paintings scratched onto the walls, dating back to the very earliest times. Once, my brother and a friend of his urged me to climb through a narrow opening between one cave and the next, saying they were too big to get through. I trustingly squeezed through, and was surprised to see them

following suit. My brother blithely explained that they had been afraid they might find a bushman in the inside cave, and had sent me ahead as a decoy.

The Okavango Swamps were up to the north. For years, our family made unfulfilled plans to visit the Etosha Pan, which straddled the border between Namibia and Botswana. Etosha means "great white place" and much later I learned that the dry, salt-encrusted pan and surrounding Etosha National Park provided a backdrop for Stanley Kubrick's film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. One year, our plans to visit Etosha had to be canceled because I got the mumps. The next year we couldn't go because my father suffered a mild heart attack. The year following that, my father's firm transferred him to another city, and we had to pack up and leave.

Disappointed as I was never to make it to the Etosha Pan, it was nothing compared to how I felt about leaving Namibia. Even at nine years old, I instinctively understood the implications. Although I couldn't know that this would be the first in a series of ever widening, concentric circles that would eventually take me as far afield as America, from that first night I learned to pull around me like a cloak the many mesmerizing things that can lodge in the memory of a dreamy, solitary child and the fascination that any child has for the first place that she can identify as home.

17 LOADER STREET ::

In the fifties I learned to drive a car.
I was frequently in love.
I had more friends than now.
:: Leonard Michaels

NO. 17 LOADER STREET was a pink house with steep front steps and an orange bougainvillea climbing up the wall.

On Loader Street I lived as a student with my brother and a pair of identical twins. One was marginally more beautiful than the other. I would put my head around his door to say goodnight, and end up hanging on it for half an hour talking about things I can't remember now.

Loader Street is in Cape Town's Malay quarter. We lived there after it was first ineptly gentrified. The corner shop was owned by the genial Mr. Ali. He charged the proverbial arm and a leg for necessities like bread and milk when we ran out. Mrs. Ali's *samosas* were the best I've ever tasted. At regular intervals throughout the day we could hear the Muslim call to prayer.

I bought my first furniture: a Victorian wardrobe with a built in mirror. Opening the bottom drawer was an art. I also bought a second-hand chest of drawers. Inside, I discovered a remarkably hideous vase that looked like a giraffe's crotch.

Loader Street was narrow and winding. My brother-in-law came to spend the night. Next morning he complained, "Man, this is a noisy place! They never stop hooting." It turned out he had parked badly, and nobody could get through.

The street overlooks the harbor, which was then a dank, dark place inhabited by seals and lowlifes. The Waterfront was still a figment of someone's imagination.

Loader Street is on an incline, which was useful because my brother's Mini Minor started erratically. We had to run it down the hill to get it going. The cobblestones were hell on wheels.

I remember Loader Street in the summer with clear, blue skies and still days. The truth is it blew a gale much of the time, and the first winter it was difficult to negotiate the living room because of the number of buckets catching drips as the rain poured through the ceiling.

The facilities at Loader Street were across the back courtyard. The lavatory had a pull chain that required the technique of a church bell ringer.

On warm summer nights we'd carry bedding up to the roof and sleep under the stars.

Loader Street is on the slopes of Signal Hill, which forms the rump of Lion's Head. Every noon the South African Navy fires a cannon from Signal Hill. Eventually, your nerves sort of get used to it.

The vagrants *bergies* came down from the mountain to drink methylated spirits in the shadow of the back wall. We would hear their

choice language ("*Jou blêrrie bliksem!*" being the mildest) and their intoxicated caterwauling late into the night. They'd come to the front door asking, "Yoo gott sum bredd for me?" in their lilting cadence. One day I found my offering in the bougainvillea bed.

Behind Loader Street, the High Level Road runs between the city and Sea Point. You can see the most spectacular sunrises from there. Especially after an all night party.

One summer night my brother's advertising friend came by in his Alpha Romeo Spider. I was the only one home so he settled for second best and invited me for an impromptu supper. He drove me round Chapman's Peak with the top down. For one night I felt like a woman of the world.

When I was living on Loader Street the police bludgeoned students in the sanctuary of the cathedral. Fellow students stood in silent protest in undergraduate gowns on the roof of the Summer House on the campus. We held an all night vigil in the cathedral. One of the twins and I crammed into a gathering at the City Hall and my glasses got smashed in the crush.

I got hepatitis. The window in my room became a picture frame. Though I've lived in more than twenty places since then, I'll never forget how, at the end of the day, the sky would turn from a luminous peacock blue to a velvety midnight blue.

And that was Loader Street.

SIMPLY BEING THERE ::

It always seems impossible until it's done.
:: Nelson Mandela

WHEN I IMMIGRATED TO AMERICA, I had a goal, although I didn't realize I had it until I began to achieve it. I wanted to be able to look at a person of color and see the person, not the color. This may sound like a very simple thing. But when every action and interaction of your early life has been compelled, often legally, by separateness *apartheid* it seems impossible.

I have no idea when I began to perceive ethnicity as separateness. The policy of apartheid was adopted in 1948 when the National Party took power in South Africa, so it was in place long before I was born and was already a well-established way of life. In our home, when I was growing up, we always had a black, live-in maid. We also had a laundry woman and a gardener. In general, although not by our family, these women and men were referred to as "girls" and "boys" no matter their age. The men were often called "John"

even if that was not really their name. We didn't have an army of servants, as Vladimir Nabokov's family had in Imperial Russia, but I never had to make my bed or clean the house, and meals were prepared for us. The maid had a half-day off on Thursdays and Sundays, so we had to fend for ourselves on those evenings.

I remember the names of three of our maids. I didn't know their last names. Perhaps my parents did; I'm not sure. First there was Lillian, who left our service for reasons I was not old enough to take an interest in. Then there was Millie. Millie was tiny — not much taller than my pre-pubescent self — but she was a fierce worker. I had no idea that the handles on my chest of drawers were brass until she polished them up. Millie was my friend. I would sit on the kitchen counter when she was cleaning up after supper and read to her the funny stories from my school reader. Our peals of laughter would issue from the kitchen, and my parents were pleased, in a liberal sort of way, that their daughter was unaffectedly attached to a black woman.

One day my father sent me with a message to Millie. He said that, because I was Millie's friend, I should be the one to deliver it. I don't remember what it was now, but I do remember that it was not a very welcome message, and I felt uncomfortable about passing it on. I was also the bearer of a message from Millie to my parents: *could they install a shower or bath for her in addition to the sink and the long-drop lavatory?* This was not forthcoming.

Now, by most standards, our family was politically enlightened. Neither of my parents, nor any of us three children, when we were old enough, ever voted for the National Party. But

there was a kind of blindness about the mandated social system, a sense that this was just how it was.

One of the built-in conveniences of having a live-in maid was that my parents could lead an active social life, with no need to find a babysitter. On one of these occasions, Millie had a friend visiting — a man friend, as it happened. With some nervousness and many injunctions not to tell my parents, she asked me if I would sit in her room, so that she wouldn't have to abandon her friend to take care of me in the house. I noticed that her small, simple room had a slightly musty, earthy smell to it. Her friend was tall and extremely courteous (he excused himself at one point to "make water" before heading for the long-drop), and they both made me very welcome. I sat sideways on Millie's high bed, with my back against the wall and my legs stretched out in front of me, and the three of us chatted convivially. I had a wonderful time.

It was only by special dispensation — by means of having a Pass — that black people were allowed to live and work in white neighborhoods. They were usually confined to townships, called "locations," outside the towns. Their true homes were even further away, in places like Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda, Ciskei, or Kwa-Zulu. In the 1970s, three million people were forcibly resettled in these black homelands or "Bantustans."

I don't know where Millie's true home was, but one day, after being with us for many years, she went home for a vacation, and she never came back. We didn't ever hear from her again, and we were mystified and heartbroken. My parents worried that something untoward might have happened to her. Perhaps it did. We will never know. It is also possible that, even in a household

where she had been treated comparatively well, she just couldn't bear to be a servant any longer.

Millie's place was taken by Doris, a large woman with a cast in one eye. I didn't warm to Doris the way I had to Millie. My mother had a sweet tooth and there was a tradition in our house of being allowed two candies from a special candy tin after meals. One day Doris asked me for candy from the tin. I gave her one. She asked if she could have another, explaining that when you have one it gives you a yen for another. I withheld for a moment, saying that one was better than nothing. She concurred, and I eventually yielded and gave her a second candy. It is a small incident, but it makes me feel hot with shame to recall it. I was being the little madam withholding from a servant. It was horrible.

A short while after this, my mother was taking Doris somewhere in the car, and I was in the back seat. They began to speak of apartheid, and Doris, stolid and unemotional as I had always thought her, became impassioned about the inequity of the society. My mother agreed. It was an eye-opener for me. It was the first time I began to suspect that there was something out of kilter about the way we lived our lives.

These women had to work as servants because they had very little education, and what education they did have was given in a way that would ensure that they would continue to be kept "in their place" by the government. I, on the other hand, had the opportunity to matriculate from high school and go on to the University of Cape Town, a right and a privilege that I didn't analyze overly much. It was a given that young people in our circle would get a tertiary education of some kind. My sister had trained as a nurse, my

brother had studied graphic design, and I was off to drama school.

Before the first semester started, I was working as an assistant stage manager on a production of *An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen. One of the actors was a second-year student called Vincent, a gentle, softly spoken and physically exquisite young man. He was quite small of stature, perhaps about five foot six, with enormous, liquid brown eyes, fringed by the longest, thickest lashes imaginable, and a very vivid smile, offset by the olive, slightly glowing complexion of his skin. He was of Malay descent. After a rehearsal one evening, we were milling about outside the theatre trying to decide where to go for something to eat. I became aware of a slight disturbance, as a couple in our group seemed to have broken away to speak with Vincent a little way off. It transpired that he had been quietly slipping away, realizing something that none of us had registered until that point: there was nowhere in Cape Town at that time where a man of Malay descent could legally walk into a restaurant in the company of a group of white students. It was quickly resolved, and we ended up going to someone's home instead. But something had changed gear inside me. This was a person I knew and loved. There was no distinction between him and us. Or there should not have been. It was one of the first times that segregation hit home in a very personal way.

Later that year, I had to go down to the post office one day to mail a package. In the line in front of me was an elderly black woman. The brown parcel she was holding had been meticulously wrapped and tied up with string, but the addresses of the sender and recipient had not been written on the package. Instead, these were

written on a separate scrap of paper. When it was her turn, she handed the paper to the Indian man behind the counter and asked him to write the addresses on the parcel for her. It dawned on me that the woman had not learned to read or write. The man (who, incidentally, had been rude to me before) berated her, and told her loudly and in no uncertain terms that he didn't have the time to write the addresses out for her. Quickly, perhaps even peremptorily, I took the parcel from her and wrote out the addresses. It was easily done. She tried to thank me in her fractured English and then, when her words ran out, she took my hand and kissed it. I would like to be able to say that I was gracious, but I was so uncomfortable about the whole situation that I'm afraid I was brusque. I was acutely aware of the inequity of an 18-year-old girl doing this kind of service for an older woman who had been discourteously treated by a post office worker.

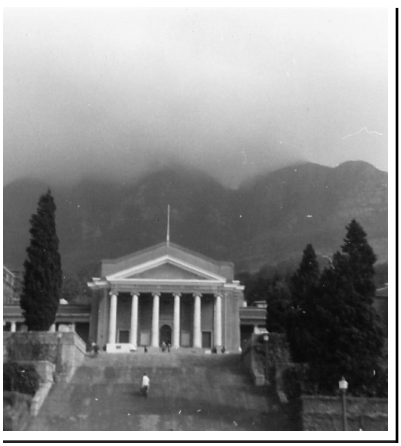
These everyday episodes were symptomatic of the larger, institutionalized injustice. Yet the men who put and kept apartheid in place were not, in themselves, evil. I had the opportunity to meet F.W. de Klerk when he was on the lecture circuit in America recently. Not many people realize that he shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Nelson Mandela because it was he, as the last white President of South Africa, who set about systematically dismantling apartheid, securing the release of Nelson Mandela, and paving the way for the first democratic elections in the country. de Klerk is a softly spoken, highly educated man who, over time and without any great epiphany, came to the realization that apartheid was, to use his words, "morally indefensible and wrong," and that the only remaining question for him was how to go about changing it.

The greater question is how these men of culture and breeding could ever have thought of apartheid in any other terms than morally indefensible and wrong. It is often true, as I have found living in America, that certain ethnic groups will gravitate towards certain areas Little Italy, Chinatown, Polish enclaves, residential areas of predominantly orthodox Jews, and black and Hispanic neighborhoods even though there is no law that says they should. To give them the benefit of the doubt, perhaps it was some sense of this that drove the Nationalists in the early days of apartheid. But to entrench it in law and criminalize the intermingling of races created an unnatural society that will take generations to unravel. And it was a system that disaffected not only those who were most obviously disadvantaged by it. Any white person of conscience had to question themselves, as I did, about their own sense of culpability and guilt at having the system so skewed in their favor. Even though I personally had nothing to do with the establishment or the execution of apartheid, and tried to work against it in my life and actions, a part of me wondered if my simply *being there* carried with it the same stigma as "just following orders" during the Nazi regime. There exists a whole Diaspora of white South Africans scattered all over the world. We feel we don't belong in our country of birth, and we carry the social distortion in a way that seems part of our DNA.

And yet . . . when I went back to visit South Africa after living in America for about seven years, I was picking up a few items in a small, rural grocery store, and I got to the checkout at about the same time as a young woman. She indicated that I should go ahead of her but, because she had been fractionally before me, I gestured for her to

go first. I paid for my items and thought nothing more of it until I was driving away afterwards, and the scene played out again in my mind. The key here was that the young woman had been black. She had indicated that I should go ahead of her, I must suppose, because of an ingrained notion that whites in South Africa took precedence. I had unthinkingly indicated that she should go ahead for no other reason than that she had arrived at the checkout before me. That incident, minute as it was, gave me hope.

THE ARDUOUS UNDERTAKING ::



Many of us owe our very existence
to the fact that people migrated.
:: Isabel Wilkerson

IT WAS DURING MY FIRST YEAR at the University of Cape Town that a group of about 400 students held a peaceful demonstration on the steps of St. George's Cathedral in the city center. I was not one of the demonstrators but we all came to know the circumstances. It was a "sit-in" demonstration, along the lines of similar protests being practiced at American and European universities, and the group of students sat on the steps of the cathedral to demonstrate their opposition to the apartheid government.

The South African Police arrived and began a baton charge. The students fled into the cathedral in fear. The police followed. Women were grabbed by their hair and dragged back out onto the street. Other students retreated to the sanctuary, the holiest place in the cathedral, where fugitives are traditionally immune from arrest. Again, the

police followed, and students, men and women alike, were indiscriminately beaten with rubber batons under the high alter.

This was in June, and I had been a student at U.C.T. for about four months. Up until this time, I had more or less lived in the self-absorbed cocoon of childhood, accepting the status quo as a fact of life. This was no longer possible. Put in the broadest terms, the student group, like me, represented the white, English speaking liberal class, and the police represented the white Afrikaners who supported the Nationalist Party. In the shadows, but central to the confrontation, was the mass of disenfranchised blacks. The clash at St. George's Cathedral revealed just how viciously the supporters of the N.P. would defend their racial policies when they were publicly challenged.

The 400 students who demonstrated at the cathedral on that day were what one could refer to as activists. It was not in my nature to be an activist and I am not one to this day, but even moderates had to be appalled by what had taken place. Timid and shy as I was, and in spite of the fact that the government had banned any further demonstrations under the Riotous Assemblies Act, I crammed with thousands of others into meetings to protest the police brutality in the City Hall, in U.C.T.'s Jameson Hall, and in the cathedral, where Dean Edward King was arrested for "obstructing the cause of justice." Everything had changed for me. My eyes were now wide open to the egregious political situation in my country. I began to feel claustrophobic, as if I had to get out.

It's not surprising that being exposed to an experience like this would bring about an epiphany and make me want to get away. But the

thing is, this feeling was not new to me. I had been miserable during my high school years living in a *verkrampte* conservative mining town in the goldfields. All the time I was there, I kept myself going with dreams of moving away to Cape Town, where I had reveled in its spectacular beauty and felt at home amongst the old buildings and like-minded people. Now, here I was and, much as I loved the city with an intensity that seeped into my soul and has never left, I still felt a hankering and a restlessness to move on.

There's any number of reasons why someone will make the decision to pick up from one place and put down in another. It could be as simple as the earliest foraging for food (a search for a better life, in today's terms), or traveling across the country to follow a love, moving to another city for education or career, or fleeing a country to escape persecution. The Khoi of Southern Africa, for instance, lived an entirely nomadic life for centuries as they moved from one place to the next, hunting and gathering. Then there's the case of the Lithuanian Jews fleeing the anti-Semitism of the Russian czars and the pogroms of the Russian Empire, and arriving in South Africa in droves at the end of the 19th century. One of their descendants told me the story of his ancestral family scrambling to get to the harbor just as two ships were about to sail one to the Americas and one to South Africa. The South African-bound ship was closer, and they boarded that. So are life's choices made.

In cases like these, going in search of food or fleeing persecution, there is actually very little choice involved in migration; it is a necessity. More often, though, there is a push *and* a pull. Then it's not just the question of *why* some people will

migrate; it is also why *some* people will migrate. The received wisdom is that those who choose to emigrate are extroverts. This makes perfect sense, of course. You would expect the outgoing, sociable, adventure-seekers to be eager to go out and explore the world, seek a new life. But how is that explained when us introverts do it too? I always go back to where the cycle began for me, with the Reverend George Barker and his wife, Sarah, who set sail from England in 1815 to become missionaries in South Africa. He was required by the London Missionary Society to keep a diary, and this is his first entry:

> *Feby 4th 1815*
> *This day I entered into the solemn engagement of marriage previous to my departure from my native land, the Lord having provided Sarah Williams a native of Shropshire to be my companion in the arduous undertaking before me.*

For these ancestors of mine, the "arduous undertaking" entailed leaving their families and their country forever, and sailing for six weeks to a place they had never seen, to live and work amongst people they had never met. George's diaries are pious and they are meticulous, to the point of being quite dull at times, about things like the weather, supplies bought, facts and figures. They are also riveting in the descriptions of natural beauty and unsought-for adventure and for the insight into the character of this deeply private man.

It seems as if it's almost against his will that we learn he is easily irritated and easily slighted. He has a quick temper (he earned his nickname "Red

George") and suffers from bouts of depression. He is a devoted teacher, a compassionate minister, and he is appalled by social injustice, to the point of confronting the authorities about it. As the focal point of the community, he and Sarah are often called upon to be hospitable, but George is clearly never happier than when he is planting out his beans, tinkering away in his workshop, or painting a fence in quiet solitude. He is, in other words, an introvert. And Sarah even more so, as she slips in and out of his shadow through the pages of his diary.

What on earth would have made these two reticent people take on a venture like this? One explanation is that religious belief can be a great spur to acts of courage. In the same way that the Lithuanian Jews fled Russia to escape from religious persecution, the Pilgrims sailed to Massachusetts in 1620, and the French Huguenots relocated, around the turn of the 18th century, to other parts of Europe, to North America, and to the Cape Colony in South Africa. But there is more to it than that. As many people as there are who migrate for religious or political reasons, there are others who stay. There is clearly something else at work here; a cataclysmic event or an epiphany will affect people in different ways.

In my case, the claustrophobic feeling that I had to get out was that old push and pull. The pull of Cape Town had been even more alluring to me as a schoolgirl because I had been so unhappy where I was in that *verkrampte* mining town. On the other hand, ironically, by the time it became feasible for me to emigrate from South Africa, the apartheid rule had come to an end, so I was no longer being pushed as a direct result of that. It wasn't just that I was leaving behind the lingering

fallout from an oppressive political system, the violent crime rate, and the slip-sliding economy I was also feeling the magnetic pull of possibility from America.

The question is still why I should have felt the pull so irresistibly when others didn't. One of my closest friends in Cape Town, the one I always stay with whenever I go back, is the polar opposite of my personality type. She is eager and enthusiastic about taking up causes, loves befriending casual passers-by, and has high-octane energy as well as being one of the most exquisite creatures I've ever seen, a benefit that brings its own level of unconscious confidence. When I asked her once where she would choose to live in the whole world if money and logistics were no object, her answer was, "Cape Town." This, despite living in a country where the government infrastructures are increasingly in disarray, and she has to fortify her house on the slopes of Table Mountain because three or four violent break-ins a week have become the norm in her neighborhood.

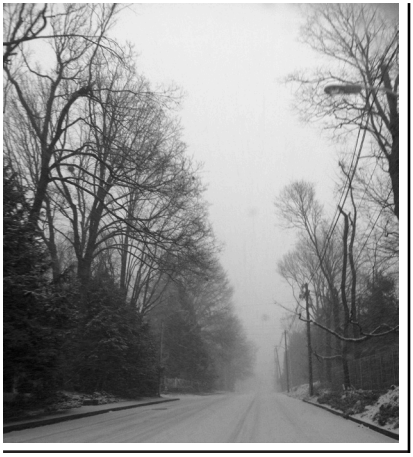
My brother was always very flexible in his thinking. He refused to pigeonhole his sexual orientation, and the "occupation" line on his passport wasn't long enough to accommodate his profession as actor, writer, director, artist, teacher, and community activist. Even though his correspondence was opened by the authorities and he was on a watch list at the height of apartheid, he remained unambivalent about his decision to continue to live in South Africa through all the ups and downs of political upheaval.

Red George came from a family that ran the White Hart Inn in the small village of Wimbish in England, and his relatives stayed on there for generations after he left. When I retraced his

steps recently, I went to have lunch at the newly refurbished inn, and then explored the church grounds where the name "Barker" can be dimly made out on the weathered gravestones, dating back to the 1700s.

It must be that there is a kind of genetic impulse, missing some descendants and snagging on others, that manifests as a type of restlessness and a straining towards new possibilities. It's the only explanation for why some people are enviably contented to be born and bred in one place, happily collecting the detritus of memories in their attics, surrounded by lifelong friends and family. Others, like George and Sarah and me seem to have a compulsion towards the arduous undertaking of picking themselves up and putting themselves down in another place.

THINGS I DIDN'T EXPECT ::



I didn't know I loved so many things and I had to wait until sixty
to find it out sitting by the window on the Prague-Berlin train
watching the world disappear as if on a journey of no return
:: Nazim Hikmet

I DIDN'T EXPECT TO RECEIVE such a warm welcome; the fresh-faced young man with his Marine hair-cut courteously calling me by name, and leaving his post at the passport control desk to escort me to an office in the nether regions of Dulles International Airport. The matter-of-fact approach of the taciturn immigration officer on duty there, and the careless way he tore open my precious immigration package, were more what I had expected. I had anticipated the heart-in-the-mouth sensation as I watched him glance perfunctorily through the contents of my package just another day and another immigrant for him, but a hanging-in-the-balance day for me before finding them in order, and scrawling left-handedly on the red stamp he made in my South African passport to grant me "lawful admission for

permanent residence to the United States." The euphoric flood of relief was only to be expected.

I didn't expect American English to sound like an unfamiliar language. Much less did I expect it to become so familiar that now it's my own family who has an accent to my ear, and I forget that I don't speak the same way as everyone here. But I have come to expect the dead silence at the other end of the phone when a stranger is trying to work out what I'm saying.

Although I knew America had a reputation for being "a land of opportunity," I didn't expect it to be quite so generous. I dreamed but didn't expect I could find work on a classical music radio station somewhere on the East Coast. I hoped but didn't expect to assimilate quite so seamlessly into a new way of life. So much familiarity was unexpected; recognizing Washington Square, diners, and mailboxes from books, films, and television. It was curious to find landmarks bigger but sometimes smaller than expected. Snowy scenes on holiday cards, which had always seemed absurd for an African Christmas in summer, came to life. Boots, hats, gloves and scarves were no longer a fashion statement, but a necessity.

I didn't expect to love the seasons so much, the passage of time so clearly delineated. The deep silence of winter; walking home in the moonlight through thigh-high snow as if I were the only creature on earth, then meeting a Siamese cat gingerly picking its way through the snow, making no indentations. Steam billowing out of manholes from the warm underbelly of the city. And, just when you thought spring would never come, the delicately upturned dogwood blossoms hanging suspended like a subtle Asian painting. The long,

slow, lazy days of summer, with everything but the throbbing cicadas drifting to a standstill in the stultifying humidity. The gradual creep of autumn, and the leaves turning to the deep red of a Protea or the vivid orangy-yellow of a Strelitzia — which I learned is named "bird of paradise" here.

I wasn't expecting the plants to be so different; no more Acacia, Baobab and Kaffir Boom trees but Ash, Beech and Maple — and I'd never even heard of Sassafras. I couldn't guess what Crape Myrtle was until I recognized it as Pride of India. Nasturtiums, which I'd always grown in abundance, showed no interest in growing for me here. I didn't expect avocados to be so expensive, or that papayas would be so hard to find.

I never expected when I saw *The Accidental Tourist* that I would ever see the house where it was filmed, or come to know the community where it was set. It was most unexpected to spot Anne Tyler walking in my neighborhood, and to receive as a special birthday present one of her books with her personal message written inside. I didn't expect to run into John Waters at the local grocery store. I didn't expect to live around the corner from a Mies van der Rohr building, to see Caroline Kennedy casually wave goodbye to a friend on a New York street corner, or that I would be so spoiled for choice with concerts, plays, opera. I never imagined that I would see — from just a few feet away — Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* at The Phillips Collection in Washington. After the isolation of South Africa, I couldn't get over the possibility of being in the presence of greatness.

After one near miss, it was unexpectedly easy to adapt to driving on the right. It took a while

before I could get used to turning on red. Then, in an unanticipated twist of irony, I had to learn the hard way about the distinction between turning on a red *light* versus turning on a red *arrow* when I was pulled over by an implacable police officer. I was amused by the unexpectedly explicit road signs (*right lane* MUST *turn right*) and baffled by the parking signs that seemed to require a degree in logic to decipher them.

I didn't expect the nickel to be bigger than the dime, and I didn't know what to make of Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July.

I anticipated that becoming an American citizen would be momentous. I didn't expect it to be quite so emotional. I was surprised by the flush of delight the first time a passport control officer looked over my new American passport and said, "Welcome home." It came as a nasty shock to feel like a political pariah when President Bush waged war on Iraq, after all those years of feeling like a pariah during apartheid. I didn't believe I would ever be able to unravel the ingrained roots of that political system. It was an unexpected gift that, slowly, I could.

I didn't know I would miss the red-earth smell of Africa; the deafening, honking call of the hadedas; the rustling, throbbing stillness of the vast African night; the purple explosion of the jacaranda blossoms in late spring. I couldn't assume that Cape Town would still feel like home. I didn't imagine it would be so difficult to make new friends — or that the bonds with lifelong intimates could remain so strong over time and distance. I hadn't supposed that I would be able to leave my native country with such equanimity, or that I would come to love my adopted one with such fervor.

The last thing I expected was to become a writer. I never anticipated how imperative it would become for me to find a way to articulate the unexpected turn of things.

TRYING ON PATRIOTISM ::

Patriotism is supporting your country all the time, and your government when it deserves it.
:: Mark Twain

PATRIOTISM CREPT UP ON ME and touched a nerve when I wasn't expecting it. Like when my father-in-law was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery and there came, out of the silence in the chapel, the sharp click of military heels as the chaplain, wearing full military blues, slowly marched up the aisle along with the two officers who were carrying the folded flag and the casket of ashes. When we walked out of the chapel into the misty January day, and the US Air Force band and a company of riflemen presented arms to the widow. When I followed the horse-drawn caisson with six white horses (and the one extra one, without a rider, to indicate the fallen soldier), and we made the two-mile procession through the cemetery, with the strains of the band floating back to us on the cold air. When we crossed an intersection, and a man

got out of his vehicle to stand, saluting, until the caisson had passed. When the commands hung thinly in the air in the distance as the riflemen fired the gun salute and a lone bugler played taps. And when the Chaplain came to kneel on one knee in front of the widow to present the flag to her, and she slowly leaned towards him to put her cheek against his as she said, in her low voice, with a catch in it, "Thank you." I had never known anything like it.

Growing up under the apartheid regime in South Africa, patriotism had never seemed like an option. We felt hostile to the very idea. After the assassination of one of the architects of apartheid, Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, I imagine there must have been a state funeral but I have not the slightest memory of it. The South African government has always followed the parliamentary model, and there were probably official opening of parliament sessions with the attendant pomp. I have no recollection of that either. When I traveled abroad, I carried my South African passport surreptitiously. We endured our nationhood rather than feeling part of it.

An uncle of mine used to stick postage stamps upside down as a form of protest. Needless to say, the Bothas and the Viljoens and the Vorsters were none the wiser about being stuck upside down, but it gave my uncle a quiet satisfaction. He was a mild mannered man, tall and lean, and the headmaster of a boys' school in South Africa's Eastern Cape. I never heard him raise his voice, and his protest was in keeping with his understated but firm personality.

The thing is, most of us black, white, Indian, Malay, Khoi, Jewish just wanted to get on with our lives in peace and quiet. We didn't all grow

up with a burning desire to be politically active. Circumstance thrust it on us whether we liked it or not, and we responded with varying degrees of discomfort and commitment. I took part in my share of anti-government protests as a student, but we couldn't all be heroic figures like Nelson Mandela or Steve Biko or Archbishop Desmond Tutu. We couldn't all make artistic statements like J.M. Coetzee or Nadine Gordimer or Alan Paton. We just wanted to be able to live with our families and our quiet ambitions. But the politics seeped in insidiously like smoke under a door. With that seepage came the anger and the frustration and the shame. And we bucked the system in ways that ranged from courageous to comical — from taking part in protests and demonstrations or risking incarceration and death, to sticking postage stamps upside down or reading the newspaper as my mother did, with pen in hand to scribble over the faces of the most egregious of the politicians.

The South African national anthem today is a hybrid made up of two anthems and five languages, reflecting what Nelson Mandela hopefully called "the new rainbow nation." It opens with *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* (Lord Bless Africa), which is the Xhosa pan-African liberation anthem that was banned until Mandela's release. It also includes *Uit die blou van onse hemel* (Ringing out from our blue heavens), the Afrikaans anthem that was used during apartheid. The curious thing is that I don't know either of them as well as I know *The Star Spangled Banner*. I moved to the States with my American husband soon after South Africa became a democracy, so *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* didn't have a chance to become familiar to me, and I had actively avoided becoming familiar with the Afrikaans anthem of the previous regime. But

I made a point of learning *Oh, say, can you see, by the dawn's early light* . . . and when I hear the drum roll at the start of the concert season signaling the moment when everyone will stand to sing, I get a lump in my throat.

Patriotism caught me by surprise. After we managed the peaceful transition to democracy, and Nelson Mandela with superhuman grace and forgiveness did everything he could to reach out and unify the country, I felt proud to be a South African for the first time in my life. But that little flame of patriotism sputtered out over time as the presidency shifted from the iconic Mandela to the well meaning but misguided Thabo Mbeki to Jacob Zuma, who tried to interfere with freedom of the press and to dismantle the constitution that Mandela had worked so brilliantly to craft.

I have come to realize that in America patriotism can also be problematic. One of the surprising discoveries I made is that it, too, is a divided country politically, ethnically, economically, ideologically. Although I wasn't around in the 1960s and 70s, there is enough collective consciousness to understand that American patriotism lost its luster with the disillusionment of the Vietnam war, and it appears never to have quite recovered. Now, the vehement factions in the country rarely seem to come together, and when they do, as they did during the tragedy of 9/11, it is fleeting. I may have felt euphoria when the first black President was elected, but the obstruction he ran into once he was in office clearly showed that the euphoria was far from universal.

Perhaps it's easier to be less judgmental about a country and its issues if you don't have a feeling of ownership about it. I can recognize problems

in America, but I don't feel the same sense of responsibility that I might if I had grown up here. And, although my husband felt disquiet about apartheid, he didn't feel guilt or shame about it because he hadn't grown up with it. Conversely, it is easier to be disparaging about a country when it's yours by birth. Even though I made a willing decision to become an expatriate and had no qualms about swearing allegiance to another country, Zimbabweans and Malawians fleeing the corruption and the grinding poverty in their own countries still flock to neighboring South Africa, convinced of a better life there. America, for all the talk of its declining international stature, is still a lodestar, and millions from all over the world continue to want to come and bask in it from the most obscure Mexican laborer, who is prepared to risk his life to slip over the border; to a Congolese woman my husband represented in immigration court, who fled to America with false papers after seeing her husband shot to death in front of her house; to people like me, who just want a chance at an enriching life.

What makes it different for an immigrant is that, when you choose to leave your own country to go to live in another, you are ripe for patriotism, even if it is only by comparison. I know I am not alone in this. When I stood and took the oath of citizenship with a group that included other Africans, Hispanics, Asians and some Europeans, the pride in the room was palpable. It is such a sense of achievement, and you have had to put so much emotional and physical effort into the process, that you dare not risk disillusionment.

It is more than just feeling patriotic by default though; there are moments that continue to take me by surprise. Like seeing the eternal flame

on John F. Kennedy's memorial at Arlington Cemetery and reading his inscribed words, *ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country*. Like reading the Gettysburg Address *that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth* on the wall of the Lincoln Memorial. Like taking my oath of citizenship or holding my American passport for the first time. When the Old Guard places 260,000 flags at the gravesides of fallen soldiers on Memorial Day. Perhaps most of all, when my husband floats the idea of going back to live in South Africa, and my heart drops because I know what a wrench it would be for me to leave America.

Still, not having grown up feeling patriotic, I had to feel it out, try it on, and discover that it is by no means a one-size-fits-all. And any feelings of patriotism I may have are in the face of being married to someone who grew up during the Vietnam years and has a rather jaded view of his native country. He has a point. The U.S. Congress makes a disheartening habit of not covering itself in glory. The bickering about the extremes of ideology in the country is reminiscent of the schoolyard playground. There's a great swath of people whose belligerent parochialism is vehemently at odds with the idea of a great nation. The bureaucracy is cumbersome, the social disparity is still astonishing, and the health care system is like some confounding game of which nobody quite knows the rules. There are problems and difficulties and things to be ashamed about in America. But compared to what I had grown up with, and the turn that South Africa took after Nelson Mandela stepped down, there is, for me, no contest.

It's difficult to explain to someone whose birthright is American how the things that are so easily taken for granted — constitutional rights, proximity to some of the greatest minds and talents in the world, the rule of law, a sense of being at the center of international affairs, even something as mundane as a FedEx package arriving on time and not being stolen from my front porch — are the things that make an immigrant — me — feel proud to live here. It is a odd paradox that I should feel more patriotic about my adopted country than I do about my native country, but that is the fact of it. I am a patriotic foreigner.

STAMP OF APPROVAL ::

Sometimes serendipity is just intention unmasked.
:: Elizabeth Berg

IT ARRIVED WITHOUT FANFARE in the mail one day, in an envelope that some clerk had forgotten to seal. I was by myself in the house when it came, and I just hugged it to my chest with an inarticulate cry of sheer joy. It was my American passport.

Actually, I have two passports. Please don't mention this to the U.S. Department of State. When I came back from a trip to London in 2004, I mislaid my passport. I couldn't believe it I knew I'd had it when I re-entered the country. I spent two weeks turning the house upside down looking for it. It wasn't just the passport itself but everything that it symbolized. After I had unpacked the same filing cabinet, bookshelves, drawers and closets for the fifth time, I had to admit defeat, and I went ahead and applied for another passport. In due course, my new passport arrived and, with the surety that a couple will fall

pregnant once they adopt a baby, my original one turned up in a place I swore I'd looked five times.

Now, if a lost passport is found after you have applied for a new one, you are duty bound to turn in the old one. But here is the thing; I couldn't bring myself to do it. It simply meant too much to me. Even though it only had two Heathrow stamps in it, that original passport was the encapsulation of all the emotions I felt about having the right to call myself an American. It was like a lifetime achievement award.

::

When I arrived at Dulles International Airport in Washington, with my heart thumping at the base of my throat, I was holding onto a fat envelope that I had been terrified of mislaying ever since they'd handed it to me at the American consulate in Johannesburg weeks before. I had fantasized about sailing past the Statue of Liberty to Ellis Island, as all those storied immigrants had done, and even investigated booking a passage on a cargo ship. Then it began to look as if the first port of call would be Houston, or some such place, and I would have to go through the whole immigration process there. That rather took the glamor out of it, so instead I ended up flying into the nation's capital.

The envelope I was holding was sealed and, fat as it was, it didn't seem nearly substantial enough for all the effort that had gone into it. Over days, then weeks, then months, in an ever-escalating process, I applied for all the immigration forms, laboriously filled them out, and went through the seemingly never-ending checklist of everything the consulate requires before they will even begin

to consider your immigration. The reason my heart was in my mouth was because my South African passport was amongst the myriad forms and documents in my package, and the American nonimmigrant visa I was granted when I'd visited the U.S. 18 months before, had been "Cancelled Without Prejudice." This meant that I had no right to enter the U.S. if they didn't grant me Permanent Residence right then.

When it was my turn to go through passport control, I blurted out something uninspired along the lines of, "I'm immigrating!" As luck would have it, the officer at my point of entry was a well-mannered young man, who called me "Ms. Krummeck" and "Ma'am," and personally escorted me into the inner sanctum of Dulles International Airport. (In retrospect, I've wondered what the people in the queue behind me must have thought.) In some back office of the airport I eventually handed over my precious package to an immigration official — who then proceeded, casually and unceremoniously, to rip it open.

::

Actually, I have three passports. If you get the sequence right, and apply at exactly the right moment in the process, South Africa will allow you to have dual citizenship. America doesn't, but the powers that be turn a blind eye. When I was on my way to the airport a couple of years ago, I was nonchalantly browsing through my South African passport when I noticed — heart-dropping moment — that it had expired. So I had to go in and out of the country on my American passport. Please don't mention this to the South African passport control. If you have dual citizenship you

are obliged to travel in and out of the country on your South African passport. It's very confusing actually because, as you leave South Africa, they want to see your American passport to show that you have a right to get into the country without a visa, so I end up feeling as if I'm playing a complicated game of poker as I go through the various checkpoints.

::

Strangely enough, no passport or even an application form was necessary in order to emigrate from Britain in the 19th century. In 1815, the London Missionary Society dispatched a group of missionaries on five tall ships to South Africa. Amongst them were a couple of young newlyweds, George and Sarah Barker. The tall ships — remember, this was around the time that the Napoleonic Wars ended — slowly made their way from England, around the bulge of Africa at the equator, to the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa, arriving in Cape Town in May 1815. The missionaries then laboriously traveled over land to the Eastern Cape to set up a mission station there.

George and Sarah Barker were my mother's great-great-great-great grandparents, and they landed in South Africa five years ahead of the big wave of English settlers — some 4,000 of them — who arrived in Algoa Bay at the Eastern Cape in 1820, as part of a British government-assisted emigration scheme. George Barker rode down to the bay on horseback on several successive days to witness their arrival. Unbeknownst to him, amongst the 1820 Settlers were the maternal ancestors of the man who would marry his great-great-great-great granddaughter.

My father wasn't as clear about his ancestry as my mother was about hers, but Krummeck was probably originally a Prussian name, and his paternal ancestors were part of a wave of Germanic immigrants who arrived in the Eastern Cape in the latter part of the 1800s. Beaufort West, where they settled, has a Krummeck Street, and Beaufort became the traditional middle name in his family.

By the time he and his twin were born, the family was living in Grahamstown. He grew up in what is now the Observatory Museum, which housed the only *camera obscura* in the southern hemisphere — you know, the precursor to the camera, that Dutch Masters like Vermeer are supposed to have used to achieve their marvelously meticulous detail? The Observatory was originally owned by a redoubtable man named Henry Carter Galpin — an architect, amateur astrologer, clock and watchmaker — and by the time the Galpin family sold the premises to my grandfather and his partner, several businesses occupied the ground floor. The basement and upper floors were divided into apartments and lodgings, and this was where my father's family lived.

Several years after my father died, I was in Grahamstown for business and I made a special point of going to visit the Observatory. I tried to sense his presence in the corridors, and to imagine his treble voice as he played with his twin sister and their older brother. He used to tell me about their illicit visits upstairs to see the famous *camera obscura*. I retraced his footsteps, and was enthralled to see the upside-down projection of Grahamstown and the surrounding hills.

::

My siblings and I are fifth generation South Africans. We had no claims or rights to apply for citizenship in any other country. Serendipity presented my sister with other options. She married a man with unquenchable wanderlust who was too restless to be able to provide a stable home for her. They moved (or were evicted because he hadn't paid the rent) so many times that one of her friends quipped that knowing her had been "a moving experience." One of these ventures took them as far afield as California. My sister had been trying to conceive for years, and the change of scene was like my lost passport showing up — she suddenly fell pregnant and gave birth to a daughter who was then, by default, an American citizen. Although the Californian sojourn was short lived and the family returned to Cape Town, my niece diligently kept up to date with her American documentation, came to college in the States, and now embraces her U.S. nationality so strongly that she hasn't even bothered to renew her South African passport.

My sister hasn't renewed hers either, for different reasons. When she married a second time, it was to a man who had been born in India, but to a British father, so they had a right to go and live in England. She began the arduous process of acquiring British citizenship and a passport (if possible, the British are even stricter about immigration than the Americans), and she just so happened to settle near to a little town called Wimbish in Essex, the very town where our great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, George Barker, was born. His father ran the forge there, and the family owned an alehouse called the White Hart, still going strong to this day. This is all so serendipitous that if you wrote a novel

about it, it would seem too far-fetched. George and Sarah sail out to Africa in 1815, establish their lives there, spawn five generations that spread out all over South Africa — and then my sister returns to live within a stone's throw of where it all began.

::

I never officially met my husband. I had seen him playing French horn in various orchestras around the country, and he had heard me on the radio, so by a very gradual process of osmosis we slowly began to absorb who the other one was. He got onto the elevator with his horn case one day when I was on my way to do a radio broadcast for a concert he was playing in, and he began to make small talk — so small, that I don't remember what it was about, but enough for me to hear that he was American. It turned out he had won an audition for the orchestra of the South African Broadcasting Corporation when he was studying horn in Germany. Knowing next to nothing about the country, but being an adventurous 23 year old, he accepted the three-year contract, with every intention of returning to the States once his contract was up. But something in Africa had caught at him, and when he was offered the chance to return, he jumped at it.

He grew up as a "military brat" — his father was in the air force — and his family moved around all over America. The longest he had lived anywhere was in Philadelphia, where he went to college, and graduated with two music degrees. He knew that the chances of finding a position in an American orchestra were slim, and so he decided to try his luck overseas. But there was more to leaving America than that. He felt a

growing disquiet about his country. He disliked the materialism, and felt more and more out of place in the society.

In South Africa, there was something about the lifestyle that struck a chord in him. He loved the measured way of life, he enjoyed the climate, he respected the dignity of the people. He never condoned apartheid — far from it — but he found the moral judgment that Americans passed on South Africa hypocritical given the fact that they had all but obliterated Native Americans as they expanded the frontier, and their own race relations remained so troubled. Living in South Africa, he felt that he could "make a difference."

When we began to talk about the possibility of living in America, we skirted around the issue of marriage for the longest time. Later, he said that my vacillating made Elizabeth Bennett's response to Darcy pale by comparison. But I needed to be absolutely sure, inside myself, that I wasn't just using him as a ticket to America. Before we were married, we visited America — me for the first time — and drove up I-95 from Washington to New York. As we passed by Baltimore he said, "We could do worse," with no way of knowing that would be the place where we would end up.

He never relinquished his American citizenship and passport, but he did take out permanent residency in South Africa, and the irony, now, is that he is more homesick for Africa than I am. As much as I have thrown myself wholeheartedly into the process of becoming American, he still hankers after the things that drew him to South Africa in the first place, and rails against the things that continue to unsettle him about America. It's a tricky issue to try to reconcile; settling half way between the two

is not exactly a viable compromise. It's for his sake that I haven't relinquished my own South African citizenship and passport. It's the very least I could do since he has given me the gift of U.S. citizenship, and the right to hold an American passport.

::

A passport. It's just a document, after all, and a fairly small one at that. It doesn't account for all the crisscrossing migrations. It doesn't justify why an American would feel such an affinity for Africa, or an African would have such an ardent response to America. Why a woman would choose to retrace her ancestors' steps and bring the whole cycle full circle. Why her daughter would choose the country of her chance birth rather than the country of her upbringing. It's something that you come by through serendipity, birth, luck. And it means the world.

HIDDEN NERVE ::

A hidden nerve is what every writer is ultimately about.
:: André Aciman

I WAS BORN IN AFRICA. I am an African. But, because of the color of my skin, I am not truly African. Strictly speaking, because I was born in Africa and I am now an American citizen, I am an African American. But, because of the color of my skin, I am not truly African American. In the truest sense, I am neither African nor American.

Given the complicated, crisscrossing patterns of migration all over the world, every citizen of every country — with the possible exception of the inhabitants of the Horn of Africa, where humankind seems to have got its start — has had to piece together a patchwork of cultures and ethnicities to find out where they come from and where they belong. Finding out where we *come from* just takes some fairly diligent research. Finding out where we *belong*, and identifying with that place, can be far more complicated.

The year that my British ancestors arrived in South Africa 1815 pre-dates the arrival of most Americans' ancestors. After the first wave of colonial immigrants to America in the 1600s, I've discovered, a second, bigger wave started in 1820, and a third, still bigger wave began in the 1880s not to forget the monstrous African slave trade dating from the early colonial days. What is fascinating is that, despite the myriad strands of English, Irish, German, Italian, Polish, Scandinavian or African people, now overlaid with the more the recent influx of Hispanics and Asians, there is still a unique and overriding American identity. Someone who was given the quintessentially Polish name of Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is still understood to be a through-and-through American. Even a man who grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia, who had a Kenyan father and was given the unusual name of Barack Obama, is undeniably American; he sounds like an American and projects an American identity. The very fact of multi-nationality has become a defining American identity.

Think about Greece for a moment. For thousands and thousands of years, Greeks of one sort or another have been inhabiting that particular area of islands and mainland, and the Greeks who struggled against austerity measures in the 21st century were, in essence, the same Greeks who came up with the philosophy, drama, sculpture, and painting at the root of western civilization 4,000 years ago. Greece is synonymous with Greeks. The same applies to the Romans. We don't call them Romans anymore, and the Italians don't speak Latin any more than Greeks speak ancient Greek, but there is the same line going from the Romans through the Renaissance up

to the present day. The French belong to France, the Danes to Denmark, the Spaniards to Spain. The Germanic countries managed to maintain an identity through two world wars, and the Jewish people have regained a tentative but tenacious foothold in Israel. Russia is still populated by Russians. The Chinese dynasties have occupied China since the seventeenth century B.C.E. and the Japanese have been on the Nippon-koku Island almost as long. Think of a place and there is a nationality to match. And it's not just that the peoples of a country are named for it. It's that there is a distinguishable identity attached to them, which goes beyond something like, say, "the gallic shrug."

As for the African continent, the roughly fifty nations — from Nigeria to Namibia and beyond — each have their own identity and culture, but there is an easily recognizable overlay that defines Africans as a whole. Yet — and this is where it starts to get complicated for me — although I am a native of Africa, I don't fall neatly into that African definition.

When Nelson Mandela referred to the new South Africa as "the rainbow nation," he was describing a collage that began 200,000 years ago with the Khoisan, the small, light skinned aborigines of Southern Africa. They were gradually displaced by the ancestors of the Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho tribes migrating south from the Niger River delta around the 5th century. Into this mix came the Portuguese explorer, Bartholomew Diaz — South Africa's answer to Christopher Columbus — who was the first European to sail around the southern tip of Africa in 1488. Then, the Dutch East India Company sent Jan van Riebeeck to build the first settlement in the Cape in 1652. In

the 1680s, the French Huguenots, fleeing religious persecution, joined the Dutch settlers. The British, to the dismay of the Dutch and the French, began showing an interest in colonizing the Cape in the 1790s. By this time, there was a hotchpotch of ethnicities in South Africa — the aboriginal Khoisan; the Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho tribes; the Portuguese, Dutch, French and British settlers; and not forgetting the slaves brought in by the Dutch from Madagascar, Mauritius and present-day Indonesia.

What was going on in America was not all that different if you think about it. The British also colonized that region, and the influx of immigrants from a mix of countries gradually displaced the indigenous Native Americans. The difference was that the Americans overcame the natives more forcefully, and those populations dwindled, leaving the settlers in the majority over time. And *this* is at the heart of what makes Africa complicated for me. Although the balance is shifting in America, Caucasians, in the broadest sense, are still in the majority, followed by African Americans, Hispanics, Asians and a comparatively small group of Native Americans. That ethnic shift didn't take place in South Africa. Although the indigenous Khoi people were overrun, the black African tribes continued to outnumber the Caucasian settlers and their descendants. In this sense, if you think of South Africa, the identity to match it is black African.

Two distinct and opposing white African groups emerged in South Africa over time — the Dutch and the English. The British settlers were, by and large, more urbanized, and the Dutch more agrarian. In fact, the Dutch became known by the generic term of "boer" meaning "farmer."

In the context of these two distinct white tribes in South Africa, my family always defined itself as English. Even though the apartheid government removed us from the British Commonwealth in 1948, we still maintained the ways of England. It was more than just the language we spoke or the tradition of afternoon tea. We felt steeped in its culture and its ideals. It was our touchstone. A visit to England was a rite of passage. The words of Keats and Austen and Shakespeare were in our blood. Some of us made a point of speaking "the Queen's English."

This harkening back to the old country was particular to English speaking South Africans. The last white President of South Africa, F.W. de Klerk, whose mother tongue is Afrikaans and whose name comes from the French Huguenots' Le Clercq, didn't hanker after the Netherlands or France to the best of my knowledge. The Afrikaners were grounded in South Africa but, for us, Britain was the old country.

In this way, I had a double sense of not belonging. Not only did I not belong in South Africa because I wasn't an African in the accepted sense, but I didn't belong in South Africa because I had been brought up to feel British. (Never mind that when my sister eventually did go back to England, and settled within a few miles of the town that our ancestors had originally come from, she felt like a foreigner there!) I dreamed of England. One of the reasons I fell in love with Cape Town is because its mild, drizzly winters, its slow grace, its Victorian terrace houses, and its quaint shops selling beautiful linens and fine teas felt quite English to me. I was nostalgic for something that didn't belong to me and was, in any event, largely a figment of my imagination.

As it turned out, although I had always dreamed of Britain, America would be the country where I ended up. There is an inexplicably condescending attitude that the English South Africans have towards America. "I don't need some American woman coming here and telling me what to do" was my mother's exasperated outburst once, momentarily losing sight of the fact that her daughter was by then, technically at least, "some American woman." England had always been the first prize and anything else was an also-ran. Still, America it was for me, and I came to love it more than I could ever have imagined. But I don't belong.

One of the strangest aspects of picking yourself up in one country and putting yourself down in another is that you choose where you will live. It is not influenced by where you grew up, or where your father went to school. You just choose. When we came, my American husband and I, with no jobs and no home, we all but closed our eyes and put the pin down on the map. We couldn't even fall back on his roots because of his having grown up as a military brat and living all over the States. All I had to go on was a sense going back to my dreams of England, now overlaid with nostalgia for Cape Town that I would feel most at home somewhere in the northeast. I still think this is true. But still, I don't belong.

I no longer dream of England. In the same way that I used to hanker after some filtered down English tradition, believing that it would ground me in something familiar, my nostalgia is now based on what I remember about South Africa. Once, after a thunderstorm, my husband came in from picking up the newspaper and he said, "It's like a Highveld morning." I immediately

knew that he meant it was crisp and dewy with no humidity, the way it is on the high plateau around Johannesburg after a storm. We choose wines according to what we know of the vineyards of the Western Cape outside Cape Town. I have tried to grow *kappertjies* "little hats," the Afrikaans name for nasturtiums in my Baltimore garden. I have yet to come across anything that matches the natural beauty of Cape Town with its breathtaking combination of mountains and forest and sea, but I look for it everywhere. Over time I have stopped converting inches to centimeters, the dollar to the rand, and Fahrenheit to Celsius. But I still use South Africa as a point of reference in other ways even in ways as elusive as how one apparently makes friends differently, without the benefit of associations that are intertwined with growing up and shared experience.

When I go "home" to Africa now which is not really home because it is in America that I live in a house with my husband and my cat, and the grand piano, the tables, the pictures, the secretary desk, the *boekenhoud* server, and the countless other items we brought with us to make a home here I find myself referring back to America as I quickly work out in my head that this peach from a street vendor, which costs R5, converts to about 50 U.S. cents. I seldom consciously hear American accents anymore, but I notice the flattened lilt of South African accents when I go back.

When I drive along the Cape Town streets that I know like the proverbial back of my hand, it's not as if I never left, it's as if I am living a parallel life. As I leave the airport in the hired car making a point of keeping to the left side of the road and changing gears with my left hand I notice that the sprawling shanty town, Khayelitsha ("new home"

in Xhosa), is encroaching even further along the side of the N2 highway. Looking at the haphazard warren, cobbled together from a conglomeration of corrugated iron, wood, and whatever else that would do to give shelter, there is evidence that the A.N.C. government has built some new brick housing, but it clearly can't keep up. The Khayelitsha residents do have a spectacular view, though, the ridge of the Constantiaberg running up from the south to join the back of Devil's Peak.

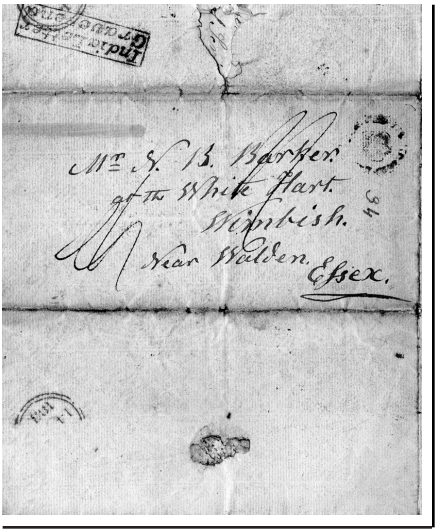
I follow the curve of the N2, and soon I am taking the exit over the Black River Parkway onto Settler's Way, driving partly by instinct and partly from memory. Here the road forks, and I feel the pull towards the direction of my alma mater, the University of Cape Town, near where my mother used to live. But I merge onto De Waal Drive, glancing up to my left to catch a glimpse of the Rhodes Memorial on the slopes of Devil's Peak. Putting it into the context of what I now know about American history, I think that Cecil John Rhodes's role in Southern African history during the late 1800s was as integral as George Washington's had been in the history of the earlier American colonies. I recall that Maryland Senator Paul Sarbanes, a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, told me once at a luncheon in Baltimore how he had retraced Rhodes's footsteps in the Cape.

I continue on to the hospital bend (a death trap before they reconfigured it in time for the Soccer World Cup) past Groote Schuur Hospital, where my sister worked on Chris Barnard's ward after he performed the world's first heart transplant there in 1967, and where my brother was treated for cancer many years later. As I round the bend, with Devil's Peak looming over me, I begin to feel the pulse of coming home. The city drops away

to my right, and I can look out over Table Bay. Dusk is coming in, but the day is still clear, and I can see as far as Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela spent eighteen of his twenty-seven years of incarceration. I dip and curve with the road, and then, just before the Roeland Street Bridge, I swing to the left onto Mill Street. And there it is Table Mountain, looking like a cutout against the clear sky, just the same as always, presiding over the deep sediment of history and memory.

It is all more familiar to me than anything in America. But it is no longer home. Whether I am living in the States and thinking back to Africa, or overlaying my American experience onto Africa, or remembering Africa as the place where I used to dream of Britain, I am constantly referring back to things to make sense of them, filtering them through a lens of familiarity, nostalgia, longing. I seem never to have had a sense of belonging in any one place to ground me in the present place and time.

If, as André Aciman says, a hidden nerve is what every writer is ultimately about, mine is no doubt about belonging and not belonging. I may disguise it as being about place or memory or history, but I write to try to make sense of the idea of belonging. I can't call myself an exile because I left my country voluntarily and could return at any time. I am not a tourist or a traveler. But I am not a true inhabitant either. In either place. I don't share an identity with either country. I feel irrelevant in Africa and an outsider in America. That is my hidden nerve.


Mrs S. B. Barker
at the White Hart
Wenbish
near Walden
Essex

Theopolis 3rd January, 1837
My dear brother,
Whether my dear Father and Mother are still living or not, I do not know as it is long since I received a line from any of you.
On the 20th of December last, my Dear partner was suddenly snatched from me . . . she was in the family way and we feared a miscarriage from the first.

:: George Barker

THESE WORDS ARE FROM A LETTER that Red George sent from the Theopolis mission station in the eastern cape of South Africa to Thomas Barker c/o the Old White Hart pub in Wimbish, England. The letter would have taken about six weeks to get there by ship. In all that time, Thomas lived unaware of his sister-in-law's death, and George would have to wait even longer to learn about the wellbeing of his family.

::

At first, February 9th 2011 was a Wednesday like any other as I abstractedly checked emails before getting down to work. It's always a rare pleasure to find a message from Hillary (our erratic correspondence would make us lose the thread if we weren't so close). Then I read her subject

heading, "Sad news about Stephen Watson," and quickly the message, "Oh darling, so sorry to send you this news. Oh No." My eyes skimmed over the words . . . *terrible news about Stephen . . . diagnosed last week . . . worst possible news . . . the cancer is incurable* . . . For a while, perhaps as long as a minute, I sat unresponsive and unmoving, looking out of the window at the slightly foggy, chilly day, until the shock found its mark. This was how I learned, sitting in my study on the other side of the world, that Stephen, beautiful man, gifted poet, lifelong friend, had months to live.

::

On an early spring evening in late April, I was luxuriating in a bath redolent of lavender when the phone rang. My husband brought it to me.

"Joobiliblottopopsillyday!"

Even it if weren't for the fact that nobody else in the world had this convoluted nickname for me, I would have recognized the beautifully enunciated, rich baritone of my friend, Peter, calling from London. As soon as his ebullient greeting was over, his voice modulated. *Had I heard the news?* he wanted to know. As I sat in a bath slowly turning cold, he told me that Jonathan, who was at drama school with us in Cape Town, had gone into the clinic to have a stent inserted into an artery in his heart, and they hadn't been able to stem the bleeding. They rushed him to the Milpark Hospital in Johannesburg, but couldn't save his life.

Jonathan and Stephen had shared a study at boarding school, and it was Jonathan who introduced me to Stephen. It was also Jonathan who introduced me to Hillary. She told me that

Stephen's latest book was by Jonathan's bedside when he died.

Jonathan was my first love.

::

There is a curious sense of suspended animation before going on air for a public radio fund-drive. The event itself is so fraught with adrenalin and energy that waiting for it to begin is like being poised on the brink. As I was filling the time before starting a 9 o' clock shift, I checked for instant messages on Skype, and found this one from my brother, Peter:

> *May 8, 8:27 AM.*
> *I have just got back from visiting Lee. There is no easy way of putting this, but I do have cancer of the bowel and liver. She has arranged for me to see a Dr Coetzee at the Cancer Clinic at Groote Schuur on Tuesday 14 at 9am. He will do further tests and scans and, with Lee and myself, decide on the best way forward.*

All the signs had been pointing to this, but to see the word *cancer* staring back at me from the computer screen made it lurch towards reality. I methodically closed down Skype, logged off from my computer, shut the lid. Then I walked to the Chief Engineer's office, sat down opposite him, and made myself say the words, "My brother has cancer." I had to say it out loud so that the words could be a buffer between learning the news and the mundane and immaterial task of going on the air to ask the listeners for money.

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When the phone rang at 11:18 p.m. on the eve of the Fourth of July, I hoped it was a wrong number. Then I heard my brother's voice. He didn't beat about the bush.

"Joan has died."

We have called our mother by her Christian name since we were adults.

For a long moment, while my brother waited quietly, everything hung in the balance. I couldn't move or think, much less speak. It was the moment I had thought about ever since I made the decision to emigrate. Every time I left Cape Town after a visit, I would turn on the street and look up to the corner window of my mother's apartment on the third floor, where she would be waiting for a final wave. I always imprinted it on my memory in case it was the last time.

Conservatively, it takes about 34 hours, door to door, to get from Baltimore to Cape Town. Ever since I left Africa, this had been at the back of my mind as I wondered: would I be able to be with my mother when she died? As it happens, I now don't remember the last goodbye.

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The Damoclesian sword of bad news can drop at any time and in any place. The question is how you choose to live your life around that certain knowledge. I could have stayed in Africa and been closer to hand for these events that made me feel so very far away, but I doubt that I could have done anything to change the events themselves. Peter was in Cape Town but he wasn't with our mother when she died.

As with anything, you have to weigh up the risk. You can take a chance and reach out for a

full life of possibility, or you can make the very valid choice to live a more moderate life out of respect for fear of the unknown. Either way, it's a compromise. My compromise has been to seize the chance of an enriching life in another country, and to try to share that life, as best I can, with the intimates I have left behind.

Unlike George Barker and his family back in England, I am lucky not to have to rely only on letters that take six weeks to get there by mail ship. I had time to write everything in my heart to Stephen, and he told me it was better than a love letter when I spoke with him on the phone that last time before he died. I saved up every detail, big and small, to share with my mother by email and phone, and her deep, mellifluous voice was firm and strong when I called her on the Sunday before she died. I don't know for certain, but I'm fairly confident hopeful that she received my last email on the morning of her death. In the months after our mother died, at odd hours during the day and night because of the time difference, I Skyped and emailed and instant messaged with Peter, supporting him in his decision not to have chemotherapy, hearing the daily progress of the radio play he was writing, sympathizing with his thwarted plans to make one last trip to England and America, sharing in the daily shifts of cortisone and morphine doses, making plans to go to Cape Town to help him sort through his life's work of writings and theatre productions so that they could be archived.

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On November 9th, six months and one day after Peter's diagnosis, I was ready to leave for

Cape Town. He had been admitted to St. Luke's Hospice for observation, and I was on my way to take him back to his home and care for him there. At 6 a.m., I was woken by the phone.

"Oh no!" I knew instantly it was about Peter.

My niece was with him at the hospice and she suggested that I should get onto Skype. For sixteen minutes, without being able to see him, I talked to my brother and heard his vocal but nonverbal responses. *He is my soul mate, we have been talking deeply all our lives, I know he can hear me.* When the charger lost power in Cape Town, I was in the dark for half an hour, not knowing.

When we could connect again, I asked my niece to make it a video call. The midday light was falling across his bed. He looked tranquil, but he drew his breath in shallow gasps, with such an interval of time between each breath, that I kept thinking I had lost him. I talked for twenty-six minutes, unfiltered, pouring my thoughts into his unconscious mind. Then the charger lost power again.

At 9:24 a.m. my niece called back. She was holding his hand. At 4:22 p.m. in Cape Town, Peter had gently closed his lips together, and he was gone. It was five and a half hours before I was due to leave for the airport to go to him.

FOR SARAH BARKER ::

A ship in port is safe, but that is not what ships are for.
Sail out to sea and do new things.
:: Rear Admiral Dr. Grace Hopper

WHEN YOUR great-great-great-great-granddaughter died, I was given two framed portraits she kept on a bookshelf by her front door. The woman in the portrait is you, with your lovely face framed by wavy, dark hair and a Regency bonnet. Your dress and shawl look simple and muted, appropriate for a Presbyterian minister's wife.

The man in the portrait is your husband, George. We have come to know him as "Red George" because of the red tint to his hair and his notoriously quick temper. I have also closely studied an old black and white photograph of George. He became quite famous, and his photograph is on display in a glass case in the Albany Museum in Grahamstown. I don't know the date of the photograph but if the first permanent image was produced in 1826, it would still have been a very new technique at the time that this picture was taken, and the image is indistinct and blurry. Even so, I could make out

a square chinned man with deep-set eyes and a Roman nose. In other words, he looked like his great-great-great-great-granddaughter my mother.

My cousin, who doesn't look anything like the rest of us, looks just like you, with wide spaced cornflower blue eyes, a clear complexion and a full, curvaceous mouth. A sweet temperedness emanates from her, as it does from you, and it makes me wonder how you dealt with George's irascibility.

In 1815, when you and George set sail from England aboard the Alfred just after your marriage, Jane Austen was publishing *Emma*, and Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Mary Wollstonecraft were in the thrall of Romanticism. Beethoven was writing his last cello sonatas and Schubert his early symphonies. The Duke of Wellington defeated Napoleon Bonaparte that year, finally ending the era of the Napoleonic Wars. America's second war of independence against the British was also coming to a close, and *The Star Spangled Banner* was written just the year before.

Looking at your dates, I have worked out that George was twenty-six when he married you, and you were a year younger. I can only think you must have been very much in love with him if you were prepared to leave your home and country, knowing that you would never see your family again. Before I left my own country, one hundred and eighty two years after you left yours, I spent many hours teaching your great-great-great-great-granddaughter how to use email so that we wouldn't have to rely on the two-week turn-around of letters to keep in touch. We sat side by side, my mother and I, at my brother's computer

in the week before I emigrated, as she strained towards the screen, trying to overcome her fear of technology. I went over the bewildering mass of new information again and again, breaking it down into bite-sized pieces, so it would make sense to her artistically inclined mind. It worked. We were in constant contact via email. We also had the luxury of the telephone whereas, for you, the only option would have been the letters that took six weeks to arrive by ship.

I like to believe that George wanted you to accompany him on his missionary work in South Africa because he loved you too, and not only because he needed a partner. When I read *Jane Eyre*, set in the era after yours, and St. John Rivers proposed to Jane in such a loveless way simply because he wanted a missionary companion, it troubled me all the more because it made me think of you.

The diaries that George kept for the London Missionary Society are housed in the Cory Library at Rhodes University in Grahamstown now, and one day I hope to go and pore over them. Meanwhile, I have been able to study copies in the Special Collections reading room at the National Library in Cape Town South Africa's answer to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. As I sat down at the long, gleaming wooden table, I was intensely aware that it was one of those significant moments, and I wanted to savor every detail. The winter light filtered through the high windows of the quiet reading room, and I took my time as I laid out my pen and pencil, and opened my moleskin notebook to the first page. I pulled towards me the flat cardboard box that had been laid out on the table with my name on it, and the date. Inside were fifteen folders, all bound

together with a white, cloth tape. I carefully undid the tape and opened up the first folder, marked MSB 57, 1 (1) MSB for Manuscript Barker. I was holding in my hands a Photostatted copy of my great-great-great-great-great grandfather's diaries. Not only that, also some of the original letters he had written in sepia ink with his neat, sloping hand letters that he had touched and folded.

Judging by some of the excerpts in the diaries, George clearly believed that a woman should know her place. That belief wouldn't only have come from his Calvinistic upbringing and his work as a Presbyterian congregational minister, but also from the societal norms of your time. Four years before you left England, Jane Austen had written poignantly in *Sense and Sensibility* about women not being allowed to own property or be their own mistresses.

Still, the true-life narrative that you shared with George is like an adventure story. The year you set sail for Africa was the year of the final war against the Barbary pirates of North Africa. On December 15th, in his 1815 State of the Union message to the United States Congress, President James Madison declared that the Barbary wars were finally over. That wasn't in time for you, though. "All we in consternation," wrote George, as he described how the alarm was given at 1 a.m. on March 20th that a strange ship was bearing down on you. With surprising calmness, George wrote how you, he and another of the missionaries' wives stood on the Poop as the other ship turned sideways to your stern and fired a broadside, pragmatically adding, "We were so far as to be perfectly out of danger and saw the balls fall into the water about half-way from her to us." However matter-of-fact George may have

sounded, and even though he went on to explain how the Alfred outstripped the pirate ship, I can only imagine that must have been a shocking beginning to the voyage for you, knowing that you would be vulnerable at sea for six long weeks.

The first time I ever saw Cape Town, I approached it from land. I drove with my family through Sir Lowry's Pass over the Hottentots-Holland Mountains, and Table Mountain came into view obliquely at first, then gradually in all its monumental splendor. I knew what to expect, having seen pictures before, but for you there were probably many false land sightings before the top of Table Mountain presented itself to your view on the afternoon of Saturday, May 20th. Late autumn in May is a beautiful time of year in the Cape, unless there are some early winter squalls. I like to believe that you were rewarded by two perfect days as you waited out at sea about 20 miles from Cape Town before the Alfred could come into anchor. George writes simply, "The scenery was beautiful," and so it must have been from your vantage point, with Table Mountain straight ahead, Devil's Peak to your left, and Lion's Head, sloping through the saddle to the rump of Signal Hill, on the right.

There is a gap of more than a month in George's diary during June, which makes me think that you were too enthralled with Cape Town to have time for anything else. But, that was not the end of the journey for you, of course. When you left your new friends in Cape Town on July 12th and began the trek to the Eastern Cape with your five wagons, you took the same route that I did that first time, in reverse, over the Hottentots-Holland Mountains. You will have known it as the Hottentots Holland Kloof Pass

the only way over the mountains, dating back to the 1660s. By the time you made your crossing, over 4,000 ox wagons labored over this pass every year to get to the interior. George wrote, "the road is very bad, but by the help of God we were all safe over by 11 a.m." In fact, the road was so bad that about a fifth of the wagons that tried to make it across the pass were damaged, and the deep ruts left behind were declared a national monument in the middle of the 20th century.

In many ways, it must have seemed like a truly thrilling adventure, starting a new life, preparing to carry out your missionary work amongst the natives of Southern Africa. But I can't help wondering about the reality of it — that long journey by ox-wagon from Cape Town to the mission station at Bethelsdorp, beginning in the height of winter and lasting for two full months. George's diary entry on September 14th reads, "Reached longed-for Bethelsdorp about half-past five o' clock in the evening." By September, you would already have been seven months pregnant with Sarah, named for you. If you and George were married on February 4th and Sarah was born on November 18th, that would have been exactly nine and a half months after your marriage. So, your first child was conceived in England, and born at the mission station in Bethelsdorp — under what conditions, I wonder.

Missionary zeal probably goes a long way to ameliorate feelings of strangeness and disorientation, but the conditions in Africa must have been diametrically opposed to your genteel upbringing in Shropshire. You had most likely never seen a person of color before you got to the Cape, and I'm curious about your response to the aboriginal Khoikhoi peoples when you first

encountered them. You would have known them as "Hottentots" at the time, although we have come to regard that as a derogatory term.

The problems associated with colonialism were only too evident in America in the time leading up to your arrival in Africa. The American settlers had railed against the political, economic and ideological control that the sovereign nation was trying to exert from across the Atlantic Ocean. The deeper, less tangible effects of colonialism didn't become as apparent until about a century later. With hindsight, we can see clearly now how negatively it impacted the native peoples in America, in India, in Africa to have other civilizations come in and undermine their traditional beliefs and cultures by proselytizing, at best, and all but obliterating them, at worst.

It is clear from his diaries that George and his fellow missionaries and, by extension, their wives believed it was a good calling. Evidently, the conditions for the Khoi were very bad by the time you got to Africa. Their social organization had been damaged and, over time, almost destroyed by European colonial expansion and land seizure, and the mission stations that had been started in the Western Cape as long ago as eighty years before you and George arrived in the Eastern Cape had the best intentions to try to redress that. The story of Red George's vehement confrontation with the governor, Lord Charles Somerset, about the social injustices he could see against the indigenous people the early seeds of apartheid, in other words has been passed down from generation to generation in our family. I'm glad of his principles, even though he clearly didn't win the argument. Still, missionary work, by its evangelical nature, is also an imposition

of a set of beliefs that are not necessarily in the best interests of the people being imposed upon.

The paradox is that at the same time that George and his fellow missionaries were trying to assimilate the Khoi into their religious way of life, you were trying to adapt to their country. Your great-great-great-great-granddaughter was an artist, and many of her early paintings were of the Eastern Cape around Grahamstown, where she grew up, got her education, met and married my father and gave birth to their first child. The scenes are of the rolling hills *koppies* dotted with tall, vibrantly bright orange aloes leaning at different, rakish angles, and of the round, thatched Xhosa huts built out of mud. This is the landscape you must have traveled though by ox-cart to the Bethelsdorp Mission Station, and then later to Theopolis on the Kasouga River when George established his own mission station there. Something else that you saw in abundance, according to George's diaries, were the quagga, which I discovered were named by the Khoi for the sound they made. I have never seen quagga because they became extinct in the wild in the 1870s, and the last captive quagga died in Europe in the 1880s. In pictures they look striking half zebra, half horse with their striped hides fading gradually from head to rump.

That is some of the fascinating side of your new, strange country, but then there is the other side of danger and hardship. It seems it was by sheer chance that you and George were away in Bethelsdorp in 1819 during the 5th Frontier War, when the Xhosas swarmed over the Fish River and attacked Theopolis, killing Brother Joseph Williams, amongst so many others. That could have been you! And how must you have felt

watching George set off to ride back frantically to Theopolis to rescue Joseph's widow and their children?

I remember some fierce rainstorms in the Eastern Cape when we visited each year to see my parents' families, but never a flood that was strong enough to wash away an entire settlement. How heartbreaking for you and George to watch the devastating 1823 floods that literally washed away the Theopolis mission station you had all worked so hard to establish! You must have been pregnant with John at the time, and goodness knows how you managed to find shelter for yourself and four small children. Then came the painstaking rebuilding from scratch, trying to make it sturdier and more secure with lime and stone that had to be quarried, timber and thatch that had to be cut from the surrounding bush, and nails fashioned by George — everything having to be done by hand; there was no going out to a nearby shop to pick up supplies.

I'm sure George's young apprenticeship at The Old Forge in Wimbish came in very handy. There was evidently a lot of trial and error, but I can tell from his diaries that he loved tinkering around in his smithy, and was competent in overseeing the setting up of the mission station — twice — hand-building everything, from the first primitive church and school-room, to the store-room and dwelling house. His writings show that he led a full and fulfilling life — running the mission station, and constantly traveling on foot, horseback, or by ox-wagon to visit other rural areas where churches and schools were established, and to attend to his duties as an administrator, preacher, builder, teacher, and even, sometimes, doctor. Despite his quick temper and,

reading between the lines, his tendency not to suffer fools gladly, he was clearly respected and liked. My mother was always very proud of the fact that her ancestors arrived in Africa before the big influx of 1820 Settlers that were sent by the British to form a colony in the Eastern Cape. George, well established by then, describes riding down to Algoa Bay again and again to greet the 21 ships bringing the 4,500 settlers.

So, George, for all his irascibility, was fulfilled. But what about you, I wonder? I hope I'm wrong to feel this way, but my heart aches for you. You were living so very far away from home, and it seems that Beth Williams was your only close friend. You had an exacting husband, and bore him one child after another Sarah in 1815, Elizabeth in 1816, Ann in 1818, Edward in 1821, John in 1824, Jane in 1825, Marianne in 1827, George in 1830, Harriet in 1831, and that's not counting the three who died in infancy. How difficult, then, to have to send your children off to school at the Salem Academy twenty miles away once they were old enough.

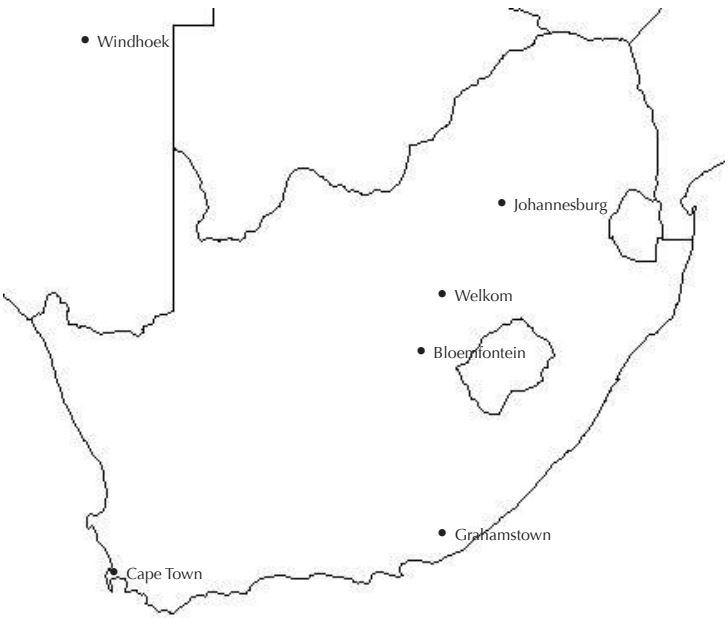
I think of my own move from one country to another. I had the luxury of visiting it beforehand so that I knew what to expect. The American culture and way of life was familiar to South Africans anyway from books, films and television, and I had a supportive, native-born husband to guide me through the process, forming a bridge from one life to the next. You had none of that.

I also think, though, about that indefinable streak of restlessness that will urge some people to reach beyond their comfortable lives, and search for something more. A part of me wishes that you had just stayed put in England and never embarked on your adventure in Africa. I know that your great-great-great-great-granddaughter

would certainly have had it that way. It is likely she would then have lived in England, and I could have been born there, and not have had to go through the compelling drive to leave Africa one hundred and eighty two years after you settled there. But only a part of me wishes that. There is no doubt that my life would have been less rich without the African chapter — and perhaps I might still have been striving towards the next thing and the next, as I continue to do now.

I wonder how it ends, though. When you lay dying in Theopolis during childbirth in that hot summer of 1836 at the age of 46, were you thinking of England and your family there, or was your heart in Africa? Your youngest child was only five, and perhaps you worried about what would become of your children. Well, your daughters Sarah, Elizabeth, Ann, Jane, Marianne, and Harriet — all married and had children of their own, continuing the line you started in Africa. Edward and George fought in the frontier wars, married and had children too. John, who never married, became a farmer. They were all grounded in the country where you gave birth to them. Did the fact that you made a family there make you feel grounded in Africa too?

As I try to understand my own urgency to reach and stretch for something more, I wonder what made you leave your familiar, safe, predictable life in England for something that was so completely unknown and foreign. Perhaps I have inherited your wanderlust. Maybe it is you who has passed down to me that restless striving. And when I die, what country will I think of as my own?



MAP OF SOUTHERN AFRICA ::

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::americas::new::world::notes::press