Twice Exiled
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2900 words

My mum always said she came from Basutoland. She was a staunch anti-racist; I suspect that she wanted to distance herself from South Africa. The youngest of four sisters, she was born in 1925 on a remote farm called Appledore, in the Orange Free State. She left aged 11, and never returned, though she lived just long enough to celebrate the end of apartheid.
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*After my mum's death, my partner Nancy and I decided we'd try to find Appledore. I scoured the Internet, which was still in its infancy, and found nothing. Eventually, I located a tribute to my grandfather, which referred to him purchasing a farm at Komissiepoort in the district of Ladybrand.*
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My mum's father was a soldier-scholar. Born and schooled in England, he bought the farm after serving in the Boer War. In between further bouts of soldiering - commanding a squadron of rifles in South West Africa during the First World War, and serving as an officer in a reserve battalion during the Second - he raised cattle and horses, and, latterly, ostriches. My mum often referred to him affectionately as The Major.
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*I got in touch with a cousin, who'd been to Appledore with our granny, many years ago. She turned up a hand drawn coloured map of the farm. Laboriously matching this map against a prototype Google Earth, we decided on a probable location.*
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My grandfather was a fine historian. He wrote accounts of the Basuto people and the South African armed forces, and what remains a standard work on horses and saddlery. My mum, herself an art historian, is credited in his short popular account of harnesses and saddlery: this may still occasionally be found in the corners of gift shops at minor British historic sites, on revolving stands of pocket books about country life.
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*After more fruitless attempts at finding a contemporary map showing Appledore, we decided that we'd go to Cape Town, hire a car and head in the right direction. We'd travelled extensively overland on our own in Southern Africa - Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia and Botswana – but were timid about South Africa itself. We'd been there twice since Nelson Mandela's release but had never ventured alone out of cities. It's an astonishingly beautiful country, but the gulf between whites and blacks permeates society, and poverty is endemic. And we are very white.*
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My mum had certainly picked up a great deal about horsewear. After going to the cinema with her to see *My Beautiful Career*, set in the Australian outback in the late 19th century, she commented that she'd enjoyed the film but the harnesses were quite wrong, being a much later police issue.
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*We flew to Cape Town via London. We arrived after dark and took a taxi to our hotel. The immense squatter camps, sprawled along the road across the Cape Flats, were testimony to how little life had improved for most South Africans, after 10 years of Black majority rule. Still, when we'd first visited Cape Town the camps were unlit: now strings of naked electric lights illuminated the chaos.*
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I met my grandfather only twice, after he had returned to the UK in the 1950s on medical advice. I was young, and remember a thin, stooped, elderly man who seemed very far away. I don't think we spoke much, though I do recall him telling me that, in their free time, the African farm labourers would lie over holes in the ground filled with burning dagga, inhaling the fumes. He also once sent me a postcard of Bushman rock paintings, with an explanatory letter.

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*Cape Town was very buzzy. We revisited tourist sites, and ate well and went to the cinema in the harbour complex. But we were warned off going out on foot after dark. In the market, I bought a length of cloth imprinted with adverts for anti-malaria treatment. I've yet to get around to having it made into a shirt.*

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Towards the end of his life, my grandfather lived in my aunt's therapeutic community in Kent. This aunt, the second youngest daughter, was a psychiatrist specialising in addiction. The therapeutic community was founded on anti-psychiatric principles, but never did very well, and is now a country club.

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*We went to the District Six museum that commemorates the last pre-apartheid multi-racial community in Cape Town. The District was flattened but never rebuilt. I wondered if, in London, my mum knew exiles who'd lived there.*

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My mum didn't get on with any of her sisters. She was much the youngest by eight years: I suspect that they bullied her. Her parents had always wanted a boy. Between my psychiatrist aunt and my mum, a son was born, but he had celiac disease, died young and was buried on the farm.

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*We visited public libraries and book shops, but still couldn't find any mapping that showed Appledore. So we picked up a car and set off cautiously out of the city; we'd been warned about car-jackings at traffic lights.*

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Still, my aunt introduced my mum to the Communist Party, where, at the end of the Second World War, she met my dad, a mathematician. And my aunt was always very good to me. I had a key to her apartment in central London and would regularly turn up unannounced, having hitch hiked from my home in Edinburgh, or westwards from university in Colchester.

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*Despite our fears, we left Cape Town without incident, and drove south to Cape Agulhas, where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet. It was sobering to think that nothing now lay between us and the South Pole. In the car park, some young Blacks had bogged their car in the sand. They were visibly wary of me as I helped them push it out.*

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I knew my granny far better than my grandfather, though I still know far less of her early life. On returning to England, she lived in Bemerton, just outside Salisbury, in a large detached house with a lawn running down to the river. Before we moved from West London to Scotland, we would regularly spend holidays with her.

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*That night we stayed in a hotel, in a fishing village along the coast. The British had squat stone houses built for the native workforce. Reminiscent of West Country cottages, today they're holiday homes.*

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My granny was a member of the Women's Voluntary Service and attended the local Anglican church, where the 17th century poet, George Herbert, had preached. Our family were atheists, so, on Sunday mornings, we would accompany her through the village but only as far as the church door. I remember her being quite cross to find the church locked one Sunday late in October: she'd forgotten to put the clock back.

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*We drove north across the arid plain of the Little Karoo. It was mid-winter and the landscape was brown. We crossed the Langkloof Mountains on an unsealed road through Prince Alfred's Pass. In the center of the pass, surrounded by gaunt eroded stone, was a small green oasis . On the other side, relieved that the hire car had made it unscathed, we had coffee and cake in a charming little cafe in Prince Albert.*

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Though she was very conservative, I think that my granny and my dad had a marked respect for each other. I found her fierce and was always rather wary of her. My mum said that my granny didn't really like boys. I wonder now if they reminded her of her dead son. Tabby cat faces bring her to mind.

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*We spent that night in the Drostdy Hotel in Graaf Reinet, a former Dutch town of white stone buildings. We still hadn't really interacted with any non-white people.*

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I don't have any sense of Africa from my granny's house. But she did like to eat an avocado with vinaigrette for breakfast, long before they became common place. Then, I thought avocado tasted soapy.

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*We continued north west across the Eastern Cape. This was one of the poorest regions in South Africa, where apartheid was visibly built into the landscape. Along the road, we stopped for a  black woman at a deserted bus stop, and gave her a lift home. She was a teacher and a devout Christian. Her small town had a river running through it. On one bank was the well proportioned main town where the whites lived: on the other was the township, for the non-whites who serviced the whites. The township seemed squalid, if lively. Her house was prim and proper. Nobody took any notice of us.*

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My mum told me that my granny hadn't enjoyed sex. How did my mum know that? Anyway, my grandfather clearly did. My granny left him, taking the four girls with her, after he had an affair with a governess on the neighbouring farm. He and the governess married, and lived happily together at Appledore: the book on horses and saddlery is dedicated "To R.M.T. Who loved a good horse."

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*We spent the next night in Aliwal North, a nondescript town on the banks of the Orange River. We were now three days and going on 1000 kilometres from Cape Town.*

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My dad died in 1991; my mum in 1995. As we cleared their Edinburgh house, we found, stacked in a scullery, several framed water colours of Appledore painted by my granny. We sent all but one to my mum's eldest sister, a farmer's wife in Wiltshire.

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*We crossed the Orange River and entered the Free State. We were getting close but still had only a vague fix on our destination. We'd worked out that Hobhouse was the nearest town to the south of Appledore.*

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The painting we kept still hangs on our sitting room wall. It shows a greeny brown, washed out landscape. A dirt road runs across the centre of the picture, from right to left. The farm buildings are towards the end of the road, to the left, beyond a grove of scrawny trees. To the right, way behind the road, is a high eroded escarpment fringing the western border of Basutoland.

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*The road ran straight alongside the winding wiggle of the Caledon River that traced the border with Lesotho, my mum's Basutoland. Beyond the river, the mountains rose to 2000 metres.*

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My mum had a strong affinity with people of African origin. We always had lodgers staying with us: students on scholarships from former colonies in West Africa and the West Indies. I now know more of what they endured when I was wee: boarding houses commonly displayed "No Coloureds" signs, and immigrants were said to subsist on cat food. I suppose this racism was, in part, born of ignorance. I recall a young friend innocently asking one lodger if he was black all over. My mum was mortified. The lodger just laughed and undid his shirt.

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*In Hobhouse, we went into the local police station and asked if they could direct us to Appledore. They politely asked us why we wanted to go there. We explained. Then they asked if we could read a map. We said we could. So they ushered us through to the back office and showed us their wall map of the district. Up in the top right hand corner, there was Appledore, maybe 20 km away.*

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We took our lodgers for granted. They were invariably nice, and fitted easily into our chaotic family. Unlike British people, they liked children, and celebrated our births and birthdays with what they told us were traditional ceremonies. And they made unusual, tasty food and listened to unusual, lively music.

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*I took a photograph of the map on our digital phone. We thanked the policemen profusely: they were most amused by our earnestness. Then, as I drove, Nancy guided us using a combination of the photo and my cousin's map. The camera display was very small and kept shutting down. We followed the sealed road to the next junction and turned right onto a well graded dirt road in the direction of the mountains.*

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Of course, we had lodgers as much out of expediency as solidarity. Then, our parents were not so well off, and had a semi-detached house full of books and four children to support. Still, this was quite unlike other people's households.

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*The land seemed barren. The fields were empty, save for the occasional cow or horse. There was no other traffic. The dirt road turned north and met another dirt road running east-west. We turned right again and met a third dirt road, running north through tall bare trees. Nancy looked up from the maps. "We're here!" she said. "We're here!"*

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In retrospect, my mum was more overtly political than my dad. They'd both left the Communist Party in 1953, the year I was born, over anti-intellectualism and anti-Semitism. Subsequently, my dad, though forthright in his views, was largely immersed in pioneering computer research, and attendant University politics over whether it was better to buy machines or build one's own. Nonetheless, they shared childcare equally, though my mum, the better cook, did most of the catering.

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*We crossed a bridge over a burn. The farm was on the left. We turned off the road and pulled up outside the gate. The farm looked abandoned. Stands of dried furze grew through the cars and farm implements that rusted in the yard. We wondered if we should really be entering someone else's property. But there was no one around, and, if challenged, we had my cousin's map by way of explanation.*

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My mum took us elder children to the final stages of the Aldermaston Marches organised by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. On one, a journalist is said to have heard my sister shouting "Bigger bomb! Bigger bomb!" from her push chair. A decade later, my mum and I picketed the Springbok's rugby match against Scotland at Murrayfield.

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*We left the car and let ourselves through the gate. To the right was the white farm house. To the left were two rows of low brown cottages, which my cousin's map labelled "Kaffir Huts". Between them and the farm house was a large brown barn-like building. We walked down the track between the mud huts, musing on what it must have been like to have lived in them. There was no sign of a well and the burn was down a steep bank.*

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In London, my mum had a large and eclectic circle of friends: former CP members, people from art college, other parents. I remember meeting a veteran of the International Brigades, a very stern man, and a concentration camp survivor who showed me her tattoo. My mum also collected waifs and strays.

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*We walked back to the farmhouse, past the barn. The barn seemed dark and uninviting. We didn't go in. The farmhouse looked well constructed and must have been relatively cosy in its day. Now, the roof had collapsed and all the windows were broken. We picked our way through rubble filled rooms. In one, perhaps the sitting room, the remains of a pressed tin ceiling were scattered across the floor.*

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To her regret, my mum steadily lost touch with most of her friends after we moved north to Edinburgh in 1963, when my dad got a senior post at the University. Going through boxes of her papers after she died, letters from the south dwindled away. I suppose Scotland was just too far to visit, and long distance phone calls were pricey.

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*We walked around the farmhouse. Beyond the house was a large pond. A wind pump stood on a tall lattice frame. In front of the house was a rock garden. I tried, without success, to imagine my granny tending it. But I'd never seen any photos from the farm, or of my mum's family before I knew them.*

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My mum found Edinburgh hard. In London, she'd had her own career as an art historian. In Edinburgh, she had no status. Women were expected to decorate male academics: the University even had a Wives Club. Eventually, my mum got two part time posts at the Art College, teaching Art History to design and architecture students. It proved a struggle to turn these into a single permanent position. She never was promoted. But she made new friends and she still collected waifs and strays. And she took in new lodgers, again from the Caribbean and West Africa, but now far more for the companionship than the rent.

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*As we wandered the yard, I tried, again without success, to picture my mum as a small child, growing up English in this most African of environments. Still, I now thought I had a far better grasp of her fellow feeling with Africans. It wasn't just about human decency and solidarity, but a deep sense of a shared exile; twice exiled in her case. It really didn't matter*

*that our lodgers didn't come from South Africa. They reminded my mum of the people that she'd grown up amongst.*

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*Nancy returned to the car. I went back into the house for the last time. The kitchen floor was strewn with broken beer bottles. Nestling on top of a mound of dirt was an open book, pages torn:* ***Treasure Island****.*