2025 BC GATOR SR GAMES & SILVERARTS LITERARY ARTS

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Hand Guns, HandCuffs and High Heels

Sub-category: Literary Arts: Life Experiences

Author: Reva Cook

Policing in High Heels

Handguns, Handcuffs, and High Heels

Being a police officer is a challenge for anyone who chooses to enter that profession, but it presents even greater challenges for women who decide to breach the walls of tradition and become an officer. The barriers remain even today, but it was indeed a wall to breach in the 1980s. Along with the gun and the badge comes the bias, suspicion, resentment, rumors, and jealousy from those who continue to view law enforcement as a man's job.

I became a detective after several years of collaborating with the police departments and the court system as an advocate for child abuse victims. As an advocate, I saw many investigators interview victims. It was rare indeed for the interviewer to be female. I noted that many of the officers appeared distant and uneasy when discussing sexual assault details with a child. I observed as victims picked up on that discomfort and, being a child, they would assume it was their fault. Kids are too young to determine cause and effect or to understand transference. All the male officers I spoke with reported they dreaded working the abuse cases. They were far more comfortable with robberies, frauds, even homicides, and none of them had completed any specialized training for a successful investigation, child development, or offender profiling.

After a disappointing loss of a particularly nasty sexual assault case that I was an advocate for, I was bitterly complaining about the quality of the investigation when one of the court officers snarled at me. "If you think you can do a better job at interviewing, why aren't you the detective instead of the armchair quarterback?"

I saw the scornful expression on his face and felt the anger emanating from him before he slammed out of the room. Boy, that comment got my mind going! Having grown up on a farm with eight brothers with whom I worked side by side, I was very accustomed to doing 'a man's

job.' I certainly had the audacity to believe I could do this job better than what was currently presented to the courts. I started my quest to give up the 'armchair' and become the investigator.

I discovered a pending Basic Law Enforcement Training class scheduled for evenings at the local community college and learned that the newly elected sheriff in a neighboring county had vowed to aggressively combat crimes against children. I enrolled in the BLET class and made an appointment the same day with the newly elected sheriff. I intended to present my case for becoming his child abuse investigator.

During my interview, the sheriff allowed me to present my argument that my experience, having interviewed not only victims but also parents, witnesses, and collateral witnesses, qualified me for the position. I stressed my familiarity with child development and with the court system. I stated that my work ethic had always been done as unto the Lord and was confident of my ability to successfully investigate and present these cases for the prosecution.

The sheriff listened to my entire story without comment or question as he leaned back in his chair beneath a large picture of Jesus Christ on the wall of his otherwise bare office. When I was through talking, he leaned across his desk, gazed steadily at me with somber eyes, and said, "I'll make you an offer." Then he pointed to a picture on the wall behind him. "I get paid by the county, but I work for the Lord, so I put the boss in this office first thing." This was fantastic news for me. I was a Christian and never apologized for my faith in the Lord.

He continued. "I don't have money in this budget for another officer, and I can't change that."

Throughout my life, I have been told that my face often conveys more than my words, and the expression on my face made it clear to the sheriff that I was disappointed.

He tilted his head and drawled, "Wait just a minute. I am not done. I have a little $9,000.00 salary in the budget for a Lab Tech position that I am not going to use. Besides, you are not an officer yet." My heart skipped a few beats when he said, 'yet.'

I silently breathed a "Thank you, Jesus."

The Sheriff smiled and said, "I figure it this way. If we can agree to this deal, you will complete the BLET (Basic Law Enforcement Training) in July when the new budget begins, and you will have six months of experience by then. July is as soon as I can ask for a salary for an investigator's position. So, can you trust me to offer a real salary in July if I can trust you to do the job you say you can on a $9,000.00 salary from now till then?"

I exhaled a relieved, "Yes, Sir." I was ecstatic. Although I had no actual law-enforcement experience, did not live in his county, and had not fired a handgun in over twenty years, I was hired on the spot. Boy, it was an emotional roller coaster hearing "You're hired."

Shaking hands with the man who was to be my boss for the next four years felt great. This had just become one of the proudest days of my life. And that was just the beginning. I soon discovered that a childhood lesson I learned about tough skin, equalizers, and being a lady would prove even more important than ever.

Believe me when I say it was not always warm and fuzzy around the department. When I joined the force of this rural sheriff's department in the mountains of North Carolina, a few of the comments I heard were 'bleeding heart liberal,' 'dyke,' 'concubine,' and 'a token female to meet federal guidelines.'

Growing up in a male-dominated environment, I learned at an early age to have tough skin. I also quickly discovered that unless I wanted to be miserable and alone, I had to be able to fit in

with the guys, set my boundaries, and not fear confrontation. At a very young age, I developed a streak of determination and persistence that was to become my trademark throughout my life.

This trait became a trademark of my investigative style. I routinely used lie detector testing during my investigations, and my polygrapher was an agent with the SBI (State Bureau of Investigation). I collaborated with this agent on multiple cases and held his interrogation skills in high regard.

On one occasion, as the agent was preparing for the polygraph test, I overheard him solemnly saying to the suspect, "Sir, I strongly encourage you to be completely honest on this test, because I would rather have the Hounds of Hell after me than Detective Cook. If you are deceitful, you will be found out. She will not give up." I laughed silently through the two-way mirror. This is one example of the many backhanded compliments I have received over the years.

I was charging through an overgrown back yard when one of the patrol officers wheezed out a question as he grabbed the suspect we were chasing, "How the hell do you run in those high heels?" In addition to my persistence, I was also known for routinely wearing high heels. I had worn ugly, rough shoes as a child and promised myself that when I grew up, I would never again wear flat shoes.

I blew my hair out of my face, "I guess it's just second nature," I said as I dropped down on one knee to slap the cuffs on the suspect who had fallen face first in a tangle of kudzu vines.

The shift lieutenant pulled up in a patrol car on a nearby dirt path and yelled at us to stuff the guy in the backseat after we searched him. This Lieutenant had been around for years and held no fondness for women in law enforcement. Imagine my surprise when he offered me a ride.

"Hey, Red." (That was a nickname I had acquired because of the color of my hair). "Want a ride to your car? I will take this turkey and meet you at the jail." I was shocked down to my toes, but I yelled, "Yeah," and hopped in the patrol car before he could change his mind.

When the uniformed officer started to get in the back seat, the Lieutenant said, "You can walk back. It will be good for you."

As I started thinking about the Patrolman's question concerning my high heels, my thoughts transported me back to a gravel road in Kentucky where I jumped rope while waiting for the school bus. My shoes were sturdy, tough-looking Brogans. I had big feet, and for some reason, I tended to tear the soles off every pair I owned.

"You're hard on shoes," my mother said as she attempted to repair a hole in the sole of yet another shoe sole I had ruined. "If I hear that you have been jumping rope in the gravel again, I'm going to spank you into next week." I knew my brothers had tattled on me from the smug look on their faces.

"When I grow up, I'm going to wear pretty shoes with high heels all the time," I cried as I threw the shoe into the corner

Mama leaned over me with a look that would freeze water. "When you can pay for them, you can wear anything you want for all I care."

A scratchy voice from the intercom jerked me back to the present.

"Detective Cook!" I yelled at the box while waving at the monitor.

"Oh." A garbled response returned. "You that red-headed woman from investigations?"

I knew who was asking all these unnecessary questions, and I also knew he was well aware of exactly who I was. "Yeah, that would be me." So much for being one of the guys.

The sound of the sally-port rolling up jerked me back to the present and the process of booking the guy we had apprehended for the original larceny charge, plus the additional charge for attempting to flee.

Sheriff's Departments in the mountain counties had very few female officers during the 80s, and I knew that I had to establish my worth quickly. The entire detective unit knew that I had not 'worked the road,' a term used to describe being in uniform and working patrol shifts. That seldom happened to a guy starting as a detective, yet here I was, a woman from somewhere else, not related to anybody they knew, and not even out of police training. Boy, was I regarded with suspicion and disdain.

I soon got the opportunity to help change that perception when a suspect I had indicted for sexually molesting adolescent boys called one of the victims and offered him a bribe. The perpetrator promised this child a large sum of cash if he recanted his statement. The victim, a young teen from an impoverished rural family, had been groomed into sexual encounters by this predator with money, alcohol, and other gifts. Offenders often use alcohol to lower inhibitions and help ensure a child's compliance during sexual encounters. Despite the offer of a great deal of money to change his statement, this young man called me to report the offer. I recognized an opportunity to build rapport with even more of the officers within the Department.

When I became a detective, I quickly discovered that information was one of the most powerful equalizers when dealing with men. Having the right kind of information loosened tongues, fostered cooperation, could make or break friendships, and ultimately even help convict.

Our SWAT team (rapid response team) loved any opportunity to suit up in their Kevlar vests, black uniforms, face paint, and mic helmets. These guys would lie in the woods for hours to practice response maneuvers and take out a bad guy. I informed the team leader of the

situation I faced and asked if he could assist me in trapping the perp as he attempted to hand over the bribery money. The SWAT leader immediately contacted his team, and together we worked out a plan around the time and location of the pending payoff.

Riding with a fellow detective in an unmarked car, we met the victim on his dirt-bike beside a logging road near where the payoff was to occur. I stressed to him that at no time should he get into the suspect's vehicle. I clearly stated, "Do NOT get in his vehicle." He nodded that he understood and continued to rev the dirt bike. Little did I know until the chase was over that all he heard from my instructions was, "Get in the Vehicle." He completely missed "DO NOT!"

That day I was partnered with a fellow detective who was familiar with the area, and his expert driving enabled us to catch sight of the suspect's truck just as he pushed the boy out the passenger door at the edge of a ravine. We radioed our location and direction of travel to the other officers, who quickly gave chase.

My partner slid the car to a stop at the top of the embankment where we had seen the boy pushed out of the truck. I lunged from the car, scrambled down the hill, and picked up my victim. He was dirty, scuffed, and had torn his jeans. Once I determined that he was not seriously injured, I angrily demanded, "Why did you get in that truck?"

He looked at me as if I had lost my mind. "You told me too!" he said. "You said it over and over. **Get in the Truck. Get in the Truck.**"

The words "DO NOT" had been completely drowned out by the dirt bike's roar. From that day forward, I never ended an interview with a child without having my subject tell me, in their own words, what they understood from our discussion.

As we bundled the kid into the car, we heard over the radio that SWAT officers were conducting a felony traffic stop with the suspect at the intersection of the dirt road and the

highway near us. We arrived at the scene in time to draw our weapons as the suspect was finally persuaded to exit the truck. The suspect smirked at me as he was searched, disarmed, and handcuffed behind his back, at which point I holstered my weapon.

He looked at me and sniveled. "Detective Cook, would you really have shot me?"

Without a trace of hesitation, I retorted, "In a New York Minute."

Every officer on the scene heard the sincerity in my voice, and that moment marked a change in my relationship not only with the detective division, but with uniformed officers as well. Word of my "fierceness" spread through the department like smoke.

That was the day I got my nickname from one of the most senior and skeptical detectives in the unit as he slapped my shoulder. "Good work, Red," he said. "Let's go write this up."

Much of the work involved in law enforcement is either urgent with blue lights and sirens or routine desk duty, so learning to balance the two extremes was crucial to both physical and emotional well-being. Daily reports, policy reviews, and updates were ongoing responsibilities, especially documentation of training qualifications and interactions with the public.

Document, document, document! Not only did it help to ensure that justice would be served in cases you worked, but it was for your protection as well. Wearing the badge, uniform, and sidearm did not make you immune from being prosecuted by some of the very people you investigated and/or charged. I know from having experienced sitting as the 'defendant' in the courtroom is scary, intimidating, and potentially life-changing. Documentation and faith were once again the resources that got me through to the next event.

THE WALLS OF 23 ELLSWORTH ROAD

LIFE EXPERIENCE

By Ken Formalarie

I know that the walls of my childhood home had a voice. They and I had countless conversations over my years growing up behind them. However, I cannot allow them to speak for me or share the secrets they possess. They must remain silent while I talk as they know too much! The story they would tell is depressing, so I shall be the one to tell it. I am certain that the walls would botch the details while sharing a bleak truth.

After my birth, I was brought back to the walls of 23 Ellsworth Road, a place my family had already inhabited for nineteen years before I got there. It was here that the family would play the cards dealt to them and me. Those walls hid a story of human suffering that too many of us are familiar with. It was a story of anguish, of a family in peril doing its best to cope with the ravages of one family member's mental infirmities. The walls might reveal the unintended cruelty and darkness, not to mention the shame and despair that result from mental and emotional deterioration. They would also tell of the family's shared love, tenderness, and triumph over the impossible circumstances that this family member endured. At the same time, the consequences spread among all who lived within the confines.

Despite the label our Mental Health professionals assign to someone experiencing internal torment, it will never explain the extent to which the individual suffers. That is because if you are on the outside looking in, you miss all the circuits misfiring, layer after layer, controlling a man's behavior in unimaginable ways. OCD, they called it (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). This was my father's label when his symptoms first appeared. They were the result, we think, of his horrific fall from a roof as a work accident very shortly before my birth. OCD was a woefully inadequate description of my father's mental cancer that couldn't be cured and was never going to kill him! It was scarring his soul and wreaked havoc on the peace the family had known. It began before my birth and continued into my adolescence.

I had many talks with my father over the years about his illness, all of them educational, but none productive. The walls attempted but failed to hide our secrets from the outside world. It was like trying to stop the rain. All anyone can do is shelter and adapt. That's what my family did and that is what I did while watching the tormented gestures and behaviors that took over whoever my father once was.

My quiet, much older teen sister showed compassion, she, more than any other of us, had known his kindness and love. My not-as-old pre-teen brother was at a crucial age of social development, needing

his father to guide him through murky waters. That father was suddenly and inexplicably gone from him, yet still physically present. It fostered anger and resentment in my brother. He developed a toxic hatred for my father that has never left him. My mother, God rest her, wasn't prepared to take over and manage my father's roofing business, expanding into the role of new mother, nurse, father, breadwinner, and all else that those walls witnessed firsthand. I was a newborn infant, innocent of all that went on around me save for the accumulated years of loud, argumentative voices that occasionally erupted into physical violence when tolerance slipped away. Those walls had much to tell, but thankfully, they never spoke of such things, they simply wept.

It was not always like this, and the walls knew it. They smiled whenever they recalled that my father and grandfather labored together to erect them. Using the knowledge gathered in their hands and the love shared in their hearts, they created a house that became a home. Those walls knew the sweat and pride of workmanship poured into them. When the family moved in, the walls happily recorded the clatter of family gatherings that filled the home like a concert hall during holidays. They witnessed the births and deaths and winked at the budding romances, then marriages. They knew much about me as well. They observed all of my practice at learning, everything from my first words to making the sounds of jazz on a piano. They heard my sister teaching me to pray and my brother playing guitar for me, imitating Elvis. They held me together long enough to spread my wings and fly.

I spent too much time behind those walls, chatting up everything and nothing about how difficult life was. It would not be too long before it would be time for us to part. It was not a sweet goodbye; it was a necessary escape. I was in a hurry to leave behind all the experiences of life those walls and I had shared. I left in ignorance; I needed time outside of and away from them to contemplate how their hidden events had shaped me. Over time, I would learn that everything about life is hidden behind walls, albeit the ones constructed for us to live in or the ones our minds construct as barriers to protect ourselves. How defenseless my father must have felt against his world to have sunk so deeply inside of himself. His walls blinded him to the constructs of normalcy. They remained erect at all times, telling their story in the depths of his mind, festering there until becoming his universe of "self."

He was not always lost to us this way, but it was often enough to seem so... The traumatic events of his life changed him. They changed me! I grew up watching his instincts for self-preservation guide him to fear harm from every corner, every shadow. I didn't understand back then, and I don't fully understand now what kind of demons could so thoroughly kidnap and erase his persona. I learned to accept the bad with the good, and there was a lot of good in Dad when it came out of hiding. I developed patience and longing while waiting for more of the real father I was missing.

As I look back to the many days he battled with his demons, I feel deep regret that I could not have done more to help him. Every memory I have of that time is filled with the scenes of what took place behind those house walls. I was exhausted from fighting the ghosts those walls made me carry into adulthood. Thankfully, those memories are no longer the burden they once were; I found peace. It was enlightening to discover that more good than harm came to be the legacy of the walls that tucked me so tight behind them. I must thank them for their gift and never forget the lessons taught to me. Among them is that life can be tough, banging us around, like being trapped in a pinball machine, but we are resilient. Like those walls, we can acknowledge the suffering of life and be forgiving, aged but undaunted by time, sturdy against all the challenges our world may throw at us. Like them, we will mark time by quietly recording all the details of life. We should not forget to listen for the more subtle whispers often missed when life gets too loud.

The walls of 23 Ellsworth Road continue to speak to me even after so many years parted. They remind me that the blood of my ancestors runs through me and will stay with me no matter where I go. I will always know their story and hear their song. My present walls, whether real or imagined, are informed by the music of my ancestors and will continue to play back for me all the new verses yet to be written.

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY

LITERARY ARTS – LIFE EXPERIENCES

by Eric Mens

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY

A photograph captures a moment in time on a fragile medium that, like a memory, fades with time. Each has its own meaning and purpose. As it records a life event, it may document the beauty or horror of life, uncertainty, frivolity, simplicity, sadness, or despair.

A particular image's impact on a viewer depends upon the viewer's psyche. Each has the power to appeal to the typical range of emotions we experience – feelings of indifference, loathing, anger, sadness, despair, peacefulness, compassion, or love. Each picture tells a story. Influenced by our experiences and memories, we derive value and meaning from each.

My sister Erica is a year older than me. The picture of us standing next to each other (left) is one of my favorites from when we were young. Without additional information, I always guessed she would have been about five years old. I've been intrigued by the picture for a long time. When and where was it taken? Why was it taken? Why do we appear so joyless? What is the story behind the image?

I found the original photo in an album while visiting the Netherlands. The album contained pictures of our early childhood, our parents and grandparents, and our first stepfamily.

The photograph's reverse is stamped, indicating it was taken in a studio in Surabaya, Indonesia, in October 1953. That information confirmed my long-held belief about our respective ages at the time.

1953 was a traumatic year for Erica and me. Our parents divorced, and our father gained custody of Erica. My mother insisted that he also agree to take me. Father remarried almost immediately to a woman with two sons. Their marriage rescued the boys from the orphanage where their mother had placed them.

Mother broke the news about our separation the night before we left. It was a beautiful moonlit night as we walked along the graveled path into the garden. Despite my protestations about leaving her, my mother's last words to me that night were, "Take care of your sister." Those words haunted me throughout my life. It was a traumatic separation, with Erica unsuccessfully trying to console me as we drove away in our father's grey sedan, watching our mother gradually recede in the distance.

When I look at this picture, I see two children standing close, arms around each other. Their eyes and faces reflect the uncertainty of children separated from their mother. Their future is as blank as the look on their faces. They hold their free hand in a similar manner – thumbs bent backward, index fingers curled as if in anxiety.

When I was born in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1949, the country was in the throes of its anti-colonialism nationalist revolution. We were protected as Dutch citizens because of our mixed Dutch and Indonesian heritage. Under the protection of the Dutch government, we, like many other Indos, were forced to flee the country virtually penniless. We left behind our privileged lifestyle of government jobs, large homes, automobiles, and servants.

Transported by the Dutch government, our family fled to Australia in 1953. Failing to gain residency there, we immigrated to the Netherlands. Three years later, we started life anew in America.

Life in our new country for Erica and me was marked by years of physical, mental, emotional, and sexual abuse. I escaped the abuse when I was fourteen. Erica was not as lucky. In 1967, before I left for a year tour of duty with the U.S. Army in Vietnam, I contacted the Red Cross and asked them to find our mother. In 1968, the Red Cross notified me they had found our mother in the Netherlands. Erica was reunited with our mother that year, but the reunion brought her no peace.

In my adulthood, I have been fortunate to find relief from my demons through intensive Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy and counseling. At my urging, Erica underwent similar intensive treatment and counseling. Today, we can confidently proclaim that we are survivors.

As Rod Stewart sings: "Every picture has a story, don't it" (from *Every Picture Tells a Story*).

MARGO

Life Experience

Janet Meuwissen

MARGO

I'm still brushing the February snow out of my hair as I arrive at Thompson Hospital's Intensive Care Unit. "Janet, over here," my father's stage whisper beckons. He and Mom have established their bivouac in a far corner. I see no sign of my sister, Chris.

As I rush to them, "How is Margo? What has happened? Will she be alright?" came out of my mouth.

Shaking his hanging head, my heartbroken father matter-of-factly states, "She was riding her motorcycle on that dirt road to where she works at Ski Valley. She hit some black ice and slid off the lane into a frozen scraper bank of snow. They think she may have a broken neck. They have stabilized her and are doing tests."

"She's under sedation," my long-suffering mother adds.

"By the way, where's Chris? Is she home with our friends Emmett and Julia?"

I get a stoic nod for yes from my mother.

"You know Margo—so strong, so vibrant, so determined to do things her way. With her stubbornness, she'll make it through this terrible storm. When will we know what will happen next? Will they operate?" I queried.

"We wait," Dad says. "I told her to get rid of that motorcycle." The dejected despair in his voice is deafening.

It was Margo who got most of his attention after I left for my new marriage and my first job. Margo, 17, and Christine, 15, were six and eight years younger than me. For whatever reason, Margo started hanging around with the wrong crowd. She, too, had to "take your sister

with you." This was the family caveat after I received my license and wanted to use the family car. Margo was expected to do the same thing.

Consequently, Chris became a part of Margo's experiences and relationships that were way beyond her years and her level of understanding. Between 1966 and 1969 much happened to Chris--most of it not good. She knew Margo had stolen my college ID card so she could get into bars even though she was underaged. My parents no longer trusted Margo so they sent her to stay with my husband and me while she was out of school with mono. However, when she returned home, she continued to do things as she had always done, including keeping her motorcycle.

The anger in my head overpowers my feelings for my father's sadness. Margo, my kid sister, is a high school senior and Dad's "boy". She is high-spirited, outspoken, and willful; determined to do things her way. She is the same age as my own English students. In fact, some are close friends of hers, which I didn't know until later. Her senior yearbook pictures her sitting on her beloved wheels, in the school hallway! She has that natural charisma which has gotten her places that were good, and bad for her.

And now she lies, motionless, perhaps dying. ***Dad,*** I want to yell, ***you could have prevented this from happening! Fifteen-year-old Margo bought her motorcycle without asking YOUR parental permission. You told her to return the cycle; she didn't. You didn't accompany her to make sure that she followed your directions. This was your parenting method? She knew that you wouldn't say or do anything, so she kept the bike.***

Why didn't you assert your parental authority over her, like you did over me? YOU decided I had to wear headbands to keep my hair out of my eyes—no bangs for me. YOU

decided that I didn't want a pony for my birthday. YOU decided I would attend Geneseo College.

But, no—in YOUR world, boys, your 'boy' Margo, could do what boys do. They do what they want to do. I guess you think boys have stronger wills than girls and that's OK. Maybe that's not right, I think. Maybe that's where parents should step in—for ALL their children. Parents should be teaching them how to make good decisions-decisions that keep them safe. In my mind, that's what YOU should have done.

Then there's Mom. Poor, poor Mom. She sits in the corner, with her handkerchief grasped tightly in hand and her head tilted toward the wall. She has little to say in the family organization. She keeps the family business running and helps her daughters by simply 'being there'. I know she had nothing to do with these events. She remains quiet, even when given the opportunity to express an opinion. She knows that the listener—YOU– probably won't hear it.

Margo is behind that glass wall--unusually still under these bright lights. What a way of casting the 'Star of Our Family Show'. Her stunning azure blue eyes are closed; brown hair is still blood-matted to her head; her neck is in a stabilization collar. Blood has been wiped from her face but bandages covering deep oozing wounds remain. I see no sign of breathing.

Tubes and IV lines are everywhere, monitors are loudly ticking and beeping, and nurses are constantly overseeing vital signs. They take blood tests. Nerve pricks produce no motion; I wonder what Margo feels. The nurse tells us that they will be giving her more tests soon: portable X-ray, electrocardiogram (EKG, ECG) for her heart, spirometer for her lungs, and electroencephalogram (EEG) for her brain. These machines take turns adjudicating Margo's life. We can only observe; the family is not allowed in the room. We wait. There is nothing I can do

here so I leave to return to my husband and home. Dad and Mom remain to watch over their daughter.

Thirty-six hours later, I return to my parents' encampment. Their expressionless faces look my way as I enter the waiting room. Behind the glass wall, Margo is still lying undisturbed under bright lights. She is surrounded by the tubes, IV lines, and monitors which seem to tick and beep more intensely than before I left.

As I approach my parents, Dr. Hanson joins our conclave. He asks us to sit as he reviews the results of her tests. "Margo's X-rays show internal injuries, but no broken bones. Most importantly, the EEG shows no brain activity. What this means is that all these machines, IVs, and tubes are keeping Margo alive. It is my belief that without her brain functioning, Margo wouldn't be able to breathe on her own. Nor will any other of her bodily functions continue. Her life will now be controlled by machines. As her parents, it is your decision as to how we proceed with her treatment. She will never wake up, but she can live with mechanical help. It's your decision."

Our family story is only one of the untold millions of unnecessary deaths around the world. With wars and so much chaos, we can only empathize with those who are also losing their children. We will mourn, but we will move on.

This is the last time that I see my sister alive. She did what she wanted to do. The lives of so many people changed because of her death. Although Margo is no longer present, the events of her life continue to resonate with us.

As for fifteen-year-old sophomore Chris? She is forgotten in all the mourning for her sister. Chris, too, becomes involved with people and experiences that shorten her life and do her more harm than good. I believe that the stress of the circumstances surrounding Margo's death

contributes to Mom's death by heart attack, seven years later. And Dad remarries three months after Mom dies. His second wife divorces him three years later, and he dies of lung cancer one year after that divorce.

I know that Margo and her personality continue to teach me every day. I spend 30 years in the education field, working with teenagers to teach them the life skills they need to make choices that will be in their best interests. I raise four children who become successful and happy adults. I have three grandchildren who are currently acquiring these essential life skills. Though Margo is gone, her presence and personality abides with me. She remains my little sister and is now a lasting part of me.

A Path Not Taken

(Life Experiences)

by Janet Stiegler

A Path Not Taken

At 23, I was almost married to a rural Ukrainian mechanic. At the time (1980), I was on a graduate exchange study program to the Soviet Union, and my American roommate, Monique, who was of Ukrainian descent, invited me to visit her relatives. After several long train rides, Monique's Uncle Vanya met us at the station and whisked us off to his apartment. Outside, a young man a year or two older than me tinkered with a truck. Monique explained that Sasha had just completed his mandatory military service, had a job fixing motor vehicles and farm machinery, and was ready to settle down.

I don't recall much about this leg of the trip other than that we slept on the living room couch and had to leave the apartment to use the bathroom. The floor's communal toilet stood opposite the elevator. Back home, I found it hard to share a bathroom with my siblings, but several apartments had access to this one water closet. Once inside, I found a naked bowl and four toilet seats hanging on the wall. Not knowing which belonged to Monique's family, I chose one that looked clean, placed it on the empty bowl, and sat down. But I tensed up every time I heard the elevator open or people outside on the landing. How do people get used to this?

The next day, we drove into the countryside and gathered at a rustic farmhouse on the outskirts of Kyiv, where Monique's grandmother lived. A bevy of happy relatives, including Sasha, waited outside for Monique's arrival. Stepping around rain-filled potholes and patches of cowpats, we made our way into the house.

The kitchen was no bigger than my walk-in closet, but the family matriarch fed us a hearty lunch of cabbage soup, pork, potatoes, and beets. The earthy aroma of boiled root vegetables seemed to hang on the walls. And although it was early in the day, the vodka flowed. There were toasts to

health, a good harvest, and family, including every relative, dead or alive. I tried to pace myself to keep up with the lively banter, but even without alcohol, much of the Ukrainian dialect went over my head. Sasha would periodically look at me and smile while the table erupted in laughter. Clueless as to what had transpired, I just smiled back.

At one point, I made a trip to the "bathroom," which was little more than a sheltered outhouse with curtains for privacy. It shared space in a lean-to shed with two cows, one of whom poked its face through the curtain as I relieved myself. Apparently, my assumptions about personal privacy were not valued worldwide.

When lunch concluded, the family ushered Sasha and me outside to take a walk. We strolled along a dirt road, barely exchanging a word. He lit a cigarette and offered me one, but I didn't smoke. After reaching our destination, a small cemetery, Sasha pointed to several headstones and read the inscriptions of those beneath them. It appeared he was explaining his family lineage. I nodded and smiled, asked a few questions to be polite, but thought it was an odd place to bring a girl. On the other hand, there wasn't much else to do or see for miles.

Since none of the men could drive after so much drink, blankets were laid on blocks of hay in the barn for naps. I readied myself with a blanket when, without warning, Sasha showed up in his underwear, ready to consummate our relationship. Had I mistakenly given him the wrong signals? Things were moving way too quickly! Everyone seemed to think this was perfectly normal! While I wasn't a virgin, I reserved such intimacy for more committed relationships. Sleeping with one eye open, I assumed that once everyone was sober, we would laugh it off as a humorous misunderstanding.

But it wasn't. The following morning, Uncle Vanya sadly asked why I did not want to marry his nephew. What could I say? That despite Sasha's physical attractiveness and steady job prospects, we had barely uttered two comprehensible sentences to one another? That I did not know enough to love him? That I would languish from a lack of stimulation and entertainment in such a rural environment? Or that I planned to see the world and pursue a career before settling down and having babies? In the end, I said none of these things and sheepishly wiggled out of the arrangement with some flimsy excuse about missing home.

Even now, I marvel at how ready Sasha was to make it work. We hadn't had a proper courtship, and he had no idea of my true nature. A few basic things defined his happiness: a loving family, good food and drink, and a proud cultural heritage. Marry a pretty girl, and love will come later. Given my relatively privileged upbringing and romantic notions about love and marriage, I had regarded his living situation with superiority. And I struggled to see how he could be content with the status quo.

In the forty years since then, I've traveled to several second- and third-world countries and realized that some of the happiest societies live relatively simple lives. Once Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs is met, including love and a sense of belonging, one doesn't need many material things to lead a happy and fulfilled life.

Things might have been different if Sasha and I had met ten or fifteen years ago, before the devasting war in Ukraine, but when technology was already ubiquitous. The internet and social media would have made all the possibilities and opportunities outside his immediate bubble available at a click. Maybe Sasha would be surrounded by a plethora of material comforts and dating apps, and I'd be just another girl passing through his village.