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Against the Grain:
Reclaiming the Life I Left Behind

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ABSTRACT

Against the Grain revisits a period of my life long neglected: the 20 years between my graduation from London University with a BA in African history in 1964 and my professional reinvention as an academic librarian. In keeping with second wave feminism’s emphasis on professional life, I had dismissed this period of my life as subservient to "patriarchy": I was the dependent wife of a Foreign Service officer. At this point in my personal and professional history I have come to recognize this was anything but a prelude to a more real existence. With the benefit of historically informed insights, I recognize that I lived for extended periods in hotspots throughout Africa and beyond in the nineteen sixties and seventies, at moments of world historical significance: Ghana, Burundi, South Africa, Bulgaria, and Zaire. Moreover, because of my relative independence I was able to develop relationships that continue to shape my understanding of this complex period in US foreign policy. In classic feminist fashion, the personal and the political were inextricable. Somewhat more against the feminist grain are the rich experiences and examined life of an adventurous, independent woman in a traditional marriage. I eventually regained my independence; when I remarried and moved to North Carolina in 1984, I put those years behind me. Viewing that part of my life in historical context has revealed that, even without a career, I led a full and rich life that has helped to shape my identity today.
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Against the Grain is dedicated to my sons, Andrew and Mark, who shared many of these adventures with me; they are my most precious legacy from those decades.
Introduction

“Personal interpretations of past time…[are] often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretative devices of a culture.” Carolyn Steedman

“You talk like the rich folks do,” a little African-American girl told me when I was working in the Children’s Room at the Durham Public Library. I carefully explained to her that I wasn’t rich, but I talked like that because I came from England, showing her where England was on the globe. Americans nearly always assume that English people living here are from upper class families; friends have even asked me whether I had a nanny or went to boarding school. These days people are surprised when they ask me where I’m from and I answer, “Essex,” because Essex is even known in the US as a working-class region. Similarly, people used to make certain assumptions about women: that they are passive, non-assertive, and nurturing. I remember my husband’s grandmother describing me in 1963 as “sweet.” This was a big surprise to me, as I never would have described myself that way, nor was it something I aspired to.

Assumptions and stereotypes like this are often embedded in standard historical or sociological works. Most of these studies, whether narrative or analytical, whatever their theme or focus, paint a broad picture of a period or subject, flattening out individual lives. So individuals who do not fit the hypothesis are lost to the historical record. In this thesis, written for Graduate Liberal Studies (GLS) at Duke University, I seek to locate my memories of the first forty years of my life in the historical context of the period and events I lived through. In this way I hope to, as Steedman puts it, explain my “life lived

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2 “Essex girl”, as a pejorative stereotype in the United Kingdom, applies to a female viewed as overly promiscuous and unintelligent, characteristics jocularly attributed to women from Essex. (*Wikipedia*, March 6, 2015).
in historical time,” but also use my story to challenge the universality of the standard historical accounts.

I was born in England 1942 to “aspirational” working class parents and grew up in the 1950s, when, according to feminist theory, fathers still ruled their families like absolute monarchs.¹ This was not my experience, because my father didn’t have the means to control me. Furthermore, I received a far better education than most girls of any class in 1950s Britain, thanks to the post-war Labour government. Consequently I was one of the very few girls of working class background to go to university, where I was one of the first class of undergraduates to study African history. As a student I went to an African university, not exactly what young women were supposed to be doing in 1963.

My life then took another dramatic, though less unusual turn, when I fell in love with and married an American. However, for me this did not mean moving to the US and settling down as a “post-war bride.” My husband, like me, wanted to live overseas, and he joined the United States Foreign Service. I thought this would be a big adventure, but in Africa as a Foreign Service wife in the late 1960s I experienced for the first time the full impact of gender discrimination. The State Department exercised control over me to an extent that my father had been unable to. In those years I also encountered post-colonial ethnic conflict in Burundi, and apartheid in South Africa: a very different environment than I had enjoyed in Ghana as a student.

Returning to the United States in 1972, my marriage was in deep trouble, but my morale and self-esteem were restored by the support I received through the women’s liberation movement. For me the movement was both personal and political; I did not

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¹ See for example de Beauvoir, Lerner, and Friedan. I will explore this theme more in Chapter Six.
perceive the distinction until much later. At that time divorce was still very difficult for women, so after a few relatively easy years in Washington, I went overseas again in 1976 with my husband. By now, Foreign Service wives were “liberated,” according to the State Department, but were our lives really different? These chapters focus on the conflict and compromises between my ambitions and the reality of my life in Bulgaria and Zaire, during a period when United States foreign policy was dominated by the Cold War. Finally, after returning to Washington in 1980, I was able to become the person I had always wanted to be.

Later I remarried and moved to Durham North Carolina, where I earned my Master’s in Library Science at North Carolina Central University (a Historically Black University) and embarked on my dream career of being a history and reference librarian at Duke University. When I retired, after more than two decades, I decided to pursue the MALs degree primarily to study women’s history, a subject I deeply regretted not having had the opportunity to learn about at university. Thanks to the broad scope of the Liberal Studies program, I took courses on the self and identity, literature, and the history of class and race as well as gender.

Towards the end of the program I enrolled in a memoir class. I decided to write about the first four decades of my life, because when I had fashioned a new, happier, identity for myself in North Carolina I had put those years behind me, literally “burying” them. Although other people didn’t know anything about my earlier life, I realized that it was still part of my self-identity, so I titled my memoir “Recapturing a Life.” It tells the story of how I went from being an adventurous young woman to a dependent spouse, and then regained my self-esteem and independence. I found that rediscovering my personal
history made me feel like a more complete person, proud of how far I had come and what I had accomplished.

I have based this critical autobiography on that memoir, hoping to show how the social and material circumstances of my life came together to make me who I became, and how I changed and grew in response to them. Understanding the historical context in which we lived also allows us to be kinder to our younger selves and forgive what might appear later to be “mistakes.” Although I have always resisted stereotypes of “feminine” behavior, being a female is part of my “core” identity. Yet, as Morwenna Griffiths contends, “the self is more than its core.” She explains “a self is made and makes itself in the changing circumstances in which she lives, and in a direction strongly affected by her own understanding of herself.”

Griffiths calls this process “the web of identity,” and lays out in her book of the same name how the people, circumstances, and events of a woman’s life contribute to her self-identity.

While many women my age are writing their memoirs for their children or grandchildren I wrote mine for the next generation (or two) of women, my “spiritual daughters.” I want them to know what it was like for one woman to live through the momentous changes that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. Lynn Abrams calls my generation the “breakthrough” generation, who bridged the gap between domesticity and women’s liberation.”

My inspiration is Carolyn Steedman’s Landscape for a Good Woman. In this brilliant and deeply personal book, Steedman tells how her story was not represented in

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social histories because her working class family did not conform to their stereotypes.

Just the other day at Duke University, a Harvard professor referred to higher education in 1950s England as “doing the Greats at Oxbridge.” I couldn’t help thinking, so if you were a female studying African history at London, you weren’t getting a higher education? Did he conflate “Greats” at Oxbridge with higher education because it was the preferred course of study for elite males who went on to run the country? Lives such as mine show that this is just a stereotype that masks the more complex and interesting character of English society at the time.
Chapter One
“Essex Girl”

“By the late 1950s a means of remodeling the female life was offered to some girls by the discourse of opportunity and self-advancement.”

“Go easy on the ketchup, Rosemary,” my father told my younger sister, as we settled down to eat our home-cooked fish and chips on a Friday evening in 1959, “or Margaret won’t be able to go University.” This seemingly trivial remark has stayed with me for over fifty years because it was so typical of my father’s attitudes. I considered him very stingy with money and resented the way he tried to use it to control my behavior (albeit unsuccessfully most of the time.) I couldn’t wait to be independent. The real irony was that he didn’t even think I should go to university because girls just got married and didn’t have careers. So I was thrilled and relieved when I won a full scholarship to study history at London University. This was especially gratifying since he didn’t approve of London; he thought it was a hotbed of socialism.

It was unusual enough for girls to go on to university at that time, but it was especially unusual for girls whose parents came from working class families. Both gender and class were impediments. Of girls born in Britain from 1940-49, only 12% stayed at school until the age of 18, and only 6.8% received a degree. Only 5% of women from the middle class obtained a degree, compared to 20% from the upper class, and 3% from the working class. Although in 1959, the year I graduated from high school, only 3,310

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6 Abrams, “Liberating the Female Self,” 17. She goes on to say that girls’ schools were especially conduits of this message.
8 Ibid, 308.
girls out of 271,778 (or 1.2 %) leaving school went to university,\footnote{Ministry of Education, Education in 1959. \textit{Report of the Ministry of Education and Statistics for England and Wales} (London, HMSO, 1960) Commd 1088, table 5, 142.} both my sister and I did. Interestingly, while I went to London University, thought to be “left-wing,” my sister went to Exeter, a stronghold of the upper class. Her life continued to be very different from mine; she has been married to the same man for fifty years, and lived in our hometown on the same street as my mother until recently. I remember having an argument with her on a bus when we were in high school; she thought a woman had to choose between a family and a career, while I argued that you could have both. Stephanie Spencer corroborates my memory, that in the 1950s “domesticity and paid work were seen as mutually exclusive.”\footnote{Stephanie Spencer, \textit{Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s}. (Basingstoke England; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.}

Joseph Pickett, my father, was born in 1902, the eleventh child of twelve in a local working-class family, who lived in a row house without a bathroom. His father, who was a stonemason, made him leave school at twelve to be apprenticed as a draughtsman, despite appeals by the school principal to let him stay. All his brothers took up trades; I had an uncle who was a plumber, and another an electrician, while another was an engineer in the navy during both world wars. After attending night school for years, my father qualified as an engineering draughtsman, and finally achieved his goal: a civil service position at the Royal Small Arms factory at Enfield, where he designed machines to make guns (he would never have one in the house.) He waited to get married until he had saved enough to buy a house in a middle-class neighborhood, so he was 37 when he married my mother in 1939.
My mother, May, was born in 1914, and grew up in London, the third of seven children. She was a genuine cockney, born within the sound of Bow Bells. Her father was a London fireman; they lived over the fire station in Stoke Newington. My mother did well enough at school to win a scholarship to the Skinner’s Company’s School for Girls, a fee-paying grammar school in Stamford Hill, north London, encouraged by her unmarried aunt, a lady’s maid in a wealthy family. The family her aunt worked for may have pulled some strings because they were Jewish, like most of the girls in the school; it was in a predominantly Jewish part of London. They continued to show an interest in our family even after I was born; for example, they always sent my sister and me elegant birthday cakes.

May had to leave school at sixteen and go to work because her family couldn’t support her any longer, something she always regretted because she wanted to be a pharmacist. Her aunt, Ada Poole, who came to live with us after she retired, didn’t have much formal education but she had been exposed to a much more sophisticated world than ours as lady’s maid, and then companion, to her employer. She read books voraciously, unlike my parents, and corresponded with people all over the world. Since Auntie, as she was known to everyone, made all our clothes, we were better dressed than we might have been. In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Steedman notes the importance of clothes and appearance if you wanted to appear middle class in England in the 1950s.11

We lived in Waltham Abbey, a small town in Essex on the river Lea close to London, but not on a main railway line. It is best known for the ancient Abbey, now the parish church, founded in 1060 by King Alfred, who is purportedly buried in the

churchyard. It was a wealthy Augustinian monastery until its dissolution by Henry VIII in 1536. Most of the buildings were torn down and the stone reused for local building, but the “people’s nave” of the church was preserved to serve as the parish church, a role it still plays today. Much added to and restored over the centuries, it is still a very impressive building with the massive round stone pillars typical of Norman churches. Even local citizens who are not churchgoers, like my father, feel an attachment to the historical church, and no doubt growing up in such a historic place helped to instill my life-long love of history. The town also has a history of denominational diversity, from Quakers to Baptists, very typical of East Anglia, from whence many of the early immigrants to New England came.

In the 1950s Waltham Abbey was a typical rural market town, with a cattle market and a regular market twice a week. We could watch our Sunday roast walking through the High Street to the butcher’s shop. The major source of employment was the Royal Gunpowder Mills, founded in the seventeenth century when gunpowder was first brought to Europe from China. Waltham Abbey’s location outside London on the river Lea was ideal for that purpose. In my youth the facility was a secret rocket fuel factory, but after that closed in the 1990s, it was restored as a museum. My maternal grandfather came from London in the 1930s to serve as fireman at the Gunpowder Mills after he lost his job with the London Fire Brigade for using their funds to bet on a boxing match. There were frequent explosions and fires at the Mills, such as the one on December 1, 1937 described in The Times; the flames shot 200 feet into the air, but the “factory’s fire brigade got the flames under control, and the surrounding buildings were saved.”

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In the 1950s many of the houses looked out onto fields or market gardens, but beginning in the 1960s large public housing estates were built in the fields for people relocated from the East End of London. As a result Essex became associated with working-class Londoners, giving rise to the “Essex Girl” sobriquet. My father would be mortified, as he lived in dread of appearing “common.” For example, I wasn’t allowed to pierce my ears because, as he explained, “only lower class girls do that.” In England, accent is one of the most important markers of class, along with speaking “correctly.”

So to get rid of my local accent my parents sent me to elocution lessons. I don’t know how, but my father lost his local accent, whereas my mother sounded like a cockney until the day she died at ninety-three. I suspect she was proud of it.

My mother was definitely proud of coming from London, and missed it all her life. Growing up there, and especially going to Skinner’s, had exposed her to a more diverse community than she would have had in Waltham Abbey. Her older brother, Philip Poole, married Pat Rimmel, who came from a prominent Jewish left-wing activist family; my aunt and uncle were members of the British Communist Party until the mid 1950s. Philip owned a shop specializing in antique pens in Drury Lane, while Pat ran a typing business in central London. She was the only “career woman” I knew who also had a family. Their two sons also went to university, the older to become a chemical engineer, and the younger a teacher and union organizer in London. My mother took my sister and me “up to London” for the day as often as she could, even though the journey involved a bus and a train. We went to museums, shows, the zoo and the shops on Oxford Street. We always had lunch at Lyons Corner House, owned by my aunt’s employers. I

only remember my father taking me to London once, to the Festival of Britain in 1951; it was a memorable day, having my father all to myself, and seeing all the exciting new inventions, including an escalator.

It was appropriate that my father took me to the Festival, since it was intended to show that Britain was a society in the process of constant improvement, and that things would get better, despite the austerity of most of our lives. He was living proof that people could improve their lives in post-war Britain. Indeed, I contend that, mainly due to my father’s ambition and hard work, my parents could be classified as middle class by the time I was born. If class is determined by the occupation of the father, my father’s fell into the “intermediate,” or lower middle class, classification that includes technical clerical workers.\textsuperscript{14} While he had to belong to a union, he resented having the dues subtracted from his paycheck every month. I didn’t understand at the time, but I believe now that he consciously pulled himself and his family into the middle class. He was very proud of being an “established” civil servant who couldn’t be fired easily. My parents bought a modest house when they married in 1939, but during the war they bought a large lot inexpensively, and in the late 1940s they built a house with four bedrooms. It also had a big garden, my father’s pride and joy, to which he devoted nearly all his spare time, supplementing our meager rations with fresh fruit and vegetables. Our house was in a middle-class neighborhood outside the town center; our neighbors included members of the professional classes, including a doctor and a school principal. No doubt the war contributed to my father’s social mobility, by increasing the need for his skills and enabling him to upgrade his house. Yet some of his attitudes betrayed the fear and

\textsuperscript{14} Marwick, “Class,” 77.
anxiety about “getting it right,” that are typical of the working class, according to Beverly Skeggs.15

As part of what I now understand as his move into the middle class, my father was a Conservative, belonging to the local Conservative club, and taking The Daily Express, a Conservative tabloid. I considered myself a liberal politically by the time I was 16, insisting on taking the Manchester Guardian, and supporting the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. This resulted in political arguments over breakfast almost every day, over subjects such as Rhodesia and South Africa. I believe that this rift was deeper than just politics; thanks to my education, made possible by his efforts, I had a very different worldview. My father was a staunch supporter of the Empire and the Monarchy, whereas I refused to stand for God Save the Queen. Dress was another area where we clashed. The first time I wore jeans he said, “Why are you wearing work trousers?” He told me that my first Laura Ashley dress, bought with money I earned working in a shop on Saturdays, looked like a nightdress. He thought my sister and I should wear our school uniforms whenever we went out; no doubt he was proud of our elite school.

The middle-class lifestyle that my father aspired to when I was young was not particularly affluent, as Britain was still recovering from the war; rationing didn’t end until 1952. We even got “care packages” from relatives in the United States; my sister and I fought over the Lifesavers, but cake mix was a bit of a mystery as my mother regularly made delicious homemade cakes. We ate plain but good food; my mother canned great quantities of produce from my father’s garden to supplement our usual winter diet of cabbage and root vegetables with meat and potatoes. We had variations of

this for dinner every day except Friday, when we had fish. Imported food, such as bananas, was still scarce. On the other hand, thanks to government policy, I received free cod liver oil and rose hip syrup every week. I don’t remember eating out in a restaurant at all except when we went to London for the day. We did not have a refrigerator, but there was a marble shelf in the pantry to keep food cool; the front room that was only used for special occasions was not heated (we did not have central heating; the house was heated by coal fires) so was cold enough in the winter that Jell-O would set in it. If we wanted ice cream for dessert in the summer, I rode my bicycle to the corner store after we ate the main course.

In 1950s Britain, consumer products did not define class; like most people we knew we had no telephone or car. There was a public telephone (the iconic red kiosk) across the street – the two large copper pennies made a solid clunk as they dropped into the slot. For transport there was a reliable, if infrequent, bus service and everyone in the family had a bicycle. Having spent so much of my childhood and youth waiting for busses I’m still amazed when Americans voluntarily give up owning a car. In the late 1940s we would even sit in the front garden on Sunday afternoons to watch the few cars drive by.

Along with everyone else in Britain, we watched television for the first time (at a neighbor’s house) on the occasion of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. Our usual leisure activities were listening to the radio, walking, going to the cinema, and, for my part, reading. Although my parents did not read books, just newspapers and magazines, I read practically every book in the local library, and was “adopted” by Mrs. Rand, a neighbor missing her daughters who were at boarding school. She would have
me over for tea and conversation, and let me borrow books from their extensive library. Auntie, when she wasn’t reading, writing letters or sewing, played card games with Rosemary and me, including an early version of Scrabble.

Even as a young person I considered my father’s attitude to women old-fashioned. He assumed, like many middle-class British people at that time, that women should not work outside the home after they were married, or at least after the children came. The “cult of domesticity,” that placed the woman’s sphere in the home and the man’s at work, dated back to the mid-nineteenth century, and was “central to the self-defining of the middle class and to the maintenance of ideas of an imperialist nation.”

After we were in school my mother wanted to work part-time in a gift shop, to make some money she could spend without his permission. He refused to allow her, telling her “everyone would think that I can’t support you.” He thought I should leave school at eighteen, and get a clerical job in the Civil Service that would earn me a “dowry” when I got married, as did most middle class girls; some even left at sixteen.

Government policy towards women reflected this middle-class attitude. The Beveridge Report of 1942 that prepared the way for the Welfare State after the war contained clear expectations of gender divisions. It reflected the 1930s rather than the wartime attitude towards women working. The report conceptualized women in terms of the needs of race and nation for women’s work as wives and mothers rather than the needs of women as individuals. Therefore the welfare state was based on the family model in which the wife stayed home. The “family allowance” was paid directly to the wife to compensate her for not working. In short, the goal of the Welfare state regarding

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16 Skeggs, Becoming, 5.
17 Spencer, Gender, 23.
women was to set the clock back to before the war. Spencer observes that Beveridge was more of an Edwardian than a twentieth-century man.\textsuperscript{18} I frequently said the same of my father.

According to Arthur Marwick, the type of education one received was one of the clearest markers of class in England. The upper class was obsessed with which preparatory and public school their sons attended, so as to get them into Oxford or Cambridge, preferably the college their father had attended. Officially, the educational badge of the working class was attendance at a free public elementary school, like my father’s. Marwick stresses how hard it was to get out of the working class: “to be working class was to serve a life sentence.”\textsuperscript{19} My father did it by going to night school, and living at home until the age of thirty-seven. The educational style of the middle class was more varied, but the fee-paying grammar school was the most common before the war, especially for boys.

Along with Social Security and the National Health Service, the 1944 Education Act was part of the government’s promise of a better life for the British people who had sacrificed so much during the war. Fees for secondary schools were abolished, and an examination at the age of eleven, known as the “eleven plus.” determined which type of secondary school the child would attend. The 1950s was a transitional time that bridged the end of World War II and the 1960s. Despite the government policy of increasing educational opportunity, the tripartite system persisted in secondary education. The former grammar schools, now free, prepared pupils for A levels and possibly university, technical schools taught trades, and everyone else went to secondary moderns that

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 31.
\textsuperscript{19} Marwick, “Class,” 80.
educated pupils up to the statutory school-leaving age of 15.\textsuperscript{20} In effect, children were still separated according to class. In the 1950s, the pupils at grammar schools were mainly middle class, while those at secondary moderns were working class.\textsuperscript{21} As Spencer writes, “the type of education received, was due largely to the individual’s position in the social hierarchy.”\textsuperscript{22} Nevertheless, “able children from the working class were effectively sponsored at the age of eleven for upward educational and occupational mobility.”\textsuperscript{23}

Because my parents were determined that I would pass the eleven plus exam, they sent me to a small private primary school in a nearby town. The local primary school was notorious for not preparing its pupils to pass the exam; in my year, no one passed from that school. Later they often reminded me of the sacrifices they made to pay the fees. Steedman observes that you have to pay back your parents for their sacrifices, taking on “the burden of being good.”\textsuperscript{24} I took up that burden from an early age, always doing well in school. Along with 19\% of girls, I did well enough in the eleven plus to get into grammar school.\textsuperscript{25} Studies show that the chances of getting into grammar school depended on social origin, type of primary school and region of the country.\textsuperscript{26} Although Waltham Abbey did not have a grammar school, there were good schools in nearby towns reachable by bus.

\textsuperscript{20} Those students seeking university entrance must successfully complete a series of examinations that result in the General Certificate of Education. These examinations have two levels: General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE; formerly “ordinary”) and advanced. Entry to a university requires a prescribed combination of passes on the GCSE and advanced level in such subjects as English, foreign language, science, and mathematics. \textit{“Secondary education.”} Encyclopaedia Britannica Online \textit{Academic Edition}. Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2015. Web. 06 Mar. 2015.
\textsuperscript{21} Spencer, \textit{Gender}, 8.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 50.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Britain since 1945}, 296.
\textsuperscript{24} Steedman, \textit{Landscape}, 105.
\textsuperscript{25} See table, \textit{Britain}, 299.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 305.
Indeed, I did so well that I was selected to attend the best school for girls in the area – Loughton County High School for Girls, which meant that I was going to school in yet another town. Since I had to take two buses through Epping Forest, I frequently had to wait for the second bus in the dark in the middle of the forest, days being short in the English winter. Most of the other pupils were from the professional class; their fathers were higher civil servants, lawyers, bank managers, and doctors. They lived in the more upscale towns of Loughton and Woodford, and their brothers went to public school. I more than held my own academically, but was not considered a “leader.” While it is true that I couldn’t do any after-school activities because of living so far away, I believe that how the other girls and the teachers viewed my social class was also a factor. Moreover, I was the only girl from my year who came from Waltham Abbey, the equivalent of the “the other side of the tracks.” It made inviting friends home difficult, but I had a few good friends, and anyway I enjoyed the academic side of school so much that I didn’t worry about being one of the “social set.” The school uniform of a navy “gym slip,” or tunic, white blouse and striped tie was a great leveler, and makeup and jewelry were forbidden. There was a lively debate in my last years about whether a CND badge (the famous peace sign) counted as jewelry. It is to Loughton’s credit that the school decided that it was not, so we could wear it.

My best friend, Ann, one of five children, was the daughter of a senior civil servant. Although they were of clearly upper-class origin – her father went to Oxford and her brothers to public school – they lived in a relatively modest house with just one bathroom not very different from ours. Ann’s house was on my way home, and her

27 Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: see http://www.cnduk.org/about/item/437.
mother often invited me to “tea” after school. They were a very musical family, who encouraged my love of classical music, and I enjoyed their lively discussions on current affairs and the arts. I envied Ann, and determined to achieve the same kind of family life myself. Ironically, she once told me that she envied me because I had discovered classical music for myself instead of being expected to like it. Although I didn’t know it at the time, appreciating classical music was considered another signifier of being middle class. My father was also very musical, but he played saxophone in a swing dance band, while my mother liked popular music and show tunes.

Another difference between us was that Ann’s family had a housekeeper, whereas my mother had no help in the house at all. All her life she resented people who had servants, even being envious of me when I lived in Africa; possibly she saw having help in the house as a sign of being middle class. On the other hand, she had to work really hard to prepare three meals a day and keep the house clean with few “labor saving” conveniences.

Although I didn’t completely fit in socially, I thrived at Loughton because of the teachers and the challenging curriculum. Lynn Abrams describes my school perfectly: “by the late 1950s a means of remodeling the female life was offered to some girls by the discourse of opportunity and of self-advancement. Girls’ schools especially were conduits of this message.” Most of the teachers were unmarried women who were very well educated and traveled widely during the summer vacation. Today they would no doubt be in all kinds of professions. Many of them lived in London, commuting on the Central Line of the London Underground, and I have no doubt they influenced my

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28 Skeggs, Becoming, 82.
political views as well as making me a “proto-feminist,” as Abrams calls us. Spencer claims that in the 1950s “male experience was the norm,” but this was not the case at Loughton.\textsuperscript{31} The school was academically focused; subjects such as domestic science or typing were not offered. Even so, many girls left at the age of 16 to go to secretarial college. But I did so well in my O levels that there was no question that I would stay on to take my A levels, in history, Latin and English. The only overt classism I remember was when the French teacher told my mother that she didn’t think I should take A Level French because “she won’t need it.” She wasn’t to know that I would live in French-speaking Africa for four years. Both my parents supported my staying on until eighteen, even though my father didn’t see the point of my going to University. For him, a “good marriage” was still the ultimate goal for a girl. I assume he thought I would get a husband with a better job if I had more education.

Fortunately, in the 1950s tuition was completely free as all universities were state-supported, and I won a scholarship that would cover living expenses. I did not apply to Oxford or Cambridge; I would have had to stay on at school another term to prepare for the entrance exams. I was not tempted – not only was I impatient to be independent of my father, but also I sensed that I wouldn’t feel at home at Oxford or Cambridge. I was offered a place at Durham University, but I chose Queen Mary College in the East End of London. No doubt my love of London, inherited from my mother, influenced this decision, together with its reputation as a progressive university (left-wing according to my father.)

When I read the academic literature about girls and women in the 1950s, I did not recognize myself. Given my class and gender I should have gone to a secondary modern,

\textsuperscript{31} Spencer, \textit{Becoming}, 2.
or at least left school at 16. A woman was supposed to demonstrate her respectability through her home and dress rather than through her knowledge or cultural capital.\textsuperscript{32} My goal should have been to get married and have children, not to have a career. At school I should have been educated with marriage and children in mind, instead of receiving the same education as boys my age. At the time, I did not appreciate the advantage of going to a girls’ school, where our education was taken seriously. Several authors write of girls feeling pressure to do what was expected of them, or a tension between group norms and individual achievement. I did not feel that kind of pressure, but felt supported by my school, my mother, and other female role models to go as far as I could in my education. Abrams could have been describing my mother and me when she writes, “Women born in the 1940s, then, found themselves in an environment which encouraged and rewarded achievement and self-development …opportunities, which had been denied their mothers.”\textsuperscript{33}

So while in many my family was typical of the middle class in England after the war, it was unusual in that both my parents came from working-class origins. My education at a state-supported school would have been impossible for a girl of any class before the 1940 Education Act, and was still very rare. I was very lucky to have had upwardly mobile parents who wanted the opportunities for me that they had not had, the chance to attend a first-class girls’ school, and access to unlimited reading material. So I happily left home for university, with the attitude that I could achieve anything I wanted to.

\textsuperscript{32} Skeggs, \textit{Becoming}, 90.
\textsuperscript{33} Abrams, “Liberating” 18.
Chapter Two

The Wind of Change: From London to Legon

“The dismantling of the Empire was less an act of cheerful colonial philanthropy than a grudging recognition of political reality.”

By the time the ship arrived in Sierra Leone on the West African coast after nearly two weeks at sea, the heat and humidity were suffocating, and the air smelled of rotting vegetation and charcoal fires. Like most English people, I had never experienced heat like that before, except in the tropical rainforest house at Kew Gardens, which I had never really liked. But now I was so excited at actually being in Africa after ten days at sea that I didn’t mind. It was March 1963, and I was on my way to the newly independent nation of Ghana, known as The Gold Coast when it was a British colony. After another stop in Liberia we arrived at Takoradi, the port of Accra, the capital of Ghana, from where we were taken directly to the University. White buildings with red roofs were nestled in a tropical setting of palm trees and brightly colored exotic flowers, about as different from London University as it could be. The intense equatorial sun shone brightly in the sky, setting abruptly about six o’clock, with no twilight.

In a reversal of the colonial custom of male African students traveling to England to study, I was a female English student going to study at the University of Ghana at Legon, about half an hour from Accra. Seven of the ten students studying African history at the University of London were exchanging places with seven Ghanaian students.

Although I had already traveled to Europe on my own three times, going to Africa would

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have been almost unheard of before then for someone who wasn’t a colonial official or missionary. When I was born in October 1942, the British Empire was still intact, although it was beginning to show serious strains. Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaya and Burma had fallen to the Japanese, and the Raj was under threat.\(^\text{35}\) In November 1942, Churchill asserted that he “had not become the King’s First Minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire.”\(^\text{36}\) But by 1960, the year I went to University, Britain had already lost all its Asian and Middle Eastern possessions, and, as Prime Minister Macmillan said in his famous speech, “The Wind of Change” was blowing over Africa. Less than two years before, I had gone up to Queen Mary College in London to study medieval history, armed with Latin, English and History A-levels. Now I was on my way to Africa. These were indeed profound changes: what lay behind them?

In the 1950s the British government had tried to retain or reconfigure what remained of the Empire after India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma left in 1947. The colonies were viewed as economic assets to be exploited to pay for the Second World War. However, the growth of nationalism as a result of the Atlantic Charter and the UN Declaration of Human Rights made them expensive to run. There were costly and unpopular wars against nationalists in Malaysia, Cyprus, and Kenya. Therefore, the British government, weakened by the setback of Suez in 1956, concluded that it was in the best interests of Britain to proceed with independence for most of the African colonies. Macmillan, who took office after Eden resigned in disgrace after Suez, took a pragmatic approach to the empire, even ordering a cost-benefit analysis of it; the United States refused to back the British pound unless Britain gave up the Empire, and nobody in


\(^{36}\) Quoted in Sandbrook, *Never had it so Good,* 264.
Britain wanted to emulate the French experience in Algeria. Macmillan believed, along with many British people, that the future belonged with the United States and Europe rather than the empire. He and his Colonial Secretary, Iain McLeod, hoped that if Britain granted independence to the African nations, they would stay in the British sphere of influence. They still viewed Britain as a major global power, and the official propaganda made independence seem like a triumph rather than a capitulation.

At my school we watched a movie celebrating Ghanaian independence in 1957, including the usual ritual of lowering the British flag at midnight then raising the Ghanaian flag. A minor British royal, in this case the Duchess of Kent, attended the ceremony, entertained by local dancers and musicians. The movie was shown in geography rather than a history class, because that’s where lessons about the Empire were taught. Given the commercial nature of the British Empire it is not surprising that the focus was on the natural environment, economics, trade and raw materials. Probably one of my main sources of information about the Empire were advertisements promoting imperial products; we ate New Zealand butter and lamb, South African grapes and oranges, and wore cardigans knitted from Australian wool, not to forget chocolate from the Gold Coast.

As a child I was aware of the Empire, but very indirectly. I still have my stamp book from the mid-fifties, with the maps of the world showing British possessions in pink, but my collection illustrates the declining interest in the Empire by then. Despite the fact that the book has several pages for India, I only have half a page of Indian stamps, and very few for the remaining colonies, compared to three pages each of stamps from the United States and France. Although we were impressed by the Queen of Tonga and
other dignitaries from exotic places in the Commonwealth and Empire who attended the
coronation, David Cannadine describes it as a “post-imperial” event, unlike that of the
Queen’s father, George VI.\(^{37}\) Girls didn’t even read the jingoistic adventure books
described by Cannadine,\(^{38}\) such as Forester or Haggard; I loved books such as *Anne of
Green Gables* from Canada, *Little Women*, from the United States, and *A Town like Alice*,
from Australia. I have never read Kipling, except for hearing some of his poetry read
aloud.

The choice of reading was appropriate, because families like mine felt much
closer to the settler colonies, by then known as Dominions, or to the United States, than
to the colonies of Asia or Africa. My family had relatives in the States, Canada and South
Africa. Later three of my cousins emigrated to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa;
I came to America in 1965. No one in my family or anyone I knew had been colonial
officials, although my family came close to going to Australia when I was in high school.
My father was offered the chance to work at Woomera Rocket Range, where Britain and
Australia had a joint program to develop a nuclear bomb, for six months. He turned it
down, to my great regret; I longed to go to Australia. Forty years later I finally spent six
months in Sydney on a job exchange of my own. Although my father didn’t actually want
to go himself, he was always a supporter of the empire, and regretted its demise.

My generation was exposed to very different cultural influences than our parents.
I listened avidly to *The Goon Show* on the radio, in which Peter Sellers and Spike
Milligan regularly made fun of the Establishment, paving the way for the famous satirical

University Press, 2001), 158. He compares the two marches composed for the coronations of George VI
and Elizabeth II, the first “redolent of chivalry, history, and tradition,” the second verging on the “jaunty
and irreverent.”

\(^{38}\) Ibid, 193.
programs of the early 1960s, such as *Beyond the Fringe* and *That was the Week that Was*. Both were very popular with college students; we enjoyed their spoofs of government and colonial officials. Spike Milligan was famous for his character Major Dennis Bloodnok, “a seedy dishonorable coward from the Rajputana Rifles.” Since, as David Cannadine observes, the empire was “constructed and envisaged on the basis of hierarchical homogeneity and social subordination,” as imperial hierarchy faltered and fell, the domestic hierarchy also began to lose credibility and conviction. I did not identify with the empire at all; when we sang “Land of Hope and Glory” at the Last Night of the Proms in 1959 the words “Wider still and wider shall thy bounds be set” seemed already anachronistic, belonging to another era.

In 1960, my first year at university, Africa was very much in the news. In his “Wind of Change” speech that January, Prime Minister MacMillan was addressing the white settler countries, Kenya, South Africa and the Central African Federation, letting them know that Britain was not prepared to support continuing white domination of black Africans. As the BBC reported, “The dark-skinned four fifths of the population are elated that the whites have been told to their face that it is they—and not the rest of the world—who are out of step.” Stuart Ward describes 1960 as a watershed in decolonization. Ghana had already become independent in 1957, but Nigeria, the Belgian Congo and the French sub-Saharan African countries all became independent in 1960.

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The brutal repression of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya had garnered much criticism in Britain, the Central African Federation was dissolved, and in March 1961, South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth rather than modify apartheid.

The year 1960 was also the “defining moment for metropolitan anti-imperialism.” The first Trafalgar Square Anti-Apartheid rally took place in 1959, while British writers, such as the Angry Young Men and Doris Lessing, were condemning imperialism. Nicholas Owen says the young were aware of Britain’s decline, and needed a “widening of horizons.” So organizations like the Anti-Apartheid Movement were a way of continuing global engagement without the colonial framework. The same could be said for Oxfam, the UN, and the study of African history. George Lamming describes Basil Davidson, whose books on the African slave trade I read at university, as approaching African problems “as a means of examining his own premises as a man…as a Left Wing intellectual.” Lamming also wrote of young people’s “spirit of curiosity and concreteness” towards black people, compared with adult indifference.

It was that spirit of curiosity that drew me to enroll in an introductory class in African history after Roland Oliver, from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), spoke to one of my classes. As this was the first year of his new program, he didn’t have many students, so was trying to recruit more. SOAS was in Bloomsbury, right in the center of London, near the University Senate House and Library. I found myself in a new world with international students and small classes, studying a continent that was in the news, where nations were brand new, not old and tired like England. I felt very much at home in that environment, compared with the more conventional

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44 Ibid, 124.
45 George Lamming, quoted in Owen, Wind of Change, 133.
atmosphere of the history department at Queen Mary College. I had not been very
challenged by the lecture classes at Queen Mary College, so I decided to switch my
specialty from British to African history, and my college to SOAS.

The study of African History, as opposed to imperial history, had emerged in the
university colleges of British colonial Africa. The only university in England to take an
interest in African history during the 1950s was London, due to the Special Relationship
between London and the African colleges that enabled African colleges to offer London
degrees. In 1948, Roland Oliver was appointed Lecturer in the Tribal History of East
Africa at SOAS.46 There were no students for several years, but by the time Oliver
organized a conference of African historians and archaeologists in 1953, there were some
graduate students. However, it was a challenge to study and teach the history of African
societies themselves, rather than just colonial history, because the colonial historians
were still in charge of the curriculum. After several years of effort, in 1960 the University
of London finally accepted Oliver’s proposal for an Honors Degree in History with
special reference to the History of Africa. Oliver writes that when he was trying to
persuade the Board to accept it, one of the members told him that while African history
was all right for the Africans, it was not all right for the British.47 Oliver writes that he
was astonished that “some ten British undergraduates were found wishing to take the
degree.”48 I was one of the ten. We studied African history from 395 to the present day,
and our Special Subject was South African history.

46 Roland Oliver, “African History: SOAS and beyond,” in The Emergence of African History at British
48 Ibid, 27.
After studying African history for more than a year, I was thrilled by the opportunity to actually go to Africa on the student exchange with the University of Ghana. To begin with, the London of my student days was cold and wet and depressing, and the famous “pea-soup” fogs still descended on the city regularly, so bad that on my way home one evening, I couldn’t see more than a few feet in front of my nose. Everything closed early, including the pubs and the Underground, there were frequent electricity cuts or “brownouts,” and even the streetlights were dim. Because of rationing and food shortages during and after the war, English food was plain and uninteresting. The famous “sixties” culture that began in England had not yet erupted, though there were hints of something new in the air. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament as well as the Anti-Apartheid Movement had captured the imagination of activist students; we demonstrated in Trafalgar Square and boycotted South African products. Easier access to contraceptives meant more sexual freedom; I got one from the British equivalent of Planned Parenthood, in a basement in Central London. I even tried marijuana once, but I didn’t like feeling “out of control.” Moreover, London was beginning to be more multicultural, especially at SOAS, where there were students from Africa and South Asia. I lived for a while in Brixton, where there were many immigrants from the West Indies.

Before leaving for Ghana I lived in a bed-sitter, or “digs” in a gritty neighborhood in East London, travelling to my college on the Underground. I had lunch at the cafeteria at SOAS, where I my favorite dish was curried vegetables, then cooked scrambled eggs or baked beans for supper on an electric ring. There was little of the student social life I craved, after an all-girls’ high school. I existed on my scholarship, living from hand to mouth – at the end of one semester, I had to take my beer bottles back to the pub to raise
the cash to take the bus home. I wouldn’t ask my father for money to supplement my scholarship because I wanted to be independent.

So I didn’t have any regrets when I boarded the H.M.S. Aurora, a small passenger ship belonging to Elder Dempster and Company (formerly the African Steamship Company),49 in the former slave port of Liverpool. A holdover from the colonial period, the ship carried West Africans home after studying or working in England, as well as English government officials and aid workers to their posts in West Africa. The two-week voyage was an adventure in itself; being served three meals a day in the ship’s dining room was a new experience for me, even though the cabin I shared with another student was small and cramped. There were a number of former colonial officials known as “Old Coasters” on board who drank brandy in the bar at 7 o’clock in the morning, then regaled us with stories about snakes and intestinal parasites, a traditional initiation for newcomers to West Africa. I still shudder when I think about the parasites, some of which I did encounter during my years in Africa. I even had a classic shipboard romance with Kwame, a tall, slim, patrician, Ghanaian law student going home to take up a position in the government. He was confident and experienced, from a prominent family in Ghana. We parted on arrival, never to see each other again; he was engaged to the daughter of a friend of his family, and I was absorbed into the university culture.

So I arrived in Ghana having already gotten to know the country in one sense. When I was taken to my room in the girls’ Hall of Residence, I was not surprised by the lack of air-conditioning or screens on the windows, because I had never known either. I

49 Elder Dempster was also the steamship company that worked the notorious route between Belgium and The Congo. Edmund Morel, who ran the campaign against Leopold’s cruel system, worked for Elder Dempster. (see Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost.*)
sat down on the bed and found out that it was hard, just a thin mattress on a wooden frame. I opened the ancient trunk I had borrowed from my great aunt, who had accompanied her wealthy employer abroad as a lady’s maid, and started to unpack. Suddenly a small, brightly colored lizard ran out from under the lid. I screamed. A Ghanaian student came running and explained with great amusement that the lizard was harmless. It was probably just a gecko, but I had never seen anything like that in England; I would soon learn to ignore any harmless wildlife. At dinner I was introduced to African food; practically every night we had palm oil stew, bits of chicken or goat with greens floating with red oil. I lost a lot of weight that semester.

Life at the University was a curious mixture of African and traditional English customs. For the first time I had to wear an academic gown for dinner, afternoon tea (Indian style, half condensed milk) was served at four o’clock every day in a huge aluminum teapot, and the doors were locked at ten o’clock in the girls’ residence. College life in London also did not include being bombarded with bugs when studying in the library at night, lukewarm showers (there was no hot water,) or risking arrest if you failed to stand for the national anthem. On Friday nights, the dormitory smelled of burnt hair as the Ghanaian students straightened their hair for the big weekend ahead. I learned to dance the highlife in local nightclubs with live bands, paid a moving visit to the historic Cape Coast Castle where slaves were held before being shipped across the Atlantic, and was burned to a crisp on the stunning palm-tree lined beach. Astonishingly, I did manage to go to classes and study enough to get by.

It was fascinating being in a newly independent country. At independence Ghana became a republic, repudiating the monarchy, but stayed in the Commonwealth. The
British had tried to keep The Gold Coast in the Empire by modernizing their cash crops, administration and local government, but Kwame Nkrumah and the Congress Peoples’ Party had created an authentic mass movement for independence. Finally the British handed over power to the urban elite who had been campaigning for independence, bypassing the Chief of the Ashanti, the most powerful nation in Ghana. Since the colonial policy of indirect rule had enhanced the power of the traditional chiefs, this would soon lead to instability.\(^50\) But in 1963, President Nkrumah was at the peak of his power, promoting Pan Africanism, including a union with Guinea and Mali. A favorite Highlife song that we danced to was “Ghana, Guinea, Mali.”\(^51\) The only sign of the problems ahead were the number of opposition leaders in prison, and the obvious personality cult of Nkrumah.

There were some interesting professors at the University of Ghana, no doubt attracted by the opportunity to help build the new nation, and Nkrumah’s progressive vision. I attended classes taught by Thomas Hodgkin\(^52\) and Conor Cruise O’Brien\(^53\) who was Vice-Chancellor of the University. His seminar on “The Congo since Independence” covered only ten days of history in a whole semester. Nkrumah attracted many radicals to Ghana; the university was a mecca for black power leaders and American communists. I met several South African exiles, including Barbara Masekela, later South African

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\(^50\) See Richard Rathbone, "Casting “the Kingdome into another Mold”: Ghana's Troubled Transition to Independence." *Round Table* 9, no.398 (2008): 705-18. (Rathbone, formerly at Aberystwyth University, was one of my fellow students.)

\(^51\) Still available on YouTube, sung by E.T. Mensah: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBXHpe3y1mA>

\(^52\) Thomas Hodgkin was a pioneering historian of Africa, who published a seminal book entitled *Nationalism in Colonial Africa* in 1956. At the University of Ghana he was Director of the new Institute for African Studies.

\(^53\) Conor Cruise O’Brien had been the UN representative to Katanga during the attempt of the Belgian mining interests in that province to secede from the Congo after independence. Since he supported the African cause he became a hero to the left.
Ambassador to the United States. With my American boyfriend, Paul, a communist graduate student, I travelled to Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti, in central Ghana on a small plane – my very first flight.

During the summer vacation we each received £50 from Barclays Bank to pay for travel in West Africa. With my fellow students Roger and David, I covered 3,500 miles by truck, “mammy wagon,” and train through four different countries. I learned to sleep almost anywhere (a skill I have lost), in spite of loud drumming or highlife music. We stayed with Peace Corps volunteers, aid workers, British expatriates, or in cheap hotels or even schools. Once we stayed with missionaries who didn’t have a mosquito net for me, so I stayed awake all night watching the bugs buzzing around the kerosene lamp, afraid to go to sleep in case something nasty would bite me. Another scary night was spent in a fleapit of a hotel that was obviously a haunt of prostitutes. We drank warm water that tasted of plastic and chlorine from the pills we had to put in it before drinking it. We lived on hard-boiled eggs and bananas bought on the street because they were safe and cheap. All the Africans we encountered were kind to us, though they must have been bewildered by what we were doing.

We went north through Ghana to Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso (then Haute Volta), across the Sahara to Niamey in Niger, then south to Kano in northern Nigeria. We spent days in vehicles with no springs, shaken mercilessly on “corrugated” roads. That region was very dry, on the edge of the Sahara desert, so we were always covered in

54 She was the sister of Hugh Masekela, jazz trumpeter and husband of Miriam Makeba. I met Barbara again in Washington in the 1970s at an Amnesty International function.
55 Worth more than $1,000 today.
56 “In all of West Africa there is no more frightening sight than a herd of wide-open mammy wagons, stuffed to the rafters with merchants, housewives, babies, calabashes and live chickens, careening toward the next town at full stampede.” (Time Magazine, June 11, 1965.)
red dust from the unpaved roads. I had to throw away my underwear afterwards. In the desert we saw Bedouin riding camels, and women walking miles carrying water on their heads. Even in the Muslim areas people were always friendly, and I didn’t experience any hostility towards women. There were no facilities, so the truck would stop in the desert for the passengers to relieve themselves. The men would go on one side, and the women on the other. The African women had convenient long wrapped skirts, but I was wearing pants, so they gathered around me to shield me from the men’s gaze.

The French colonies of Haute Volta and Niger had gained their independence in 1960, and the French influence was still evident, although they were much poorer than Ghana and Nigeria. Leopold Senghor had hoped to make them part of a federation of other French West African former colonies, but this did not materialize. We encountered many French officials, one of whom treated us to a gourmet dinner at a modern hotel in Ouagadougou – by far the best meal I had the whole time I was in West Africa. Instead of the ubiquitous Coca Cola and peanuts available at roadside stands in Ghana we could buy orange Fanta and French bread.

Northern Nigeria was similar geographically and culturally to Niger, except for the British influence. Both Niamey and Kano were still walled cities at that time, with picturesque mud-walled buildings and camels everywhere. Nigeria, that had also become independent just three years before, in 1960, was then, as now, a huge and varied country, with rich natural resources. We travelled third class by train all the way through Nigeria from Kano to Enugu in Biafra. It was a nightmare 20-hour journey on wooden benches in intense heat, with a smell of urine from the toilets, and a continual stream of wretched
beggars. It haunted my dreams for some time afterwards. Peace Corps volunteers we met in Enugu told us that they always travelled first class.

From Enugu we travelled through the tropical forests of southern Nigeria, stopping at Benin, Ibadan and Lagos. After the dry heat of the sparsely populated desert we were back in the steamy heat of the coast, with its smell of rotting vegetation, and massed humanity. In West Africa I felt a strong sense of the power of the natural world, unlike England, where it had been subdued centuries ago. There was so much more life and color, in the clothes of men and women, the way the buildings were decorated, and in the vibrant outdoor markets. Here, as in Ghana, the women were very independent, running small businesses and market stalls like the true entrepreneurs they were.

Arriving in Lagos, the biggest port in Nigeria, we learned that we couldn’t travel back to Ghana overland as we had planned because the border was closed between Togo and Ghana. Luckily the ship home left from Lagos, so we went on board there. Our luggage would be loaded at the next stop, Accra. It was the same ship we had travelled to Africa on all those months before, but I was not the same person. My African adventure was nearly over, but it had changed my life in ways I didn’t yet appreciate.

Not only was I was much more confident, having successfully lived and travelled in a completely different culture and environment, but also the excitement I felt in newly independent Ghana made a deep impression on me, compared to the depressed state of England at the time. The sense of freedom and optimism for the future in Ghana reflected my own feelings of confidence and the sense that I could do anything. I would go back and get my degree, and embark on my career or a graduate degree; maybe I would even to the United States. It seemed that the world was at my feet.
Chapter Three

“Alien Spouse”

“Marriage to a lover is fatal; lovers are not husbands.” 57

Lagos harbor: I had just settled into my tiny steel-walled cabin when there was an announcement summoning all passengers to the main deck for a lifeboat drill. I grabbed the orange life jacket that was hanging on the back of the door and made my way up the metal stairs to the assembly point. I looked for Roger and David, but didn’t see them. Next to me stood a young man a bit taller than me with curly light brown hair, and a friendly face. When he saw me he introduced himself with a smile, “Hi, I’m Dan.” I recognized the American accent and asked him where he was from and what was he doing in West Africa. He explained that he had graduated from Yale two years before, but didn’t know what he wanted to do with his life. His father wanted him to go to business school, but Dan didn’t want to be a businessman, so he took a job teaching English in Nigeria instead. I told him about my travels, and we realized that I had spent a night very close to where he was staying in Benin, in southern Nigeria.

We quickly became inseparable; Dan was good company, full of stories about his two years in Nigeria. I did not suspect that not much more than a year later I would marry him, move to America, and within a few years return to Africa as a Foreign Service wife. Why did I fall so quickly and decisively for an American?

The idea of going to America was not new; I had dreamed of applying for a scholarship to go to graduate school there. Like many young people of the working and lower middle class who grew up in England in the 1950s, I was fascinated by American

57 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Writing a Woman’s Life. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2008), 87.
culture. British culture was still dominated by an upper class elitism that seemed stuffy and old-fashioned to young people. We listened to American music, from Bing Crosby to rock and roll and jazz. We abandoned our parents’ ballroom dancing for the much freer and livelier jitterbug or twist. The BBC tried to limit the number of American television programs because they were so much more popular than British shows, but despite their efforts, my family’s favorite shows still were *Lassie* and *I Love Lucy*; we even watched Westerns, such as *Rawhide*, *Gunsmoke* and *Wagon Train*. We loved American movies, especially musicals such as *The King and I*, *South Pacific*, and *Oklahoma*. They were a real escape from drab England, and were much more glamorous than British movies, especially after Technicolor was introduced. What’s more, as John Lyons notes, because the stories in American movies were more often about ordinary people, they appealed to middle and lower class British people.\(^{58}\) British movies were still written and made by establishment figures; film director Lindsay Anderson said in 1957 that the number of British films with working class characters throughout could be “counted on the fingers of one hand.”

Like many of my peers, I thought of American society as classless, somewhere where you could get ahead based on merit rather than birth, compared to England, where your background was still crucial. Lyons observes that, compared to the egalitarianism of the United States, “the nation remained class-ridden with a rigid social hierarchy.”\(^{59}\) I also admired the energy and optimism of the Americans I knew in London, who all seemed happier and better off than us -- and they probably were. Americans seemed so full of life, while Londoners were still tired after the war. Everybody wore beige

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\(^{59}\) Ibid, 56.
raincoats and went to bed early. Even in London everything closed at ten o’clock. As Lyons so vividly puts it, “Americanization liberated rather than subjugated the minds of young Britons.” While the upper classes criticized Americans for being too casual and not deferential enough, young people found them refreshingly free from the restrictions of class.

Likewise, I found American men to be better company than their British peers. Dan was not even my first North American boyfriend as I had dated a Canadian, my friend Ann’s cousin, the year before in London, as well as Paul in Ghana. Thousands of British women had found the Americans based in England “friendly and fun,” and I was no exception. During my long conversations with Dan, I found out that we shared the experience of being the first in our families to go to University. What’s more, his journey from a small town public high school in a depressed region of Ohio to Yale on a scholarship seemed more impressive than my going from Waltham Abbey to London University, probably because he made it sound that way. I didn’t appreciate at the time how unusual my experience was. Like me, he had found Africa exciting; he hoped to join the Foreign Service, and would be taking the entrance exam on his return to New York. In turn I told him of my dreams of doing something significant with my life.

One evening when we strolling on the deck in the moonlight, Dan said, “I’ve had a great idea. Why don’t we get off the ship at the Canary Islands, spend two weeks there, and then get the next one to Liverpool.” I readily agreed; I would see another new place, I could spend more time with Dan, and delay going home for another two weeks. I liked the idea of the Canary Islands; they sounded romantic and sunny, and it always seemed to

60 Ibid, 63.
61 Ibid, 52.
be raining in England in those days. The very amused bursar on the ship arranged the switch for us at no extra charge. I wrote my parents an air letter from Sierra Leone, beginning, “I’ve met an American…” and explaining that I would home two weeks late. I wasn’t worried about their reaction—they would be over it by the time I got home. (My sister told me recently that they were not worried about me.) My fellow students were not so impressed by my running off with an American. Naturally, British men resented the attraction of Americans for British women, and tended to attribute it to materialistic reasons.

Whatever my motivation, our relationship unfolded on the beautiful, still unspoiled island of Gran Canaria. We stayed in a modest guesthouse with marble floors and colored tiles on the walls, and in the evenings we danced to Spanish music and ate delicious Spanish food. Even better, the sun shone every day, the beach was beautiful, and the ocean was warm. I had grown up swimming in the North Sea, which was perpetually cold and grey. We would run in, swim vigorously for as long as we could stand it, then run out, dry off and have a cup of tea. By contrast, swimming in Las Palmas was heaven. The two weeks flew by and all too soon we had to board the ship back to England.

Dan spent a couple of days with my parents before flying back to the United States. He admired my father’s garden and my mother’s cooking; he was good looking, educated, polite and friendly. They approved. As a civil servant himself, my father was impressed by the idea of the elite Diplomatic Service. After Dan left, promising to write often, my father asked me, “Is he going to marry you?”
He did write often, easing my transition back to university that fall. Then on Friday November 22, I was in my room in the residence hall in London, listening to the radio while getting ready to go to a party. Suddenly an announcer broke in with the news that the American President had been shot in Dallas. Shocked and distraught, I ran along the hall to tell my American friend Sally, who was in the shower. At first she refused to believe it, then she burst into tears. I stayed with her to comfort her, and after much soul-searching we decided to go to the party given by a fellow student from Sudan; we needed to be with other people. Everyone there, whether British, American, or African, was mourning the loss of the young American President who had seemed to bring hope for the future of the whole world. We all just sat around drinking beer and cheap wine, feeling sad together in the cheerless semi-furnished apartment. A few days later Sally and I watched the funeral on TV, in the common room of our dorm, along with most of our fellow residents. The first live broadcast across the Atlantic, it faded in and out according to the position of the satellites. The mood was somber in London that grey November.

Kennedy was particularly well liked among young people in England because he represented youth and modernity in contrast to the “old staid” British politicians such as Prime Minister MacMillan. Lyons confirms that his assassination shocked the nation. He explains that for many Britons of my generation, it was the first negative side of America many of us had experienced, though I was certainly aware of the problem of racial prejudice both in America and in Britain. So I was surprised to get a letter from Dan complaining about some minor inconvenience he had experienced as a result of the assassination. Later I realized that I should have paid more attention to that remark, but I

62 Ibid, 84.
was young and in love, and so I wanted to believe in him. Likewise, we both ignored the fact that his career plans would not make it easy for me to have a career of my own.

Finally the Christmas vacation arrived, and I flew across the Atlantic for the first time. Dan had passed the written Foreign Service exam, and was substitute teaching in Ohio while waiting to take the oral exam. When I went to the American Embassy to get my visa, the official who interviewed me was suspicious because I said I was going to visit my boyfriend. He was afraid I would get married and stay without the proper visa. After I persuaded him that I planned to finish my degree, he reluctantly gave me a visa for three weeks. But I felt wanted and loved when Dan ran towards me at the airport in Pittsburg to welcome me. It was dark and snowing as we drove for an hour or so to Dan’s home in Ohio, but the brightly colored Christmas lights on the houses glowed cheerfully in the night. I told him again my dreams of making something of my life—later he told me that he should have listened more carefully.

When we arrived at their modest house his parents greeted me with warm hugs. I was surprised by how affectionate they were, compared with my family; I liked it. Dan was an only child born after ten years of marriage, so his parents idolized him, but they included me in their love. I’m sure my parents loved me too, but my father was strict and my mother self-absorbed. Like most English people then, they did not show affection openly. Although Bellaire was probably about the same size as my hometown just outside London, it was a run-down, depressed former coal-mining town on the Ohio River about fifty miles from Pittsburg; but that December it was looking its best thanks to the snow and Christmas decorations.
Christmas with his family was wonderful, with a huge tree, piles of presents, and a traditional turkey dinner, not lavish by American standards, but more than I was used to in post-war Britain. The difference in material comforts in the U.S. and England was still striking in the early 1960s. Hardly any British homes had central heating, telephones or refrigerators, though by 1960 most families owned a television.\textsuperscript{63} On the day after Christmas, Dan took me to dinner at the best restaurant in Wheeling, West Virginia, across the river, a huge treat for me, who never went to restaurants. After dessert, he asked me to marry him, and I didn’t even hesitate to say “yes.” He expressed some reservations about whether he could “make me happy,” but I was still too much in love to have any doubts. I brushed aside my thoughts about a career by convincing myself that that I would share his career in the diplomatic service; we would make a good team. Just as I had unrealistic ideas about Americans, Dan may have been misled by my English reserve, which was actually more the result of not being able to express my feelings than not having them at all. I recall him saying that American women “took their emotional temperature constantly.” I probably didn’t do it enough.

My brief time in America did nothing to dispel my positive image, especially when we went to New York City for New Year’s. We drove across Pennsylvania in Dan’s 1956 pale blue Buick – luxury for me since my parents still didn’t even have a car. I was amazed by how rural Pennsylvania was – I hadn’t realized how much of America was farmland. It looked a lot like England, but much bigger. New York was definitely more exciting than London in 1963, especially with all the holiday decorations and bright

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, 54.
lights. We stayed on the twentieth floor of a hotel, ate a real hamburger in Greenwich Village, and went to a Modern Jazz Quartet concert at the brand new Lincoln Center.

After the New York trip I reluctantly returned to London to prepare for my final exams in June. Although Dan passed the Foreign Service written exam, he was restless waiting for the interview, so he took a job teaching English at the Military Academy in Benghazi, Libya, beginning in January. (He taught Qaddafi as a cadet.) It never occurred to us that we could live in the same place for a year or so to get to know each other better before marrying. Dan was determined to go overseas again as soon as possible, but I needed a visa for Libya, and would have to be his wife even to live with him in the official housing. So if we wanted to be together we had to get married.

As graduation and finals approached, I found myself having doubts about getting married instead of pursuing a career. I had always planned to be a history teacher, but being a librarian sounded interesting, and I even thought about getting a PhD. I confided my doubts about my decision to one of my younger professors, who predicted, “You will probably begin your professional life in about fifteen years.” He was ahead of his time, because in even 1964 women were still expected to choose between marriage and a career; if you got married you could work until the first baby arrived, then you were supposed to be a full-time wife and mother. Nevertheless, my goal was still to have a family and a career. I wanted children, but I had seen my mother’s frustration at not being able to work outside the home, or have an income of her own. She even advised me to have my own bank account after marriage.

Despite my reservations I went ahead with the wedding. I believed that women were more independent in America, though I didn’t quite appreciate the complication of
the Foreign Service. Besides, by now it was like being on a roller coaster that I couldn’t get off, and Dan wasn’t around to confide my worries in, since he arrived in England only a few days before the wedding in the 900-year old parish church in my hometown. Sadly, his parents did not come; he only had a few friends to support him. We were very young: I was twenty-three and he had just turned twenty-six. After a honeymoon in Scotland (Dan’s choice—I preferred Greece), we began our married life in Libya. I found out while on honeymoon that I had received an Upper Second degree, good enough to go on to graduate school. I even missed my graduation in August – I was already in Libya. Reality intruded very quickly when I discovered upon arrival that in a Muslim country wives were not allowed to work. Not a very propitious start to my married life.

However, October 1965 found us driving to Washington D.C. from Ohio in our brand new Volkswagen Beetle. It was a spectacular drive through mountains covered with brilliant fall colors – a sight I had never seen before. I liked Washington from the moment I first saw broad Connecticut Avenue, lined with stately old trees in their fall foliage and handsome old apartment buildings. I was finally to achieve my dream of living in the United States; soon we would move into our own apartment right off Connecticut Avenue, overlooking Rock Creek Park.

After the year teaching in Libya, Dan had finally joined the Foreign Service, but State Department policy was to assign officers who married non-Americans (also known as alien spouses) to Washington so their wives could be “Americanized.” So his first assignment was in the Africa Bureau in Washington. After a tough job hunt in DC, where all government positions were reserved for United States citizens, including the DC Public Library, I worked for a year as a claims adjuster at an insurance company. I was
thrilled to get my social security number and my first paycheck, and to be actually working after a frustrating year in Libya; I was soon promoted to answering letters and phone calls from people with complaints or questions. It was an excellent introduction to American life, but when a friend told me about The World Bank I immediately applied. Because it was an International Organization non-Americans were welcome, and I was offered a job in the West Africa Information Center. The staff of four in the Center supported the economists and engineers working on projects such as roads, dams, and education in West Africa with information and documentation. It was a great place to work; not only was the work itself interesting and seemingly worthwhile, but the staff was truly international. The social problems that emerged later regarding the projects the Bank financed were not yet evident, at least to a low-level staff member.

Living in Washington in the mid-1960s, I soon came to understand that American society may have been less class ridden than England, but racism was still a real issue. The Civil Rights Act had passed in July 1964, and I naively assumed that meant an end to racial discrimination. However, in my very first job I worked alongside a young African-American woman from Richmond Virginia, who told me just how much work there was yet to do. Moreover, Dan worked with a student intern from Mississippi who further educated me on the situation in the Deep South. I was surprised to find that Americans thought that the British were not prejudiced against people of color. I remember giving Rhodesia as an example of the fallacy of that idea. Rhodesia, a British colony, had just issued its own Unilateral Declaration of Independence in November 1965, in an effort to delay an immediate transition to black majority rule.
Any thoughts that living in Washington isolated us from what was going on elsewhere were dispelled when Martin Luther King was assassinated. Riots broke out in parts of Washington on the Friday afternoon, my first direct experience of civil unrest. When the World Bank sent us home from work early after a curfew was declared, Dan and I offered to give a ride home to a Kenyan colleague, as the busses weren’t running. She lived on 16th Street, near where the riots were taking place, and driving back to our apartment we encountered blocked streets. That evening, as we stood on the roof of our apartment building and watched the flames across the river, I was not afraid, but I felt very sad about the tragic loss of another great American leader, and began to question whether America was the utopia I had thought it to be.

The State Department expedited my citizenship and I became an American in August 1967, at the height of the Vietnam War; when I took the oath, there were few young men present, since becoming a citizen meant that you would be immediately drafted. Despite, or maybe because of, my concerns about race relations and the war, I wanted to be able to vote and participate fully in my adopted country. We had a party to celebrate that evening. I wrote to my parents a bit hesitantly to tell them, but my mother wrote back, “I thought you had been nationalized (sic!) a long time ago.”

Despite the war and the civil rights issues, the three years in Washington confirmed my impression that the United States was where I wanted to be. My marriage was secure, I had a good job that I enjoyed, we had made interesting friends, and I loved the cosmopolitan environment of Washington, where I had the sense of being at the centre of the world, where things were happening. Despite the assassination of Martin Luther King, the Civil Rights movement seemed to be making progress. Then Dan got his
first overseas assignment, to the tiny country of Burundi, in Central Africa. My life would change drastically once again.
Chapter Four

Foreign Service Wife:
Burundi, 1968-1970

“No other life style demands so much of a spouse in terms of constant readjustment to foreign cultures and stressful situations.”

Bujumbura, March 1970. The pediatrician’s shabby waiting room was hot and crowded with mothers and babies. I smiled at the other mothers as they chatted among themselves in Kirundi, the language of Burundi, which I didn’t understand. One or two greeted me in French, which I spoke quite well. I held my newborn baby anxiously, because Andrew had come home from the hospital with a staph infection that had terrified his father and me. We had rushed him to the French pediatrician, who prescribed baby antibiotics, but doubted there were any to found in Bujumbura. Dan called the Embassy where he worked to ask them to fly some in from Nairobi, Kenya, the nearest large city, then went the rounds of the pharmacies in town. I stayed at home giving Andrew cool baths to reduce his fever, and praying that we would get the medicine in time. I was so relieved when Dan came home with the precious drops, and Andrew recovered in a few days, to our great relief.

So here I was again at Doctor Lamartine’s office, but this time just for a checkup. We finally got to see her, and after giving Andrew a clean bill of health she asked a favor of me, “When the women in the waiting room ask you what you feed him be sure to tell them that you breastfeed,” she said. “Nestlé is marketing powdered baby milk here and the Africans buy it thinking it will make their babies healthy like European babies. But

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because it’s expensive they water it down so their babies don’t get enough nourishment. Breastfeeding would be much better for them, and besides they would get the immunities from the mother.” I willingly agreed, thinking how ironic it was that breastfeeding was now becoming popular again in the United States and Britain, after a generation of mothers who preferred the convenience of bottles. I wanted to feed Andrew myself because I had read how much better it was for him. I did not realize that it would also be a political act.

Dan was political officer at the very small American Embassy in Bujumbura, on Lake Tanganyika. Burundi is a beautiful, mountainous country sometimes called “the Switzerland of Africa” that, together with Rwanda, had made up the German colony of Ruanda-Urundi. The capital was a small attractive town on the narrow plain between the mountains and Lake Tanganyika. The colony was awarded to Belgium after the First World War to administer under a League of Nations Mandate, later converted to a United Nations Trust Territory. At independence in 1962, Rwanda and Burundi became two nations once more. Burundi couldn’t have been more different from Ghana, and not just because it was smaller, poorer and formerly Belgian rather than British; the people were by nature much more reserved and thus less friendly, but also not as cosmopolitan or as well-educated as the Ghanaians.

Moreover, I had to speak French most of the time because Burundi had been a Belgian colony, so French was literally the lingua franca. There were not many Americans or British people in the country: four or five Americans in the Embassy, a few missionaries, and the “British Consul” who was the manager of Barclay’s Bank. There was also an aid worker named Warren Weinstein, who was killed in Pakistan in April
2015 by an American drone after a lifetime of service overseas. Dan had had French lessons in Washington before leaving, but at first I had to rely on my high school French because at that time wives were not given language instruction. However, because I had always wanted to speak French fluently, I worked hard to improve it, listening to the radio and reading French magazines and newspapers. There was plenty of opportunity for conversational practice at social events; we even played bridge in French. I remembered wryly my French teacher at school telling my mother I wouldn’t need more than “O Level” French.

I needed an occupation, so I found a job teaching English in the Catholic girls’ High School. However, I discovered that as the wife of a Foreign Service Officer (FSO), I had to ask the permission of the American Ambassador if I wanted to work. When I met with him, he agreed, but said patronizingly, “I expect you need the money.” The job paid $75 a month, so needless to say I wasn’t doing it for the money; it gave me a sense of purpose, an activity of my own away from the Embassy, and a chance to get to know some local people. The school was a large airy building on a hill just outside town. Most of the teachers were Belgian and Burundian nuns, while most of the students were Tutsis from the ruling class. There was quite a traditional curriculum of English literature, including Shakespeare and Dickens. *Macbeth* was a big hit, because they could really relate to the story of tribal chiefs murdering each other. Teaching English conversation was more challenging, since the girls were brought up to be quiet and submissive. I worked hard to get them to talk in class, and I knew I had succeeded when one of the nuns came into the classroom to see what all the noise was about.
Soon I discovered that I had another job – that of Foreign Service wife. I was expected to call on other diplomatic wives, accompany Dan to dinners and receptions, and do my share of entertaining. There was even a place on the husband’s performance review (known as the “efficiency report”) for the wife’s contribution. The husband’s boss would note whether the wife had done a good job of representing the United States or whether she was a “handicap.”\(^{65}\) I did everything I was supposed to do to help Dan’s career, but it was not easy because the American Ambassador to Burundi and his wife were very “old school,” and insisted everything be done according to strict protocol. It felt very much like “playing a role,” but I did my best, although I had no background in giving dinner parties or formal entertaining. I had never even been to one before marrying Dan. Although I had inherited a cook, Stephan, from our predecessors, I had to plan the meals, invite the guests and work out the seating plan. This was a very serious business in the diplomatic service – the guests had to be seated in strict order of importance, or they would be offended.

I was not the only wife who was already questioning the role, according to Jewell Fenzi, who wrote an oral history of Foreign Service wives. Some senior wives accepted it, even welcomed it as being more interesting than the traditional housewife role back in the States. Fenzi’s book includes a comment from a senior ambassador’s wife in 1994: “on the whole I think most Foreign Service wives looked forward to a life that was going to be full of adventure and possibly excitement.”\(^{66}\) On the other hand, Fenzi quotes a younger wife who had been in the Peace Corps: “I had myself been a teacher, and


\(^{66}\) Ibid.
enjoyed a very important independent role, I found it difficult then to be a Foreign Service spouse.” She goes on, “I had grown up in a very self-sufficient family; we had no servants…in the Foreign Service, for the first time, I was put in an environment where I did not have what I considered any useful role.” For my part, I welcomed the adventure and excitement, but also preferred to have some “useful work.”

Although wives were expected to be official representatives of the United States, they were given no training or financial recompense. A survey conducted in 1985 by the Association of Foreign Service Women concluded that the majority of spouses found the representational role “time-consuming, tiring, often boring and personally unfulfilling.” Protocol was very strict; for example, we had to call on senior wives of the American and other embassies and leave a card on arrival at a new post. This was quite a hardship for me in my second post with a small baby. The ambassador’s wife automatically had a leadership role and had the right to tell the other wives what to do (and what not to do); for example, we had to attend all the official receptions, properly attired of course, arriving early and leaving after the last guest left. We also had to attend many local ceremonies and occasions; the famous Burundi drummers would perform while we drank tall bottles of Primus, the local beer, and ate spit-roasted goat, listening to officials making endless speeches in French. Since we represented the United States, we were expected to behave in a certain way, and not express our own opinions if they differed from official United States government policy. Years later, after a dinner party in Washington, Dan made me call a South African diplomat and apologize for having

\[67\] Ibid, 139.
\[68\] Report on the Role of the Spouse, xiii.
criticized the policy of separating workers from their families under apartheid. The diplomat was very gracious, saying he understood my feelings.

Moreover, Dan’s career always came first; FSOs were expected to work at any time of the day or night if required, and the needs of the service always came before the needs of the family. According to the Report on the Role of the Spouse, many wives felt “like their partner’s baggage.” Other grievances with which I agreed were the disruption of their own career plans, restrictive US government rules on travel, and the wife’s almost complete responsibility for family life because of their husband’s total commitment to the job. A wife quoted in the report describes the typical marriage: “My husband lives, eats and breathes his job…His dedication to the job often conflicts with my needs, but the job always comes first.” The report concludes, “It requires flexibility, a sense of humor, and emotional stability to keep moving around the world, reinventing one’s role, and adapting to every new circumstance.”

About a year after we arrived in Burundi, I became pregnant. For me, this was a longed-for baby; Dan was the one who had insisted on waiting until we were overseas and could have a nanny. Despite the risks of giving birth in Africa, such as infection, the poorly equipped hospital and no obstetrician, I decided to have my baby in Burundi. I could have been evacuated to Germany two months before the due date, and wait around in a maternity ward in the military hospital at Wiesbaden until the baby came. Or I could have gone to England to stay with my parents. Neither option appealed at the time, though later I wished I had gone to England. More than anything else, I wanted Dan to be there for the birth, so he would “bond” with his child, according to the latest thinking on

69 Ibid, 11.
70 Ibid, 1.
parenting. I also had a copy of Grantly Dick-Reid’s *Childbirth without Fear*, and was convinced of the importance of natural childbirth.

Andrew was born in the Clinique Prince Louis Rwagasore (named after Burundi’s first Prime Minister, assassinated three weeks after the election), which still exists. According to the picture online, it looks much the same now as it did in 1970 – an aging colonial building, picturesque but dilapidated. When Dr. Verstraaten, the Belgian surgeon who delivered expatriates’ babies, saw *Childbirth without Fear* on my bedside table he told me that I could forget about it – he didn’t believe in it. The story around town was that he preferred dealing with unconscious people. As the labor progressed, I complained about the air-conditioning being too cold, and before I could object he gave me a shot that put me to sleep: yet another reminder that I was no longer in charge of my life. When I woke up the doctor handed me a beautiful healthy redheaded baby boy; at least Dan had witnessed the birth, and was so moved he rushed out of the room in tears. Although I was disappointed at having missed the big moment, I was thrilled to hold my baby for the first time.

I went home the next morning to our bougainvillea-draped house, with views of the mountains behind and Lake Tanganyika in front. I loved seeing the storms come over the mountains in the rainy season, but now it was the dry season and the air was so dusty you couldn’t even see the other side of the lake. Dan had to spend the night with me in the clinic because there was no night staff or food service. There were also no baths, so the one thing I really wanted was a shower, but the water was off at home. It stayed off for three days, one of the joys of living in Africa. The cook boiled water for drinking and bathing the baby, but I desperately wanted to stand in the shower for a long time.
When Andrew had recovered from the staph infection, I had to leave him with the nanny while we went out to receptions and dinners. Having a baby was no excuse for not carrying on with my diplomatic duties. I could never completely enjoy myself, since I was either missing Andrew or worrying about him, but I had no choice. The novelty of the diplomatic social life had worn off by now, and I was increasingly finding it superficial and tedious. People ate and drank too much; small talk substituted for real conversation, especially at cocktail parties.

Meanwhile, Burundi was torn in two by ongoing conflict between the Tutsi and Hutu. Burundi is unusual in Africa in that the borders are the same as the historic kingdom, but sadly this did not prevent ethnic violence from occurring after independence. The reasons for this are complex, but not rooted in deep-seated ethnic hostility as many assume. There are three ethnic groups (not tribes) in Burundi: Tutsi, Hutu and Twa, pygmies who live in the forests, who share the same language and culture. The Twa were the original inhabitants, followed by the Hutu, agriculturists of Bantu descent, related to most people in sub-Saharan Africa. Sometime in the distant past the Tutsi immigrated from the north, seeking pasture for their cattle. For centuries the Tutsi and Hutu lived together peacefully in a patron-client relationship, in which each owed obligations to the other. The Mwami, a semi-divine king, ruled the country, with the assistance of the Ganwe, a princely caste of Tutsis. The Tutsi were the dominant group, but some Hutu were chiefs or in positions at court.71

The seeds of the later conflict were laid down during the colonial period, intensified by the way Belgian officials acted just before and during independence. Since there were too few Belgian officials in Rwanda-Urundi to govern directly, they relied on local leaders to enforce their laws, including the hated corvée, or forced labor system. Coming from a country with an aristocracy, they assumed that the Tutsi, and especially the Ganwe, were the aristocrats of Burundi, so not only did they appoint fewer Hutu to positions of power than they had held in pre-colonial Burundi, but also the colonial educational system favored the Tutsis. Naturally, these measures provoked resentment among the Hutu in Burundi, but the situation in Rwanda was much worse. Traditionally the king and Tutsis were more autocratic there, so the Belgian policy caused such resentment that the Hutus rebelled in 1959, just before independence. They had the support of the current Belgian Resident, who thought the revolt would lead to a more democratic state (they were under pressure from the United Nations to implement a democracy in their colonies.) After many Tutsis were massacred and forced out of the government, many thousands fled to Burundi.

Not only did the Rwandan refugees promote the Tutsi cause in Burundi, but also the Burundian Tutsis were terrified of the same thing happening there. This was the first time a clear-cut distinction was made between Tutsi and Hutu in Burundi; traditionally the boundaries between the two groups were flexible. At the election held in 1961, just before independence, the Uprona party, headed by Prince Louis Rwagasore, won decisively. Although he was a royal Tutsi, Rwagasore was a charismatic leader whom the Hutus supported. He was left leaning and close to other radical African leaders such as Julius Nyerere of Tanzania. René Lemarchand believes that the subsequent history of
Burundi might have been very different had he not been assassinated. He was murdered by a Greek employed by the opposition majority Tutsi party, with the support of the Belgians, who thought they would not be able to control him because of his popularity.\footnote{René Lemarchand, \textit{Rwanda and Burundi}. (London, Pall Mall Press, 1970), 58-59.}

In 1965 there was an abortive plot by Hutu army officers to kidnap the king and take over the government. The king fled the country and Captain Michel Micombero, a young Hima Tutsi (not high ranking) became President. This was in effect a military coup and there was no attempt at imposing constitutional government. What’s more, there were reprisals against the Hutus, and many army officers and other educated Hutus were executed. This was the situation when we arrived in 1968. Although I had lived in Ghana under Nkrumah this was a dictatorship of quite another order. Nkrumah had been elected, and although he imprisoned some opponents, he did not indulge in wholesale massacres. Despite his well-deserved reputation, Micombero had a certain personal charm and was fascinated by the United States, especially the space program. He even invited the American Embassy staff to his residence to listen to the Moon Landing on the radio, a very bizarre experience. My husband was in charge of the plans that had to be drawn up in case the capsule landed in Lake Tanganikya. Luckily for all, it didn’t.

Needless to say, fear and suspicion prevailed, especially in Bujumbura. During our time a purported Hutu plot (never proven to have actually existed) resulted in more executions of leading Hutus, some of whom we knew. We were obliged to attend a Te Deum service of thanksgiving for the safety of the President in the Cathedral afterwards. Soldiers holding rifles lined the aisles; the Tutsi Archbishop preached a sermon about Cain and Abel.
We tried to break out of the diplomatic isolation by making local friends whenever possible. Our best friend, Raymond Setukuru, was a Hutu about our age who, after being educated by American missionaries, had attended American University in Washington, DC, so he spoke perfect English. Hearty and gregarious with an infectious laugh, he was an economist who had worked for the World Bank, but returned to Burundi to help his country, even though he knew it was dangerous for him as a prominent Hutu. We enjoyed many evenings with him chatting about Washington or American politics. Then one evening about ten o’clock the doorbell rang. When Dan answered it he found Raymond standing there trembling. He asked if he could spend the night with us because he had heard that there was a threat to his life; he would be safe with us, as no one would attack a diplomat’s residence. Dan gave him a beer and he filled us in on what was going on. He was the highest-ranking Hutu in the government, and although he was not “political,” certain elements among the Tutsis resented his position, so they planned to kill him. That particular threat blew over, but he was killed in 1972 during the first comprehensive massacre of Hutus.\(^\text{73}\) It was a tragic loss for his country as well as a personal one for his friends and family.

In the summer of 1970 we received our next assignment with no advance consultation; the State Department simply told you when and where you were going. I had been hoping for a post where I could have more opportunities to work or pursue my education, but Dan came home one day to tell me that we were being sent to South Africa. I was appalled. “How can I go to South Africa when I can’t eat South African

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food,” I replied; I had boycotted South African products since my student days in London. “Well, I suppose we could ask for a different post,” Dan said reluctantly. I knew it wouldn’t look good for his career. “I guess we don’t want the United States to be represented there only by people who agree with apartheid,” I ventured. Moreover, Dan would be in charge of relations with the extra-parliamentary opposition, which sounded interesting. So we agreed to go, giving up our home leave since the embassy there needed Dan urgently.

Living in Burundi, a country ruled by a dictator, where a large number of people lived in constant fear for their lives, only enhanced my sense of powerlessness as the wife of a diplomat. Apart from teaching school and the few close relationships we had with local people I didn’t feel very engaged in the country as I had in Ghana. My training and background had not prepared me for life in such a restricted environment; most of my social life was ordained by the needs of Dan’s job, and I was not even able to have my baby or care for him in the way I wanted to. And now I was going to another country with serious racial conflict. It was with great apprehension that I boarded the plane to Nairobi, from where we would fly to Johannesburg to begin yet another new chapter.
Chapter Five


“Now you have touched the women you have struck a rock.”
Song from the Women’s Anti-Pass Rally in 1956.

Early on a warm sunny morning in Pretoria, South Africa, an American toddler
with bright red curly hair sits on the back step of a ranch-style house with a kindly
middle-aged African woman wearing a cotton overall and headscarf. They are both eating
bowls of mealie pap, the breakfast porridge of South Africa. I have no idea what they are
talking about, if anything. However, I can tell that he feels very secure in Martha’s
company, which is comforting because I have to go out to an embassy wives’ coffee. I
hate having to leave Andrew so much, but it’s 1971 and as a Foreign Service wife (my
husband Dan is political officer in the American Embassy) I’m expected to attend all
official functions.

That is my favorite memory of Martha, who was our nanny for two years in
South Africa. The little boy is my son Andrew, now in his forties and a father of two sons
himself. Born in Burundi, he moved to South Africa when he was five months old. Our
South Africa posting got off to a traumatic start when Dan’s father died suddenly weeks
after our arrival. This was the second time that year that I had experienced a death in the
family so far away; my beloved great-aunt Ada (Auntie) had died just before Andrew was
born. We didn’t even get the news until the day of the funeral, because the Burundi post
office put the telegram in our post office box, which we only checked twice a week when
the plane came in from Brussels. At least this time we made it back for the funeral, even
though the trip took two days; fortunately we were able to stay with his mother for
Christmas and New Year’s before returning to South Africa. Nevertheless, it was very hard on Dan; his father was only sixty-two years’ old, and he had never even met his first grandchild. Dan was an only child, so he would now be responsible for his mother who only had Social Security to live on, having never worked except as a piano teacher. I loved his parents too and missed his father. Leaving his mother alone back in Ohio was heart breaking.

Occasionally, someone comes along who is just what you need at the time; Martha was that person for me. We hadn’t hired a nanny before we rushed back to the States, so when we returned I was relieved to have a referral from her previous employers, who were leaving South Africa. I liked her immediately; she had a warm, outgoing personality and was easy to talk to. She had an eighth grade education, so she could have been a primary school teacher back home, but she made more money working in the city for American families. Martha had three school-age children of her own, taken care of by her mother back in her home town, and whom she saw for two weeks a year when she had her vacation, and when we were travelling. Their home was in an African “Homeland,” where there was no work and the land was too poor to support a family by farming; migrant labor was the only alternative to poverty. Martha sent most of her

74 “Previously called Reserves, [the poor, fragmented areas] are now grouped into ten units officially called Homelands reflecting the attempt of the government to suggest that they are the homes of those assigned to them. They are presented as the territories of separate National States. Every African is assigned to a homeland, irrespective of whether they were born there or have ever lived there. When the regime declares a homeland independent, all those who have been allocated to it lose their South African nationality.” From Hilda Bernstein, For their Triumphs & for their Tears: Women in Apartheid South Africa. (London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1985), 125.
wages home to her mother to pay for the children’s food, clothes and school fees. She must have missed them dreadfully.

I first had servants in Burundi, where we had a cook and a nanny, as well as a gardener and a night guard. It was a new experience for me, because my parents came from the class that had supplied the servants before the war; my father’s mother was a “downstairs” servant in the country house of a local aristocrat before marriage, and of course my great-aunt was a lady’s maid. I was never really comfortable having servants in the house; I felt guilty about someone else doing work I could have done myself. I also disliked the lack of privacy; I could never ignore their presence like people who grew up with servants could. However, at least the servants in Burundi had homes, however modest, and families of their own, whereas Martha just had a room in our backyard, hundreds of miles away from her family. What’s more, since we spent half the year in Pretoria, and the other half in Cape Town, following the South African government, she had to leave her friends in Cape Town, where there were more people who spoke her language.75

Martha and I shared the work – I did most of the cooking and took care of Andrew when I didn’t have to go out. I don’t know how I would have managed without her, due to my “representational” duties and frequent moving house. Cleaning the house in Cape Town was especially hard because it was heated it with a coal fire that left a film of greasy black coal dust over everything; we didn’t have a dishwasher or clothes dryer,

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75 The South African government is divided into three parts: the Executive (the Cabinet), the Legislature (Parliament), and Judiciary (the courts). The Executive was in Pretoria, Parliament in Cape Town, and the Supreme Court in Bloemfontein. Some members of the diplomatic corps would spend six months of the year in Pretoria, but move to Cape Town when Parliament was in session, for the other six months.
which was typical of South Africa in those days, where servants took the place of technology. It made me appreciate what my mother had to do when I was growing up, and understand why she yearned for help in the house.

I was especially glad to have Martha’s help because I was pregnant a good part of the time we were in South Africa. First I had a miscarriage, then got pregnant again right away with Mark, another redheaded son, who was born in Cape Town when Andrew was only two. Having a baby in Cape Town was a much better experience than I had had in Bujumbura; Mark was born in Kingsbury Maternity Home, with no anesthetic and a midwife in attendance the whole time. They even brought me a cup of tea during the labor, something that would be unheard of at home; I felt so good afterwards I was able to walk to my room and eat a three-course lunch. Then I enjoyed a few days of being pampered and getting to know Mark, also unknown in the United States. Andrew was not allowed to visit, so Martha brought him to wave at me through the window of my first-floor room. I should have been able to relax knowing that he was in such good hands, except that while I was there Dan was tear gassed while observing a student demonstration on the steps of the Cathedral.

I had badly missed my mother after Andrew was born in Burundi, but having Martha was nearly as good (or maybe better.) She took care of Mark by strapping him to her back African-style while she cleaned the house, so I could spend time with Andrew, who was quite jealous of the new baby, typical for a two year old. He was a very active toddler who would run away if you didn’t hold tightly to his hand. Martha took him to the park when I was too pregnant to run after him; she enjoyed getting together with the other
nannies anyway. She had no problem controlling Andrew: “You’ll be squashed like a bug,” she would tell him to stop him running into the road.

When my mother came to visit she and Martha became good friends; she reminded me of my mother in many ways. Unlike many employers we gave her Sundays off, and she liked to get dressed up to go to church in a suit and matching hat, just like my mother. As a good Methodist she didn’t drink alcohol, even refusing to eat food I cooked that had wine in it; my mother didn’t drink much because her father drank too much. Both of them were quite particular about food. When I bought whole wheat bread and skim milk because they were healthier, Martha said these were for poor people, so I had to buy white bread and whole milk for her. My mother was also fussy about her bread and milk. Sadly, Martha not being able to enjoy her own children made it possible for me to enjoy motherhood; since she did so much of the housework I could spend quality time with Andrew. I hadn’t had much experience taking care of children, just one summer as an “au pair” in Italy, so Martha was my mentor as well as my helper. She had a firm, but loving, way of dealing with him, and was much more patient than I was. I loved my children very much, and enjoyed reading to them, playing with them, and taking them on outings, but I was never very patient. The truth is that Martha’s labor made my life easier and enabled me to attend diplomatic functions, entertain, and participate in women’s groups.

I never talked politics with Martha, so I don’t know what she thought about our inviting black South Africans to our home, including radicals like Steve Biko, who came to our house when he was a student leader. We were not in danger because of our diplomatic immunity, but it was risky for black South Africans, and I didn’t want to get
her into trouble. I do know that when President Hastings Banda of Malawi visited South
Africa she was holding Andrew when an airplane flew over. She pointed to the plane and
said “that’s Banda” proudly. After that Andrew thought Banda was the name for an
airplane. Banda was the only African President to maintain diplomatic relations with
apartheid South Africa, in return for aid. His visit was widely condemned in the rest of
Africa, but at least it meant something to Martha.

It wasn’t always easy to treat an African domestic worker like a human being in
apartheid South Africa. When we moved into our permanent house in Pretoria, newly
acquired by the embassy, we found that the toilet in Martha’s quarters didn’t have a seat.
So Dan requested one from the Embassy, only to be told by the white South African
employee in charge of housing that servants didn’t get toilet seats. Dan made sure that
that policy was changed immediately. Similarly, when we travelled in South Africa we
couldn’t take Martha with us because the accommodations for African nannies in the
hotels were not acceptable, and it gave her a chance to visit her family. One hotel we
stayed in had two sittings for dinner – an early one for children and nannies and a later
one for adults. So I went down with the children, and had a great time chatting to the
nannies, who were very amused that I was eating with them.

Martha was Xhosa, from Ciskei in the Eastern Cape, and I confess that I cannot
remember her family name probably because of the way servants are always known by
their first names. While I remember the names of people we knew in other contexts by
both names, she is simply “Martha.” Just as her employers always knew my great aunt as
“Poole”, even after she retired, and the uniformed chauffeur who came to pick her up for
visits to her former employer was known as “Pulsford.” Moreover, we were guilty of a
particularly African colonialist attitude in that we didn’t even know her African name. “Martha” would have been the name she adopted when she became a domestic worker, to make it easier for the English-speaking employers.

It was hard not to feel complicit with apartheid despite our efforts to treat Martha fairly. Jacklyn Cock describes her important book, Maids and Madams: Domestic Workers under Apartheid, as “an indictment of the liberal mentality which asserts the humanity of Africans, only to deny the human needs and feelings of African servants.”

In South Africa, the Pass Laws governed where Africans could live and work. As Winnie Mandela said, they could not have houses, work, stay in towns, register births, or even die without them. So fifty percent of working African women, almost one million, were domestic workers; their only other choice was to live in poverty in the homelands. There were no regulations governing their wages or working conditions, so many of them didn’t get even a whole day off every week, and some didn’t get any vacation. Pay was totally determined by the employer; the employee had no negotiating power whatsoever. They had no sick leave, and were completely dependent on their employer’s good will if they were needed at home to take care of their families. Moreover, part of their wages was in kind, such as food and clothing, a system that fosters dependency. Since they often lived at their workplace, their employers’ control extended to their private lives including what they ate, whether they could have visitors or not, or even listen to the radio. They were vulnerable to instant dismissal which also meant losing their home.

77 “For the majority of people in South Africa there is no freedom of movement in their own country. Their movement is controlled by a system of regulations known as Pass Laws, which apply only to Africans, and form part of the policy and practice of influx control. Every African over the age of 16 must carry a set of identity documents known as a Pass.” Bernstein, Triumphs, 127.
Most South African domestic servants were female—the men were needed to work in the mines—and they were triply oppressed: as blacks, as women and as unprotected workers. Not only was South Africa the worst kind of colonial racist society, but also South African society defined women as “secondary, inferior and dependent.”

All married African women and all women below the age of twenty-one were defined as minors. The husband retained the power of property and the wife couldn’t enter into a contract without his consent. How could Martha possibly be a minor? She was one of the most responsible and competent people I have ever encountered. Indeed, many rural women were de facto heads of household since their husbands were working in the mines.

Whereas in nineteenth-century England being a maid was something women did between leaving home and getting married, in South Africa domestic service was a lifetime occupation, though most women intended to return home eventually, building and furnishing small houses in their homelands while working in the city. No wonder one of the maids Cock interviewed told her, “We are slaves in our own country.”

If they lived with their employers in white areas they were not allowed to have their children with them, even if the employers were willing. Indeed, the government even instituted fines for employers as well as the servants. Unlike the men in the mines, they didn’t even have regular contact with people from their own region, an important issue in South Africa, where there are many different African languages. Moreover, the social gap between domestic workers and their employers was wide; it was especially depressing for domestic workers to be exposed to a vastly higher standard of living at such close proximity.

79 Cock, Maids, 12.
80 Ibid, 92.
quarters. Hilda Bernstein points out that while South Africa was famous for its hospitality, it was based on cheap African labor.  

Nevertheless, South African maids did find ways to fight back against the restrictive laws. For example, they frequently had lovers, children or friends to stay with them in their rooms, with or without the knowledge of their employers. Rebecca Ginsburg explains that although domestic workers had a reputation for conservatism, the actual situation was more nuanced, as they used the “weapons of the weak,” such as gossiping about their employers, stealing from them and hiding guests in the back room. My research on maids in middle-class English households showed much the same behavior. As in nineteenth-century England, the workers wore a mask of deference in the presence of their employers, hiding their real opinions, though if they were unhappy it was harder for them to change jobs than in England because their permits were tied to their employers. Regardless, Ginsburg observes that many domestic workers refused to “allow apartheid to get in the way of their pursuing meaningful lives,” and that they contributed to the downfall of the influx policy.

Maybe because the efforts to separate the races weren’t completely successful, the two years during which we lived in South Africa saw an intensification of the government’s efforts to implement apartheid through a plethora of restrictive laws, resulting in more opposition groups being immobilized through banning and harassment of leaders, passports withdrawn, and detention without trial. Homes and offices were raided by Special Branch and documents removed; some friends of ours suffered

81 Bernstein, Triumphs, 66.
83 Ibid, 29.
midnight raids. In 1969, just before we arrived, the notorious BOSS law was passed. This law decreed that any demonstration that caused embarrassment to the government was deemed to be an act of terrorism; in effect this severely restricted the right to protest. Radical Organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan African Congress (PAC) had been banned since the early 1960s, after the Sharpeville Massacre that took place when police fired at a peaceful demonstration against the Pass Laws in 1959, but the new legislation made it dangerous even for white liberal groups to stage protests. Then in 1970, the Bantu Laws Amendment Act gave the government the power to control African labor and make it completely migratory, by removing African locations, villages and hostels from white areas. The Bantu Homeland Citizenship Act of 1970 decreed that every African would become a citizen of a homeland and not of South Africa, or to quote a Minister in Parliament, to “enable the so-called urbanized Bantu person to find a home for his political aspirations with the people to whom he belongs.”

The intention of these laws was the complete geographic separation of Africans and whites, but of course it was impossible to fully enforce them; domestic workers being an excellent example. As Ginsburg concludes, “female migrants undermined apartheid’s vision of perfect racial geographies,” simply by living in white areas.

The Black Sash was a non-violent white women’s resistance organization that was still active when I was in South Africa, trying to protest and mitigate the effects of apartheid laws on Africans. Founded in 1955, originally to campaign against the removal of Coloured, or mixed race, voters from the voters' roll in the Cape Province, as the apartheid system began to reach into every aspect of South African life, members

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84 Ibid, 172.
85 Ibid, 111.
demonstrated against the Pass Laws and the introduction of other apartheid legislation. The Black Sash grew very quickly at first, but after an attempt to turn it into a multi-racial organization the government cracked down. Many members left, but the smaller group continued to work tirelessly against apartheid by organizing protests, operating advice centers for Africans caught up in the byzantine Pass Law system, helping those forced to leave their homes due to the removals, and educating the white population in the sufferings of the African people. Their main activities were silent protests, publishing a magazine and pamphlets educating people on forthcoming laws, and operating Advice Offices to provide help for Africans caught up in the brutal system. As Marcella Naidoo, the National Director said in 2005, its members "used the relative safety of their privileged racial classification to speak out against the erosion of human rights in the country."86 Their main goal, however, was to puncture the bubble in which whites, and especially white women, lived and open their eyes to the abuses perpetrated on Africans, including their own workers.

As part of this campaign, the Black Sash organized a tour of Soweto, the black township outside Johannesburg, for the diplomatic wives’ club. I remember seeing miles and miles of unpaved streets lined with small tin-roofed cinder block houses interspersed by simple shops, cafes and churches. During a simple lunch in a church hall there were talks about the difficulties Africans faced as a result of the Pass Laws and other restrictions they suffered under in their own country. Maybe because of my feelings for Martha, as well as being a mother myself, since then I have been passionate about parents who are forcibly separated from their children. Mothers were forced to seek work as live-

in servants in the cities, or endure a long commute to and from the townships, just in order to support their families and earn the money to pay for a decent education for their children. Education was free for white children but not for Africans. Fathers had to work in the mines where families were not allowed to join them; they had to live in worker’s dormitories that were no better than prisons. The only alternative was subsistence farming in the “homelands.” Although I was already familiar with the “facts,” seeing the actual places where Africans lived and the distance from the white areas where they worked was eye-opening. They often had to leave home and return in darkness. Moreover, many of the diplomatic wives were not even aware of the conditions under which African workers lived. It was easy to stay in that bubble if you were white.

Although I knew Barbara Masekela87 in Ghana almost a decade earlier, I did not meet any African women activists in South Africa. Many South African dissidents went into exile, especially after the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan African Congress (PAC) were banned. Since those organizations had gone underground, it was extremely difficult to meet their members. In better days, the multiracial Federation of South African Women (FSAW) had been established in 1954 with the goals of freedom from apartheid, freedom for women and trade union rights. Lilian Ngoyi, an African, became President, and Helen Joseph, a white South African, the Secretary. When the government tried to extend the Pass Laws to women in 1955 the Federation of South African Women organized protests outside the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The second of these, on August 9, 1956, drew 20,000 women from across South Africa. Because of

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protests the government didn’t succeed in actually imposing the Pass Laws on African women until 1963, by which time the FWSA had been forced underground, along with the ANC and PAC. As Bernstein observes, it had taken the government eleven years, during which time “the courage, the discipline, the unity of women had been demonstrated over and over again.”

The only member of the FASW whom I met was Helen Joseph, when we were able to visit her at her home to which she had been confined for years as a banned person. When we visited she had had cancer, so her ban was temporarily lifted and people could visit her. As one of the organizers of the 1955 march, she was put on trial for treason, along with Nelson Mandela and thirty other radicals, but they were acquitted. In 1962 Joseph and Ngoyi formed the Human Rights Welfare Committee, with the aim of supporting African anti-apartheid activists who had been deported to remote rural areas. With two companions she travelled throughout South Africa on a two-month journey, finding many of the banished and letting their families know of their situation. She also alerted the international community to what was happening through speeches, letters, and the manuscript of a book smuggled to London. The international furor she stirred up helped to embarrass the government into abandoning its policy of banishment. In the meantime Joseph had been served with a further, more restrictive banning order and became the first person in South Africa to be placed under house arrest in October 1962. The original five-year order was renewed in 1967. She also had to endure telephone death threats, bizarre hoaxes, a failed booby-trap bomb, and shots fired into her bungalow.


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Many other white South African women actually risked house arrest, imprisonment, or worse, and not all the danger was “official.” The publication of Jacklyn Cock’s book resulted in abusive phone calls and a dynamite attack on her house.  

As a result of interest in the United States in conditions in South Africa, Attorney General Ramsey Clark visited Cape Town when we were there on a fact-finding trip for the Lawyers’ Committee on Civil Rights. Dan was in charge of the visit, so we met, and even entertained in our home, several important members of the opposition, including Helen Suzman. This remarkable woman was a Member of Parliament (MP) for more than thirty years, all of them in opposition. She started as a member of the United Party, the party representing most of the English-speaking white South Africans. They claimed to believe in racial equality, but in practice went along with apartheid because it suited their personal interests. Having left the United Party on a question of principle, she founded the Progressive Party with a handful of other MPs. From 1961-1974 she was the sole Progressive Party MP, and in many instances, the only Member to actively oppose restrictive legislation. Despite her activism, Suzman’s constituency in Johannesburg consistently reelected her. A quotation from her autobiography sums up her mission:

> A voice in Parliament to speak up for the disenfranchised millions, who refused to compromise on individual liberty, human rights and the rule of law…I was convinced that I represented a point of view which still existed in South Africa—despite intimidation, despite the bullying of the government, and the toady ing of the one-time anti-government forces…My job in Parliament was to be a voice of dissent, expressing that point of view.  

Suzman actively opposed all legislation implementing apartheid during her decades in Parliament: on the Homelands, the Removals, the Pass Laws, the restrictions on free speech, and the death penalty. As a result she was the recipient of countless insults from

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government ministers, including anti-Semitic slurs. On more than one occasion she was
told to go Ghana. She visited prisons regularly; in the foreword to her book, Nelson
Mandela recalls meeting her for the first time when he was in prison. He recounts that
even Bram Fischer, the chairperson of the South African Communist party was in awe of
her, “significant for a man whose political views would not normally lead him to respect
a liberal.” 92

Of course, having African servants enabled the members of the Black Sash to use
their privileged position to do what they could to bring about a more equitable South
Africa. Helen Suzman, who became an MP while her daughters were still at school,
writes in her autobiography that she was able to leave the family to go to Cape Town
where Parliament sat because she had “adequate domestic staff to look after the
household.” 93 All I could do as a foreigner and diplomatic spouse was to privately
express my support for those who were putting their freedom on the line; I could not
participate in any political organization. On one occasion, I left Andrew with Martha to
attend the trial in Pretoria of Gonville ffrench-Beytagh, the British Dean of Saint Mary’s
Cathedral, Johannesburg, who was arrested and charged under the Terrorism Act of 1967.
He had held multiracial services, and worked with anti-apartheid organizations, so he was
accused of incitement to overthrow the government. One of the accusations was that he
had urged members of Black Sash, “to support and prepare for a violent revolution.”
ffrench-Beytagh was also indicted for pursuing links with banned organizations such as
the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party, for possessing
their literature, and for using the money supplied by a British friend to further the aims of

92 Nelson Mandela, in Ibid, 1.
those organizations to subvert the regime. The judge, finding him guilty on three counts, sentenced him to the mandatory five years' imprisonment. After this sentence was overturned on appeal in 1972, ffrench-Beytagh immediately left the country.\(^94\) He and other people of faith who opposed apartheid inspired my respect and admiration after the poor impression I had had of missionaries in West Africa.

With my support, Dan he did what he could to keep the American Ambassador from getting too close to the government, sometimes even risking his career. For example, when the ambassador, a Nixon appointee, went hunting on Robben Island, where Mandela was imprisoned, Dan leaked the story to the American press. Dan also passed on pictures of South African police using dogs against demonstrators to Congressman Diggs, who was a leader in the US of the campaign against apartheid. It was not an easy time to be at the embassy since the Ambassador was a political appointee who had been the co-treasurer of Nixon’s campaign in Texas. When I tried to explain to him the hardships resulting from South African workers being separated from their families, he replied that it was no worse than the Mexicans in Texas. Quite apart from the lack of respect for basic human rights, he seemed totally ignorant of the fact that the South African workers were in their own country; no doubt he chose to believe the South African government propaganda that the homelands were “independent countries.” The United States embassy was not the only one with an insensitive ambassador; when a friend in the British Embassy objected to Britain selling arms to South Africa, his ambassador replied, “It’s all about the lolly, son.”\(^95\)


\(^95\) “Lolly” is British slang for money, similar to “bucks” in the U.S.
During the years we were in South Africa, there was the beginning of a transition in leadership of the anti-apartheid movement from the traditional liberals, who believed in multi-racialism, to Black Consciousness, a movement that believed that Africans needed to fight for their own freedom, not using existing institutions. It was clear by then that the Nationalist government was impervious to change using constitutional or legal methods. The movement began among African students at the new segregated university colleges, who didn’t feel represented by the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), since they were no longer allowed to belong to it. At a conference in July 1969, the black South African Students’ Organization (SASO) was formed, with the aim of being independent of whites. Steve Biko was one of the founders of SASO, and became its first president. As Stanley Uys wrote in the Sunday Times in 1972, “Black Consciousness believes that…liberal intervention in the Blacks’ struggle is only a hindrance, not a help.” It rejected the whole foundation of liberalism, based on cooperation, gradual change, and using existing constitutional institutions. Biko was expelled from university in 1970 for political activities, and later banned. He continued to be active in the Black Consciousness Movement; after police beat him to death in 1977 he became a martyr and hero of South Africa.

The Black Sash was forced to come to terms with the reality that they were unable to influence South African politics, but they continued to operate the Advice Offices and provide relief for people in need. Their resistance movement came to an end in the early 1990s with the end of apartheid, the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Nelson Mandela from imprisonment. When he eventually walked free from prison in 1990, Mandela made reference to the Black Sash in his first speech, delivered at the Grand

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96 Michelman, *Black Sash*, 162.
Parade in Cape Town. He said “the Black Sash was the conscience of white South Africa during the dark days of apartheid.” It was reformed in 1995 as a non-racial humanitarian organization, working to “make human rights real for all living in South Africa.” It may have helped to prepare the way for the multiracial society that emerged after the fall of apartheid.

We left South Africa in the summer of 1972 to move to Chicago for a year, so Dan could do graduate work in African Studies at Northwestern University with Professor Gwendolyn Carter. When we left, the situation was even more repressive than it had been in 1970 when we arrived. Any spark of political opposition to apartheid had been snuffed out, and the only way out seemed to be violent revolution, which seemed like a remote possibility, given that all the leaders were in prison, exile or banned. Moreover the government had an extensive network of spies embedded in all types of organization; it was said that one in twelve South Africans worked for the government. Maybe I would have responded differently had I not lived in Black Africa, but I found South Africa very oppressive. When I arrived in England and set foot in a free country again, I felt like a load was off my mind. You really have to live in a police state to appreciate what it really means; it is not a term to use lightly. I deeply regret not keeping in touch with Martha after I left, so I do not know what happened to her. I hope she lived to see the end of apartheid in 1994, and enjoy freedom at last.

Chapter Six

Back in the USA:
“The Personal is Political”

“Consciousness Raising Group/ All women invited/ Wednesday evenings at 7 pm/United Methodist Church Evanston.” - Flyer in the Evanston Public Library, November 1972.

Reading the flyer ignited a little spark of hope in me at a time when I was feeling sad, lonely and isolated. We had just moved to Evanston and I had no family or friends in the area, having just returned to the U.S. after four years in Africa as a Foreign Service wife. I had not been able to work, except for a short time teaching English at a girls’ high school, and now I had two children aged six months and two who took most of my time and energy. Having read about consciousness-raising groups in the news magazines we received through the diplomatic pouch in Africa, I was intrigued. If nothing else, it would be a chance to meet people.

I felt like a different person than I had been when I left the United States; not only was I totally dependent on Dan economically, but also my marriage was on the rocks because Dan had recently had an affair – his first, though not his last. It happened in Washington where he spent six weeks on a State Department course before going to Evanston. I desperately wanted to go with him, but he suggested that I spend the time with my family, arguing that with a two year old and a month-old baby it would be a lot easier (and cheaper) than staying in temporary quarters in Washington. Although I always enjoyed being in England, six weeks was a long time to spend with my parents. My father still thought of me as a child, probably because he didn’t like to travel, so had never visited my home. I sensed from Dan’s letters that something was wrong, so became very anxious, even telling the doctor when I took Mark for a checkup that I was
depressed, but he didn’t take me seriously. I also confided in my mother, but she made excuses for Dan, as in “well, what can you expect from a man?” My parents were proud of having a diplomat for a son-in-law, and he was always friendly and charming with them.

Dan had gone ahead to Washington, so I had to fly to Pittsburg with the children where he would meet us and take us to Bellaire. After the long flight from London with a baby and a toddler, I was relieved to arrive in Philadelphia, but before flying on to Pittsburgh I had to go through customs. Since we were coming back from an overseas assignment, the State Department paid for excess baggage for all three of us, so I had several bags and suitcases. Turns out they expected me to transport all of it through customs myself together with the children. Totally overwhelmed, I just sat on a suitcase and cried. At that point, a female customs official took pity on me and helped me out. I was grateful, but hated to feel so helpless; I had always been so independent.

When we finally arrived in Pittsburgh, Dan met us without much enthusiasm and on the hour-long drive to his mother’s house I could tell that something was wrong. So different from the first time he met me in Pittsburg only ten years earlier. This was the beginning of a nightmare couple of weeks after he told me that he was “in love” with another woman, a fellow FSO whom he met on the course. My sense of betrayal was intense, compounded by the fact that I had put my career plans on hold for his, only to lose him to a career woman. I saw all our future as a family dissolving. It was hot as Hades in his mother’s house because she didn’t have air-conditioning and it was in the river valley, not on the hills overlooking the Ohio River where the more affluent citizens lived. I didn’t tell her what was happening because she had only lost her husband less
than two years before, so I wanted her to enjoy our visit, but she must have known something was going on. For example, one afternoon when some of Gladys’ relatives were visiting, I really didn’t feel up to meeting people, so I lay upstairs on our bed crying; not like me at all. Looking back, I must have been really close to a breakdown, but I kept going for the children’s sake. I didn’t even tell my mother what was happening, partly because long-distance phone calls were very expensive then, and partly because I was ashamed. I was sure my parents would blame me.

Dan spent hours on the phone with the “other woman,” who finally gave him up because she felt guilty about the children and me, which was not much comfort for me. Nevertheless, I didn’t blame her; I blamed Dan for not understanding the demands on me having two babies in a row overseas, with a miscarriage in between. He even accused me of not being “sexy” enough. I don’t think we seriously considered separating because the children were so young, and Dan couldn’t afford to maintain two homes.

Divorce was still not common; indeed, it was still something to be ashamed of, especially in England. According to Lawrence Stone, there was an ancient moral stigma that for centuries lay upon marital breakdown, and especially on public divorce.98 The decline of the influence of the church in England helped to remove the moral stigma, but many working and middle class women, like my mother, were still against it because they thought it would “make it easier for middle-aged men to trade in their ageing wives for sexually more attractive young women.99 They may have had a point.

Being a single mother was also still relatively unusual in 1972; I didn’t think I could make enough money to support us all, as salaries for women were still very low,

and childcare was expensive. I contemplated going back to England, but that would have seemed like a defeat. The boys’ and my lives would have been very different had I done so, but instead I went to Evanston with Dan, to begin again in another new place, this time feeling utterly on my own.

This was a transitional period for gender relations, especially for married couples. The introduction of the birth control pill in 1960 had freed men and women to have sexual encounters without fear of pregnancy, but equality in marriage was rare and no-fault divorce was not yet legal. Indeed, Nancy MacLean points out that the sexual revolution could be confusing for women, making it harder for them to say no. I would add that since it removed the possibility of pregnancy as a barrier to extra-marital affairs it demanded a new level of commitment to marriage, or a mutual agreement to have an “open marriage.” Indeed, the book, *Open Marriage* was published in 1972. For a couple with small children, it was a lot easier for the husband to have an “open marriage” than for the wife.

Since we had far from an equal marriage, thanks to the Foreign Service, I had to negotiate with Dan to leave the children with him for the evening so I could go to the consciousness-raising group. While I used to go out on my own in Washington in the evening, I had not done so since the children were born. He reluctantly agreed, after I promised to feed and get them ready for bed as well as do the dishes after our dinner. Whenever I tried to get him to help around the house or with the children he would reply, “You don’t hire a dog and then bark.”

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It was with some trepidation that I set out to find the church where the group was held. I was not used to driving on my own at night, but Evanston was easy to navigate and I had no trouble finding my way; I parked and anxiously made my way down to the basement. I had no idea what to expect, so I was extremely relieved to get a warm welcome from the dozen or so women sitting in a circle, several of whom were my age; I was afraid they might all be younger than me. Most were casually dressed in jeans and were drinking beer from cans, something I had never done before. It seemed very daring (especially in a Methodist church). We took turns introducing ourselves, and telling our stories; I immediately felt a much-needed bond.

I found out that my feelings of being trapped in marriage and lacking in intellectual stimulation or a sense of achievement were more common than I had realized. Moreover there were others whose husbands had cheated on them, and they stressed that it was important to feel angry instead of humiliated. We were responsible for our own destinies, and should not see ourselves as victims. They talked about male domination, sexism, and how society had different expectations of women than men, particularly in marriage and childcare. I realized that I had not intended to play a subordinate role when I married Dan; nothing in my background had prepared me for it, but in the Foreign Service, I had no choice. I was so grateful that my curiosity had led me to that church basement.

The group taught me to be proud of being a woman, and that it was natural to want more autonomy, opportunity, and equality in my life. Sheila Ruth wrote in 1973 that the modern women’s liberation movement believed that political, economic and sociocultural change was secondary to “another more radical change…an alteration of the
psychic, emotional and phenomenal stance of the woman vis-à-vis her environment and her experiences.” She adds, “Consciousness means the manner in which we construct our reality,” 101 and that it helped women like me to resolve the internal conflict between their inner self and the role assigned by society. Ruth points out that women who “do not buy the package … apparently suffer most.” If a woman is self-affirming, and sees herself as substantive person, instead of simply being “the other” in relation to a man she is “at odds with tradition, religion, society and with numerous individuals.”102 Ruth concludes that consciousness-raising helped women move towards integration and authenticity;103 my personal experience confirms this.

Being more aware of the social reasons for my feelings of frustration inspired me to be more involved in politics, in order to try to change society. I subscribed to Ms. Magazine, (in its first year of publication) heard Gloria Steinem speak in Chicago, and I bought the record of Helen Reddy singing “I am Woman, Hear me Roar.” I also became aware of women’s health issues, avidly reading the Boston Women’s Health Collective.104 Ever since then I have tried to have women doctors whenever possible, as well as taking responsibility for my own health. I joined the Evanston Women’s Center, participating in political activities such as lobbying for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) at the Illinois Legislature in Springfield (unsuccessfully as it happened), and answering the phone hotline to refer women to abortion clinics in Wisconsin. This restored to me a sense of agency and power that had been so lacking in my self-image in recent years.

102 Ibid, 296.
103 Ibid, 299.
104 First published in 1971; later titled Our Bodies, Ourselves.
My new activism led to my first involvement in an election campaign: that of McGovern vs. Nixon. When I volunteered for the Democratic Party I was sent to a Republican precinct to hand out leaflets, but I still felt like I was doing something important. The Evanston Democrats planned a post-election party, so we hired a babysitter, but in the car on the way there we heard the election results on the radio. It was such a devastating loss for McGovern that we didn’t have the heart to go to the party. We turned the car around, went home, and paid off the babysitter. As a friend in Washington said, “I couldn’t understand why McGovern didn’t win, all my friends voted for him.” Nevertheless, it was the start of a lifelong interest in politics.

Through the Women’s Center I joined my first book club that met monthly, reading books by or about women. Our first book was Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex, first published in 1947. De Beauvoir’s erudite combination of philosophy and history appealed to me in a literary sense, but I did not identify with her description of the traditional woman’s role. She argued that woman “determines and differentiates herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other.” In other words, men are doers who strive to achieve while women are passive vessels that serve as helpmeets and mothers. This was enlightening for me about how these attitudes had influenced society, but she seemed to be writing about women in another world from the one I had grown up in. Even though I was dependent on Dan economically, I still didn’t feel that he

was the “doer” and I was the “passive helpmeet.” I had hoped that we were a team, who would enjoy the adventure and challenges of the Foreign Service together.

I found Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* more relevant to the world I lived in because she wrote about the gendered nature of contemporary American society, especially within the family. Just as traditional patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over his wife and children, so modern sex roles assigned domestic service and childcare to the female; the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition belonged to the male, at least in the middle and upper classes. Millett contended that chattel status continued for women in 1969 through loss of name, adoption of husband’s domicile, and the general legal assumption that marriage involved domestic service and sexual consortium in return for financial support. This seemed to describe the status of wives in the Foreign Service fairly accurately.

When I compared my birth family to the model described by Millett and my experiences with the women in the group, I realized that my father was not the classic middle-class patriarch. Maybe he would have liked to impose his values (that I considered old-fashioned) on me, but he did not have any means to control me because I earned my own pocket money working on Saturdays and vacations from the age of fifteen, as soon as I could legally do so. (As did Carolyn Steedman.) What’s more, I received a free secondary and university education, and didn’t expect any “extras.” For example, although I wanted to go on the annual school trip to Switzerland, I knew we couldn’t afford it, so I didn’t even ask him for the money; instead, I worked for a month that summer to pay the train fare to visit my pen friend in Germany. I was also fortunate.

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107 Ibid, 34
enough to have several strong women in my life, including my mother, my teachers, and my aunts who encouraged me to achieve academically and pursue my own interests, however adventurous. Nevertheless, the relevance of Millett’s argument to my current situation was not lost on me. The key aspects of my life, including where I lived, my opportunities for a career, and further education were determined by Dan’s career. One thing I could change: from that time forward I refused to use the title Mrs.—from that time on I became Ms.

The book club was so important to me that when I got back to Washington, I started one with a neighbor that still meets monthly with almost the same members, except for two or three who moved and one who died. Dan would tease me about it, in a demeaning way, insinuating that we were reading children’s books; he always expected me to get the children ready for bed before I left, and do the dinner dishes when I got home. I have now been in my Durham book club (that also began in the early 1970s) nearly thirty years. Although we don’t only read books by women, we often read women’s history and memoirs, as well as literature by women authors, but even more important, we support each other during the good times and bad.

The women’s movement that was flourishing when I returned to the United States in 1972 is history now, known as “second-wave feminism.” Its roots went back to the 1930s, with the New Deal and progressivism; Eleanor Roosevelt was one of the founders of the National Organization for Women in the late 1960s. The Second World War brought many women into the Armed services or the workforce, but the Cold War, anti-communism and the conservatism of the 1950s were a setback for all progressive movements. Nevertheless, there were women activists, including Pauli Murray, an
African American lawyer from Durham, North Carolina, in the labor movement and the Civil Rights movement. As Nancy MacLean writes, “nothing so paved the way for a new era of activism for gender equity as the movement for racial equality.”

She explains that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was vital because it enabled a realignment of women’s politics. In the meantime, the President’s Commission on the Status of Women, established by President Kennedy in 1961, and chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, issued a major report that became a best seller. By exposing and denouncing sex discrimination the report led to the Equal Pay Act in 1963. Unfortunately the part of the law that applied to women was not enforced until the late 1970s.

Another milestone in the women’s movement was the publication of The Feminine Mystique, by Betty Friedan, who was a journalist and union official. In the United States it was a best seller that resonated with many unhappy and frustrated women. Friedan has been widely criticized for her focus on the plight of the white middle-class 1950s housewife, whom she described as leading a bored and empty life with nothing to occupy her mind, despite her good education. Friedan did not write about working class women like my mother, who may have regretted not having a career, but didn’t have time be bored. Indeed, the book did not have the same impact in England as it did in the United States. As we have seen, Britain was still in a post-war economic depression in the 1950s, so getting a college education, or even staying at school until eighteen was very unusual for women of any class; moreover, housewives did not have the laborsaving devices already popular in America. As Eleanor Timbres writes in her review of the book in the Manchester Guardian in May 1963, when I was in Africa, “To

108 MacLean, American, 10.
state the obvious, America is not England, and the goal of professional careers for all capable women is perhaps not the solution at present. Higher education for women is far more limited in England and it is correspondingly difficult for women to entertain the idea of entering the professions.”

Friedan described how hard it was for even educated women to find jobs that were not clerical or service work. Likewise, I was very discouraged when I first looked for a job in Washington in 1965, especially as I had never learned to type. In England you only learned to type if you wanted to be a secretary, and I did not; my school did not even teach typing. Unfortunately, I did not read *The Feminine Mystique* when I was in Washington in the 1960s, probably because I did not consider myself a housewife. It might have alerted me to what was to come when Dan and I went overseas.

Because the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission refused to recognize sex discrimination, despite the Equal Pay Act, Friedan and Pauli Murray formed the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966. Although it was established to promote employment equity it soon took on other issues and grew rapidly, so by 1974 it had more than 700 chapters and 40,000 members. Historians, such as MacLean and William Chafe, distinguish between the women’s movement and women’s liberation. The former accepted society and its institutions in their traditional form, but wanted women to have equal access to them. Somewhat later, younger women, typically college graduates, developed a distinctive movement – women’s liberation -- that challenged the “system,” coining the word “sexism,” focusing on intimate relationships, and

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“refashioning personal identity.”\textsuperscript{111} The consciousness-raising groups came out of this movement, as we addressed questions of gender and power in everyday life.

At the time I was not aware of the distinction between these two groups. Political activism seemed like a natural outcome of what I had learned in the conscious-raising and book groups. As MacLean notes, participants realized that they faced society-wide problems rooted in power relationships.\textsuperscript{112} Nor did I distinguish between “liberal” and “radical” feminism; I took what I thought worthwhile from each movement. The real breakthrough for me was realizing that I was not alone in feeling undervalued and frustrated by lack of opportunity. I loved the feeling of solidarity with other women, and the affirmation that I didn’t need a man to be a whole person, or even to have a good time. In South Africa I had felt lonely and depressed every time Dan went away, but after I learned to value women friends I have always made sure to have them wherever I was. They have provided me with unlimited companionship and support that I have striven to reciprocate. I have never felt alone again.

After the year in Evanston we moved back to Washington, renting a house in American University Park, a neighborhood I loved. Dan was not yet ready to buy a house, although I wanted to. I have happy memories of those years; I enjoyed being a mother and the freedom and stimulation of being in Washington; our marriage recovered, or at least I thought it had. However, Dan was less happy working in the State Department, as he always preferred the relative freedom of being overseas. It was ominous that I felt freer in the United States, while he felt freer overseas; in retrospect, it is clear that the long-term prospects for our marriage were not good. Happily, his next

\textsuperscript{111} MacLean, \textit{American}, 17.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, 18.
assignment, Bulgaria, required a year of language training, so we were able to stay in Washington three years instead of two. In July 1976, I packed our belongings, divided as usual into “take with,” “air freight,” and “sea freight,” put the furniture in storage again, and we left for Sofia. Although I was sad to leave my friends and Washington, I was looking forward to discovering a new country and culture, and even to the challenge of living in a communist state.
Chapter Seven

Diplomatic Life in the Cold War I:
Sofia, Bulgaria 1976-78

“Women learned how to beat the socialist state with its own weapons” 113

On a chilly March evening in 1977, Dan and I were hosting what seemed like a routine dinner party in Sofia, Bulgaria, but in fact it was highly unusual, because it was the first time we had invited Bulgarians to our home for a meal, the first time they had gone to any American function other than for formal receptions at the Embassy. Since Bulgaria was behind the Iron Curtain, only certain types of people could socialize with Americans, and even they had to have official permission to come to our apartment on the eighth floor of the “diplomatic” building. Among our guests were a university professor, an official from the foreign ministry, and Nicolai, a journalist, who was a friend of ours and not a communist. Because he worked for a French newspaper he was allowed to associate with us. The others would all have been good communists, and all were men; I assume their wives weren’t allowed to come. We had also invited our friends Keith and Mary Manning. Dan was First Secretary and Political Officer at the American Embassy, and Keith was his counterpart at the British Embassy. Unlike most foreign representatives, they didn’t live in our building, but in an old house the British had owned since pre-communist days. The British had a long relationship with Bulgaria, ever since the First Balkan War, in 1912-13. Mary and I often talked on the phone, but were invariably cut off after ten minutes by whoever was listening in, no doubt bored by our

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conversation. I had several other women friends of various nationalities, who all very lived in our building; this was especially convenient in the cold Sofia winter.

By nine o’clock the party was going well. We had finished the main course of lasagne, made with ground beef I found at the local butcher shop, while the tomato sauce and pasta came from the PX military supermarket in Athens; the Embassy Marine Guards drove a truck there once a month to buy American goods for embassy staff. We were sitting around the dining room table talking about anything but politics; we all knew that our apartment was “bugged” so the Bulgarian equivalent of the KGB could listen to our conversation. Andrew and Mark, by now aged five and seven, were in bed asleep. I was just about to serve the dessert of pecan pie I had made with canned pecans from the PX, when suddenly the university professor, who had lived in San Francisco, said: “we are having an earthquake.” I looked up and saw the chandelier over the dining room table swaying to and fro, and then I could feel the floor moving. All our guests jumped up and ran out, while Dan and I rushed into the children’s rooms to pick them up out of their beds. I was in such a panic I picked up Andrew, who was really too big for me to carry, and left Dan to get Mark, who was a lot smaller. Thank goodness Dan had the presence of mind to blow out the candles on the table.

I ran down the stairs as fast as I could. The power was off so it was pitch black, the building was creaking and groaning and chunks of plaster were falling on us. The air was thick with dust, and there was an acrid smell of plaster. People of all nationalities were running out of their apartments and screaming. I kicked off my shoes so I could run faster, and when Andrew was fully awake I put him down and held his hand. I was absolutely terrified, totally sure the building was going to collapse on us and we would
die, when Dan caught up, still carrying Mark. Although it seemed like forever, the shaking only lasted a minute and actually stopped before we got to the bottom of the stairs.

We lingered in the lobby for a few minutes before going outside, and were amazed to see a Japanese family calmly walking down the stairs with their overnight bags in their hands. Obviously they knew what to do. The Embassy had briefed us on all possible dangers – terrorism, spies, kidnapping, wandering into forbidden areas, going to Bulgarian doctors, but forgot about the fact that we were on an earthquake fault line.

We went outside to find Keith and Mary; she was five months pregnant and had run out so fast she watched the building shaking from outside. There were crowds in the street and all the streetlights were out. It was bitterly cold, and many people would have to sleep outside tonight, but we were lucky – the Mannings invited us to go home with them because their house was undamaged. Luckily the damage to our apartment was fairly superficial, so we could move back in a couple of days. Miraculously, nothing was broken, though the water I put in the lasagne dish to soak had all slopped out. The damage to my nervous system lasted a bit longer, especially as we had several after-shocks. The joke around the Embassy was that it happened because we had Bulgarians to dinner. Without a doubt the most exciting dinner party I have ever given.

I had done all the work for the dinner party, despite a recent State Department ruling stating that I wasn’t required to assist Dan with official “representational” duties any more. According to the Directive A-728 of January 31, 1971, *Policy on Wives of Foreign Service Employees*, “the wife of a Foreign Service employee who has accompanied her husband to a foreign post is a private individual; she is not a
Government employee. The Foreign Service, therefore, has no right to levy any duties upon her.”

This meant that although FSOs still had “broadly defined representational responsibilities overseas,” spouses were not required to participate in them, and, most importantly, it ended the practice of evaluating the wife’s “participation in representational activities” in her husband’s performance reports. Despite the Directive, I did not stop participating in “representational activities,” because I enjoyed entertaining and being entertained by other diplomats and expatriates in Sofia. There were embassies from some really interesting countries there, including India, Afghanistan and Iran, as well as all the European countries and Japan; this was just the kind of milieu that I enjoyed. Life in Sofia would have been much less rich without their company.

I also enjoyed mingling with ordinary Bulgarians as I went around town doing my errands. As part of the new policy on wives the State Department had committed to teaching spouses the local language before they went overseas, so I had lessons in Bulgarian for a year at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington. As a result I spoke Bulgarian well enough for a conversation, enabling me to communicate with the local people and get around on my own, dressed inconspicuously. Being able to read Cyrillic (the script Bulgarian is written in) enabled me to drive in Sofia; many of the diplomatic wives could not because they couldn’t read the street signs. The real surprise was that although the United States was officially the enemy, this was not the case for many of the Bulgarian people. They disliked Russians; once I saw a street vendor of potatoes (a precious commodity in the winter) refuse to serve a Russian--whereas most Bulgarians were well disposed towards Americans.

115 For example, wearing jeans marked you as a Westerner since they could not be bought locally.
The Directive stated that a wife would be “free to engage in her own interests,” recommending “charitable activities,” but in fact wives were now free to seek “suitable” employment locally or in the Embassy. However, despite the new State Department policy, I had few opportunities for work in Sofia. As a diplomatic spouse from a Western country I couldn’t work in Bulgaria, or even teach Bulgarians English, but through the American Cultural Center I was hired to teach English to the employees and wives of a large Japanese company. The intermediate and advanced classes met weekly in the evening at the cultural center; all the students were men, who already spoke English. The Cultural Center provided all the materials; I just had to follow the program. The advanced class was the most interesting; each week we discussed a topic in the news, and the students were enthusiastic and well informed. The beginner’s class that met in my apartment during the day was the hardest at first because only one of the women spoke a little English. Luckily the book we were using had lots of pictures, but it was hard to get them to talk because they were very shy, like my students in Burundi. As I slowly I got to know them and appreciate their individual personalities, they also felt more comfortable with me. In the end that class was the most satisfying as the women made real progress, and enjoyed the lessons. A decade later, the Durham Public Library hired me for an internship because they thought that if I could teach Japanese in Bulgaria I could cope with whatever came my way in Durham.

I was also on the Board of the Anglo-American School, which Andrew and Mark attended. It was really an international school, the only one for Western children other than the French school. The Embassy had asked Dan to be the American representative, but he suggested that I do it instead; I was the first wife to serve in that role.
year I became Chair, which gave me some experience in leadership. I believe I was well suited for the role, as an American who had had a British education. The Board was responsible for hiring staff, supervising the curriculum and the physical plant. We even built a classroom during the summer vacation from a kit imported from Finland, rather like giant Lincoln Logs, with all the wooden pieces numbered.

Bulgarian women didn’t need permission to work; on the contrary they were encouraged to work by the government, which, at least in theory, made it possible for them by providing generous maternity leave and child care. When the communist party took over in September 1944 the Party decreed men and women “equal before the law,” including marriage and employment. Women were to be liberated from the drudgery of “domestic slavery” and patriarchal authority, for their own good but also to provide labor to industrialize Bulgaria. Up until this time it was a nation of peasant smallholders, so industrialization was a dramatic change that led to massive urbanization. Between 1947 and 1965, about 1.5 million people left the countryside and moved into towns. Initially, the Party intended to reform the family, freeing it from its social, welfare and production functions, but in reality this proved too difficult. As a relatively poor country, Bulgaria did not have the resources to provide all families with adequate childcare or housing, and because of collectivization and the forced export of food to the Soviet Union, there was not enough food available, quite a change from when Bulgaria was primarily an agricultural economy.

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Bulgaria was known as the most obedient of the Soviet Bloc countries; R J. Crampton describes its foreign policy as “slavish obedience to the Russian line.” He goes on to describe the vast majority of the population as content or apathetic. There was no real dissidence, partly because of the Bulgarian history of 500 years of Turkish rule, and partly because life in Bulgaria was actually better for most people in the 1960s and 1970s, compared with previous decades. Politically, there was no general terror, just a reactive policy against those who spoke out. Bulgaria benefitted from the COMECOM schemes; for example, they could import cheap oil from the USSR. Their nationalism tended to be cultural rather than political. Although President Zhivkov was very pro-Soviet, he was a modest man from humble origins, so didn’t arouse intense resentment at home. Bulgaria was traditionally egalitarian; they never had a real aristocracy to arouse anti-communist sentiment. Most of the opposition came from intellectuals.

Education was very important in socialist Bulgaria; all children went to school, and everyone had access to higher education. Women achieved almost complete equality in education; in 1946 only 0.4 percent of women in the work force had a higher education. Before the socialist revolution, many institutes of higher education excluded women, but by 1985, 52.3 percent of all university graduates were women.

Moreover, it seems as if Bulgaria had less of a gap between women’s education and their opportunities for work than the United States at that time. Indeed, statistics show that in the mid-1970s, half the total labor force in Bulgaria was female, and women

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118 The Eastern Bloc’s equivalent of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Western Europe.
worked in all sectors, including industry. By 1984 every third engineer was a woman.\footnote{Ibid, 33.} Women were 29.8 percent of managers, 45 percent of judges, and 30 percent of lawyers. In 1975, 93 percent of women in the labor force were married, and only 7.4 percent had no children.\footnote{Maria Todorova, "Historical Tradition and Transformation in Bulgaria: Women’s Issues or Feminist Issues?" Journal of Women’s History 5 No. 3 (1994), 129-143, 134.} A study conducted in 1980 revealed that most women (85\%) would not give up their job, even if their husband had earned enough to support the family.\footnote{Brunnbauer, “Women,” 146, and Ananieva, “Women,” 33.} Anavieva and Razvigorova concluded that for many Bulgarian women, “work has become a spiritual need, a most important factor for self-fulfillment.”\footnote{Ananieva, 33.} Unfortunately, even though the Party decreed that husbands should take an equal share in housework and childcare, they did not comply, so that in 1977, for example, women did about 85\% of the housework,\footnote{Brunnbauer, 146.} and even childcare was still largely the mother’s role. Therefore it was not surprising that most of the younger women I saw around town looked tired and harassed.

Grandmothers solved the childcare problem by minding the children until they went to kindergarten, thus enabling the mothers to go to work; only 18\% of children were in day-care, compared with 75\% in kindergarten.\footnote{Ibid, 145.} When I would encounter the grandmothers in the street or in the stores, they would often compliment me on my children, but also they felt perfectly free to tell me if they weren’t dressed warmly enough, or should have had a hat on, as they would have done in the villages where they came from.

As well as providing childcare, families also helped to mitigate the housing shortage. The government, which provided the mostly high-rise apartments in the cities,
could not keep up with the influx of people from the country, so many couples lived with their parents or other relatives. I don’t remember ever going to a Bulgarian’s home; either their apartments were too cramped, like Nicolai’s, who lived with his parents, or they were not permitted to entertain us. By contrast, our spacious apartment on Lenin Boulevard was in a building reserved for foreigners set back from the busy street; the huge L-shaped living-dining room had large windows and a balcony overlooking a park and Mt Vitosha, where you could hike or ski. The kitchen was small, but there was a “maid’s room” that the children used as a playroom. Children of many nationalities played together on the large terrace downstairs; Mark’s “Big Wheel” tricycle was very popular, and his best friend was Finnish.

Food grown either by relatives still in the country, or city dwellers in the gardens of their small country houses, alleviated the food shortages. Many Sofia residents would drive their little Russian cars into the country at weekends and come back laden with produce. One statistic shows that they spent 70% of their leisure time in their gardens. This arrangement has been called the “rural-urban extended household.” It reminded me of how my father grew fruit and vegetables in his garden when food was scarce in England. I imagine that men did most of the gardening in Bulgaria, while the women canned the produce for the winter, like my mother did. In the fall, you could smell peppers roasting on balconies all over Sofia. In the summer, the farmer’s markets were a cornucopia of wonderful fresh fruits and vegetables, such as I have never seen until the last decade in the United States.

126 Ibid, 144.
I had a part-time maid who cleaned and babysat, but I did all the shopping and cooking myself. Although I found shopping locally time-consuming, doing it brought me closer to ordinary Bulgarians in a way that would have been impossible otherwise. There was a “Diplomatic shop,” where you could buy imported food and alcohol for hard currency. Sometimes they had bananas, and as I walked home with them in my string bag people kept stopping me on the street and asking me where I got them because they were like gold in Sofia. Once a young Bulgarian woman came up to me as I approached the store, and asked me to get her some bananas for her elderly mother who was craving them. Of course I did; I couldn’t get into trouble with the secret police and she knew the risk she was taking. Meat was always hard to find; you had to haunt the butcher’s shops, hoping for something edible, and I had to buy bread every day because it was as hard as rock by the next morning; still better than Wonder Bread from the PX. Eggs and dairy products, including butter, milk and wonderful yoghurt in glass jars, were usually available in the local stores, but coffee was also almost impossible to find; we paid Andrew’s piano teacher in instant coffee. I acquired a taste for good yoghurt that was only satisfied in the United States when we began importing Greek yoghurt.

Learning about Bulgarian history and culture, both of which were fascinating and completely new to me, definitely enriched my life there. A powerful Bulgarian woman, Ludmilla Zhivkova, the former President’s daughter, was instrumental in promoting Bulgarian culture and folk-life as means of strengthening national identity. The Balkans have played a role in European history since the time of the ancient Greeks, and Bulgaria has many historic cities, such as Veliko Tarnovo and Plovdiv, wonderful old monasteries such as Rila, beautiful mountains and beaches on the Black Sea. We travelled in the
country often, and even attended a famous folk life festival, at Koprivshtitsa, held only every five years; Bulgarian folk music and dance are deservedly world-famous. I gained an appreciation for “world” music there and in South Africa. Bulgarians are also well known as opera singers; I learned to love opera in Sofia as it was as easy and cheap to go to the opera as it is to the cinema here. We only went to the cinema once when were invited to a very luxurious movie theater usually reserved for the party elite. The movie was “Star Wars,” in English with an interpreter repeating everything in Bulgarian.

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, that was an important part of Bulgarian culture, remained very traditional, despite the modernization of society under the Socialists; for example, services were still in Old Church Slavonic, which most people couldn’t understand. At first I was shocked by the lack of congregational participation, unlike the protestant churches I was used to, but I came to appreciate the mystical character of the worship. Women played no role at all in the church; even though priests could be married, bishops couldn’t. The Communist Party was concerned about the influence of religion, which was seen as contributing to the submission of women, among other things, so the priests were state employees, and only certain people were allowed to go to church, including our friend Nicolai who was very devout. The congregation at the few regular services we attended consisted mainly of elderly women, presumably because there was no way the state could prevent them from attending. On Easter we obtained special tickets as diplomats to attend the midnight mass at the Cathedral. It was fabulous: a visual and aural extravaganza that was especially stunning in the usual dreary surroundings of Sofia. The custom in Bulgaria was to take the lit candles we had received

\[127\] Ibid, 141.
home, and as we left the Cathedral we saw a huge crowd behind the barricades that surrounded it waiting with their candles to get a light from those who had attended. They were believers who were not allowed to attend services. We passed on the Easter light to as many as we could; it was a real lesson for me about what religious freedom truly means.

Sadly, Dan had had another affair just before we left with a young secretary from the British Embassy. I found out about it at a cocktail party, in a very public and humiliating way. In a classic “double standard,” she was sent home, while Dan just got a reprimand. The American Embassy did nothing to help me, but my American and British women friends gave me the support I needed to weather the crisis. Although I thought seriously about leaving Dan, once again I didn’t feel as if I was able to since I didn’t have a job or a home of my own (or any money.) My parents were not in a position to support us, even if I had wanted to return to England. What’s more, I didn’t want to deprive my sons of their father; they would not have seen him at all if we had moved back to Washington while he was overseas. Although by 1978 divorce was getting easier in the United States, there was still no guarantee that a wife would get adequate child support. This was in sharp contrast to Bulgaria, where there was state support for single-parent families; American women had no such safety net. So I reluctantly agreed to go with Dan to our next assignment in Lubumbashi, Zaire, despite my profound misgivings.

I especially resented Dan’s lack of commitment to our marriage because I thought I had done a good job as a Foreign Service wife. It’s possible that the new policy towards wives made him feel less dependent on my contribution for the success of his career. When I reminded him of my role, he replied that being a wife was “not a job.” Once
again I was caught in a transitional situation; I couldn’t have a career of my own, but my contribution to Dan’s career was not recognized. It is significant that the wives who wrote the preface to the Report on the Role of the Spouse assume that “the feeling of self-worth in our society had come to mean purposeful work.”¹²⁸ They go on to describe this as being “in the home or office…salaried or voluntary.” In this respect they were more open-minded than many feminists of the time, who only recognized salaried work as being worthwhile.

Looking back I can see that my life in Bulgaria was full and interesting, even without “salaried work.” Nevertheless, I envied Bulgarian women being able to work outside the home, and admired how they coped with the challenges of their daily life, with the help of their families, something else I didn’t have. Indeed, women finally brought about a change in official policy in the early 1980s to recognize the family’s contribution to childcare. The new Labor Codex of 1984 gave working grandparents the opportunity to take childcare leave, if no one else would look after their grandchildren.¹²⁹ When I was in Bulgaria I used to wonder who would care for the children when the grandmothers worked too; now I know. Although the Socialist state strengthened the family role in other ways too, they didn’t pursue a “back to the kitchen” policy but continued to stress the need for women in the work force, and to provide support for female employment. According to the party, women were supposed to be equally perfect in all the three main roles attributed to them: “mother, worker, public activist.”¹³⁰ It seems like high expectations for women’s achievement were not confined to feminists in the United States.

¹²⁸ Report on the Role of the Spouse, 11.
¹³⁰ Ibid, 149.
Chapter Eight

Diplomatic Life in the Cold War II:
Lubumbashi, Zaire 1978-1980

“We will do our best to prevent Soviet influence in Africa. If Europe trembles every time Brezhnev coughs, it is not for me.” (Mobutu, 1977)

One hot sunny morning in 1977, Dan, our sons, and I were all waiting outside the President’s Residence in Lubumbashi, the capital of Shaba Province in Zaire (now Congo.) Dan was the American Consul, a role he relished, and I was “the consul’s wife,” a role I did not particularly enjoy. Waiting with us were a disparate group of French and Belgian diplomats and businessmen, officials from Gécamines, the mining company that ran the local economy, and high-ranking Zairian officials. We were all dressed in our best clothes, and Mark, aged seven, clutched a bunch of flowers from our garden (there were no florists in Lubumbashi.) The residence had a high wrought iron fence, but it was on a street lined with beautiful flowering trees. We were awaiting the arrival of Mobutu Sese Seko, the autocratic President of Zaire. Eventually a motorcade of black Mercedes drew up and a bunch of armed guards in sunglasses jumped out. One of them opened a car door and out stepped the dictator himself, clad in his signature leopard-skin hat and Mao-style jacket with a silk cravat tucked into the neck. During his “authenticity” period he decreed that all Zairian men should wear the same jacket, which he called abacou, from “a bas la costume,” French for “down with the suit.” He was also carrying an African chief’s staff and wearing his usual aviator sunglasses. After Mobutu shook everyone’s hand, Mark, as the youngest child, presented him with the flowers. After the President and his entourage
swept into the Residence, we took the children to school; they had had the morning off for the occasion.

Later Dan and I went back to have lunch with President Mobutu at his Residence, along with the European diplomats and businessmen and their wives. The Residence was very opulent, in keeping with Mobutu’s normal style, the table laid with silver and French china. The President sat at the head of the table and made conversation in a relaxed, rather disarming way. He didn’t get to where he was without a good dose of charm to dispense when necessary, and the guests there that day – the American, Belgian and French diplomats, and the European mining officials, all represented institutions whose support had put him where he was and whom he needed to stay in power. As we ate our gourmet French food, I felt as if I was in a movie or a play. What on earth was I, the nice middle-class girl from Essex, doing having lunch with the tyrant who was in the process of despoiling Zaire? Sitting down to eat with one of the worst dictators ever, whom we, the United States, had put into power, was probably the most jarring moment in my whole career as a Foreign Service wife.

Who was Mobutu, and why was the United States backing him? Why was he living such a luxurious lifestyle in a country with such poverty? The United States had a long history of involvement with the Congo. When King Leopold of Belgian had seized this huge territory in the centre of Africa in 1888, making it his own personal colony, not only did an American adventurer, Henry Morton Stanley, help him to acquire the land, but also we were the first nation to recognize the Congo Free State. Although Leopold, with Stanley’s help, had convinced the American President that it was a humanitarian project, to rescue the Congolese from Arab slave traders, he proceeded to exploit it in the
most inhumane manner, forcing the Congolese to harvest rubber in conditions of near slavery, and killing an estimated ten million people. Finally, in 1908, an international campaign waged primarily in England and the United States forced King Leopold to hand the Congo over to the Belgian government.

Although the Belgians avoided the worst of Leopold’s atrocities in what was now known as the Belgian Congo, their rule was completely authoritarian. The Congolese were given very little share in the government or education compared to the British or French colonies. Under international pressure to grant independence in 1960, they left precipitously, without preparing the Congolese at all for self-government. Even worse, most of the Belgian administrators went home at the same time, because they had been guaranteed jobs in Belgium, but not if they stayed in the Congo. The story we heard was that they had even taken the light bulbs with them.

The province where we lived, then known as Katanga, revolted against the new Congolese government soon after independence. In a democratic election held immediately after independence Joseph Kasavubu had been elected President, and Patrice Lumumba Prime Minister. Almost immediately the Belgian army intervened to put down an army mutiny and install their protégé Joseph Mobutu as Chief of the Army. Eleven days later the province of Katanga seceded, led by Moïse Tshombe, with Belgian military and administrative support. Most of the country’s mineral resources were in Katanga, and the Belgians wanted to keep them in western hands, not trusting Lumumba, whom they considered left leaning. At the request of Belgium and the United States, U.N. forces arrived in July 1960 to put down the secession.

Meanwhile, Kasavubu and Lumumba disagreed on the proposed constitution for Zaire (which should have been settled before independence). Kasavubu was in favor of a Belgian-style centralized government, while Lumumba wanted a more federal system. In September the President removed Lumumba as Prime Minister, but he refused to step down and fled to Eastern Zaire, where he rallied his supporters. The United States government saw Lumumba as a potential pawn of the Soviet Union, even though in retrospect there is not much evidence of Soviet interest in the Congo. The CIA predicted chaos and communism, cabling Washington, “Embassy and Station believe Congo experiencing classic communist effort takeover government.”132 Once again an American adventurer, Lawrence Devlin, the CIA Station Chief, betrayed the Congolese people, convincing Washington that the Congo would be another Cuba. President Eisenhower ordered Devlin to assassinate Lumumba. So the CIA lured him to Katanga, where the Katangan rebels assassinated him in January 1961.

Schatzberg judges Lumumba to have been more of a populist and a nationalist than a Soviet-style communist.133 According to Sean Kelly, this was one of the most unexpected and total interventions by the United States in the Cold War era.134 The United States considered Congo strategically important because of its size, location in central Africa, and especially because of its mineral wealth. In addition to copper, gold and diamonds, most of the world’s supply of cobalt, essential for jet aircraft engines, was

133 Ibid, 16.
located in Katanga. The United States government also feared that the Soviets would extend their influence in Africa, using Congo as a base.

In 1963 the Congolese army took control of Katanga under United Nations auspices; Mobutu remained Commander-in-Chief of the army, and an important power broker behind the scenes. In 1964, Tshombe returned from exile to become Prime Minister, and brought the Katangan gendarmes back from Angola. However, in 1965 Tshombe was ousted by CIA-backed coup led by Mobuto, who became President. Mobutu moved quickly to replace Parliament with a rubber stamp legislature, abolish the provincial legislatures, and nationalize the provincial police forces. He appointed Provincial governors personally, instead of elections, and they had to serve outside their areas of origin, thus reducing their power substantially. Finally, in January 1967 Mobutu founded the Mouvement Populaire de la Revolution (MPR,) that became Congo’s only party and only political institution, giving himself control of all institutions of both state and party. The Katangan gendarmes, who had joined the national army, mutinied, but failing to unseat Mobutu, retreated to Angola, where they formed the National Front for the Liberation of Congo (FLNC.) While they awaited another opportunity to liberate Katanga they supported the Portuguese in their struggle against the Angolan rebels.

Mobutu was now unopposed in Congo, backed by the United States and Belgium, who considered him pro-American and anti-communist, while in reality he was only pro-Mobutu, shifting his loyalties whenever he stood to gain politically by doing so.\(^{135}\) He relied on Washington’s fear of the unknown to maintain his power. As Schatzberg writes, “an extraordinary personalization of political rule resulted. A cult of personality

\(^{135}\) Ibid, 248.
flourished.”

“Zairian authenticity” led to changing not only the name of the country to Zaire, but also provinces and cities. Thus Leopoldville became Kinshasa, Katanga became Shaba, and Elizabethville, the capital, became Lubumbashi. All Zairians had to change their Christian names to African ones, so Joseph Mobutu became Mobutu Sese Seko. 

“Authenticity” was followed by “Zairianization,” in 1973, when Mobutu gave foreign-owned stores and plantations to individual Zairians who “quickly ravaged the firms they acquired, with catastrophic effects on the economy.”

The combination of scarcity and violence created an oppressive environment, in which Mobutu ruled through coercion by the army against the civilian population, sustaining a reign of terror: extortion, arbitrary arrest, and extrajudicial executions. Kelly concludes that Mobutu thought that autocracy was the “African way of governing.”

This is the man who was described as “one of our most valued friends” by President George Bush.

As a student of African history, the idea of going to Shaba intrigued me. I had learned about the events surrounding the Katanga secession during a seminar at the University of Ghana given by Conor Cruise O’Brien fifteen years before, in which he talked about his involvement in it as UN Representative, when he had provoked the ire of the United States and Belgium by trying to prevent the secession. However, the summer of 1978 was not a good time to go there because only a few months before, in May 1978, the FNLC rebels, bolstered by thousands of new recruits, had invaded Shaba for the second time. The first attempt, known as Shaba I, in 1977, did not get very far;

136 Schatzberg, Mobutu, 34.
137 In fact, his full name was Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga (“The all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, goes from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake.”)
138 Ibid, 37.
139 Kelly, America’s Tyrant, 194.
140 Ibid, 1.
Larmer believes that it was primarily a war of recruitment, to enable a subsequent war of larger scale. The Zairian army was slow to engage, and Mobutu appealed for western military aid, claiming that Cuba and Angola were behind the invasion, even though they clearly were not. Finally, Morocco sent 1,200 troops, airlifted by the French, who also took the communist threat seriously, no doubt concerned about their former colonies in Africa.

In May 1978, the FLNC again invaded Shaba, but this time with thousands of new recruits. When they marched directly to Kolwezi, a mining town less than 200 miles from Lubumbashi, Mobutu’s army fled. The rebels held 2,500 mostly Belgian and French mining employees hostage, but the Zairian army attacked anyway, resulting in the murder of 37 hostages. At this point France and Belgium airlifted troops into Shaba, with substantial United States help. The CIA had once again convinced Washington that the Cubans were involved, even though Cuba had sought to avoid or delay the attack. The French Foreign Legion was part of the airlift; they had a reputation for being ruthless. Indeed, I later sat next to a Legionnaire at dinner party who described his job thus: “I parachute in, kill everyone in sight, then leave. I don’t even know where I am or who I’m killing.” The Americans organized a major military airlift, flying in 1,500 Moroccan troops, who formed the UN Peacekeeping force in Shaba. “Once again, Mobutu’s friends had come to his rescue and protected him from his enemies.” The final death toll was

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142 Ibid, 102.
143 Kelly, *America’s Tyrant*, 239.
around 160 expatriates, 150 Zairian soldiers, 200 Katangese, 3 French soldiers, and around 800 Zairian civilians.\textsuperscript{144}

Obviously it was taking a risk for Dan to go there, let alone take his wife and family. Over 2,000 Europeans had been evacuated to Belgium, and were only just now returning when we arrived in August. When I asked Dan recently why we went there at that time, he replied, “But that’s what we do.” We still had a Consul-General in Lubumbashi because although President Carter had hoped to improve the United States’ record on human rights in Africa, the two Shaba wars gave the CIA a reason to convince him to support Mobutu. Larmer presents convincing evidence that Cuba saw involvement in Shaba as contrary to their interests.\textsuperscript{145} But Carter was led to believe that backing the worst dictator in Africa was necessary to prevent Soviet influence in the region, or getting control of the mineral riches of Shaba, making Dan and I the “boots on the ground,” as they say, in this minor skirmish of the Cold War.

Nevertheless, daily life in Lubumbashi was comfortable, and we felt safe because the UN peacekeeping force from the Moroccan army was well disciplined and reliable. Our house was the nicest I have ever lived in -- a spacious white California-style villa with a red tile roof and a terrace in front covered with purple bougainvillea. There were huge red-flowered flame trees or purple jacarandas, in bloom according to the season, in the front yard. In the back were banana and mango trees laden with fruit, and a large swimming pool fringed with tall poinsettias. I thought they only grew in pots! The air was clear and much cooler and drier than Kinshasa because of the altitude; it only rained once a day for six months of the year.

\textsuperscript{144} Larmer, “Local Conflicts,”105.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid, 106.
The only clue that we were in a war-torn area was a wrought-iron gate to the stairs that we had to lock when we went up to bed in case of intruders. In case of attack we were supposed to lock ourselves in the upstairs bathroom, the designated “safe room,” with bottles of water and army rations. There was a short-wave radio in the bedroom that frequently crackled in the night, waking us up with “All Points Bulletins” from the State Department, almost always irrelevant to our situation. The radio was two-way, so we could use it to call out in a crisis, and we took another one with us when we went out. Once the boys called us when we were out to tell us that there was a bush baby in their room that had gone by the time we got home, if it ever existed at all. (They still insist that it did.) The boys were not alone, but the nanny was asleep in her room behind the house, and the night watchman slept so well that one night his radio was stolen.

Although life in Lubumbashi was pleasant, it was very restricted, especially for me. Dan had his job and the boys had school, but there was almost nothing for me to do there, and I missed the international community in Sofia; the only other Consulates in Lubumbashi were the French and Belgian, and I didn’t have much in common with the mining executives and merchants. Nightlife was non-existent because the Moroccan Army enforced a curfew every night for our first year; as diplomats, we could move around, but most people couldn’t. Travel in Shaba was impossible by road, so Dan would tour the region in a small plane belonging to the Methodist missionaries. I went along once in a small four-seater with an American pilot. We flew low over the bush and could see all the little villages scattered among the trees. When we arrived at the remote missions, the pilot buzzed the houses before landing, so the missionary could come and meet us in a Land Rover. The landing strips were flat grassy cleared areas with just a
single gas pump; the pilot had to climb onto the wing to fill up the tank. The missionaries were providing all the education and medical services in the province, and the plane was the only source of supplies and mail.

Once again our daily life was almost entirely in French; the only school for Andrew and Mark was the French program at the Belgian School. Although the boys didn’t know a word of French when they started, the teachers made no concessions; the very first week Andrew scored zero for a dictation. But he learned fast, and with my help was top of his class by the end of the year, to the chagrin of the Belgian parents. Mark had learned to read in Sofia, a year ahead of his classmates in Lubumbashi, so he learned French as they learned to read. There was an English-speaking boy from Barbados in Mark’s class, whose father was an agricultural advisor. When Mark told me about him the first day of school he didn’t even mention that he was black. The boys led a relatively normal life, going to school, playing with their friends, and riding their bikes around town. Andrew even went camping with the Cub Scouts in the “bush,” coming back covered in red dust from head to toe. They wanted a dog, so we adopted a mutt named Simba, who liked to swim in our pool. They hadn’t had television since Washington so they didn’t miss it.

I tried to keep busy, swimming daily in our pool, playing golf (for the first and only time) and joining the local Lions Club (“a charitable activity”), where at least I got to know some Zairian women. But it wasn’t nearly enough. I really only had one good friend, the Chinese/Singaporean wife of the Swiss manager of the one international hotel in town. I became very close to Judy after her seven-year old son, a playmate of Mark’s, died after falling out of a second-floor window. With no family nearby, she was totally
alone in her grief; her husband coped by throwing himself into his work, so I spent hours just sitting with her listening to her talk about her son.

I found it increasingly tiresome to give dinner parties for visiting Americans with guests I didn’t even know, or had nothing in common with. Most of the people we entertained were collaborating with Mobutu, or worse. Typical were George and Maggie, Sephardic Jews who had fled from Malta to avoid the Nazis in the Second World War. George, who had New Zealand citizenship, had made a fortune supporting Mobutu and getting government contracts for road building and other public works. They entertained lavishly; I believe they could not take all their money out of the country. One New Year’s Eve we went to their house for dinner and were served whole lobsters specially flown in from Belgium. The boys were seated at the table with us, and Mark recoiled in horror when the waiter offered him the platter laden with lobsters. He only ate certain very American foods; pizza, hamburgers, spaghetti, so I had to carry crackers and peanut butter with me everywhere we went. Sadly, Maggie died not long after we left of cerebral malaria.

Zairian men didn’t usually bring their wives to dinner parties, and only once did we visit a Zairian’s home, which was a compound because he had two wives, each of whom had her own house. At least we now received videos to show our guests, instead of the old reel-to-reel movies we had shown in Burundi and Bulgaria, which inevitably broke at the most exciting moment, sending yards of film all over the floor. The movies helped to pass the time instead of making polite conversation, but videos were also more current -- we received one of the famous 1980 Olympic ice hockey game where the USA beat Russia just a few weeks after the event. Even though everyone knew the outcome, it
was exciting to watch it. The *Roots* TV series, shown at the American Cultural Center, was immensely popular, attracting a huge crowd of locals and expatriates. It was very moving to watch it in the heart of Africa, from whence many of the slaves had come.

Sadly, the people of Zaire were still suffering from a form of slavery under Mobutu. Everyone there knew that Mobutu was skimming the cream off the revenues from the export of the minerals for his own use. While his people were starving, illiterate, and insecure, his extravagance was out of control. As well as several residences in Zaire, he owned luxurious homes in the South of France, Paris, Brussels, Switzerland, and Portugal. Michela Wrong suggests that the people tolerated such an oppressive regime because they didn’t know any better, having suffered a similar tyranny under the Belgian colonial regime. On the other hand, Weissman believes that Zaire’s leaders learned the corruption “so extensive that it devours institutions and norms” from the CIA, whose predominant techniques—corruption and external force—constituted a tutorial on irresponsible government.”

Probably Mobutu learned from both, but what was hard to understand was that he seemed so invulnerable. When he visited Lubumbashi, the capital of the province that had recently seen two invasions by his enemies, he rode around town standing up in an open jeep. Locals opposed to him ascribed his invulnerability to black magic; no doubt Mobutu encouraged that idea.

Weissman points out that the United States wasted opportunities to pressure Mobutu to reform his government, including after the Shaba Wars, and that the American officials directing Congo policy “inappropriately projected their Cold War experiences in

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146 Michela Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in the Congo.* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 96.
other continents onto Africa, where conditions were completely different.”

Unlike in Bulgaria, where the Soviet Union had helped to put in the communist government, we represented the government that was responsible for the suffering of millions of Zairians.

Moreover, unlike Bulgaria, from where we could drive to Greece or fly anywhere in Europe in a couple of hours when we needed a break, the only way to leave Lubumbashi by air was through Kinshasa by Air Zaire, because the roads were no longer usable. If we wanted a change we could drive to Zambia, but we couldn’t go to Rhodesia because of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). Since the United States didn’t recognize “independent” Rhodesia, as American diplomats we couldn’t travel there, even if we had wanted to. In the spring before we left, UDI finally ended, and I listened to newly elected President Mugabe’s speech on the radio. Now we could finally visit Victoria Falls, in what was at that time called Zimbabwe/Rhodesia. We stayed in a seedy, run-down hotel, reeking of post-colonial decadence, did the Zambezi crocodile boat trip and walked across the falls on a steel bridge. I was terrified the boys would fall in because there were no guardrails on the banks of the river.

To stave off boredom in Lubumbashi, I had started reading books on American history and government from the American Cultural Center library; although I had been a history major, I had never studied American history. One languid afternoon while I was lying on the couch in our living room reading Daniel Boorstin’s three volume history of the United States, *The Americans*, I suddenly realized that I could take the Foreign Service exam. After all, it was mainly about American history and politics, subjects I had been reading about for months. Thanks to the new State Department policy, wives could now become Foreign Service Officers, provided they passed all the exams. A new

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phenomenon of “Foreign Service Couples” had appeared, who tried to get assignments together, or in neighboring countries. The idea of taking the exam gave me a sense of anticipation and purpose that I hadn’t felt for years.

When Dan came home from work I blurted out in my excitement, “Guess what, I’m going to take the Foreign Service Exam.” “Well, I don’t know that these joint careers are working out very well,” he replied pompously. Undeterred, I made enquiries, and learned that I could take the written exam at the Consulate in a few weeks, the same day that it was given around the world. I was thrilled, diving into my books with new enthusiasm, reading about the United States Constitution as well as its history. The day of the exam finally came, and I took my very first multiple-choice test. (In England all the exams consisted of essay questions.) The cultural attaché who supervised the exam had encouraged me, because his wife was also joining the Foreign Service. I was relieved to find that I knew most of the answers to the American history and politics questions; moreover, the “international section” included several questions about the parliamentary system of government—easy for someone who had been educated in England.

A few weeks’ later the results arrived – I had scored 85% and passed! I could take the oral exam on my return to Washington. This was a huge boost for my self-confidence. I no longer felt like “just a wife,” but as someone who might just possibly have a career – quite a change from when I had to ask the Ambassador for permission to teach English in the girls’ high school in Burundi. Dan congratulated me, but told me that he doubted that I would pass the oral exam; it was known to be more difficult. I would find out soon; we were due to leave in a few weeks, and the exam was scheduled just after our return; I was
relieved that Dan had been assigned to the State Department in Washington for two years. I was ready to go home.

Whatever the reason, I had a sense of something coming to an end as we left the house in Lubumbashi. I think I knew deep down that this was to be my last post as a Foreign Service wife. Not only did I not feel loved or appreciated by Dan, but it was clear from the last two posts that being “liberated” as a Foreign Service wife did not make much difference, unless you were in European capitals, a career trajectory that did not appeal to Dan. By then I knew that I either had to join the Foreign Service myself, or settle in Washington with a career of my own.
Epilogue

Coming Home

“Questing is what makes a woman the heroine of her own life.”

To my great delight we actually bought a house when we moved back to Washington in the summer of 1980, something I had been campaigning for since we had left four years before. We had saved all the “hardship allowance” (twenty five percent of Dan’s salary) in Lubumbashi, and used the money for a down payment on a pretty little yellow 1920s bungalow in our old neighborhood of American University Park, where I had already put down roots. There was a not-very-tidy lawn, flowerbed, white rose arch, and a large umbrella-shaped dogwood tree. The porch spanned the entire width and the front door opened right into the light and airy living room; it was cozy and inviting with oak floors and wood trim. Windows on three sides looked out over the garden and tree-lined street, and there was a little sun porch off the kitchen where I loved to read the paper in the morning.

I soon picked up my old network of friends; as well as the book club, I belonged to a local Episcopal church and a baby-sitting co-op. The neighborhood is compact and tree-lined, with older homes, mostly brick colonials and bungalows, each one unique. You could walk to shops and easily take the bus downtown. There were playgrounds for the children, where parents congregated and chatted while watching their children. There were countless routes for my daily walks, past an endless variety of well-kept small yards with people outside working in their yards, or watching their children play. Halloween was wonderful because the houses were so close together; the children and I would

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149 Katha Pollitt, in the Preface to Heilbrun, Writing, xvi. Did Pollitt get the idea from David Copperfield? (I am indebted to Susan Thorne for this insight)
shuffle through the ankle-deep leaves from house to house. Monsters or ghosts opened many of the doors, and one eccentric neighbor gave out vegetables; the sidewalk outside his house would be littered with zucchini. AU Park felt like home, and still does in some ways.

I had already taken the all-day Foreign Service oral exam; it included an interview with a panel, an “in-basket” test, and a group mock-negotiation exercise. Although I had only been back from Africa a few days, and still suffered from jet lag, I had to drive my friend Julie’s VW Beetle to Arlington in rush hour Washington traffic because Dan had taken our car to work. It was hot outside already, but I was not dressed for the freezing air-conditioning, which I was not used to—we didn’t have it in Lubumbashi. I didn’t think I had a chance because most of the other applicants were young men who were working in what sounded like impressive jobs, but at the end of the day they told me that I had passed. I must have learned something as a Foreign Service wife after all.

When Dan had yet another affair that Christmas, I asked him to leave. At first he was angry, blaming me, accusing me of not being a good Foreign Service wife, and “not taking him seriously enough,” but I stood my ground, and he moved out the next April. The next two years were tough, as I adjusted to being a single working parent, but I had tremendous support from my friends and church and loved being back at work. At first I had a part-time job in admissions at a downtown business school—it was perfect because it conformed to school hours and vacations—but it didn’t pay enough to supplement the child support Dan gave us. I had heard nothing from the State Department, so I applied to the World Bank again, and got my old job back. Going back there the next summer was a real turning point as I would be earning enough to support us, and even stay in AU Park,
which was really important to the boys and me. I would have to sell my beloved house under the terms of the divorce settlement, but at least I could now afford to rent one in the neighborhood. The Bank even dug the microfilm of my old personnel records out of a mine in Pennsylvania and gave me my accrued sick leave. The work was interesting, and the environment was cosmopolitan; plus there was a real cachet to working at the World Bank in Washington—friends would love coming to have lunch with me in the cafeteria. I even started to make plans to go to Library School and get my Master’s—a long-term ambition.

So I finally achieved my goal of autonomy and a career, but at what price? Dan was dutiful, always paying the child support on time and seeing the boys once a week—six o’clock Friday to six o’clock Saturday, but after a year or so he went overseas again, so in effect was out of their lives except for summer visits to wherever he was. Not going overseas with him somehow made it real that I was leaving the Foreign Service. It had been my way of life for almost twenty years; I even lost touch with most of the people I knew from it except for a few close friends. Like most divorced women, I had to get used to doing everything on my own, from taxes to vacations, and of course I missed Dan’s company; we had had some good times together. In the end, although I regretted the boys not seeing more of their father, I was happy to be in charge of my own life again.

Charles Taylor contends that achieving authenticity is a continuing tension between the individual and society, of “the ignoring by one or other side of the pull towards individual and social.” My experience as a Foreign Service wife epitomized this dilemma, as I strove to retain my own identity while still trying to meet the

expectations of the role. Feminists might regard Foreign Service wives as dependent: not only I was dependent economically but also I had no choice in where I lived. But I also enjoyed the adventure of going to new and exciting places with the protection of the United States government and the security of Dan’s career. As well as travelling within the countries where we lived, we visited many surrounding countries, notably a memorable three-week trip we took around East Africa in our Volkswagen Beetle in 1969. We drove around Lake Victoria to Tanzania to witness the migrating herds in Serengeti, then on to the Olduvai Gorge and Mount Kilimanjaro. In Kenya we saw lions and elephants in the Masai Mara National Reserve, then visited Nairobi, Mombasa and the Indian Ocean beaches. We completed the circle by travelling through the White Highlands, Uganda, and the mountains of Rwanda to return to Burundi. In Uganda we visited my cousin, who was there as a cattle range expert. I had always wanted to see the African animals in their native habitat, so this was a dream come true, as well as a last adventure before parenthood (I was already three months pregnant.)

Moreover, despite not having a career of my own, I led a full and interesting life, helped no doubt by my deep interest in history, aptitude for languages, and ability to get on with people in other cultures that I had learned at SOAS and the University of Ghana. Moreover, at least Dan was in the American Foreign Service, where my family background was not an issue; class-consciousness was very much alive in the British counterpart. Yet the austerity of post-war England prepared me to go without certain consumer and food items; it was much easier for me than many of my peers. Although at times I felt as if I was playing a role when I participated in diplomatic functions, at least it was by my own choice after Foreign Service wives were “liberated” in 1972, thanks to
pressure from women activists. Although I resented the restrictions of the role of Foreign Service wife, and sometimes disagreed with United States policy, I respected the work that the FSOs did, trying to solve problems by diplomacy rather than by force; having diplomatic immunity allowed me to move about freely and associate with whomever I wished, even under repressive regimes.

I experienced many examples of what Abrams calls “transitional” situations: change, even when it came, did not happen overnight; even after 1972, the amount of freedom wives enjoyed varied considerably. This was like being in a limbo between full participation in our husbands’ career, and complete freedom to pursue our own. In my case, it was just not possible to work in Bulgaria or Zaire, and entertaining fellow expatriates made up most of our social life. Moreover, sometimes by the time it happened the change was no longer desirable. One of my friends was an FSO, but fell in love with a fellow diplomat at her first post, and had to quit when they got married. She became a librarian, divorced her husband, and rose to a management position at the National Library of Medicine. She told me recently that the Department asked her to come back when the rules changed, but she declined. She liked her new job, enjoyed living in Washington, and didn’t want to start over again. I also declined when they finally called me in 1984, for much the same reasons. The delay was because the Reagan administration did not make hiring women a priority. Had I still been married to Dan my decision might have been different.

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If change was slow to come for white middle-class American women, it was hardly on the horizon for the women in most of the countries where I lived. At least in Ghana women played a role economically as entrepreneurs, and had a strong influence in the family, whereas in Central Africa women were totally subservient to men. In Burundi people said that wives had less value than cattle for the Tutsis, and Hutu women were at the bottom of the pecking order. The oppressive regimes in Zaire and South Africa were totally patriarchal; even white women in South Africa were not equal to white men. Only in communist Bulgaria did I live in a society where women had more rights and opportunities than American women, though those came at a steep price of the loss of personal freedom of expression and religion, while the government never fulfilled its promise of providing adequate housing and childcare. Living in these countries where women had few or no rights at all gave me a real appreciation for the gains we had made in the United States.

Although I consider myself a feminist, marriage and family are still important to me; I wanted my children to have the security and perspective of a mother and a father. On the other hand, any ideas I might have had about sharing childcare evaporated because Dan’s dedication to his career, although arguably it benefited all of us, took precedence over the family. So it fell to me to be the primary parent even when I was still married. At the time, my independent streak would not let me admit it, but I realize now that I missed my family in England more than I was willing to acknowledge, especially the “extended family.” We spent a lot of time with our many aunts, uncles and cousins when I was growing up, and I have missed countless family gatherings over the years. I also worried about Dan’s mother, who was on her own back in Ohio; although my mother
came to visit us in South Africa and Washington, Gladys, like my father, did not want to travel abroad.

Perhaps it was because of being so far away from my family that I felt so strongly about divided families in South Africa; maybe growing up as a working-class girl in a middle-class environment led me to identify with the underdog. In any case, my personal relationships with people like Raymond, Martha, and Nicolai gave me a profound appreciation of what it was like to live under repressive regimes. Moreover, my close encounter with racism in South Africa left me with an enduring hatred for it, together with deep admiration for people like Steve Biko, Helen Suzman and the Black Sash who fought against it. It was also a revelation to observe the opportunities that women enjoyed in socialist Bulgaria, and then experience the complete lack of them in Zaire, where the United States supported President Mobutu. Griffiths opens her book with a quotation from Miriam Makeba: “If given a choice, I would have certainly selected to be what I am: one of the oppressed instead of one of the oppressors. But in truth, I had no choice.”\textsuperscript{152} Would I have selected to be one of the oppressed? Maybe not, but at least I could choose to avoid being the oppressor. Dan actually went back to Zaire twice after our divorce, the second time as Ambassador.\textsuperscript{153} I'm glad I wasn't along.

Returning to Griffiths’ concept of the web of identity, the decades I have written about shaped me as a woman, mother, American, friend, historian, Christian, linguist, and librarian. I am passionate about human rights, equality for all, and democracy. If I had become a teacher or librarian after university and not married Dan or become a Foreign

\textsuperscript{152} Quoted in Griffiths, \textit{Web}, Title Page.

\textsuperscript{153} Dan was mentioned in some of the books on Zaire; he was Ambassador when Mobutu finally fell from power. Dan later became a friend of Lawrence Devlin, the CIA Station Chief who ordered the murder of Lumumba, left the CIA, and worked for a diamond exporter in Zaire. Devlin supposedly still wielded influence over Mobutu.
Service wife, I would not be the same person I am today; I might not even have had such an interesting career. “Identity is not just my choice, but the actuality of my choices—how I shape and fashion the circumstances of my birth and family, linguistic, cultural and gender identity into a coherent narrative that stands as my life’s story,” according to Selwa Benhabib.154 Telling the story of my years as a Foreign Service wife has restored my sense of agency vis-à-vis that “buried past,” when I thought I had accomplished little because I didn’t have a career. I am finally the “heroine of my own life.”

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154 Selwa Benhabib, quoted in Griffiths, Web, 81.
Works Cited


