

Where My Heart Used to Beat – Sebastian Faulks

It must have been forty-eight hours after I'd written my letter of polite refusal to Pereira that I saw the corner of the envelope, still unposted, beneath some junk mail on the hall table. I pulled it out, dropped it in the wastepaper basket, sat down at my desk and began again. 'Dear Dr Pereira, Thank you for your letter. I should be delighted . . .'

A week later, I heard back from him; and ten days after that I was on the plane.

Flights to Toulon were rare and expensive; I dog-legged via Marseille and a boxy hire car to the tip of the peninsula – what Pereira called the *presqu'île*, or 'almost-island' – to a small area where pleasure boats and water taxis berthed. Here I stood outside a scruffy place with a red awning, the Café des Pins, waiting to be collected.

What reckoning with my past had made me change my mind? I conceded now that looking back over my youth in such detail was probably a way of preparing my defences. Recent research showed that your brain came to a decision more quickly than your mind could do so and fired the relevant systems before your plodding 'judgement' took the credit. Overlooking the implications for free will, or the illusion of it, I was happy to accept that that had been the case with me.

I was going to meet a man who could open a door on to my past: it made me vulnerable to think a stranger might know more about myself than I did; I needed to make sure my own version of my life was in good order. At the same time, the wretched Annalisa business (such a mess of lust and fear and blocked feeling) had made me admit there were aspects of my character – or behaviour, at least – that not only were self-defeating but also inflicted pain on others. Even in my early sixties, I felt young and vigorous enough to change – to confront whatever I had yet to face; and perhaps a medical man of my father's generation whose special interest was in memory could be the very one to help.

I was into my second cigarette when an old woman in black stopped and looked me up and down.

'*Vous êtes Dr Hendricks?*' Her accent was strongly of the Midi.
'*Oui.*'

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‘Venez.’ She gestured me to follow. Despite her bowed legs she moved at speed. We went down a stone jetty, past the public ferry that had tied up for the night, over a gangway and on to a boat with a white canopy. It was big enough for a dozen people, though there were only three of us on it. The third was a man in the wheelhouse, who opened the throttle and began to edge the boat out into the waters of the bay.

My French was good enough to ask how far we were going and how long it would take, but I couldn’t make out the old woman’s answers over the noise of the engine, and it seemed to me she preferred it that way. Eventually, I gave up trying to talk and instead looked back over the churning white wake to the port. Twenty minutes later, the mainland was no longer visible; we had left behind the croissant shape of Porquerolles island as we headed away from the setting sun.

At some point, despite the heave of the sea, I must have nodded off. I was woken by the thump of the side of the boat against a rock. It was dark.

There was an urgent exchange between the pilot and the old woman. We had arrived at a rocky inlet, or *calanque* as the man called it. He shone a torch on an iron hoop hammered into the reef; through this he secured the painter. The sea was calm enough to allow him to jump out and extend his hand, first to the woman, then to me.

It was an awkward scramble by torchlight before we reached a path. Here the man left us and returned to his boat; I followed the old woman in the dark on an uphill wooded path. I caught the smell of pines and could feel their needles under my feet. Eventually we came to some steps, which after a considerable time – there were perhaps a hundred of them – led to a flat area on what must have been the cliff top. A large rectangular house was now visible, lit only by the moon; I could make out numerous tropical shrubs and trees along its shuttered verandah.

We went in through a side door, into a dark passageway. The old woman told me to wait, while she vanished into the gloom, returning shortly afterwards with a gas lamp. With this, she led the way up a bare

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staircase and into a long corridor. At the end, we turned at right angles, towards the back of the house, and went up a half-flight of stairs to a door.

‘Isn’t Dr Pereira here?’ I asked in my rough but serviceable French.

‘No. He was called away to the mainland. He’ll be back tomorrow. There’s a bathroom down there. Breakfast will be at eight o’clock.’

I lit a candle and said goodnight as I looked round my room. The bedstead was iron; the mattress was thin, but yielded when I sat down on it. There were clean sheets and a single blanket; the night was warm. Above the bed was a crucifix, a carved figure in soft wood with convincing thorns and drops of gore; on the opposite wall was a painting of a pious-looking man in a robe with a faraway look.

The shutters gave way to a hefty push and opened on to the chatter of cicadas. The moon was obscured by loose clouds, but I could make out the shapes of umbrella pines; I thought that over the din of the insects I could hear the distant gasp and slap of sea in the *calanque*. The shouting of the women in my London flat seemed remote.

Pereira’s island appeared on none of the maps I had flicked through at the airport – being too small, probably, for their tourist scale; yet the size of this house alone argued the presence of running water, labour, human habitation. As if to confirm my guess, a distant church bell struck the hour.

I tried to read by candlelight, but even with two flames the print was hard to make out. I was lucky to suffer few of the indignities of middle age – beer belly, stiff knee or hair loss – but a bright light had become indispensable for reading.

It didn’t matter. When you’ve slept in as many spare rooms and lodgings as I have, there is a comfort in strangeness; the new is always familiar.