

Lost and Found in Vollezele

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[PHILIPPA YAAA DE VILLIERS]

I was born left-handed and changed over because my mother believed that to be left-handed was a kind of deficiency. As a result I've got a strange kind of spatial dyslexia, I struggle to understand maps and I pretty much always get lost. I like it. I enjoy getting lost because it gives me an opportunity to see people and places that I didn't plan to see.

Sensible people see this as a rationalisation; the kinder ones are indulgent of this supposed eccentricity. It is not an eccentricity in the sense of being a choice, like wearing your pants halfway down your legs is a choice. I don't know how to do it any other way. That means, getting lost is not a choice.

A goldfish's memory is not long enough for it to know that the bowl it's circling is still the same bowl it circled a minute ago. Like the goldfish, I am always surprised. Getting lost so often, I come back with stories. I find myself in them, in the mirrored reflection on characters and places that I discover. Or I don't find myself at all. Either way, the process yields results: when I get lost, I find things.

Perhaps because of our continents' history, I am very aware of my identity as a mixed-race African. Part of me is a wild warrior wearing the wind as a cloak and some skins to cover my private parts. The other part is European, neurotic and orderly. Being in the world is complicated by the attitudes of these different selves, and the attitudes of other people to those selves. When I write, I take off my skin and my selves. They lie beside me in this act of reflection.

In a fit of homesickness I decided to cycle to the post office and send some postcards to my son. I set off, my tyres crunching the magnificent gravel at the entrance of Villa Hellebosch. Certain that the post office would be a very simple thing to find, I looked around for somebody to guide me.

It was a fine afternoon. As usual in these parts, it was eerily quiet. The village houses were well-kept, everything was in its place. The horses were in the fields, the dogs lay about here and there, there was nobody lolling about.

This is very different to the city from which I come, Johannesburg, the largest city in Southern Africa and the economic powerhouse of Southern Africa. My suburb of Troyeville used to be a stronghold of the rich, but has now fallen on hard times. It is now a very mixed neighbourhood: people who can afford to maintain their houses alongside those who cannot. There are absentee land-

Phillippa Yaa de Villiers
(1966-).
Photo by Alexandra Cool.



lords who charge a fortune for a single room, thereby forcing families to crowd into the space so as to be able to afford a roof.

There are many unemployed people in Troyeville. On my street they usually take the morning sun with a beer and a joint in their hands. Hence the lolling that is so much a part of daily activity in our neck of the woods. In Belgium, it seems that everyone is employed or busy with something.

Yet the first person I approached for directions to the poskantoor would fit right in to Troyeville. A teenager at the roadside, her rollerblades around her neck and a vacant look in her eyes. When I asked my simple question, she shook her blonde mane like a sleepy horse and pointed down the road. Nothing more, nothing less. A simple instruction, which I followed with alacrity. Within a blink of an eye I had left the village, no post office in sight. I sighed. This was going to be one of those days.

I saw an elderly lady aching along the road, carrying her body like so many heavy shopping bags. As an African, we are taught that older people - the elders - know better, so I asked her: '*Verskoon my mevrou, waar is die poskantoor?*'

As a black child growing up in white South Africa, I learnt to never draw attention to my difference. My instincts told me to speak like the people, blend in. So in Belgium I speak Afrikaans, the distant cousin of Flemish. Usually they don't get that it's another language until a couple of sentences into the exchange.

The old lady sighed: *'Dis ver, my kind. Jy moet die bus vat, na Gooik.'* I pointed at my borrowed bike:

'En die fiets?' Shaking her head with misgiving, she launched into a complicated explanation of the route. Something about following this road till it crossed a big road, and a garage, and then crossing the big road to go to the next village.

I sort of followed what she was saying, I don't really understand Flemish or Dutch, it's actually 300 years and 5000km from Afrikaans. Seeing my puzzled face, she asked me:

'Waarvandaan kom jy?'

'Suid Afrika.'

'Oooh. Dis ver,' she said with empathy, as if I had ridden my bicycle all the way from Johannesburg.

Outside of Brussels the broader Europe, the significant identity that parleys on the same level as great big countries like the USA and China, does not seem to exist. People in rural areas seem content to watch the fields grow ripe and grow old, and continue the centuries-old cycle of nature. Trying to buy a card to call Africa in Vollezelle was impossible: the elderly lady behind the counter shook her head at me: *'Afrika? Nee, nie hier nie.'*

All well and good, but I wanted to say, did you know there is a poet in the Bahamas who knows every single piece of music that Bach composed? There is a tenor in the North Cape who can sing better than Pavarotti. He's never been to Italy. His education tried to keep Europe and its so-called superior culture out of his grasp, but he heard the music and fell in love. He bought the CD and memorised the words. He makes white ladies cry with his interpretation of the opening theme of Verdi's *La Traviata*. There are people there who know the best of what your culture has to offer. Why don't you know us?

I kept on riding with this petulant thought pushing the pedals. As narrow as this perspective is, I quickly got lost. As explained by my first old lady, I found a big road, but as far as I could see there was no intersection. There was a large garage being rebuilt by two sturdy, sandy youths. There was no road to follow. I turned back.

In a neat driveway I discovered three elders, a man and two women, who were dressed very smartly, as if they were going to a funeral. They were about to get into their car. I debated whether to bother them, because the grief-stricken should not be bothered, but I had to find the post office and I quickly rationalised that if they were indeed grieving, this would take their minds off it. I thought if there was polygamy in Europe, the gentleman was about to get into the car with his two wives, one around fifty, the other about fifteen years younger, with heavy red lipstick on her full, pouty lips.

The gentleman told me optimistically in French that I would easily reach the post office if I went back the way I came and followed the small road beside the garage. His 'wives' were less hopeful.

'The post office closes at around 3,' said the older, looking dejectedly at her watch.

'Not always,' countered the red lipstick. *'sometimes it closes later.'*



A brief look passed between them, a hidden war suddenly exposed. I'm older so I know better, said the one party. Exactly, you're older, you old bat, but you're no wiser, especially at finding your way. The look passed like lightning, held for a moment, then dissolved.

The older wife turned to me reluctantly: *'It's hard to know when it closes. It's different for different days.'*

'Don't worry, it's not that far, you'll follow the road and find the post office is on your left,' said the man breezily, eager to be rid of me and get on with his life. He folded his wives into the car, got behind the wheel and drove off.

My imagination delighted by the domestic scene, titillated by wondering who they were going to bury, I retraced my route with new energy. Just to the left of the garage I found a tiny, unremarkable road, like a driveway actually, I followed it and it led into another village.

It looked like a life-size architect's model of a typical town in Europe. Belgian children rode their bicycles silently in perfect circles around the perfect houses. The children seemed mechanical, well-mannered and quiet, alien to the chaos and noise that I associate with children. In my street in Troyeville, children are a multisensory experience: smelly, noisy and always hungry for fun and food.

Villa Hellebosch, Vollezele,
Flanders.

Photo by Alexandra Cool.

Suddenly I felt like a stranger. A man carrying seedlings out of the boot of his car shot me a cursory glance that seemed to me laden with xenophobia. I was obviously foreign, I felt pitch black, my lips like the Nubians in Asterix comics. I thought I heard drums beating as the man's eyes bored into my too-large African behind.

Racism is such an imprecise syndrome. Yes, obviously there is that slavering, lynch-mob racism; at least in those scenarios the motives are clear. But this strange suspicion, this odd us-them cross-purposes gaze, puts my hackles up. There is a strong possibility that it is all in my mind, the man was thinking of his plants and where he's going to put them in his garden. This paranoia is mine. I have to deal with it.

My father is Ghanaian and has decided that racism does not exist, so he simply ignores it every day of his life in small-town Australia. That is a great strategy. I came to it later in life. In the West Africa that bred my father and so many people like him, there is only one race, the human race, so everyone has a respect and a self-respect that has given the world such great mediators as Kofi Annan and writers like George Padmore, Chinua Achebe, WEB du Bois and many others. Ghana seemed to me a crucible where the long-lost children of Africa could return to the motherland and claim their space in history.

This liberated view is not one that comes to me automatically, I have to think my way there, or move to where I can feel it authentically. With children it's usually easier: their innocence stares at us and they are curious and pleased to be surprised, they are not yet set, their fluidity opens the way to possibilities, they want to learn.

A teenage boy removed his headphones to help me. His eyes were kind and gentle, like those of so many of the people I have met here in Belgium. They don't mean any harm. No predators here. He tells me that I'm in the wrong town. He shows me which way to go. I keep pedalling until I reach Gooik, and find, as he described it, as they all described it, the *poskantoor* on the left side of the street.

I hand over my postcards. The young lady squints at them, and seems pleased to practise her English.

'You want to send them normal?' I nod. She charges me 3 euros and 60 cents for each postcard. I gulp. I want to say, *'I'm sure you've made a mistake, you know, that is four loaves of bread where I come from, so four days' food!'*, but I don't want to look like a poor relation. I owe it to South Africa to stand up as a citizen of the world. I pay up without flinching and leave.

I know exactly how to get home now. I push up and down the small hills, inhaling the manure, watching the horses. A big bay with feet like an elephant canters around his paddock, chasing some horsey dream. Close to home an old lady comes out to look at the sunset, her radiant face turned up to the pink evening, a smile of ecstasy on her face. I turn into Villa Hellebosch and cruise down the avenue of ancient trees, like the Madame of the Castle, coming home to her barking dogs and her whisky. Home is where the heart is, and mine is pumping with the afternoon's small adventure.

In the not too distant future, my son will see where I am on a postcard. I am here. He is there. On the way from me to him, I found a few stories. I found myself.

Postscript: a black family has moved into Gooik. I saw them yesterday on a ride to the post office. They have moved in next door to the Indian family. I said hello to them. They weren't too friendly. I imagine that black people like them in this European village kind of context, they feel exposed and strangely blessed, so they don't want their buddies from the street coming in to the party, eating up all the snacks and finishing the wine. Because how many times have we heard this: *'It's okay for one or two of you to come. But sixty thousand? That's too much.'* We don't want to be too much. But we want to live peacefully and raise our kids, get them educated so that we can all live a better life. ■

Phillippa Yaa de Villiers stayed as a writer in residence in April 2009 at Villa Hellebosch, Vollezele, Flanders.

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