

# PATTI MILLER

## A BLACK HEART

It's strange how we sometimes knowingly say the thing that will betray us. It's as if we want someone to see at last our shabby heart. One day we reveal it, just for a moment we are mortified, a rare enough pleasure, and then we put back on our intelligent and compassionate clothes and continue on our way.

It happened the day Rosina came over. Rosina is South African — if she lived there she would be called a Coloured. I haven't known her very long so we still talk a lot about our childhoods. I've also been writing about my childhood so I like to go over the details with anyone who will listen. Sometimes I think no-one would be interested anyway — mine isn't a dramatic or unusual background. Rosina, being South African, has experienced much more than most people I know. She was from a professional family so she wasn't as badly off materially as the majority of Coloureds or Blacks, but she tried to let me see how material denial was only a shadow of the real denial. Even twenty years after leaving there she is still tensed, waiting for the look that doesn't see her, the gaze that denies her human existence.

This day she started talking about her brother Aloysha. She hadn't told me much about him before. First though, she mentioned the heart transplant programme in South Africa — I thought it was to locate the time for me.

'Remember about fifteen or twenty years ago when they did the first heart transplants — it was in South Africa?'

'Yes,' I said, 'Christian Barnard, he was in the news all the time for a while.'

'Even more so in Capetown. He was at Capetown hospital. We were very proud of him. We were proud he was South African. It was different then. Anyway, at the time Aloysha was about seventeen. He was very bright, and good-looking too, but he didn't care about anything. He jeered at everything. He used to wag school all the time. It made Dad angry because he was a teacher and he believed in education — in bettering yourself.

Dad hit him once. He was usually even-tempered and in our family his authority wasn't questioned. At least Mum and I always accepted it. He didn't know how to handle Aloysha's jeering, and one night he lost his temper and started hitting him around the head. Aloysha walked out and didn't come back for two days.



After that Dad let Aloysha get away with more than he should have. He used to let him borrow the car at night . . . .

Anyway, one Saturday night Aloysha had taken the car to go to a dance. It was a church social in our suburb and he was meant to be home by midnight, so when he wasn't home at one Mum was agitated. Dad said to go to bed, that Aloysha would be sneaking in later on. In the morning Mum shook me awake. Aloysha wasn't home.

She asked if he'd said anything to me, but he didn't really tell me much more than he told them. I suggested calling in on a few of his friends.

Dad stood in the doorway looking tired. He reminded us that Aloysha had the car, and besides, it was Sunday morning and everyone would be on their way to Church. If we hurried we could ask around before they went in for Mass.

We found a few of his friends hanging about the side-door watching the girls go in like they always did, but none of them had seen Aloysha after the dance. When they realized he still wasn't home one boy said he had seen Aloysha leave the hall with Michael D., one of their group of friends, around eleven.

We went into Mass but I don't think any of us could concentrate. After Mass we didn't know what to do. There didn't seem to be anything we could do except go to the police, and we knew they wouldn't be too concerned about a Coloured boy missing overnight. It was mid-morning. We had just decided to go home and see if Aloysha was there when Michael appeared around the side of the church. His clothes were dirty and his face bruised down one side.

Before we could speak he asked if we'd seen Aloysha. When we said we hadn't he opened his mouth to speak but he started to sob without saying anything. Poor Mum, she nearly collapsed, but she put her arm around him and asked him what had happened. Dad seemed helpless for the moment.

Michael told us he and Aloysha had left the dance and gone driving in Town. Blacks and Coloureds were forbidden in Town at night. They had driven fast and yelled out the windows and laughed at the angry faces of the Whites in the street. Then they had gone for a swim at a Whites Only beach in the darkness.

They were driving back through a White suburb at about five in the morning — it was still dark — and they had stopped because there were two bikes sprawled on the road. They belonged to African Milk Boys. They were men but they were called Boys, even by us.' Rosina stopped and smiled strangely. I didn't know what to do so I smiled too, not sure of what I was indicating.

'The Milk Boys carried money on their rounds. It wasn't much but it was all they earned so they carried metal bars as well. Michael said they got out of the car to move the bikes, and maybe that was all they intended. I don't know. I know they'd both stolen a few things, just for the thrill, just kids daring each other. In any case the Milk Boys were just coming out of a front gate and didn't have two thoughts about what the Coloured boys were doing. They laid into them with their iron bars. Michael and Aloysha ran but Aloysha fell and Michael said he didn't realize until he reached the end of the street and he looked around and saw they were beating Aloysha as he lay on the ground.

Michael stopped and started sobbing that he was too scared, he was too scared, he was too scared. Over and over. It was terrible. Mum and Dad couldn't look at each other. I just stood there. We all felt sorry for him. We were all scared. We'd always been scared.

Dad put his hand on Michael's shoulder and asked him if anything else had happened. Michael said he had rung an ambulance and had waited out of sight until the ambulance came at about seven o'clock. There weren't enough Coloured ambulances to go around — injured people often had to wait. And then he had walked all the way back to our suburb and waited for us to come out of Mass.

Dad asked him which hospital he'd rung for the ambulance. He was taking control of the situation. Michael stopped crying and straightened up. He said it was the main hospital, Capetown hospital.

Michael went home and we caught a bus to the hospital. It took a long half hour to get there. As we arrived I could see Dad losing the calm authority he'd had with Michael. It was always the same. The White control of everything outside his home seemed to destroy him. The fear and the powerlessness could be avoided at home, but here it seemed printed on his face. It didn't affect Mum and me so much — we were used to accepting his authority, but Dad trembled. Maybe it was rage, but I always thought it was fear and I hated it. I hated Dad being scared.

We passed the Whites Only doors and entered the Coloured section of the hospital. There all the staff as well as the patients were coloured but the Whites still had the final say. Dad asked for Aloysha. The nurse checked her registration book and then shook her head. Dad said he must be there, that we knew he was. The nurse replied that he couldn't be in the hospital without there being a record of him. Dad became angry and said they could have made a mistake and that he was going to look around the hospital himself until he found his son. The nurse told him to sit down and not disturb everyone, but then she must have felt sorry for him because she offered to ring other hospitals to try to find Aloysha.

Suddenly my father sat down and held his head in his hands. He looked so despairing that in that moment I felt everything coming

undone. Our well-ordered life seemed a pretense, the whole life of South Africa a horrible facade that no-one else believed anyway. It must have been then that I knew I'd leave. I knew it couldn't be my home anymore.

Dad continued to sit, his head bowed. A coloured doctor who had been talking to someone else in the waiting-room came up to him and touched him on the shoulder and motioned that he wanted to speak to us out in the hall. He led us along the corridor a short way and then turned to us. He appeared to be frightened. He kept looking around as if he didn't want anyone to see him talking to us.

He said he thought Aloysha may be in the hospital. There was a boy on a trolley near the operating theatres — perhaps it was him. Mum looked at him and he quickly said the boy was alive. He told us to follow him a distance behind. He was looking more and more anxious.

We hurried after him until we saw a trolley in a corridor with someone lying on it. The figure was unconscious, the head bruised and bloody. It looked as if one side of the skull was crushed. It was Aloysha. Mum let out a moan. I clutched at his hand and stared at the sheet covering his body — his head was too horrible to look at. Mum kept saying, 'Oh my poor boy, oh my poor boy.'

The doctor had turned to hurry away but Dad grabbed him by the arm. Why wasn't Aloysha being operated on? Why was he out in the corridor? The doctor tried to pull away but Dad wouldn't let him go. The doctor tried to speak several times and stopped and looked away. Finally, in a sort of cry he said, They, he meant the white doctors, had ordered him to leave Aloysha to die because They wanted his heart.'

Years later in my kitchen I was implicated. And envious. 'How could they possibly think they could get away with it?' My voice wobbled, high and childish. I didn't have any tragedies when I was young.

'They thought no-one knew he was there. It's happened before. And since.' Her voice encompassed bitterest injustice without a waver.

I tried one more time before I betrayed myself. 'So they didn't mind using a Black or Coloured heart?' I said. Rosina didn't answer. I was angry. She thinks she owns suffering. I could take it from her and use it. There was nothing to say. I kept thinking of something I knew would give me away. I don't know why I couldn't stop myself.

'It would make a great story.' I said. My smooth white skin hardly reddened.