

RUSKIN PARK

SYLVIA, ME AND THE BBC

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an extract



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Photo on page 90 from *Radio Times*, 6 November 1953.

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CHAPTER 1

RETURN TO RUSKIN PARK HOUSE

On a showery Sunday afternoon in May 2022, I stood outside the south London block of flats where I had spent my childhood and wondered what I was doing there. Peering up at the second-floor flat, my home for 19 years, I could see the windows were open. Somebody must be in. But when I rang the mobile phone of the woman who had invited me over, my call went to voicemail – four times in a row. The rain started up again and I took shelter by the door to the block. It had been open to anyone when I lived here but now it needed to be unlocked by a flat owner’s key. I felt conspicuous and not a little foolish.

An hour before, I had set off on a journey which I hadn’t made for more than 25 years. Back then, it had become tediously familiar. Leaving the house in West Ealing where my family and I have lived since 1992, I travelled slowly down the traffic-clogged A40. I passed the old Hoover factory, now a Tesco superstore, and a string of some of the least attractive 1930s and 1950s housing estates, heading towards central London. But this time, driven by a sense that if I was on a

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journey into my past I had better go the whole hog, I turned off and drove down Wood Lane, past my former workplace, BBC Television Centre.

I had first visited Television Centre in the 1960s, taken to what seemed a magical place, more exciting than any theme park, by my mother, who worked in the drama department. As a child, I had delighted in spotting *Doctor Who* villains in the canteen or peering into a studio at a *Blue Peter* rehearsal. As an adult, I found that the asbestos-riddled complex where I practised my trade as a broadcaster had lost none of its glamour.

I drove on, retracing the route my mum had taken home in her little yellow Mini or later the MG Midget which I always suspected had been bought for her by an elderly neighbour who was an admirer. I passed the Albertine wine bar, just closed but for many years the scene of much BBC post-programme carousing. This had also been the location of my first meeting with my half-brother Simon in 1985.

Down, through Earl's Court to the Embankment, past the Royal Hospital. Across Vauxhall Bridge, overlooked by the postmodern fortress that is the MI6 headquarters, into grimy south London. Past the Oval cricket ground, where in 1968, aged ten, I had been left with a sandwich and a ten-shilling note, the price of entry to my first Test match. I sat on the grass by the boundary and watched England's John Edrich and Basil D'Oliveira – soon to be shamefully dropped from the team touring apartheid era South Africa – as they began to build a commanding first innings total against Australia.

Along Camberwell New Road, still choked with traffic but with some fine Georgian terraced houses that had since emerged from the blackened slums I had seen from the top

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deck of the number 12 bus in the 1960s and 70s. Then a right turn at Camberwell Green and up past the Maudsley Hospital, where in 1995 my mother and I had met the doctor to hear a diagnosis which frightened me but which she appeared to take in her stride. On past King's College Hospital, where she had been transferred the following year, and where her life had ended.

Finally, up Denmark Hill, turning off at Champion Hill, just short of the border with leafy Dulwich, to arrive at Ruskin Park House.

My mother, Sylvia Rich, had arrived here in 1955 with her 13-year-old son, my half-brother Stephen. She had written to a friend about the new home: 'It really is much nicer than the usual Council flats, central heating, constant hot water, quite new, and situated on top of a hill with a delightful little park just outside.'

It was, however, very small – Stephen had the one bedroom while Sylvia slept in the living room on a couch, or 'divan' as she called it, which became her bed each night. Then in 1958 I came along and, for a while, until Stephen left home to make his way in the theatre, it was even more cramped, with my cot joining his bed in the single bedroom.

From then on, it was just me and Mum, all the way until 1977 when I left the flat, first to live in West Berlin for six months, then to start my degree in modern and medieval languages in Cambridge.

When I picture the years I spent growing up at Ruskin Park House they have a stain of gloom. From very early on I was miserable there. At first, I suppose like most children of single parents, I had a strong bond with my mother. We would sit at

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the dining-room table on a Sunday lunchtime eating one of her very limited repertoire of meals – poached eggs, fish fingers, occasionally a flavourless beef casserole – singing along to ‘Puff the Magic Dragon’ on *Two Way Family Favourites* or laughing at *Round the Horne*. The stately old valve radio, the centrepiece of the living room until we got a little portable black and white telly, is the one piece of furniture I still have from the flat. It sits in our attic, waiting for the day when the team from BBC’s *The Repair Shop* brings it back to life.

But as time went on, Mum grew increasingly eccentric and possessive, before sinking into depression in my teenage years. Spending time alone with her in the flat as she began another rambling story about the goings-on at the BBC became a grim prospect.

I did escape during the holidays, when my mother, trying to hold down a demanding job with unpredictable hours, sent me out of London to stay with her family or with my godparents, whose house in a Wiltshire village had a long garden with a stream running through it. These were times of joyful freedom, while going back to the flat felt like a return to prison.

I escaped but my mum, who had at first so loved Ruskin Park House, did not. In the mid-1970s, the flat-dwellers, always encouraged to see themselves as a cut above most council tenants, were told that they had an opportunity to become homeowners. Under a Labour government, even before Margaret Thatcher came to power, the starting gun was fired on the privatisation of council homes. It was a revolution that gave thousands of tenants a valuable asset just as the 1980s housing boom got under way, and it would transform the politics and economics of Britain.

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But Sylvia Rich was not going to be a part of it. She turned down the opportunity to acquire our flat for the sum of £5,000, despite – or perhaps because of – my brother Stephen telling her what a good idea that would be. He was exasperated because she was trapping herself in Ruskin Park House when she could have had a nice nest egg and moved somewhere better. ‘It’s all a con,’ she would mutter under her breath when the subject was raised. She remained a Southwark Council tenant.

As the 1980s rolled on, the flats appreciated in value and a new breed known as the ‘yuppies’ moved in – after all, with Denmark Hill station just down the hill offering a ten-minute journey to Blackfriars, you could be in the City in no time.

By the early 1990s, one-bedroom flats like ours were going for upwards of £25,000, netting a tidy profit for those that had bought them in the 1970s for £5,000. Sylvia, however, appeared to have no regrets. After she died, I found a draft of a letter she had apparently sent around this time to the Conservative Party about a party political broadcast.

She wrote that while she was a Conservative voter she disliked the message in the broadcast about enabling tenants to have the ‘dignity’ of owning their own homes. ‘Are you not equating “possessions” with dignity?’ she asked, going on to claim many buyers had ended up having their homes repossessed. She ended by warning that if the ‘misleading’ statements continued, she would stop voting Conservative and she knew several people who felt the same.

I wonder who those ‘several people’ who shared her views on home ownership were? By this point, she barely knew anyone on the estate, although a young BBC radio producer who had bought a flat on her corridor knocked on her door

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from time to time to check that she was OK, letting me know if there was a problem.

One of my former BBC colleagues, Ellie Updale, who was born five years before me and spent her childhood in a three-bedroom flat in block B on the estate, has a different story. Her parents, despite some similar misgivings, did buy their flat. Then her father, a sub-editor on the *Daily Mirror*, died suddenly leaving her mother worried about meeting the mortgage. But things worked out: 'She'd always worked, my mother. She got through and eventually she sold it and moved to a little flat in Dulwich. And that was the making of her because she was pretty well independent.'

Now, on that rainy afternoon in May 2022, as I looked up at the flat, my mind went back to another Sunday more than a quarter of a century earlier. Then – as now – I had stood outside wondering how to get in. I had grown alarmed after failing to get Mum on the phone and had driven over to check up on her. When I got no response to knocking on the door and shouting through the letter box, I borrowed a ladder from the porter and climbed on to the second-floor balcony and through the open kitchen window. In my old bedroom, I found Mum and an empty bottle of sleeping pills. If she had meant to take a fatal dose she failed. The ambulance came and took her to hospital but she was home again within a few days. It was a stroke that killed her some months later.

A few days after her funeral in 1996, I again drove over to Ruskin Park House, this time to clear out the flat before it was handed back to Southwark Council.

I took the cramped little lift to the second floor and produced the key which we had found pinned inside my

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mother's coat pocket after her death. She had always had a terrible fear of being locked out and when I was first given a key insisted, to my great embarrassment, that it was attached to my school trouser pocket on a piece of elastic.

Opening the door, the familiar smell of the overheated flat hit me, overlain with the extra layers of dust accumulated while it had lain empty for the last two months. Looking around, it struck me once again how sad a picture of her life the flat painted. Much of the furniture was cheap and flimsy, dating back to the 1950s when Sylvia and Stephen had moved in. Stephen's earnings as a child actor at the Old Vic had helped buy him a bed and a wardrobe but a tea chest served as a side table and old orange boxes as bookcases, and they were heading for the dump.

In the bedroom, the wardrobe was stuffed with cheap women's clothing, much of it acquired from charity shops, and some of my old school shirts, which Mum had taken to wearing – after all, they were only slightly shabby. But hidden at the back I discovered two extremely elegant 1950s evening dresses, one a long, white, silk number. We later handed them to a friend's two teenage daughters, who were delighted with their glamorous new party outfits.

It was as I began to open drawers, look under the bed and investigate behind the dressing table that I became aware that there was something far more valuable here. Everywhere, there were bundles of letters – hundreds, possibly thousands of them – along with folders full of BBC memos, my school reports and legal documents relating to custody battles and child maintenance arrangements. It seemed she had never thrown away any letter she had received and kept carbon copies of just about every one she typed, either in her BBC office or



Stephen's wedding reception, 1967. Sylvia in fur stole, with Joan, Rory and Bunty.

at home on the portable typewriter she had brought back from work.

I immediately recognised the handwriting in hundreds of letters from her two sisters, my aunts Bunty and Joan, who had attended her funeral days earlier. I had known that they had written to each other at least weekly – my mother used to read out selected items of family news to me while I stifled a yawn and pretended to be interested. What I had not realised was that she often typed her replies and kept carbon copies.

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As I skimmed through some of these letters, a correspondence stretching over 50 years, I got the first inkling of something that was to become more evident when I looked more closely over the coming weeks. Yes, there was plenty of humdrum stuff – ‘just bought a new winter coat from Lewis’s’. But there was a total intimacy between the three sisters, Sylvia and Joan willing to share the details of their equally dramatic and sometimes disastrous romantic lives with Bunty, happily married but always with a kind word of comfort or advice. And between them they painted a vivid picture of what it was like to be a woman in Britain from the 1940s to the 1990s, especially one who wanted more from life than just domestic routine. What’s more, I began to realise that my mother, who left school at 14 and had appeared to read little more than the *Sunday Express* when I was growing up, had a real gift for writing, her letters peppered with pungent descriptions of her colleagues and friends.

Next, a small, dark blue 1945 diary with ‘B.B.C.’ stamped on the cover fell out of one folder, and beneath it I found a sheaf of letters from the war. With her husband away in various non-combatant roles around England and then in Washington DC, she found herself a job in the radio talks department in Bristol. By day, she was mixing with poets and artists and giving her boss Geoffrey Grigson the benefit of her opinion of their scripts; by night, she was sheltering from bombs or going dancing with American officers. Oh, and taking a few weeks off in 1942 to give birth to her son Stephen.

There appeared to be mountains of letters telling the story of her separation from her husband, sparked by his distaste for her BBC job, and her move to London in the 1950s to

work in television drama. I kept on reading, engrossed in the stories that unfolded about characters I thought I knew so well – my mother, my brother, my lovely aunts and cousins – but eventually I realised time was passing and I had to get on with the job. I scooped everything up and took it down to the car to examine more closely at home.

A few days later, I was trying to sort this sprawling archive into some sort of chronological order when I came across one batch of letters that made me catch my breath. They were in a small rectangular red box with ‘Charmed Life by Kayser’ printed on the lid, which must have once contained a pair of stockings. In blue biro, in my mother’s familiar handwriting, I saw this: ‘Keep for myself & Rory later.’ Opening it, I first saw a brown envelope with another message: ‘For Rory, to read and think about in the hope that it will help him to understand how it really was.’ Inside was a bundle of love letters which told the story of how I came to be born and how I was very nearly given away to lead a different life under another name. But there were also clues to an entirely different woman to the one with whom I had grown up.

It would take me years before I was ready to undertake the journey this accumulated pile of paper invited me on. Years before I was able to begin to reconcile the greyness of my teenage years with a resourceful, beautiful woman working in those post-war years. But in 1996, with a young family and a career at the BBC which I felt at the time had stalled, it did not feel right to immerse myself in the past. Yes, I still had a whole series of questions about the circumstances of my birth but the answers might prove hurtful to at least one person I had grown close to in recent years. Better to leave well alone for now.

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In 2021, a freelance journalist who knew a bit about my background contacted me about a story idea she was trying to sell to the *Telegraph*. Its letters pages had been full of people reminiscing about what they found when they cleared out their parents' homes – didn't I have a story about that? I told her my tale about the letters and it appeared in the *Sunday Telegraph* under my byline.

Writing the article sent me back to the filing cabinet stuffed with the letters I had not looked at for years. I wondered what had happened to the flat in Ruskin Park House and once Covid restrictions were removed, I sat down and wrote a letter, addressed to The Householder. I explained some of the story of my family's involvement with the flat and asked whether I might visit. I put it in the post and waited ... and waited. Four weeks later there had been no reply. I decided on one more try, just in case the letter had not arrived, resending it with a covering note.

A few days later, my phone rang, an unfamiliar number flashing up on my screen. It was a young woman called Christina, who introduced herself as the girlfriend of Alex, who owned the flat. They had received my first letter but it had been a busy time and they'd not got round to answering – but yes, I'd be very welcome to visit the following Sunday. I put the phone down and did a little dance around the kitchen, excited but also a bit nervous about returning to Ruskin Park House.

But now I was staring up at the flat with a sense of anticlimax – maybe Christina and Alex had decided my visit was a bad idea after all? Then my phone rang. It was Christina, apologising – she'd had her phone on silent and missed my four calls. She rushed down to let me in and we made our way

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up to the second floor in the cramped lift, one of the few things that hadn't changed – apparently it still sometimes smelled of pee.

Along the familiar corridor – now carpeted – to the door. Christina produced a key and we were in. I had been bracing myself for a wave of emotion, perhaps even tears, but I felt ... fine. Perhaps because the flat was almost unrecognisable. Gone was the battered furniture that took up far too much space and the threadbare living room carpet that had helped make it feel dusty, cramped and overheated.

A new wooden floor, minimal furniture and the windows and balcony door flung open gave the place a light, airy feel. They say that when you return to places you knew as a child they feel smaller but this felt like a bigger space. I wandered down the hall and peered into the galley kitchen where in December 1976, as I sat eating a boiled egg, my mother had handed me an envelope containing the news that I had won a place at Cambridge. I seem to remember her patting me on the shoulder but there was no great emotion from either of us at this momentous news which signalled that I would be escaping from Ruskin Park House.

Then I sat with Alex and Christina, showing them the few black and white photos I'd brought with me on an iPad – me as a small baby in my mother's arms looking out over the trees; me aged about four on the balcony blowing bubbles.

Then Alex explained how he had come to buy the flat during the pandemic in 2020 and had been just as delighted to move in as my mother and Stephen had been 65 years earlier. He, like Christina, worked in the arts and appeared to have a keen sensibility about architecture and firm ideas of what he wanted from his first home. He had seen another Ruskin

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Park House flat featured on a website called The Modern House, aimed at design and architecture aficionados. It described the estate as ‘a wonderful modernist development’ and one of the few of its era ‘to retain most of its period features, including Crittall windows, a laundry and exquisitely tended gardens’.

Really? I thought to myself. I’d grown up in a modernist masterpiece with white steel framed windows that had been period features, and I hadn’t noticed? Yes, I did remember sitting in the basement laundry watching our weekly wash go round and trying to avoid the women who wanted to mother me, but as for exquisite gardens – well, a few municipal begonias was about it. Still, Alex’s enthusiasm was genuine. ‘It was the first and only flat that I saw,’ he said.

But what did he like about it so much? I asked, trying to keep the tone of incredulity out of my voice.

‘It is old and well built and was in a location that kind of had everything. It’s next to a park, it’s next to the hospital. It’s next to the amenities and Camberwell – it’s connected.’

As a cat meandered lazily down the hall and onto the balcony – Mum, no feline fan, would have shuddered – I reflected that he was right. The flat was desirable and he’d snapped up a bargain in the early days of the pandemic when the housing market briefly stuttered. He and Christina, a costume designer, had made it into a beautiful home with a calm, restful vibe.

But what a story the flat told of changing Britain. From the 1950s, when a woman with a teenage son arrived, probably to disapproving whispers – where’s her husband? – which grew louder as she suddenly acquired another child without a man appearing on the scene. Through the 1960s, when the younger

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boy ends up with a place at a fee-paying school, funded by the local authority as part of a vast levelling up scheme. Then the 1970s, when he gradually wanders a little further afield into a London scarred by IRA bombs, while at home the power cuts of the three-day week see mother and son eating their evening fish fingers by candlelight. Through the giddy 1980s and 90s, the era of privatisation when the older residents died or sold up, replaced by young professionals, and into the twenty-first century, when Ruskin Park House is christened a modernist gem and my own children start looking at former council flats in places like Bermondsey, which my mother regarded as beyond the limits of civilisation.

When I picture the flat it is still in 1960s monochrome or the muddy Kodak Instamatic colours of the 1970s – somewhere to escape from, somewhere to be embarrassed about when the parents of friends with houses and gardens asked where I lived. But as I left Alex and Christina they looked relaxed and content in their perfect little home.

I had one last look around the estate, noticed that the playground where I once kept a nervous eye on rough kids who might push me off the roundabout had been replaced by a car park, and headed home. I felt relief. My journey into my past had been fine; I reckoned I had emerged emotionally unscathed. But there were questions and memories niggling at me. My mother had been dead for a quarter of a century; my father had died just a couple of years ago. I had two serious health conditions: a malignant tumour behind my left eye, which had been spotted in 2005 and had needed regular treatment ever since; and a recent diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. It felt like I needed to take stock of my life while there was still time.

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I knew that if I wanted to understand my own story, how my parents came together and split apart, why my father disappeared from my life until I was 23, what had made my difficult, eccentric, cussed old mum such a captivating figure to him and others, and why the BBC had played such a big part in all of our lives, there was only one place to go. Back to that filing cabinet full of fading old letters.