Claire Furniss

Heimwee

Mom spends her last days in her room full of sky. High blue walls frame the windows that overlook the Indian Ocean. At this southerly juncture, the African continent digs a calloused heel into bleached sand. From the mixing bowl of the bay, salty pulses spill into this room crusting the windows with a permanent sticky rash. Above my parents' bed, which faces the bay window that fronts onto the sea, a signed print of Sir Russell Flint's fleshy nudes cavort in the silent waves, their pink curves now bleached blue after years of being caressed by sun-stroking days. On the desk in front of the window, is the old computer we brought for Dad one Christmas from our new home in New Zealand a decade ago. Our reluctant three small children once shared its leaden anatomy among our five suitcases. They would rather have carried their own treasures for a summer holiday to their homeland. The computer had been received with a mixture of pleasure and polite panic. My parents had smiled aghast at the modern artefact. But if it was not for this piece of modernity, my Dad and I may have lost each other across the watery divide that separated our continents: Antipodean and African.

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"Daddy, why are we outside in our pyjamas in the middle of the night?"

It was 11.05pm on 29 September 1969, and within rumbling milliseconds of the 6.5 earthquake that reduced the quivering rural hamlet of Tulbagh to randomly tossed piles of rubble. Aged nine, I found myself standing between my mother and father in the front garden of our Cape Town home, each parent holding one of my two younger brothers. Dad's consoling response belied the paternal concern he must have felt spinning my young imagination into orbit as he replied,

"To see the stars, my girl."

My father and I always had space between us: physically and emotionally. It was my mother who filled that space with her hands and caresses. Cajoling and caring, cuddling and kissing, there were no need for my Dad to speak. She did it for him.

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I was born in early 1960 to middle class South African parents perfectly situated on the 'right' white side of the apartheid colour fence. From birth, this position guaranteed me the 'right' to an excellent education and all the attendant privileges that were denied to the 'non-whites' who comprised the majority of our population. Immediate entrée to a good government school for twelve years with easy access to tertiary institutions and healthcare, was ensured by virtue of my fair skin colour. A succession of white governments in South Africa and the fact that the black majority could not vote ensured that these rules remained unchallenged. Growing up in a colour-coded society was normal. I had nothing to compare it with. We lived in a virtual zip lock bag which the outside media world was unable to permeate. Television only arrived in South Africa in 1972. Programs were rigidly 'sanitised' before being aired. TV was received with a thrill by most of us who had until then only experienced the 'bioscope' as the ultimate weekend treat. To be able to bring a screen, albeit a very much smaller one into a home, was a major event. I remember scrambling over the garden wall on Friday nights to watch "The World at War" on our neighbour's brand new television set before Dad bought ours. It was hardly riveting screen fodder for a teenager. The black and white images seems appropriate, now, for the monochromatic society we were living in. Perhaps the lure over the fence for me was not so much the content of the televised program but the sudden realisation that we had this visible connection with the greater world. Sir Laurence Olivier's dulcet tones smoothly narrating the horrors of WWII, rang with an irony considering the political sentiments simmering under the taut tensions of South African society then.

Growing up in the cocoon of middle class Cape Town in the 60s and 70s, was like living in a Legoland with the jungle poised on the periphery. Suburban life for us was tame, perhaps even subdued, under the apartheid banner. Yes, there were wild things lurking out there: lions in game parks where we holidayed; a snarling dog over the neighbour's fence; a spat with an irritating brother....Meanwhile the infamous Group Areas Act had spawned a simmering mass of indigenous humanity living on distant fringes of the city in designated locations, in squalid shanty towns and in drought-stricken 'bantustans' remotely perched on the arid hinterland. In my young mind, the 'Whites Only' signs on the railway benches at the railway station, a mere block from our home, were as innocuous as the three shades of ice-cream on billboards advertising *Walls Neopolitan*. Our 'White Only' benches were in proximity to the ticket office as compared to the 'Non White' benches some distance away. Living in a whites only world **was** our world, a neatly ordered monochromatic chessboard. We all knew our positions. The fact that our coloured maid and African gardener had their own tin mug, plate and cutlery tucked unobtrusively under the sink apart from 'Baas' and 'Madams' unchipped plates, was just how things were arranged. Apartheid spoke stridently when it came to separating everything from benches, bathrooms, crockery, the suburbs we lived in, to marrying illegally across the colour divide.

When I was old enough and curious enough to perceive that there was a difference between the signage that demarcated benches on train platforms, partitioned doctor's waiting rooms,

entire cinemas and schools into 'white' and 'non-white' zones, I asked my father: "Why?"

"Oh, I will explain when you are older. It's complicated."

His answer failed to satisfy me. Perhaps he was being as honest as a father could be during a time when the political machinery had begun to snag thinking citizens like him in its evil wake.

We grew up with a live in 'maid' as did so many in our diaspora. A maid was the appropriate servile accoutrement that enabled domestic mechanisms to tick over so that fathers could pursue professions and mothers could extend themselves in tennis mornings, painting classes or perform 'good works' to appease the burden of their conscience as a politically advantaged class. There was always a pair of unquestioning dark hands in the kitchen to peel the vegetables, bring in the washing, and supervise the children of employers. I don't recall surnames to our domestic staff. For us as children, they only ever had first names, much like our various pets. Saturdays were half days for most maids and once lunch had been served, Iris or Joyce or whoever was the current reliable maid, went off duty and was only required to report for work again on Monday morning. Unless, of course, a Saturday night dinner party, meant additional help in the kitchen, *just a favour for the madam and I'm sure you don't mind.*

Iris, our maid during most of my adolescent years, had a room attached to the back of our house, separated from my purple bedroom by my father's bathroom. The tight walls admitted a single bed, a cupboard and an upright chair loaned to her by 'the Madam'. Her only window opened onto the dog's kennel in the small courtyard where our washing danced flippantly in the Cape South Easter.

I can still hear the surreptitious sigh of the back door closing in the fecund night air, air thick with possibility, announcing to my curious adolescent ears the arrival of Iris's Malay boyfriend, a regular nocturnal visitor for a short time. My imagination drew pictures to all these sounds with surprising accuracy as I lay in my virginal single bed, an imaginative audience of one. As the months pushed forward and Iris's belly curved her into a single swollen bracket, a sober connection between her night visitor and her pregnant status delivered a dilemma for my parents. However much I lurked at my parent's bedroom door, there was no discussion to satisfy my eavesdropping. After a few months, there was a sudden unexplained absence of Iris from our home for a couple of days. During this time, my mother had to embrace the diverse roles of mother and maid. When Iris returned to work 2 days later, I noticed it was with a noticeable absence of her former ripe curvature and the presence of something else. An emptiness not understood by me then. Iris slotted straight back into her domestic routine but this was punctuated with stolen sniffs and a demeanour that leaked a loss not understood by a fourteen year old. I later surmised that her bastard baby was given up for adoption, a decision that probably led Iris to give birth to another illegitimate child a few years later, which she then kept. Single mothers and illegitimacy were messy in our generation. They left a blot on the pruned landscape of our lives. The shaming evidence was always discreetly

removed and hidden. Symptomatic of Calvinistic morals of our era was the Magdalene Home, an imposing white edifice tucked behind leafy camouflage a block away from our home. Tucked away inside this place were the unfortunate white girls who had fallen into trouble and got themselves pregnant. On my afternoon walk home from school, I would strain my eyes through the high gate, chameleon style, to spy on these poor girls and see what shame really looked like, whether it had a colour or a sound. I was always disappointed because they could just as easily have been any of the girls at my government high school except that they did not wear uniform.

Our gardener, John, made a weekly pilgrimage to mow our lawns, to cut the disobedient limbs of a massive myrtle hedge by hand and to keep our badly behaved herbaceous borders in check. His long Saturdays were typical of so many of his ilk. His journey to our back door (never the front) demanded that he travel on a chain of train and bus links to this job and no doubt to the many others that filled his menial week and emptied his energies.

These people were the necessary 'blackground' who maintained that respectable facade of order in our neatly circumscribed lives. Sundays were ideal to share social time with friends around the swimming pool in our back garden. After John's ministrations the previous day, the garden was a neatly coloured-in drawing, crayonned herbaceous borders obediently inside the lines with mown grass precisely lined up on the other side. The smoke from Sunday *braais* is still a pungent memory up through the years, the spitting oiliness from sausage hitting the singeing coals of the manuka wood below as my father *'braaied'* our chops and *boerewors*.

Dad was a solid, silent constant in our young lives. He was the presence in the photograph that was always reliably in position, the solemn suited figure who would leave home early after his cooked breakfast and return home twelve weary hours later to retreat behind the newspaper, orthopaedic journal or the 8pm television news. His absence and presence were easily confused; like having the radio switched on but the volume muffled. His silent Germanic presence may be attributed to the commingling of stolid Afrikaner genetics and the anoxic stresses of growing up in the Depression. Given these genes and his generation, my father unquestionably honoured and obeyed his own father's wishes. This was to follow a profession that would provide economic ballast forever, however long this was. It was while dutifully following this careful path that my father's vector collided spectacularly with my mother's. This ignited far more than eventual marriage. It was to trigger seismic aftershocks that rumbled down the years thereafter.

Besides the legislated colour barriers in South Africa, there were also deeply entrenched cultural divisions between English and Afrikaner. These fissures that ran relentlessly through the unforgiving fabric of history into the present, were a sad legacy of the Anglo-Boer war. My mother was the first born of four children to parents who had emigrated from the bog of Scotland and mud of Bristol to the red African soil, a transition sufficient to send frissons through any northerly souls. My grandparents were hardy farming folk who lived

in a predominantly English-speaking community in the then Eastern Transvaal. Here, anti-Afrikaner sentiments were collectively fuelled by local colonists breathing similar sympathies. My maternal grandfather aimed his antipathies towards my father, a Boer, and therefore a convenient symbol of the hated Afrikaner making Dad an illogical target. Grandpa Duncan's vitriol threatened to destroy my grandparent's marriage. In defiance of her father who refused to attend her wedding and give away his first born, my mother married my father, and my parents embarked on a marriage born of tension and seasoned with bigotry. There were tell tale scabs didn't escape my acute childhood vision even though it wasn't until much later that I was officially told of their jagged journey.

I marvel at the forces that connected my parents and jolted them forwards through forty-seven years sharing time and space. My father's emotional restraint met headlong with my mother's glorious titian exuberance that left an aura long after she had left a room. Dad was the backdrop against which my mother painted vivid brush strokes emboldening us to step out into our lives and embrace the space that she stirred merely by being there. Even now peering down the years, I see my mother creating the patterns to our lives. My father is always *just* beyond my vision. His profession exerted a demanding clinical calling upon him. Over the years he allowed Mom to fill the parental lacunae with her effortless quickstep. Our lives proceeded pleasantly along a join-the-dot trajectory. We grew up in a stable home where one parent was centre stage and the other remained in hover mode in the wings. Dinner parties were a regular feature in our home, and a perfect social habitat for my mother who flitted from guest to conversation, deftly charming all who sat at their table. On these occasions, usually Saturday evenings, my father would rise to the occasion and surprise me as I sat in the hallway eager for an aural morsel from the table. Whether it was the catalyst of sated guests or the heady blend of Mom's epicurean food and wine, those evenings Dad would morph into a man I was not familiar with. He would slip into a convivial social persona, a guise that hung differently on the man who dressed quietly every other evening of the week.

In January 2004, Nelson Mandela was released into the world after decades of incarceration. The world sighed in relief. My country entered this new life inhaling deeply. My own life as I had known it for 34 swaddled years, abruptly ended. The rhythm of our lives punctuated with smoky weekend *braais*, the toothless smile from the coloured fruit hawker plying his wares on the pavement, the squirrels tumbling up and down the avenues of oak trees, our African sun dissolving another sundried day into the ocean.... became suddenly archived as memories. Immigration sliced through my world with a bleeding that seeped into the corners of my life. Still.

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In late 1993, after 15 years of marriage, we decided to settle at the bottom of the world. New Zealand. We wanted to sidestep political conflict and settle in 'Godzone,' the land of the long white cloud. Remote, pristine islands clotted with lakes, peaks and the verdant vegetation that surges out of these watery latitudes. We ticked the bureaucratic boxes on the immigration

papers. Each scratch of the pen took us further from 'here' and closer to 'there'. I failed to read the road signs. Our arguments for emigration, at the time were, to me, a daughter welded out of African sun and soil, profoundly solid and persuasive. As we packed up our lives, our home, our memories, a leaden lining attached to my heels and my heart as we leapfrogged the days leading up to the gangplank of departure.

The Maori people of New Zealand are fiercely proud of their *turangawaewae*. This attachment to land among indigenous peoples, is nothing new, a mere concept linked to a name, after all. But the feeling was new to me as Africa fell away from my feet. The urge to have traction on what we perceive to be *our* land is visceral, a cellular scream. I found myself stamping angrily onto the moist New Zealand turf in early 1994, washed up on a foreign shore with a harsh realisation that the black volcanic sand, the glaring southerly sea and sky, was not home. Liquid dreams kept me treading water desperate to return to the shore behind me except that the shore kept retreating with each merciless day.

I had made it my mission to hate where I now found myself, the fading rural town where we settled, the funnily phonetic people who were friendly from afar while they kept our newness at bay, the bizarre calls of southerly birds. And the irrational tears from an adult, supposedly mature and educated but raw in the birthing as an immigrant.

My first lessons in adult buoyancy arrived in the form of fortnightly aerogrammes from my mother. Telephone calls were too cruel: the desired embrace frustratingly out of reach. Mom's faithful letters were replaced by faxes as technology accelerated us closer. I hungrily watched pages emerge from the machine. Then, there were years of emailing: a predictable and comfortable Sunday tradition, timed to plop into my parents' inbox as they rose to greet the day from their seafront bedroom. A short sunset later and a continent away, I would grasp my mother's answering email from the cyber ether. Once, she let slip about her own loss, how she still heard the ghostly echo of her little grandson's toddling footsteps down the corridor of her memory.

Throughout those eleven years, Dad was always 'there'. The father referred to fondly in emails; the occasional voice over the telephone; the husband to Mom when they visited us. But my mother was the consistent voice.

And then, one Friday, the day before they were due to visit us in New Zealand, an email arrived. It was out of time order. The wrong day for an email. My mother had written from a hospital bed: a cancer, harsh treatment, hopeful remission. For three years the emails continued. Then the flow became a trickle. Each full stop fell with an increasing finality.

Mom died three years later. My maternal lifeline was severed. I shared her final three months in that room full of sky in their home by the sea, leaving my family in NZ to care for each other in my absence. Much of the time we spent outdoors, in joyful communion walking the Cliff Path, Mom in a borrowed wheelchair with me as her unlikely nurse, pushing my fragile load.

I savour these days still. It brought me bittersweet perspective. A farewell far more final than immigration and a gentle acceptance of the other unwanted journeys that life can present.

I left my father behind as a single man and took my motherless self back to my family. These unknown positions loomed starkly for both of us. The roles had been rehearsed months before. My mother played prompt from the sidelines of her sickness. Now there was no script. The tattered remnants of the year fell in front of us like the pages of a book whose binding had collapsed. I worried - for Dad on his own - for me as the matriarch in the family, a role that I also had not auditioned for. I did not sit comfortably with the change.

Then on my first Sunday back in NZ, an email blew quietly into the inbox that evening at the appointed time. But this one was from Dad.

"I'm over your mother's death now..."

By scooping my father's emailed words from the printer and delivering them into my flesh and blood hands, they might perhaps pulse into something that was alive. Seven years later he continues to do a weekly lap past my inbox. We write honest words shed from the heart. An ageing father whose words are absorbed by a maturing daughter. Missed conversations we never had over the many years we shared a home and our lives. I am still getting to know him a little more each week as he lays down his words to me, a supplication of sorts. My own *heimwee* has been beautifully bridged. I have grown myself another *'turangawaewae.'* I've appropriated the concept as well as the land and like my Maori countrymen; I can see that I have two places where my feet can stand now.

> "Our native soil draws all of us, by I know not what sweetness, and never allows us to forget."
> *Ovid (The Poems of Exile: Tristia and the Black Sea Letters.)*