# Book Review: Lauren Hough's 'Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing' and Sari Fordham's 'Wait for God to Notice'

*"I was like an inept spy pretending to be American based on movies I'd watched and books I'd read."*

— Lauren Hough, 'Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing'

*"In 1984, we would arrive in Texas, and we might as well have been aliens."*

— Sari Fordham, 'Wait for God to Notice'

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In Lauren Hough and Sari Fordham's recent memoirs, human life reads like a series of parallel universes. Both authors' families moved, globally, for religious motivations, many times when they were young: Hough grew up in seven countries, while Fordham lived in Uganda as a child, then Texas, Georgia, and, later, South Korea. The religions here are not exactly the connection (though in each author's case, religion is arguably their first culture, their first universe). Hough grew up in an abusive cult called The Family (Children of God), while Fordham's Adventist family was close-knit, loving, and devout.

Rather, the connection is Hough and Fordham's attunement to the many different worlds of their lives, which they navigate from very young ages: observing, skirting the edges, shifting their behavior when necessary. Hough and Fordham both describe the shock and dance of trying to match these as they are moved from place to place, culture to culture.

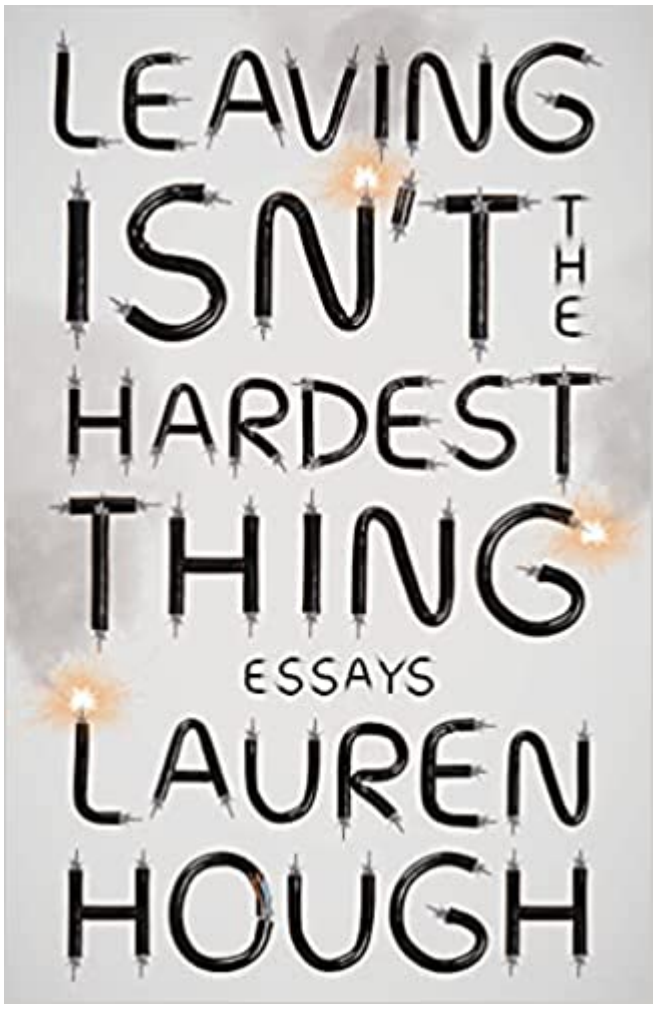
Their memoirs beg the question: Are we the same people we are now as when we were young? Are we the same people when we have changed lifestyles, allegiances, mannerisms, attitudes? How much choice do we have in how we become who we are?

Both Hough and Fordham have a complex understanding of what it means to be sometimes lonely or left out, peripheral, wondering; excluded or bound by place or newness or religion, by politics or sexuality or ethnicity, or by whatever power structure is currently in place; to be thrown at the world in various ways that are sometimes neither fair nor wholly deterministic. These two beautiful memoirs are deeply moving, funny and observant and sometimes very serious, but always attuned, and always stunningly, openly, thrown.

1. **“Where Are You From?”:** Lauren Hough’s ‘Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing’

Lauren Hough opens her memoir with a lie. Or, rather, with the lies she tells other people when they ask where she is from. They can’t place her accent, her manners.

*If you ask me where I’m from, I’ll lie to you. I’ll tell you my parents were missionaries. I’ll tell you I’m from Boston. I’ll tell you I’m from Texas. Those lies, people believe.*




Where Hough is “from,” at least in one sense, is an Apocalyptic cult called The Family (formerly Children of God), where the Antichrist was a constant imagined presence and children were passed around for sexual “sharing nights” with adults. For Hough, who never fit in with the expectations of the cult (gender and otherwise), this was a source of shame, fear, and resentment. She was once badly beaten for not smiling. These are some of the milder details, and many are very sad.

This – the cult – is an important fact about her. But it is not the only fact.

She’s also empathetic and funny as hell. (“Sometimes all you can do is fucking laugh.”) She is a champion of the underdog. Her attention to the ties that bind people – spiritual belief, escaped religion, the military, terrible jobs, homelessness, family, love – runs throughout the book. When Hough finds a

novel in Barnes & Noble which lists in the author bio, “raised in the Children of God”:

*You’d have thought I was a closet case buying lesbian erotica the way I carried that book…I had to buy three other books just so it wouldn’t stand out.*

Upon escaping the cult, Hough joins the Air Force. The thing is, she is a self-admitted “closet case” in more ways than one, and this is under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (which, in retrospect, sounds like it could have been a name for her cult). Eventually, after “Die Dyke” is written on her car and then her car is set on fire, *she* is the one expelled under Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.

It’s grossly unfair. It’s also not entirely surprising to anyone associated with military culture.

*I thought I’d find something in the military. I’d wear the same uniform as everyone else. They’d have to accept me because I was one of them. I’d find what every book I read, every movie I watched, told me I’d find friends and maybe even a sort of family, a place where I belonged.*

*But all I’d done was join another cult. And they didn’t want me any more than the last one had.*

*

After leaving the Air Force, Hough is temporarily homeless, sleeping in her car. Her caring and fiery passages in defense of the working poor and the unhoused, replete with her trademark lush cursing, are refreshing to read.

She eventually finds an apartment with her friend, Jay [also military discharged for “homosexual admission”]. It has only one bed, which they must share, and the gallows humor is off the charts:

*All I cared about was that we had a door and a roof, a*

*bathroom….I had a home. It was hard at first to focus on anything but that relief. But you can't share a twin bed past the age of ten unless you're related or fucking. Jay's an aggressive cuddler. I'm an unrepentant snorer. There wasn't even room to build a pillow wall between us. So after a few sleepless nights of his telling me to roll over and my trying to shove him just hard enough to get him away from me without throwing him onto the floor because I thought the hair on his legs was a mosquito, we headed to Walmart. The cheapest air mattress was $19.99. But in a stroke of genius, we found a five-dollar inflatable pool raft in the clearance section of sporting goods. It's probably a good thing we bought it. Anyone hoping to stay afloat in a pool would have drowned.*

Jay, whose shift at the bar ends earlier, claims the bed. Hough gets the raft.

*

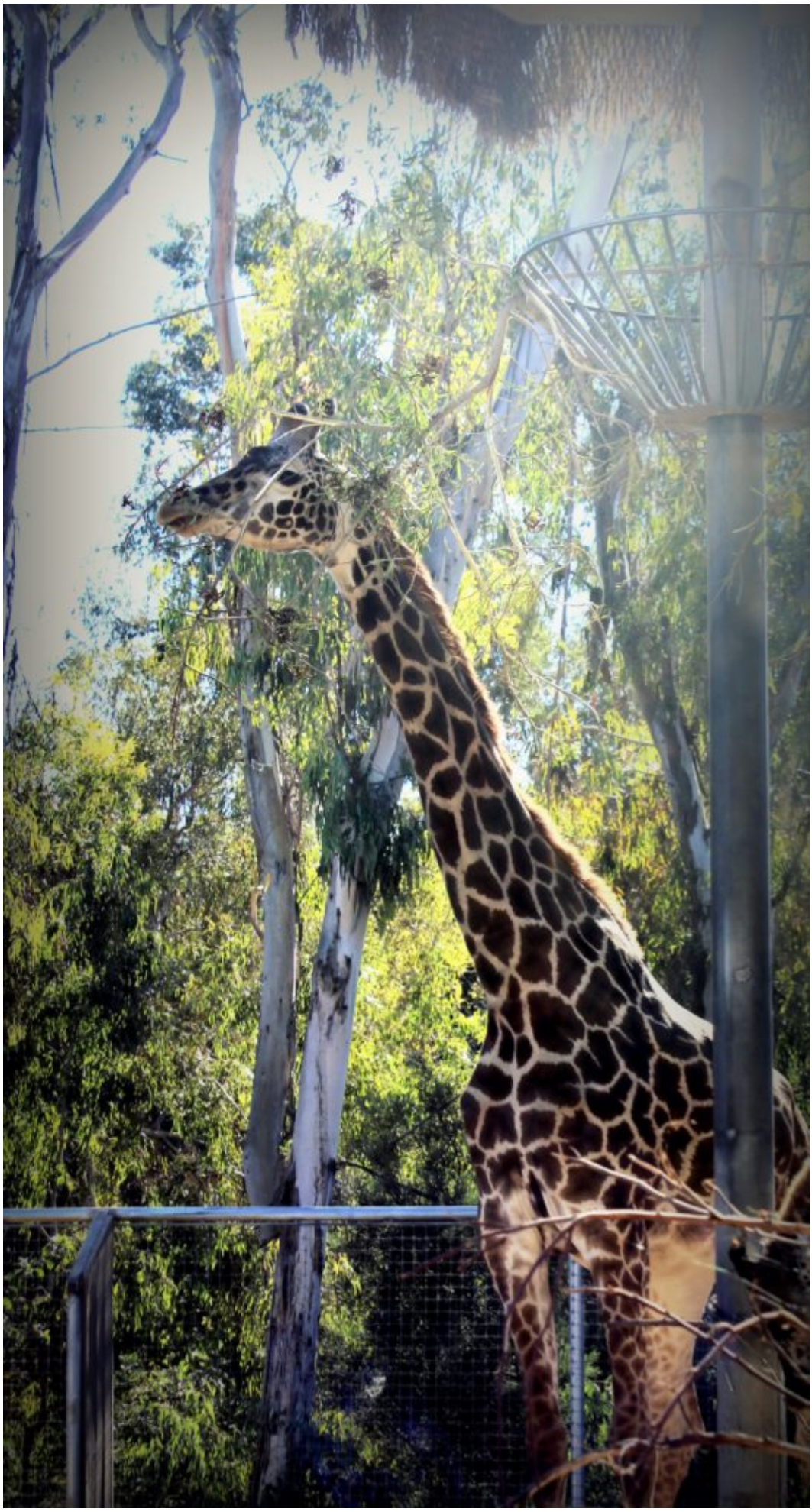
'Leaving' made me wonder, then: What does it mean to be "defiant?" Hough has experienced defiance in every form: early on, defiance of herself; defiance of authority; defiance on behalf of other people who need it. This may be one of the most cohesive threads running through her personality as presented in 'Leaving': a keen attention, almost an instinct, for the way people are forced to duck and hide, reveal themselves, band together, survive. She's had experiences with power structures most of us would not want.

"I was going to be normal," Hough vows, once she's on her feet, with a steady job as a bouncer and a home of her own. She is out of the cult. She has joined the world of what The Family had called the "Systemites."

But one day, traveling through Texas and suddenly curious, she decides to go back to the Texas site of the original cult. It's an incredibly lovely, lonely scene.

*If anything remained of the old buildings, I couldn't tell*

*from the fence line….[But] the fence was all wrong. …[It was] black steel and eight feet tall. I was busy staring at it when a family of ibexes with their twisted antlers bolted out of a mesquite clutch. That’s not a sentence found in nature. Then I looked up. Towering above us all stood a single fucking giraffe, probably wondering why the trees wouldn’t grow tall enough to chew. You’re not supposed to identify with a fenced-in giraffe that doesn’t belong in Texas. I rolled to a stop and stared at the poor animal, awkward, lonely, and completely fucking lost.*



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I don’t want to spoil the very last scene of the book, which is so gorgeous I teared up typing it out to a friend. It’s set back in Hough’s cult days and involves a wonderful, visually beautiful act of youthful defiance among a group of children. You cannot help but cheer them on: *Defy* it!

Lauren Hough’s ‘Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing’ is a glorious, raucous, fuck-you to anyone who has abused their power, and a love letter to those who have endured it. That is where she is from.

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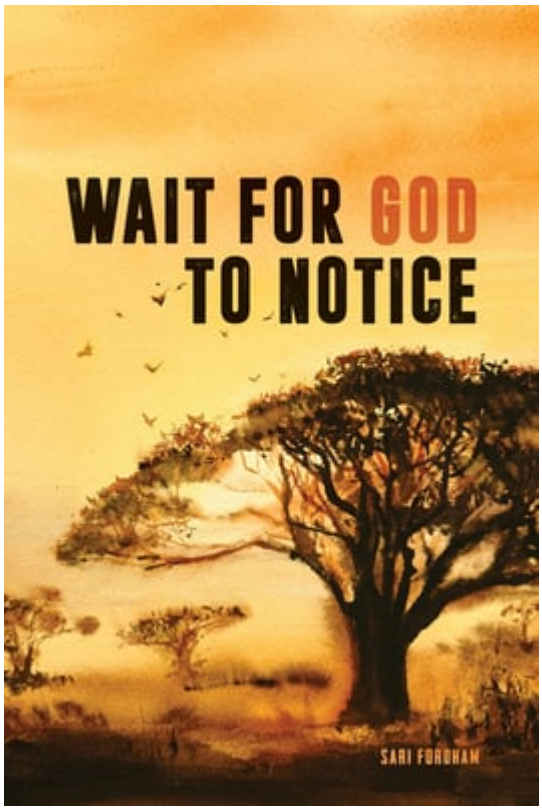
2. **“What are you doing here?”: Sari Fordham’s ‘Wait for God to Notice’**

*In South Korea, where I had once lived and where Sonja [my sister] still lived and worked, we were known as ‘You Fordham sisters.’….Sonja’s husband added to the mantra. On long trips in the car, he would sigh, ‘You Fordham sisters and your stories,’ and we would realize we had spent long hours passing familiar narratives back and forth. The stories began like this:*

1. *Wouldn’t Mom have liked this?*
2. *Remember that time in Africa?*
3. *We were such outcasts in the States, such nerds.*

*The last was the most developed narrative. It was the one that started us laughing. It is not difficult to spot a missionary – there is something about the hair, the dress, the earnest eyes. We had all that and more. We were the kind of missionary children that other missionary children found uncool. When we stepped into our respective American classrooms, we never had a chance.*




When she is very young, Sari Fordham's family moves to Uganda, where her father will serve as an Adventist minister. Her Finnish mother, Kaarina, packs up the two girls – Sari and her older sister, Sonja – and they fly halfway across the world to meet him.

As missionary kids it is, obviously, a religious childhood (Fordham's young friends, bored on the Sabbath because games aren't allowed, sneakily devise a game of Bible Freeze Tag, in which, unfreezing each other, they recite a Bible verse: "'Jesus wept,' we shouted. 'Rejoice in the Lord always,' we shouted"). But it is by all accounts a loving one, within a close-knit family, in which her parents are genuinely concerned for the people they serve.

First arriving in Uganda, however, the Fordham sisters feel their visual difference acutely:

*The children darted forward in ones and twos, laughing. How could anyone be as drained of pigment as we were? They touched our skin and held tentative fingers toward our hair….The children stared at us, and Sonja and I stared back.*

Soon, being children, they settle in. They play with the other kids. Fordham chronicles the lush, often fun, and occasionally terrifying moments of her Ugandan childhood, where snakes drop from the trees, fire ants climb over her sleeping infant body until her parents follow the trail and notice; and where in an airport, guided by her mother's careful calm masking enormous fear, they have to shake hands with Idi Amin.

One of my favorite passages (indulge me) is an example of Fordham's riveting and lyrical writing – as well as a lovely insight into memory, and how we claim our own life events – when her mother, who has been reading *Animals of East Africa*, takes them to see the hippos:

*The water stirred with hippos…Adult hippos can't swim. They walked along the river's floor, occasionally propelling themselves to the surface…Those on the bank seemed to hitch up their trousers and haul themselves up. In the distance, there was snorting and flashing of teeth. The river boiled around two or three angry hippos – it was hard to know – and then the water and the vegetation settles as they resolved their differences. The hippos moved up the bank, a hippopotamus migration, and they stood, majestic, on the shore.*

*This is how you would remember: you took a picture. You would later have something concrete to hold onto. That hippo would be yours. You could make as many copies as you liked, and you could show people. See, this really happened. You would have tangible proof. And you would own something magnificent.*

*

After Idi Amin's violent rise to power ("soothing" widows of the disappeared on the radio by telling them their husbands are not dead, they must have just run off with another woman), missionary families are forced to leave the country. And so the Fordhams head home.

But where is home?

At first, it is Texas. “Boys fidgeted in their jean jackets, their legs draped across the aisle. *We are Texas men*, their posture said. *Who are you? And what do you want*?”

Fordham’s account of her sister Sonja’s first day of seventh grade is so tender it is almost hard to read:

*She was wearing an outfit our mother had bought in Finland, an outfit too sweet to wear without irony. Sonja looked as if she had just stepped off a Swiss Miss box.*

*…She stood in the doorframe for just a moment, but it was enough for her to have an epiphany: Everything about her and her Care Bear lunch pail was terribly, terribly wrong.*

*…She was so silent that as the day progressed, her classmates began to believe she was mute. They would ask her questions* (Can you talk? Do you understand English? Are you retarded? Do you think Steve is cute?) *And she would look away. During Texas history, her teacher forced her to read aloud from the textbook, and when she rhymed* Waco *with* taco*, she could hear the whispers…She ate lunch in a bathroom stall.*

Siblings, sometimes, claim one another’s stories as their own. Or at least feel for them. Perhaps memory is permeable, and definitely shareable. You can make as many copies as you like. *Remember that time in Africa?*

“We were like a family of polar bears plodding across the savannah,” Fordham writes, in an interesting corollary to Hough’s giraffe story. “We didn’t belong. We didn’t belong in Texas.”

*

The Fordham sisters persevere, first in Texas and then in Atlanta, where the family settles.

Much later, in college and strolling across the spring campus, Fordham is thrilled to be mistaken for a non-missionary kid:

*A man known as ‘the preacher’ appeared. ‘Don’t be an Eve,’ he said as I declined a pamphlet. He walked beside me, ‘Jezebel, Jezebel.’ I quickened my stride, my mouth a scowl, but inside, I felt pleased. He hadn’t seen the earnestness that Adventism and my missionary childhood had drawn onto my features. I, Sari Fordham, was fitting into a public university. ‘You’re traveling to hell, missy,’ the preacher shouted at my back.*

*

Much of ‘Wait for God to Notice’ is devoted to Fordham’s mother, who died far too soon from cancer; a fascinating woman both resilient and fearful, who traversed continents but would not drive at night, could not keep a secret, was fascinated by the weather. The ultimate belonging is within our families, though we may resist it. “You’re just like me,” Fordham’s mother tells her, to her occasional teenage disgust, and it’s a double-edged comment, both a compliment and a rebuke, or maybe a caution. But it is also a powerful sharedness, and one can’t help respecting the fact that, through all of this, Fordham’s mother must have felt like an outsider, too. She had also lived many lives.

*

Perhaps what Hough’s and Fordham’s memoirs make most meaningful is that there doesn’t need to be a strict divide between our past and present lives, or our relations to the people around us. These will never touch up completely anyway. There is only so close we can get to that, “you’re just like me.”

“We knew her best of all,” Fordham says after her mother’s passing. And maybe that is the important thing, impossible but not entirely sad: to try to know other people as well as ourselves, not in the false divisions of difference but in the joy of it. It might be that when it comes to who we are, the only choice lies in this trying.

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Hough, Lauren. Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing. Penguin Random House, April 2021.

Fordham, Sari. Wait for God to Notice. Etruscan Press, May 2021.

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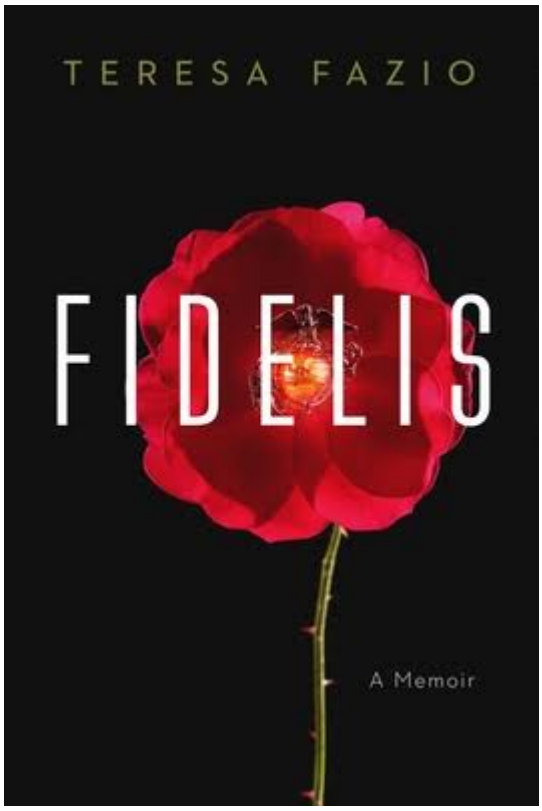
# Loyal to the Corps: A Review of Teresa Fazio’s ‘Fidelis’

The motto of the U.S. Marine Corps, or USMC, is “Semper Fidelis.” Commonly translated to “always faithful,” the motto—adopted in 1883 upon the urging of Colonel Charles McCawley, 8th commandant of the Marine Corps—replaced earlier mottos, including “with courage” and “by sea, by land.”

The definition of the motto and what it “means” to be a Marine is different for different people, and almost never exactly what one probably thinks from the outside looking in. Now commonly shortened to “Semper Fi” by Marines, the motto and its history bear testament to the essentially arbitrary way in which rules are enforced not only in and by the USMC, but by and in American society, as well. After all, “Semper Fi” means “always fi,” in Latin—fi means nothing, it’s a nonsensical term. Taken at face value, the reduction of a motto to shorthand underlines the motto’s essential mutability. Faithful… to what? Each other, the constitution, the president? Always… since 1883?




Meaning, as every adult understands, is highly contextual. This essential truth underlines most modernist and all post-modernist art and literature. When one takes the changeable truth of life and runs it through a harsh and dogmatic set of ideals, the resulting psychical energy is sufficiently powerful to drive some people to superhuman acts of discipline, in the name of honor and self-respect, and this is very useful when fighting a dedicated enemy. It drives almost everyone else mad, according to the extent to which they failed to live up to those ideals. Some rationalize their misbehavior, building up elaborate personal philosophies to justify their actions. Others descend into pessimism and become jaded.

Teresa Fazio is a proud former Marine, and her war memoir—*Fidelis*—grapples with that mutability at the heart of everyday life, and her own efforts to live up to ideals. It is a top rate book about war, and how serving in the Marines requires great reservoirs of emotional energy under normal circumstances, but especially on deployment to Iraq. It will resonate with anyone who has served in the military. *Fidelis*

may even give military leaders something to think about when it comes to setting and enforcing rules.

The story begins with Fazio's difficult family background—a household broken by infidelity, and an abusive stepfather, the type of situation that breaks many people down and ruins their potential before they have a chance to properly begin their lives. The setting did not break Fazio. Instead, she discovered great reservoirs of personal forbearance that complemented an aptitude for science. She put herself through MIT on a Marine Corps ROTC scholarship. She also learned early to rely on herself to succeed and overcome obstacles in an effort to achieve independence in two worlds dominated by men, first, that of science, then, that of the military.

One of the threads that Fazio follows from her childhood through the military and then afterwards is her complicated relationship with femininity. Growing up, she seems to see in her mother's adultery a kind of moral hazard specific to women, and this feeling is reinforced by the masculine circles in which she moves. It takes time and great effort for Fazio to overcome this inherent bias against her own identity as a woman, both in her own estimation and from others. The parts of her memoir that deal with this question are unsparingly honest.

Once in the military, Fazio proves herself a competent leader whose attention to detail makes her ideally suited to ensuring that communications for a Battalion-sized fort ran smoothly. The war intrudes in the form of dead bodies from outside the wire, and also mortar attacks, one of which nearly ends her life. Nevertheless, Fazio's greatest challenge arrives in the form of a man—a much older, and (not incidentally) married man, who seduces her in Iraq, and with whom she sleeps after the deployment. Far more troubling to Fazio than the embarrassment of having fallen for a manipulative adulterer is her violation of two codes: her personal code, which depended on a lifelong repudiation of using femininity to gain any

advantage (in this case, the attention of a man), and her violation of her expectations of herself as an officer and a Marine.

Above all, *Fidelis* is a memoir of endurance; a story about how a person can bear up under the weight of external and internal expectations. The prose is spare and straightforward, assembled carefully, attentively, and in a way that drives the reader forward sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter all the way to the end. Capable of being experienced in a weekend, or even over the course of a single day, at 215 pages, *Fidelis* is, like Fazio's deployment, intense.

The story is also filled with moments of understated wit, such as when she describes the midnight runs necessitated by a shift schedule that required her to stay awake at night:

*Before midnight, I ran on the rough gravel roads, carrying a flashlight so trucks could spot me. Even with its bouncing beam, I could hardly see five feet ahead, and I tripped over concrete chunks, bruising my knees through OCS-issued sweats. I got up and kept running. Head- lights higher than my head screamed toward me, and I scrambled off-road to avoid them. Trucks roared past, carrying water or sewage to or away from this place; I couldn't tell. I turned around and jogged back for a freezing shower.*

Of a rebound relationship, "if I squinted, it looked like love." Of the internet and cell phones, technology made it easier to talk, but not to connect."

According to Fazio, and the strict rules of the Corps, in helping a married man cheat, Fazio failed to live up to its standards of behavior. But she was surrounded by people who were skirting the system—drinking on deployment, cutting corners, focused on their own happiness and well-being first, before that of the corps. Not, in other words, being *Semper*

*Fidelis.*

This is one of Fazio's greatest accomplishments: she remains essentially optimistic, loyal to the Corps and to her memory of the military. In spite of the failure of various Marines to live up to the ideals of the Corps, in spite of her own inability to reach perfection, Fazio carries out her assigned duties faithfully. Making an error, even one that consumes a substantial portion of one's energy and attention, does not define an individual, and although Fazio's error was apparent to her at the time and since, this aspect of her life does not capture her essence any more than it captures the essence of any human. The experience could easily have ruined her as an officer and a human, embittering her and turning her toward cynicism – but she must have been a competent and caring officer, and earning a PhD at Columbia after leaving the military establishes her bona fides as an intelligent and steadfast worker.

In writing *Fidelis*, Fazio more than makes up for her in retrospect understandable transgressions, by offering aspiring young men and women a realistic and expertly-written account of what it's like to go to war. Her unprepossessing prose, dry humor, and faithful rendition of the trials and temptations faced by deploying women should be read by anyone curious about what it was like to be a woman in the Marine Corps.

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# New Nonfiction from Teresa Fazio: "Light My Fire"

*The following excerpt is from Teresa Fazio's **Fidelis: A Memoir**, reprinted with permission from Potomac Books.*

A week before leaving Iraq, I shuffled through my post-deployment health assessment, a quiz to divine if we were crazy or sick or prone to shooting our loved ones. I gave the pasty Navy doc the answers he wanted: *Yeah, I'm fine. No, I haven't seen anyone killed—lifting that transport case doesn't count. Yes, of course I was exposed to sand. No, no nightmares, not lately. Shit blows up, whatever. No anxiety, just stress. I'm an officer; I can handle it. Let me go.*

I was impatient with anyone who hadn't also been in Iraq for seven months, laying cable like my wire platoon. Our replacements' questions—where did this cable lead, when was chow, was there really a shot-up mural of Saddam Hussein—disrupted my precious workaholic routine, the one for which Marla, another female lieutenant, had nicknamed me Rain Man. With the new troops swelling our numbers, we spent the next several weeks laying as much cable as possible. The Marines bore down, digging what trenches they could with a motorized Ditch Witch, then pickaxing the more sensitive areas bordered by concertina wire. They laid cables straight into sandy trenches, zip-tying them every few feet and burying them under fine grains. Their knees shone white, and they washed grit from their hands and necks before meals. It sucked, but it was celebratory for the Marines leaving country: a last hurrah, the old guys willing to do anything to get out of there, the new guys excited to do anything at all. Even if it meant pulling cable hand over hand, fingers pruning with sweat in canvas gloves. As they tipped blue strands of Ethernet, bits of plastic tumbled to the ground, until everything was wired in. I watched Marla help dig, her slim figure bent at the waist, forearms dirty, red bun over delicate features. Though half the company comprised new troops, I didn't overhear anyone hit on her.

Fortunately, a squared-away comm-school classmate named Torres took over my wire platoon. Major Davis tossed me the keys to our battalion's SUV, so Torres and I could inspect the cable

line. Airfield to the left, headquarters to the right, the rest of Camp Taqaddum a desert plateau. The Euphrates winked below us if we craned our necks just right. Though I hadn't driven in seven months, the potholed roads felt familiar. Torres' clean uniform stood out against dusty upholstery.

I pulled over within sight of some junked Soviet planes, where I'd once gone on a long run with Jack and one of his sergeants.

Torres asked if mortars hit around TQ a lot. I told him that in the past month, most of the danger had stayed outside the wire. Except down that road—I pointed toward the gate where insurgents had crashed a vehicle full of explosives. And, I continued, when the mortars got close to regiment, peppered that empty tent—that was bad. Cut our fiber optics. Fucked up like a football bat. I climbed out of the car and kicked a toe in the sand, unearthing zombie cable. Torres didn't ask any more questions.

A few afternoons later, hopped up on caffeine with nothing to do, I called Jack from the Systems Control hut. He couldn't hang out; he had an angel coming in, he said, a mortar victim from Fallujah. All of the other times I'd been in his room, he'd shooed me away when the calls had come. This time, I asked to watch him work. I wanted to finally witness the cause of his sleepless nights.

"Major Davis would crucify me if I let you see this without him knowing," Jack said. But when I asked the major if I could watch Jack work, he just braced a hand on the two-by-four door frame and said, "Yup."

In his bunker, Jack pressed play on James Taylor's Greatest Hits. It calmed him, he said. Two Marines lay a stretcher on sawhorses and unzipped a body bag: an ashen Navy Seabee with a fresh haircut. Blood sluiced to the sawdusted floor. One Marine held the clipboard; several more circled the body. They

marked the locations of wounds and tattoos, crossing the Seabee's stiff arms over his chest for balance. Jack donned nitrile gloves and pulled a brand-new pack of Camels from the Seabee's pocket. A fist-sized hole bled where a heart had once beaten. *Fire and Rain* kept time.

I shifted from foot to foot as Jack counted dog tags, ID card, wallet, and photographs into a manila envelope. He motioned me back with an outstretched arm and a frown.

The whole process took only fifteen minutes. Soon the chaplain thumbed a cross on the Seabee's brow. The Marines put him in a fresh body bag, strapped it into a flag-draped transport case, and tied it tight with twine.

After, Jack wadded his nitrile gloves into the trash and led me to his room. We shut the door, no matter his Marines cleaning up in the outer bay. He pulled me in, kneading my back; I pressed my nose into his T-shirt and inhaled. Together, we breathed.

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The next night, there were no casualties. I stayed long enough after midnight to hear Jack say my name and "I love it when you touch me" and his son's name and "I love you." He saw the dead when he slept. He thought of them constantly, he said, except when he was with me. We dozed an hour. Then I pressed my lips to his forehead, found my glasses, and slipped away. Six more days left in Iraq.

The next morning, on my walk to stand watch, I ran into Sanchez exiting the chow hall. I teased him about the samurai pads snapped to his flak vest: floppy hip guards, shoulder pads, a flat, triangular groin protector. Each piece sported a different pattern: digital desert, analog woodlands, Desert Storm chocolate chips. He was a Marine Corps fashion nightmare.

When I got to work, I found out the reason for all that gear. A vehicle-borne IED had hit a convoy northwest of Fallujah, killing seven Marines and wounding six. A “mass casualty” event. Jack, Sanchez, and others rode out on a convoy to recover the bodies.

I couldn’t sit still, so I walked into the TechCon van. Maybe the sergeants could offer distraction, whether with work, or with *Nip/Tuck*, their latest binge-watching addiction featuring plastic surgeons in compromising relationships. We watched for three hours, until we hit an episode where the plot revolved around infidelity.

I remembered that Jack was on the convoy.

This “other woman” had terminal cancer. Her adulterous lover helped her commit suicide before the cancer took her. The woman penned letters and sipped milk to coat her stomach while swallowing handfuls of pills. As she watched a lakeside sunset and the soundtrack played Elton John’s Rocketman, I felt a

wash of fear.

Jack was still on a convoy.

While watching the show, I wondered, Will that be my punishment, too? I'd become increasingly anxious about our imminent return to the States. Even more than getting caught, I feared losing what I thought was my only chance at love. Jack's wife in California loomed far larger than any bomb threat. A thick sludge of guilt coated my powdered-egg breakfast. I controlled my breathing.

He was still on a convoy.

After the episode ended, I stumbled out of TechCon into sunlight, blinking back lethargy from hours of TV. I had to do something good, something officer-like: inspect the cable. Check on my troops. I controlled my breathing and swallowed the lump in my throat.

At the far end of the flight line, my Marines were deepening a trench in a spot plagued by heavy truck traffic. I walked the fiber optic lines along the airfield's edge, checking them for bald spots, kinks, and cuts. The air reeked of diesel. Helicopter rotor blades blended into a buttery hum. Sparrows flitted along eight-foot-tall Hesco barriers. After fifty yards or so, I stopped and peered down the flight line. Maybe a hundred yards left. Hot, boring work. I figured I could get to my Marines more quickly on the other side of the barriers, where there was a concrete path. I ducked behind them at the next opportunity.

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WHUMP. Seconds later, a mortar landed on the airfield. I felt the blast wave in my chest and teeth. I took a few steps forward, thinking of my troops digging near the flight line entrance.

WHUMP. Another mortar round, a little farther away. A small rock kicked up by the blast flew over my head, or was it shrapnel? I had the urge to reach for it, to catch it, but I did not. Instead I turned around to head back to our company's headquarters. As my Marines fast-walked past me, carrying ammo cans full of tools, I thought only of counting their heads.

In the following months and years, I would wish I had been on the exposed airfield side of the Hesco barriers when the mortars hit, that I had sprinted full-tilt toward my Marines digging that trench, instead of taking a few steps forward before retreating. I would even wish I'd been hit by shrapnel, like a vigilant lieutenant. Was that the most fitting consequence of what I'd been doing with Jack? If he returned from his convoy to find me lifeless, would caring for my body have made him love me, made him stay?

In any case, he returned. Late that night, I lingered outside Comm Company's compound under a hard pearl moon. A hundred yards away, Jack's Marines unloaded one, two, three, four, five, six, seven body bags from their refrigerated truck. Then they hefted still more.

Under the floodlights, I made out Hoss's lanky silhouette, spotted Mullins's round shoulders and rolling gait, almost heard his Southern drawl. Two more darted around the truck, its tailgate the height of their heads, shepherding paperwork. Sanchez stood straight and musclebound, lifting tirelessly. Sergeant Jonas barked orders.

Soon they all moved inside; they must have been grabbing clipboards and unzipping body bags. I stared at the bunker doors, wishing I could enter. If I had tried, Jack would have shouted me away, and Mullins and Jonas would have shaken their heads. I would like to say decorum held me back from going over there. Really, it was shame. The most honorable thing I could do was stay away. Wait to go home.

*Fazio, Teresa. **Fidelis: A Memoir** (Potomac Books, September 2020).*

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# New Nonfiction: Soft Target

When I was nineteen years old, in 2016, I joined the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). I sat at my family's kitchen table, holding in my hands a contract for 13 years (standard length for a 00178 Armour Officer), over the moon with happiness and excitement. My family stood around me, confused and apprehensive but trying hard to be supportive. I could feel their unsaid thoughts: *you are making a mistake.*

I signed the papers.

I felt logic leave the building, felt a scorpion made of bullet casings climbing up my back.

*

At twenty, I went to basic training. In the CAF, it's called Basic Military Officer Qualification (BMOQ, say "bee mock") and it takes place in a giant, 14-story grey zigzag a full kilometre long. The building is officially known as the Batiment General Jean-Victor Allard Building, but its nickname is the Megaplex, or simply the Mega. "Megaplex" is also the name of a Furry convention that has taken place annually since 2002, in Florida. Perhaps I should have gone there.

My BMOQ course was taught by a rotating stable of instructors, all colourful characters in their own rights. One went by "Bear" and had had his nipple piercing torn out during a parachute jump, one was a cheerful master seaman who was into

RuPaul’s drag race in the creepy way straight men sometimes are; another couldn’t stop talking about killing children. He wasn’t the only admitted war criminal who taught us, but he was the one who made the biggest impression.

He was a big guy, exuberant, dramatic, profane, broken. He had gone to Afghanistan twice, and he had killed Taliban child soldiers there, and now that he was back in Canada teaching recruits, he just could not shut up about it. Killing children, he told us, was easier than killing dogs. He had done it and he would not hesitate to do it again. When everything else from that course fades into an age-hazed blur, I will still see him standing by our sixth-floor window, talking about how easy it is to kill a child.

Banksy, Bethlehem street art.

Other candidates could laugh it off, ignore it, giggle at it, whatever, but I was the one whose brain it stuck in. After basic, no one mentioned it at all. Sometimes want to ask my former coursemates, “Did he really say those things? Did he kill those children? Did you forget? Did I hallucinate?” The instructor will probably die before me, and when he does, I may be the only one on the planet, aside from the parents, who remembers that those children ever even existed.

Things vanish like that, in the army. Uncomfortable moments, questionable incidents, they all disappear. The moment passes, the words fade, and then it's back to business, back to the military's hollow approximation of normalcy. Things vanish because they need to vanish, because if they didn't vanish, every soldier would end up like me, overburdened by memories, struggling to parse or even comprehend what they experienced. Under heavy physical weight, limbs fracture (mine did); under heavy mental weight, minds will do the same (mine did).

*

Before I joined, I interviewed a family friend for a school project. He had been one of several "mission monitors" authorizing NATO airstrikes in the former Yugoslavia during that nation's protracted collapse. This is how it worked: pilots enforcing the no-fly zone would see something suspicious– the four barrels of a ZPU anti-aircraft gun, or a Serbian attack helicopter spinning up its rotors– and radio the NATO control centre in Verona, Italy, asking for permission to destroy whatever they had spotted. Based on their information, he would say "yes" or "no".

From 35,000 feet, it's hard to get a full picture. Bombs sometimes don't fall where they're aimed. The ZPU turns out to be a playground, the helicopter is taking off near a mosque. You know how it goes. "I estimate I killed about 200 kids over there," he told me "but you can't let that catch up with you, or it'll kill you." Everyone knows someone whose deeds have caught up with them. Things vanish because they need to vanish. You forget, or you die.

There's a famous Mitchell and Webb sketch where two SS officers are nervously chatting during a firefight. "Are we the baddies?" one asks, in his charming British accent. "Our hats have got little skulls on them!" We laugh, but it's really not that funny. The British Royal Lancers wear skulls on their hats, skulls and two crossed lances and their motto

*Or Glory*. American soldiers graffiti Punisher skulls on their helmets. Canadian soldiers wear them on their t-shirts.

“Are we the baddies?”

Yes. Of course we are. We’ve always been that way.

In the army, beneath every normal-seeming moment lurks the possibility of unimaginable violence, of cruelty beyond measure. Robert Semrau is a former Canadian army captain convicted of “mercy-killing” a wounded Taliban fighter, of shooting a dying man in the head with his pistol. I bought his book before my second army course, Basic Military Officer Qualification-Army (BMOQ-A, say “bee mock ah”). If you read the book, it’s very clear that Robert Semrau had a pretty good time in Afghanistan, except for the whole murder trial thing. What’s subtle, what whispers to you underneath each page, is that Robert Semrau cannot understand why he was arrested at all. What did he do that was so wrong? Only shot a wounded man to death.

Violence without thinking, cruelty as a reflex. The army puts enormous effort into making sure its soldiers are capable of these. Military training is a process not of breaking down and building up but of warping under pressure, the way plastic does when it’s bent. Like plastic, the warping process leaves its stress marks on the brain. Like plastic, if you try and bend the soldier back into the position he was before he got warped, sometimes he will break.

*

BMOQ-A is what’s known in the CAF as a “cock course”. “Cock” is an acronym; it stands for “confirmation of combat knowledge”. A cock course is a military training course that is designed to suck as much as humanly possible. It’s meant to harden the soldier against all physical and mental torment, designed to produce in him, her, or them the ability to be instantly and reflexively violent.

At the beginning of BMOQ-A, a friend asked me something about the army. I don't remember what he asked, but I remember what I told him: that for me each day in the army required constant buy-in, that as soon as I woke up each morning I had to convince myself that everything I was going to do that day would be morally acceptable to me. "Are we the baddies?" I asked myself every single day, and I didn't have the spine to answer "yes."

It is the narrowest of all possible lenses. If I had asked myself whether everything I was going to do that day would be morally acceptable to the families of the civilians killed by NATO, by ISAF, by the IDF, maybe I would have had my realizations sooner.

*

In the middle of BMOQ-A, my platoon was getting inspected by the commandant of the Infantry School and his regimental sergeant major (RSM). The RSM was a sturdy French-Canadian, and he walked from soldier to soldier, tapping us each on the chest and asking us why we joined. When he got to me, I babbled something about how interesting tank combat was to me (I'm an armour officer, remember) and my desire to lead men.

"You do not have *it*," he told me simply, and moved on to the next man, asking him the same question.

"RSM," bellowed the young officer. "For queen, god and country, RSM!"

"You have *it*," the RSM said.

*It*: that precious ability to be cruel without thinking, to commit violence in the name of ideals that were never worth anything in the first place. To absorb and replicate the violence around you, to live in it, marinate, become it, and never ever even think of being anything else. *It*, the desire never to question but only to serve. I don't have *it*. I never

had *it*. I'm too soft, and I couldn't harden myself, not the way they could. Some people have tried to reframe softness as strength, as necessary and worthwhile, but to me it never felt like anything but failure.

"I'm showing you my 'girl side,'" said the strikingly handsome young infantry officer, tall, with honey-tan skin and warm blue eyes. His "girl side" was the side of himself that he showed to girls he was hitting on. "Maybe I'll start hitting on you next." Was he joking? Wasn't he? I fell regardless. I fell despite myself. For the rest of the summer, he told me how much he loved spending time around me, how highly he thought of me. He ruffled my hair and flashed me tender smiles and for just a moment I forgot we were learning how to kill people.

We were in the woods on a five-day navigation exercise, and the sergeant was showing us how to put a grenade under a water jerry can so that if someone goes to get water, the grenade explodes. If a civilian is going to use that water, we have all just committed war crimes.

On the last live-fire range of the course, I mistook the realistic human targets for real people. I turned to the man next to me and was about to tell him to stop firing, that there were people on the range, but then I realized I was already shooting.

*

Sometimes I wake up panicked and sweating, thinking I'm back on BMOQ-A and late for formation.

Sometimes I think about the senior captain who paused a Russian propaganda video right as it was talking about "sexual degeneracy" and said *doesn't this make you wish you were Russian?*

Other times I remember the corporal who said *I'd rather fuck a*

*five-year-old than a tranny, because at least the five-year-old is a real girl*, to a quiet smattering of laughter that accepted the joke.

It's really enough to make you want to scream. I want to go up to every CAF member I see in the hallways of my workplace and tell them *Listen buddy, I feel it too. I feel that growing gnawing sense of wrong. I hear your doubts in my own head! Give in, man, give in, let's leave this place together, let's those quiet doubts dominate our brains until it forces us to be the opposite of what the army wants. Please, just take my hand and let's get out of here! Let's build something outside this, something real and not based on the logic of cruelty. Let's do it! We can do it, if we really want to.*

If you say that to a soldier, of course, they'd think you're crazy. So I want to say it to you.

This essay is for you. It's for you to read and feel each wrong, for you to get to know the absurdity of this system the same way I have, for you to realize there is nothing, not one scrap, not one shred of it worth saving. It simply shouldn't exist.

I hope that if you take nothing else from this, you take that. I hope it stays with you. I hope you do something with it.

I hope I do too.

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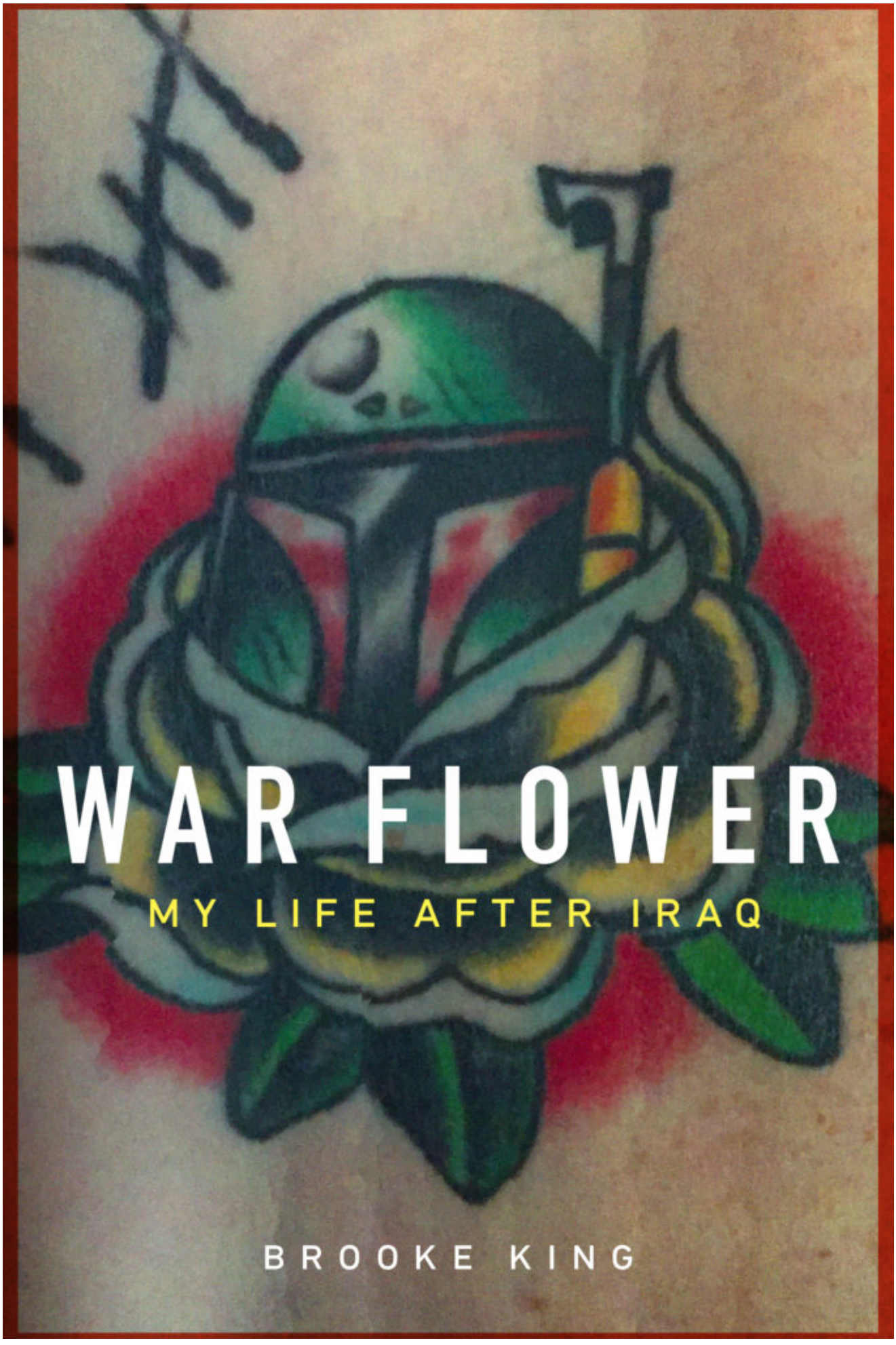
# An Interview with Brooke King, author of WAR FLOWER:

# MY LIFE AFTER IRAQ


WAR FLOWER
MY LIFE AFTER IRAQ
BROOKE KING

**Andria Williams: Brooke, thanks so much for taking the time to chat with Wrath-Bearing Tree. We are all excited to feature an excerpt from your debut memoir, *War Flower: My Life After Iraq*. In a starred review, Kirkus called it "an absolutely compelling war memoir marked by the author's incredible strength of character and vulnerability."**

**How long was this book in the making? How does it feel to finally have it out in the world?**

**Brooke King**: It is a bit nerve-wracking to have it out in the world, but then I remember that it took me four years to get it there, and even longer to try and write the book. I struggled with what people would think of me and what I have been through in my life, and then it dawned on me. The 19-year-old girl I was then doing all those things is not the same person that I am today, and so I gave myself permission, in a sense, to just let the criticism slide away. Yes, there are going to be people that judge what I did or shame me for falling in love with an officer when I was a married woman, but to me, that girl no longer exists. A mother of three no, I don't even know who that girl is anymore because I am so far removed from who she was and to me, that is what makes it okay to have this book out in the world for all to read.

**AW: I have to ask, because my kids (especially my 11-year-old son) are magnetically drawn to the book's cover: what's the significance of Boba Fett? Is that your tattoo?**

**BK:** So, it's funny you should ask. The Fett tattoo is mine. It's located on the inside of my left forearm. I originally got it because I wanted to get a tattoo that symbolized my nickname, "War Flower." And because I am a writer and symbolism is everything, the meaning behind it is kind of cool, but also very nerdy. Boba Fett is a bounty hunter form the Star Wars lore. And here is where my nerd shows through…. He ultimately was a war byproduct of his father Jango Fett who was a general for the Clone Army during the Clone Wars. The

symbolism behind it is that during his hardships of growing up, he turned away from the traditions of the Mandalorians and chose to follow his own path, and so having him blooming out of a flower seemed to be a perfect metaphor for *War Flower*. The design staff over at University Nebraska Press asked for what my interpretation of *War Flower* was and I mentioned that I had it tattooed on me. I sent them over the image of my tattoo along with the meaning behind it and they loved it so much, they decided to use it.

**AW: I'm a fan of the Fetts, so I think that's pretty cool. (I have even dressed as a Mandalorian, but that's another story.) Anyway, I love your tattoo, and it makes a perfect cover.**

**So, the book's synopsis begins, "Brooke King has been asked over and over what it's like to be a woman in combat." I found an intriguing hint of an answer to that in the line, "Here is where a girl is made into a woman and then slowly into a man." What does that mean, exactly?**

**BK:** It means that there is a time in every female soldier's service where she is forced to grow up. But for me, as a female soldier who saw a lot of things that normally I wouldn't have, I was forced to grow up, but then thrown into a situation that normally is reserved for a male soldier sort of forced me to become emotionally and mentally like a male soldier. In a sense, I was forced into survival mode by adapting to what male soldiers would normally go through in the harsh condition of combat.

**AW: And yet, even though many women have served in combat over the last decade and more, you share an anecdote about being driven by your grandfather to the local VA upon your return home and encountering not one, but two VA employees who meet your explanation of combat trauma with disbelief and even**

**hostility: "A man comes in, asks me to follow him to the TBI and spinal injury ward. He points to the men inside the room, tells me to think long and hard about lying about combat before I tell him anything more."**

**First of all, what an asshole. But also: How is it possible that such a disconnect can exist, not only between female veterans and the civilian public, but even between women vets and the civilian professionals meant to serve them?**

**BK:** I think it stems from the concern that women are supposed to be the bearers of life, so to think that a woman can be hurt in the same way as a man at war, it makes people uneasy. However, I think the disconnect about female veterans comes from lack of knowledge. Civilians just didn't know to what extent women were involved in OIF and OEF, and because of that, they have a hard time believing when a woman comes in for help with combat PTSD or combat related injuries. In order for this stigma or misconception to diminish, the government and female veterans really do need to speak up and account for that missing link of information. I know that personally speaking up has helped thousands of other women because I was one of the first women to go through combat PTSD treatment from OIF. I went through a lot of trial and error for years until I was able to find a regimen that worked for me.

**AW: *War Flower* alternates between sections of traditional first-person memoir, and brief chapters of creative nonfiction in which you imagine your way into the minds of other people—a teenage Iraqi girl, a tormented young boy—and even (as in "Dog Tags") inanimate objects. How and when did the structure of the book become clear to you? Did it begin as a more traditional memoir, or did you always know that you wanted it to be more of a kaleidoscopic view of war and homecoming?**

**BK:** I began writing the book several years ago and it wasn't until I ran into a part of the memoir where I couldn't remember all the details correctly enough that I began to

imagine what it would be like to be that person. I am referring to the section “Ghosts” where I imagine what it would be like to be an Iraqi girl on the other side of the war. After I wrote this section, I realized that memories are a jumbled mess of information recollected over time, and someone with combat PTSD has memories that are distorted by their trauma, so when I went back to rethink the structure, I decided that the structure should mimic my memories; fragmented, disjointed, and at times kaleidoscopic.

**AW: Your wartime experience appears to have given you an empathy with veterans of former wars, and particularly for Vietnam veterans. In the chapter “Legacy,” you very sensitively craft a sort of plural voice of Vietnam vets: “I am nothing, they would say. I am the fault of my government, my father. I am plagued with nothing but lies. I did what I was told.”**

**This tone seems matched by one of your early observations about your time in Iraq: “We didn’t know the names of the streets or which roads led to nowhere. When shit hit the fan, sometimes we didn’t know which direction to fire the bullets…In the end the only thing we knew for certain was that we were all soldiers stuck in the same godforsaken country until the military let us leave or we died, whichever came first.”**

**Do you think there is a particular understanding between veterans of Vietnam and the GWoT?**

**BK:** I think there is a sort of “oneism” that comes from being a combat veteran. There is a silent understanding that even though your war was somewhere different, you can still share that bond of knowing they went through hell as well. So you adopt with it this perspective of empathy towards other combat

veterans of foreign wars. You know their struggle because you are silently struggle with the same issue. Though by no means was the homecoming I received the same as the Vietnam veterans, but it is that quiet understanding amongst us that to suffer and see war changes you into someone else, that there is a slow coming back process that each veteran must take. Some get there sooner than others and some never find their way back to the person they were before war.

**AW: You mention reading Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* while in Iraq. I'd love to hear more about your reading (and listening!) life during your military service—boot camp, wartime—because it seems that this kind of inner world is so linked to a person's state of mind at difficult or transformational moments. (Did you listen to the Grateful Dead in Iraq, for example, or did that just bring back too many memories of your dad?)**

**BK:** When I was deployed I listen all sorts of music. On days when I needed to unburden my soul a bit, I would turn on the Grateful Dead and listen to Jerry's guitar in "Stella Blue" crying out to me, allowing me to feel the emotions that I needed in order to get through another day. Other days, I would stare at a blank page in my notebook unable to write a single line. Halfway through my deployment, I stopped reading and writing all together. I stopped listening to the Grateful Dead and listened more to heavy metal like Cradle of Filth and Dark Funeral. Some of soldiers around me listened to Slipknot. Sometimes I went days without anything but the sound of mortar rounds exploding and helicopters flying overhead, soldiers laughing and arguing in the smoke area, and sometimes, I just listened to the wrench I was holding while I laid underneath a truck ratcheting a bolt down. The sounds of war and of home coagulate if you let them, so I made it a point to never let the two intermingle for too long because I become either homesick or pissed off that I was still stuck in Iraq.

**AW: Metal! Were you a fan before you went to Iraq, or did you**

**start listening to it there?**

**BK:** I listened to Pantera and Slayer, and I think I even listened Iron Maiden, but I really didn't listen to it too much before. I was a punk rock kid growing up so I listened more to the Ramones, Rancid, Anti-flag, and Bouncing Souls, that sort of stuff. It wasn't until the guys in the PSD team put on Slipknot and Cradle of Filth that I began to listen to more mainstream metal. And even then, it was only because one day I was smoking a cigarette and I began to really pay attention to the lyrics and was honestly blown away by how poetic Corey Taylor's lyrics were, and it sort of resonated within my soul how I was feeling at the time and gave me some sort of tragically fucked-up sense of peace to know someone else had a dissonance within themselves they were wrestling with, in a way listening to it made it few as though there weren't two different women inside of me trying to tear my body in half so that they could both be free. I felt that the war for me was a constant struggle between who I wanted to be as a human being and the person I had to be in order to survive, and for me, music sort of helped calm the tearing apart of my soul.

**AW: Well, I think that's a really powerful explanation of what music does best.**

**Is there anything you left out of the book that you wish, in retrospect, that you'd included?**

**BK:** I think every writer wishes they had put something in the book that they forgot, but for me, I struggled with whether or not to include more about my late ex-husband. He passed away right after I signed my contract and though he was happy that the book was getting published, I wish I had incorporated more about our marriage, more about how he was the one to save me in Iraq from not only the war, but from myself. He truly was a wonderful man and I wish I had incorporated more of that in there. The next book, however, does pick up where this one

left off, so maybe there is time to redeem myself.

**AW: I was very sorry to hear of your loss. For what it's worth, I think the book paints him in a positive light—as a mostly helpful, concerned person for whom life was not particularly easy.**

**What were the hardest and most effortless parts of the book to write?**

You always want to say that the easiest parts of the book are the ones where you talk about your family, but for me, the easiest part to write in the book were the wartime sections. Because I had gone through so much therapy and introspective at myself and war, it became very easy to write it down. To me, the hardest part was writing about my family. I really didn't want to write about my upbringing. It wasn't something I wanted to put in the book simply because I couldn't dedicate enough space to the matter that it needed, and so I ended up summarizing those parts and it really pained me to do that in particular because I knew I would be leaving huge sections of my life out that needed to be discussed fully. I also feel bad about it because I shed some of my family members in a very negative light, much to their dismay, and I have gotten flack for it by them, but in my defense, I did tell them that the next book was going to discuss more of family and less of war. It also was extremely hard to dissect my marriage that at the time I was writing the book was in steady decline. How was I supposed to write about falling in love with my husband when I knew he was somewhere else with another woman? But I found another reason as to why to tell that love story; my twin boys, who the book is dedicated to. I wanted them to know who their father was when I met him and even more so now that he has passed, so I wrote everything down as though we were still in love and tried to remember those memories instead.

**AW: In the Sierra Nevada MFA program, you were able to work with writers who were not just talented at their craft but are**

**also combat veterans. What did this mean for you in developing confidence as a writer? Do you think your MFA experience would have been different if it had not included other veteran-writers?**

**BK:** Being in the SNC MFA wasn't just about being surrounded by combat veteran writers, it was about being surrounded by talented writers. I found that I was more so inspired to tell my story from the non-veteran writers than I was the faculty that were veterans. Of course, it helped that I had other vets cheering me on in my journey as a writer, but writers like Patricia Smith reading "Siblings." Gah! It gives me goosebumps just thinking about it now. Colum McCann. Rick Moody. Writers, truly amazing writers inspire and light a fire underneath your ass, and I think the director bringing those writers is what really helped me become the writer I am.

**AW: I love hearing that. I had a similar feeling when I went into my MFA program, too—that I was finally joining a creative culture that I felt I'd been seeing from the outside for a long time. And we can all use a creative fire lit under our asses, I suspect. What projects are you working on next?**

I have started writing my new book, nonfiction of course. It really does pick up where "War Flower" left off, and traces the roots of my childhood while raising my children, the ups and downs of my marriage to James, my struggle with PTSD, and the death of James which damn near almost broke me. To say that this second book is going to be a hard one to write is an understatement, but I think will be almost like an emotional enema, and will really be interesting for readers who are struggling with PTSD, or the loss of a veteran to suicide, or even being a parent struggling to raise your kids. What made "War Flower" so unique was that I was a woman with combat PTSD, but having PTSD while trying to raise kids is a whole other beast that I really didn't tackle full on in "War Flower" so the next book is really going to explore transgenerational trauma and female veteran related issues

that surround combat PTSD.

**AW: Can’t wait to read it. Thanks so much for talking with me, an sharing your work with Wrath-Bearing Tree.**

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# Memoir by Sari Fordham: “House Arrest in Thirteen Parts”

***Part* I: *The House, circa 1977***

The house in Uganda was red brick with a metal roof, a rusted water tank, and a screened-in verandah that had once been painted green. My mother spent most of her day on that verandah. She read Psalms to us there in the mornings, combed our hair afterwards, and then wrote letters to my father’s family in the States or to her own in Finland. She was struck by how different the world was, how isolated each person was in their reality. *It’s strange,* she wrote my grandfather, *that you’re skiing and otherwise getting in shape. Here the weather is usually so exhausting that you cannot get enough exercise.*

The house sat at the top of a hill and was surrounded by jungle. Monkeys gathered in the trees, and such bright and peculiar birds flew through the clearing that my mother later regretted that she hadn’t started birding yet. The house had three bedrooms and a bath. With the exception of the verandah, it looked like an average American house, maybe a little older, maybe a little shabbier. By Ugandan standards, it was palatial. It wasn’t just the space, more than a family of four needed, it was also the amenities: running water, electricity, a fridge, a stove, a washing machine, and cupboards filled

with items you could no longer buy in Uganda.

The Fordhams' house on the hill.

We lived a mile from campus, a mile from all those grievances. Our closest neighbors were unaffiliated with the school and lived in what we called "the village," even though the collection of mud huts belonged to a single Ugandan family: a patriarch, his wives, and their children. The wives and daughters collected water from our spigot every morning and carried it down to their communal kitchen. When my father was home, he would help hoist the pails onto their heads. One girl complained to my father that her neck hurt. "No wonder," my father later said. He could barely lift the pails.

My parents were missionaries at Bugema College, a Seventh-day Adventist institution. The campus was twenty-one miles from the capital, Kampala, but the trip could take over an hour,

depending on the conditions of the road or the number of military checkpoints. The distance suited everyone on campus just fine. The school had a dairy and a poultry farm, and beans and bananas were still available in the countryside. Whenever one missionary family eventually drove into town, they set aside personal grievances and ran errands for all the other missionaries.

The wives and daughters saw our house every day and had their own relationship with it. They walked past the screened-in verandah, the glass panes on each window, the light on the porch that turned on and off when the generator was working. They saw the external trappings of privilege and could only imagine what the interior held. We didn't think we were privileged. My mother worried because she couldn't buy toothbrushes in a store or children's vitamins. To supplement our iron, she threw a nail in with the beans as they boiled.

My mother disliked the patriarch because he beat his wives, and she assumed he also disliked us and waseven spying on us for Idi Amin or someone high in the government. These were paranoid times. Bugema's principal had been warned that "the American" was being watched, and my father was the only American on campus. When the patriarch asked my parents what they thought of Uganda, their answers were repetitive and chirpy: wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, *wonderful.* They were on edge with every interaction. Yet when we were under house arrest, the patriarch was not the person who accompanied the soldier.

***Part II: The Missionaries***

My parents, Gary and Kaarina, met in 1966 at an Adventist university in Michigan. My father, tall and skinny, had grown up surfing in Hawaii and had a fondness for practical jokes. To my mother, he seemed like the all-American boy. Later, she learned that my father and his siblings had spent their childhood bouncing around foster homes. During the last such

interlude, an Adventist family took in the three children. My father and his siblings converted, and then his mother, who came for visits, did as well. My father found stability in the church and worked his way through Adventist boarding schools, eating only two meals a day because that's all he could afford. When my mother met him, he was studying for his Master's in Theology because he wanted to serve God and because he believed Jesus was coming soon.

My mother ostensibly came to the United States to study for a Master's in English. Like my father, she'd grown up poor, but hers had a different texture. She was born in Finland at the beginning of World War II and was raised during the harsh austerity that followed. Her father, a Bible teacher at an Adventist boarding school, gave his salary too freely to needy students and to missions, leaving little to support his five children, the eldest of whom was handicapped. My grandmother was so anxious about finances that she tried unsuccessfully to induce miscarriages during her last two pregnancies.

My mother lived with her family in a house without indoor plumbing or running water. As she later told us, an outhouse in winter was no joke. For washing dishes and clothes, she and her siblings carried up pails of water from the Baltic Sea. It was a decent walk even without the weight of water. My mother and her siblings were always busy with the task of subsistence. In the summers, they foraged for mushrooms and berries, which they either ate or sold. My grandmother, who had never been to the United States, wanted her children to aspire to a future outside of Finland, telling them that in American even the telephone poles were higher than anywhere else.

My mother was the daughter to leave. She received a scholarship to study abroad, but more to the point, she had no marriage prospects in Finland. Despite being raised among all those potential Adventist suitors, she was, when my father met her, a twenty-six-year-old spinster who looked sixteen. The

eligible bachelors had dismissed her as the Bible teacher’s bookish, less captivating daughter. In a black-and-white photograph taken before her departure, my mother stands beside all her worldly goods, three small suitcases and a bundle. Her hair is tied up, her eyes downcast. What seemed lost on everyone in Finland, especially herself, is that she’s strikingly beautiful.

The Fordhams in Uganda (author Sari is on far right)

My father noticed immediately. He walked into the library looking for a date. Everyone knew that if you wanted to be hired as a minister, you had to be married. Earlier that day, he and his friends had planted books on each of the library's study tables. The plan was to sit at the table with the most attractive woman, gesturing to the books. The hitch, for my father, was that my mother was a student librarian. Stripped of pretense, my father approached her directly and asked her out.

My parents got engaged four months after their first date, got married in Finland, honeymooned in Lapland, and settled in Indiana where my father pastored two churches and where my mother taught fourth grade, and where they rented their first house, a two-bedroom with wood panels and shag carpet. When Sonja was born, my mother quit teaching and spent her days photographing my sister and sending pictures to the beautiful baby contests advertised in the back of ladies' magazines. My mother found America strange and lonely. People would say, "Come over any time," but when my father drove her over, they looked confused, and she felt embarrassed in front of her new husband. She tried to get her driver's license, but traffic frightened her, and she kept failing the exams. Church members critiqued her parenting. When I was born, my mother was ready to leave Indiana. She was tired of the winters, which she said were windier than those in Finland. She was tired of corn. When my father began talking about the mission field, she didn't say no. In 1976, they moved to Uganda.

***Part III: The Dictator***

Idi Amin came to power in a 1971 military coup that was welcomed by most Ugandans. The deposed president Milton Obote had made himself unpopular by marginalizing Uganda's largest tribe, banning oppositional parties, detaining dissidents, and declaring himself Life President.

The West supported the "regime change," as coups we approved

of were called. Milton Obote was a socialist, and Idi Amin wasn't. Moreover, Idi Amin appeared malleable. Before Ugandan independence, he had served in the King's African Rifles and had ruthlessly fought with the British against the Mau Mau rebels in Kenya. He boxed and played rugby. He was charming. He had a wonderful laugh. Western leaders considered him not too bright, despite the four languages he spoke.

Idi Amin preached an Africa for Africans, and then, in 1972, he expelled the Asians who ran the economy. It was not a small thing. There were 40,000 Asians, as the expatriates of mostly Indian origin were called, living in the country. After business hours, so few ethnic Ugandans walked the streets of Kampala that the city could have been a suburb of Bombay. The Asians had ninety days to leave, each taking with them only two suitcases of personal items. Their houses, furniture, appliances, cars, livestock, shops, pharmacies, coffee plantations, cotton farms, and factories were given to Idi Amin's supporters.

Their bank acconnts were absorbed by the National Treasury. Uganda's robust economy, a model on the continent, crashed hard. By 1976, you couldn't buy oats in a store. Yet that one move helped mitigate Amin's legacy with his countrymen. There might be nothing to buy in Kampala, but at least that nothing belonged to Ugandans.

The West came to view Idi Amin as a buffoon, and in private meetings, world leaders questioned his sanity. A popular theory was that he had syphilis-induced psychosis. Amin was surely aware of his reputation and might have seen it as an advantage. In any event, he was a man who liked a joke, particularly one where the West was the punch line. You laugh at me; I laugh at you. His official title-read in full before radio addresses-was "His Excellency President for Life, Field Marshal Alhaji Dr Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, CBE," with the CBE standing for Conqueror of the British Empire. My parents laughed at that. They also laughed at the outrageous telegrams

he sent world leaders. In a correspondence with Queen Elizabeth, he sympathized with England's economic woes and volunteered to send "a cargo ship full of bananas to thank you for the good days of the colonial administration." In Uganda, the killings began nearly as soon as Amin came to power. Concerned about a coup, he purged the army of soldiers from Acholi and Langi tribes, two ethnic groups allied with Milton Obote. He established the State Research Bureau, an intelligence agency infamous for torture. He killed those who threatened his power. He killed those who might threaten his power. He killed those who didn't threaten his power at all. Bodies were tossed into the lakes, and the crocodiles grew fat. After fleeing Uganda, one of Amin's former aides told *Time* magazine, "'You are walking, and any creature making a step on the dry grass behind you might be an Amin man. Whenever you hear a car speeding down the street, you think it might suddenly come to a stop – for you. I finally fled, not because I was in trouble or because of anything I did, but out of sheer fear. People disappear. When they disappear, it means they are dead."

HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II
*of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Head of the Commonwealth*

HIS EXCELLENCY GENERAL IDI AMIN DADA
*President of the Republic of Uganda*

Archives of New Zealand: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and Idi Amin.

Humanitarian organizations were unsure how many Ugandans had been murdered. Some groups estimated that 80,000 had been killed. Other groups estimated that 300,000 had been killed.

***Part IV: The Archbishop***

On February 16, 1977, Janani Luwum – the Anglican Archbishop of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Boga Zaire – was murdered. The world had to notice.

Janani Luwum was a rare man, a warm individual – taking time to write letters to those he had met – and an innovative, effective leader. He encouraged theology students to take classes in Developmental Studies, and he promoted a Christian practice that looked African, not European. He was the most influential religious leader on the continent, and the first Ugandan to hold his position.

If Luwum had lived long enough to have a full career, he likely would have changed the Church. Instead, he became linked irrevocably with Idi Amin. They both were Ugandan men shaped by colonialism, both dynamic leaders, both capable of dazzling the camera with their smiles. These two men initially had a cordial relationship, despite the fact that Luwum came from the Acholi tribe, an ethnic group with sympathetic ties to the deposed president. The Archbishop used their friendship to temper the dictator's excesses. Parishioners came to him with names written on slips of paper, and he would carry those names with him, cajoling Idi Amin into releasing someone's brother, someone's husband.

At the beginning of 1977, Amin survived yet another coup attempt, or invented one. Observers weren't sure. What's certain is that in response, he ordered the slaughter of everyone in Obote's hometown. An entire town murdered and the

world looked away. In the same fit of spite or fear, Amin purged the army of the remaining Acholi and Langi soldiers. A witness described the carnage to *Time* magazine. “You would hear a short cry and then sudden silence. I think they were being strangled and then had their heads smashed. Next day the floors of rooms C and D – the elimination chambers – were littered with loose eyes and teeth.”

It was too much. The Archbishop wrote Idi Amin an open letter and sent copies to government officials. Seventeen bishops signed the letter and Archbishop Luwum personally delivered it to Idi Amin. With the candor of an Old Testament prophet, he wrote: *We have buried many who have died as a result of being shot and there are many more whose bodies have not been found. The gun which was meant to protect Uganda as a nation, the Uganda citizen and his property, is increasingly being used against the Ugandan to take away his life and property.*

Few in Uganda were surprised when the Archbishop was arrested for “smuggling weapons,” fewer still when Radio Uganda reported that the Archbishop had died in a car accident on the way to the interrogation center. It was whispered that he had been shot. Some claimed that Idi Amin had pulled the trigger.

***Part V: The Trip***

After the Archbishop’s murder, even expatriates were anxious. The thing to do, the missionaries all said, was to be unobtrusive. Don’t make waves. It went without saying that you shouldn’t travel unless you had to. Any time you drove, you risked getting stopped by soldiers or by carjackers, soldiers being preferable of the two, but with the country on edge, who knew? It felt melodramatic to speak about getting killed. It felt presumptuous to clutch your passport and assume you were above it all.

For months, my father had been planning to drive into Kenya to attend church meetings. My mother had always intended to stay

with us on the hill because it was safer and because she had little patience for the border crossings. She had created a shopping list for my father that might as well have said: *buy all the things.* Now this.

“No one expects you to still go,” my mother said. “No one.”

“I’m not that kind of missionary,” my father said. It was his favorite line.

My mother could feel the tug of their old argument. She sometimes veered away, setting her mouth and saying nothing further. More often, she railed. *Why can’t you just once put your family before the church?*

On the morning my father left, she was cheerful. My mother might shout during a fight, but she didn’t stew. As my father dashed through the house – “Where’s my Bible? Where’s my passport? Have you seen my glasses?” – she pointed him toward the items he needed, and when he was ready to leave she handed him a stack of aerogrammes that had accumulated on our table. For the past week, missionaries had been dropping off letters for my father to post in Kenya. Mail sent from Uganda was opened and read by someone, we all knew.

My father said goodbye to us in the yard. I sat in my mother’s arms and watched him go. It was a familiar sight. He left, and then he returned, often with presents. The best were matchbox cars. Sonja and I loved them because we loved him. At night, he would get on the floor with us and push cars around the legs of the dining room table.

“You better get going,” my mother said. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

She didn’t have to say that we’d be fine. Of course, we’d be fine. If you didn’t count snakes and malaria, life on the hill was uneventful.

***Part VI: The Press Conference-February 23, 1977***

My father was in Kenya when Jimmy Carter held the second press conference of his presidency. Reporters wanted to know how Carter's campaign promises were holding up to the realities of office. No one anticipated that Uganda would be mentioned or that the press conference would have international consequences.

Halfway through, a reporter asked Carter: "What if anything, do you plan to try to do to help victims of political repression in these countries?" The countries in question were Iran and the Philippines, and the reporter noted that despite human rights abuses by both regimes, the United States was aiding their governments. Carter spoke vaguely about changes his administration was making and then pivoted to Uganda. Uganda was a small, politically inconsequential country, one the United States was not supporting either covertly or overtly; still, the Archbishop's murder was shocking.

"Obviously, there are deprivations of human rights, even more brutal than the ones on which we've commented up till now," Carter said. "In Uganda, the actions there have disgusted the entire civilized world, and, as you know, we have no diplomatic relationships with Uganda. But here is an instance where both Ambassador Andrew Young and I have expressed great concern about what is there. The British are now considering asking the United Nations to go into Uganda to assess the horrible murders that apparently are taking place in that country, the persecution of those who have aroused the ire of Mr. Amin."

It was a throwaway line. The press conference, broadcast live on television and radio, continued for fourteen more questions, none of them about Idi Amin. Jimmy Carter didn't mention Uganda again.

The next day, Idi Amin announced that Americans couldn't leave

Uganda and were to report themselves to Kampala on February 28 for a personal meeting. No one was quite sure what this meant. It could mean nothing. It could mean we'd be deported. It could mean we'd be imprisoned or held in Kampala. There were only 240 Americans in Uganda. Most were missionaries like us, who had ignored the State Department's travel warnings. There were also a handful of airline employees, oil workers, and technicians. Sonja and I were some of the youngest Americans. With our father in Kenya, we were likely the only American children without an American guardian in the country.

"Goddammit. Why couldn't our first crisis have been a more dignified one?" a White House adviser reportedly said.

***Part VII: Singing in the Dining Room***

News of the house arrest, as the missionaries called it, moved swiftly through campus. There was news, and then there was *news.*What were the Fordhams going to do now? Would they be deported or worse? What was Carter thinking? The other missionaries were relieved that the leaders of their respective nations – Australia, Canada, and the Philippines – -had sense enough not to irritate Amin, and it was fortunate, they all said, providential even, that Gary was in Kenya. They knew my mother was Finnish, and they speculated on whether or not Sonja and I were dual citizens. We weren't. That my mother was the last to hear the news said more about living on the hill than anything.

"Please, can we have some peace and quiet?" my mother said. "We're trying to talk here." Her voice was sharp, and I began weeping. "Oh, for goodness sakes," our mother said. After the midday rain, a missionary hustled up to tell us. She called out "*Hodi,"* and my mother's heart lurched. "Gary's fine," the missionary said, as she sat  on the couch. In the dining room, Sonja and I were building a puzzle. We began singing because we liked to sing and because we finally had an audience, even if she was only a missionary. The women spoke as if we weren't

there, and so we responded in  the only way we could: we raised the volume. “God is so good. God is so GOOD. God is SO GOOD. HE’S SO GOOD TO ME.”

To the missionary she asked, “What does this mean? What’s he thinking?”

After we went to bed, my mother turned on the radio. She confirmed the date and time we were to present ourselves in Kampala and wondered whether or not she should take us. Who would even drive us? Surely the Ugandan government wouldn’t seek out two children. Did anyone even know we were here? Who kept track of these things?

Termites flew against the glass with steady pings. A few had gotten into the house, where they fluttered on the floor, lattice wings propelling thick bodies. They were a delicacy. When they came flying out of the ground, children would leave whatever they were doing and run out into the fields to gather them. The termites were roasted and eaten. My mother carried the mugs into the kitchen and set them in the sink. She stood in the green darkness, water running through her hands, and cried.

***Part VIII: The Letter***

My father sat down to write his mother and stepfather. Despite attending meetings all day, he must have felt like he was on vacation. No teaching, grading, or lessons planning. And the food! In Uganda, we only spoke of such meals: toast with marmite, potatoes and green beans, spaghetti and peas, cake.

My father dated his letter February 24, the day after Jimmy Carter’s press conference. Either he hadn’t heard the news or the detention hadn’t yet been announced.

*Dear Mother and Gordon,*

*Wanted to let you know all is well with us. There is trouble*

*in the land, but we have not been bothered.*

He filled the front page of the aerogramme with the minutia of our daily lives: mail in Uganda was censored, the dairy farm was down to six cows, wages for Ugandans were only fifteen cents an hour, fellow missionaries were requesting transfers.

Four days later, my father, fully aware of the events in Uganda, returned to the letter. He had left the back flap empty and so he turned to it and wrote in the date. February 28. So much could happen in four days.

*I am still in Kenya (Union Session finished yesterday) and Americans are detained in Uganda. We are not sure what to do because Kaarina, on a Finnish passport, can leave more easily if I'm not there. We expected to get an indication today, but now the meeting [with Idi Amin] is postponed until Wednesday. I may go in tomorrow to be there for the appointment with the president and I may wait.*

*I wish I could contact Kaarina, but the phones are cut at the border. We know the Lord will watch over us, but feel it may be wiser to see what's going to happen before complicating matters. The Lord Bless you. Love, Gary*

My father was a phlegmatic man who liked to say, "Don't make a mountain out of a mole hill." After hearing we were under house arrest, he had continued attending meetings. He was a delegate, after all. Let the world burn around him, Gary Fordham would fulfill his duty. The letter to my grandmother, however, suggested that my father had identified a mountain as a mountain. Over and over, he used the pronoun *we,* as if he and my mother were in consultation. *We are not sure. We expect. We know. We feel.* Unable to contact my mother, he was conversing with her in his head.

Two decades later, after my mother died of cancer, he returned to this unconscious habit. *We think. We hope. We feel.*

“Who is this ‘we’?” I finally asked. “You and mom?”

“Yeah,” he said, and smiled. He never used *we* in the same way again.

***Part IX: The Soldier***

The soldier came in the morning. We were on the verandah when we heard the crunch of tires on a road that led to us and nowhere else. The rumble was a back and forth sound, a jostling of vehicle against washed out road, against mud, against potholes. My mother set down her Bible and the three of us watched the Land Rover jut out of the jungle, roll across the yard, and stop beside the frangipani tree. A soldier, dressed in green, sleeves rolled past elbows, climbed out, and there, from the passenger’s side, emerged Joseph, my father’s student.

“Good morning, madam,” the soldier said.

“Good morning, *bwana,”* my mother said. “Morning, Joseph.” The soldier was tall, or so he seemed to us, and dashing. His eyes followed our chickens, Rebecca and Sarah, as they snatched termites in the yard. “Can I help you?” my mother said. “If you came to see my husband, he’s not here.”

“Can we come in?” the soldier said.

My mother led them up the cement steps and through the verandah. She removed her shoes at the door and asked them to do the same. “All the mud,” she said. She motioned toward the couch and as the men sat, she asked Joseph how he was enjoying his classes. He answered that he was liking them very much.

Sonja and I scooted behind her. A soldier was sitting next to Joseph on our couch. Any other day, Joseph would have been the occasion. I would have climbed into his lap and demanded a story, but Joseph was not the point. There was a soldier in our house. He was wearing a beret and there were holes in his

socks.

In the kitchen, our mother made cherry Kool-Aid out of water she had boiled the night before. We hadn’t had Kool-Aid in months, or as my mother liked to say, not in the memory of man. Sonja and I hoped the visitors wouldn’t drink it all. My mother hummed as she moved, reaching for our tall cups, then opening a Tupperware of dried finger bananas. She carried the Kool-Aid out first, giving a cup to both Joseph and the soldier. Then she brought out the dried finger bananas and held them out, and they each took one or two. Bananas were, well, bananas, but the Kool-Aid had made an impression.

“These are my girls,” my mother said. “Sonja and Sari.” We ducked and smiled. “What do you say?” she said.

Sonja stepped up to the soldier and said, “Hello.” The soldier took her hand and shook it. “You are welcome,” he said. I pressed my face into my mother’s waist, and they laughed.

“Okay,” my mother said. “You can go outside and play. Take the cat. Stay near the house, and for goodness sakes, don’t get too muddy.” And so we went, the reluctant Kissa looped through Sonja’s arms.

***PartX: Inventory***

Our mother frowned as we left, feeling what exactly, I shouldn’t know, but I’ve heard this story so often I can’t separate my memories from hers, my feelings from hers, and so I see her standing in our house, irritated. She was irritated at the excitement of her daughters, irritated at their father for being gone, irritated at Jimmy Carter for opening his big mouth, irritated at Joseph for accompanying the soldier, irritated at herself for not smiling more pleasantly, irritated that she had to smile. Underneath all her peevishness was fear. Quite absent was the triumph she later had while telling this story.

She sat in the La-Z-Boy we had brought from the States. It had come in a great shipment of things that had taken a year to be released from customs and only then, after my father had overcome his scruples and bribed the custom official. Opening those crates had been like a bad Christmas. So much bounty, so little practicality. Better to have brought more soap, more children's cereal, more watches for bribes. Instead, there sat our La-Z-Boy.

My mother now looked at the soldier with as much pleasantness as she could muster. Even if she could remember where my father kept the watches, she didn't dare bribe an official. It might be exactly the wrong thing. She wasn't going to give Idi Amin any reason to throw her in jail. "If there's even a speck of mud outside, my girls will find it," my mother said. "So today, forget it. Mark my words, they'll be filthy when they come back in. Do you have children?" When the soldier nodded, she rattled off her Questions For Soldiers With Kids: *How many do you have? How old are they? What are their names? Are they attending school? Do you like being a father?* If we had been at a roadblock, she would have concluded the conversation with a small present for the children (a pencil or a nub of soap), but today she was too anxious.

"Where is your husband?" the soldier asked. "Where is Gary Fordham?"

"Joseph didn't tell you? He's in Kenya." It was not lost on her that the soldier knew my father's first name. She was certain she hadn't told him. "He's attending the East African Union meetings."

My mother hadn't expected this visit, but now that the soldier sat across from her, his visit seemed inevitable. Of course, he was here. But what about Joseph? Why had he come?

The soldier explained that he had been sent with orders from Idi Amin Dada himself. All Americans were to appear before Idi

Amin on Monday and couldn't leave the country before then. He was here because the Ugandan government wanted a list of our family's valuables. There was nothing menacing in the solder's voice. It was the message itself that was menacing. Soon we would be separated from all that we owned. If we were lucky, we would only be kicked out of the country like the Asians. If we were unlucky, well, no one wanted to consider it.

"This is a misunderstanding," my mother said. "I'm European, not American." She excused herself and returned with her Finnish passport, which she handed to the soldier.

He flipped through it, giving the pages a cursory glance. "Gary Fordham, he is American? Your babies, they are American? Madam, why is your husband gone now? Why are you all alone?"

My mother smiled blandly.

"Thank you," the soldier said, handing her the empty cup and the passport. He was polite. She was polite. "I must inventory your belongings now," he said. He had brought a clipboard with him into the house.

"The furniture doesn't belong to us," my mother said. "It belongs to the school. A fine Ugandan school, as you saw driving in.That couch isn't ours. The table and chairs aren't ours. The refrigerator isn't ours. If you take them, you'll only be hurting the school." She shot a look at Joseph.

"This one is Ugandan?" the soldier asked, nudging the La-Z-Boy.

"Oh, goodness," my mother said. "Of course, you're right. That's ours. Actually, it's mine, and I'm not an American citizen. It's not an American belonging."

The solder looked at her, pointedly, though he didn't write anything down. He walked into the kitchen.

"The stove is the school's," my mother said, "But the pots and

pans and dishes are mine. The Tupperware is mine."

The soldier began to pull open drawers. "Does the silverware belong to the school?" he asked.

"No, it belongs to me," my mother said. She claimed everything in the kitchen. She claimed the rice cooker my grandmother had sent from the States and the transformer that allowed it to work here. She claimed the cheese slicer, cutting board, and ceramic bowls (which actually were from Finland), and the can opener, dishtowels, and colander (which weren't). In the back room, she claimed the washing machine. She smiled and nodded. Mine. Mine. Mine. They went through the bedrooms, attempting to separate the property of the school from the property of the Fordhams. The beds belonged to the school, as did the mosquito nets, the dressers, and the bookcases. The sheets and blankets and books were ours. The typewriter was ours, as Joseph pointed out. So were the matchbox cars, the Fisher Price toys, our Sabbath dresses, my father's ties, a Swiss Army knife, an old perfume bottle, the radio, our hens, the dog. My mother claimed them all.

The car, our most valuable possession, was in Kenya, but Joseph suggested that the bicycle should be here. "Pastor Fordham bikes to campus every day," Joseph said.

"Yes, Joseph," my mother said. "He needs the bike to get to campus." She wanted to hiss in his ear-Whose side are you on anyway, brother Joseph? "It's in the garage," she said to the soldier. Bicycles were impossible to buy in Uganda. Everything was hard to come by. Even our pots and pans would be snatched up on the black market. But the bicycle? Well, people had been killed for less. "I can show it to you if you think it's necessary." The soldier nodded. "But I think you should know, it belongs to me."

"Your husband's bicycle?" the soldier said. His incredulity sat between them.

“Yes,” my mother said. “I bought it, and I’m European.” Let them prove she didn’t own that bicycle.

“Madam, what is your husband’s? What belongs to him, eh?”

My mother said nothing.

***Part XI: The Misunderstanding***

Jimmy Carter set up a command center to monitor the crisis in Uganda and redirected a nuclear aircraft carrier to the coast of Kenya, along with five naval vessels. The ships, which had been cruising the Indian Ocean on routine missions, were not prepared to rescue us. *Time* later reported that between all of them, there were fewer than 200 Marines. Still, the message was delivered. “The President will take whatever steps he thinks are necessary and proper to protect American lives,” the White House Press Secretary announced. So much promised effort, so few endangered lives. Of course, every life is precious to its owner.

Idi Amin must have felt conflicted. When a British professor had insulted Idi Amin in 1975, Queen Elizabeth had apologized personally, and England’s Foreign Secretary had come to Uganda to secure the professor’s release. After a much more public criticism, President Carter was offering nothing but a show of force. Moreover, if Amin had seen the inventories taken by his soldiers, he must have been happily considering the political support he could secure with all those washing machines and cars.

But Idi Amin had learned what even a small country might do for its citizens. A year earlier, Palestinians had landed a hijacked plane at the Entebbe Airport and held Jewish passengers hostage. Idi Amin had played host to both terrorists and hostages. He was a Big Man, courted daily by Israeli negotiators. And then the raid happened. Israeli commandos freed most of the hostages, killed the terrorists and the Ugandan soldiers on duty, destroyed the Ugandan air

force, and left Idi Amin looking weak and inept. He might not survive another such fiasco.

Idi Amin sent Carter a telegram stating that “the Americans in Uganda are happy and scattered all over the country” and that “Uganda has the strength to crush invaders.” He postponed meeting the Americans and then a few days later, canceled it. The fun was over. Idi Amin assured us we could leave the country if we wished. But why would we? Uganda was a beautiful country, and he had just wanted to thank us for our service.

My father was in the Finnish embassy when the final announcement wasmade. The clerks were creating counterfeit Finnish passports for Sonja and me, which they planned to smuggle into Uganda through a diplomatic pouch. It was as James Bond as anything we would be associated with. On hearing the news, my father thanked the clerks. Now for his errands. Of course, the Fordham family would stay in Uganda. The crisis was over. Why make a mountain out of a molehill?

My father walked to the nearest *duka* and bought two matchbox cars.

***Part XII: The Foreign Government Dances***

For years, the only accounts I had of the house arrest were my own memories and my parents’ stories. I looked for confirmation in Ugandan histories, but amidst the atrocities of the Amin years, the event was too small to matter. Then one day, I stumbled upon *Time’s* archives and discovered articles written in the midst of the crisis. Once I found one piece of coverage, I found more and more. I listened to Carter’s press conference and watched an ABC news report that was broadcast during the crisis. Experts called Idi Amin a “butcher” and said that while Amin didn’t usually kill foreigners, nobody knew what to expect. My American grandmother likely saw the news story weeks before my father’s letter arrived.

For most of my life, I considered this my mother’s story. My

mother stood in the living room and made a rash decision. She hadn't known, until she claimed that first item, what she would do. She was angry and that was part of it. A soldier was informing her we might lose everything we owned. She had grown up poor, and possessions mattered to her, never mind that she was a missionary. She was also anxious about us, her American daughters. When we were born, she hadn't wanted us to be dual citizens or even to learn the Finnish language. She wanted us to be fully American, unable to return to the land she had left and still missed terribly. Our US passports were to be talismans, offering protections and opportunities that we, as Americans, would never fully appreciate. As she stood across from Joseph and the soldier and claimed everything we owned, she felt utterly alone, and so she did what she did. She was courageous. I think this, still.

My mother stood across from a soldier who carried his own stories and fears. He held all the power in their interaction, and yet, he must have known that he was far more likely to be killed by Idi Amin than she was. Surely, there had been whispers about what had happened to the soldiers at the Mugire prison. They weren't just killed, they were killed with sledgehammers because bullets were too costly. If Idi Amin stayed in power, this soldier might join the disappeared, and if Amin was overthrown, he might be killed as retribution.

Standing beside the soldier, inexplicably, was Joseph. Joseph had no obvious reason to be at our house or so helpful. My father was a popular teacher who often ate breakfast in the cafeteria with his students. He was a hard grader to be sure, but he was also funny and kind. I don't think Joseph came because he was angry at my father. His anger – if it was that – was probably broader. Why should expatriates have so much and Ugandans so little? Upon graduation, Joseph would likely be hired by the Adventist church and assigned a district that covered hundreds of miles and included multiple churches. He would work more than forty hours a week, but he wouldn't be

able to afford a car, and if he owned even a bicycle, it would be through charity. A rural church in Ohio or North Carolina might send money for one as their “mission project.” They would expect a thank you note and photographs. Where was the dignity for the Ugandan? Where were the opportunities?

My Finnish grandmother knew that some people were more valued than others. The church might teach that God loved everyone equally, but in this world, citizenship determined worth. My grandmother had tended cows as a child, and as she stood in the dung, warming her bare feet, she decided that if she had children, she would urge them to move away and to matter. In Uganda, an entire town was murdered and my parents didn’t hear about it. How many residents lived in that town? There were surely more than 240 people, but they had no advocates. Even today, the only record of their existence is their annihilation.

After the detention of the Americans, *Time* put Idi Amin on the cover, titling their piece “The Wild Man of Africa.” One of their sources, a Ugandan who bad self-exiled to Tanzania, described Idi Amin’s foreign policy: “He always acts the same way. He threatens a group of foreigners, and then he says everything is okay. Then he threatens them again, and then he says everything is okay. The foreign government dances back and forth-and everyone forgets about the thousands of Ugandans who are dying.”

***Part XIII: The Matchbox Car***

We were the foreigners, or some of them. We weren’t thinking about political dances or how Idi Amin might be using our presence in Uganda. Officially, my parents were thinking about God. In addition, my father was thinking about teaching, and my mother was usually wondering whether there would be any letters in the mail. We were all thinking about food. And with my father gone, I was thinking about matchbox cars.

Believing my father would be home soon, my mother used the last of the whole-wheat flour to make *piirakka*. It is a Finnish pastry, and for months, Sonja and I had been begging her to make it. She had waved us off, saying it was too hot here or that we didn't have enough powdered milk or that *piirakka* wouldn't taste right without rye flour. She stood over the stove, stirring the rice, stirring the rice. If she let it burn, she would feel even more foolish than she already did. "We'll see," she told us. Who makes *piirakka* in Uganda? Well, she was making it now, and we would see.

My father had originally planned to return that day and my mother expected that he still would. "He has class tomorrow. He'll be back," she said. Sonja and I spent the morning arguing about who would tell him about the soldier. We sat for a while on the patio steps, giving each other shoves.

"I'm telling."

"No, me."

Our mother poked her head out the door. "Daddy's probably sitting at the border right now, just wishing he could hear you two fight. Oh, boy. He doesn't know what he's missing." And then, "As long as you're out there, keep the monkeys off the tomatoes."

By the afternoon, Sonja was building a puzzle and I was pushing my matchbox cars around the kitchen floor. "Daddy's bringing me a car," I told my mother. "Maybe orange."

"Don't count on it. We'll be lucky if he brings flour. And, good grief, if I step on one more car, I'm taking them away."

By supper, my father still hadn't come. My mother set the table. "Never mind, he still might come. Or he might stay the night in Kampala and come in the morning. We can wait another day, right, girls?"

She put the *piiraka* and some finger bananas on the table and told us that it was probably the first time they had been served together in the history of mankind, making us feel very important indeed. The *piiraka* had a salty, creamy bite, and though my mother had been complaining about their looks, she smiled after trying one. “This is a nice change of pace.”

We were almost done eating when we heard a car. We ran for the door. My mother was out of the house first, bare feet even, but once she got outside, she slowed to a walk. She kissed my father and asked how the border went. Sonja and I were jumping and shouting, *soldier, soldier, soldier,* and also, *Kool-Aid.*

“What’s this about a soldier?” my father asked. “Did you have any problems? Did you get to meet Idi Amin?”

“Nothing like that,” my mother said, “Someone came to the house to find out how rich we are. The girls are dying to tell you. But,” and she lowered her voice, “you’ll never guess who came with the soldier. It wasn’t Idi Amin, I’ll tell you that.” She turned to us.”Okay, girls, let’s go inside and you can take turns telling. Let’s not talk out here.”

My father picked me up, and I whispered in his ear, “Did you bring me something?”

“Do you mean oil?” he said.

“No,” I said. “A present.”

“A present? Like a matchbox car?”

I nodded.

“Oh, man! I just knew there was something I was forgetting. I was driving all day today, trying to remember what I had forgotten. At least, I think I forgot it.”

Each time he came back from Nairobi, he did this. Sometimes, he said he forgot to buy matchbox cars and other times that he

forgot to pack them. When he finally found them in some obscure corner of his luggage, I would be near tears or full out crying. “Gary,” my mother would say.

“This is just terrible,” my father said now and smiled at me.

I looked into his eyes and believed him. I was sure that it was the worst thing in the world.

That night, we sat at the dining room table, the four of us. Sonja and I were still damp from our bath, and my mother was still cheery from my father’s arrival, though he had already confessed that he had been unable to bring back flour or oil or any of the other staples on her list. Never mind, that was tomorrow’s problem. Sonja described the Kool-Aid and how the soldier had drunk it, glass after glass. I nodded my head, as if it all meant something grownup and important and that I had noticed it, too. In my lap, I held an orange matchbox car. I ran my thumb over the silver chrome. My father asked what flavor the Kool-Aid was and if there was any still in the fridge. It was past our bedtime and soon our mother would send us to bed. She would tell us that our father had to teach tomorrow and that we would see him at breakfast. He would carry us to our rooms, one by one, and  have prayer with us. Then, we would lie in bed and listen to our parents talking, to the hushed turn of their voices.

The house in Uganda was red brick with a metal roof, a rusted water tank, and a screened-in verandah that had once been painted green. At night, I would pretend that we lived in a boat. The jungle was the ocean and the thrumming frogs were the waves and we were far away from everyone else in the world. I would close my eyes and listen for the water, and I would imagine that we were completely safe.

Sari Fordham on a return trip to Uganda.

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# An Interview with Krystal A. Sital, Author of SECRETS WE KEPT

 In her debut memoir, Krystal A. Sital paints a vivid picture of life in Trinidad, which to any tourist’s eyes must seem like something of a paradise. Blue-green waters, intersected by rapid streams and jungle vegetation: the inhabitants of Trinidad are surrounded by the call of the Caribbean filled with carnivals, rum, calypso, and soca music.

For the people born and raised in this island paradise, of course life is littered with far more harsh realities. Extreme poverty, land unsuitable for farming or sustaining life, lack of education or opportunity, a caste system determined by money, race, ethnicity, religion, sex, and other accidents of birth.

The book begins as Krystal and her family, now living in the United States, learn that her grandfather, Shiva Singh, has suffered from a life threatening brain aneurism. As the reality of his condition grows more critical, Krystal is confused by her grandmother's reluctance to immediately approve of the suggested procedures recommended for his survival. In contrast, Krystal's mother, Arya, the daughter of Shiva, seems devoted to him and sits day and night by his side.

As the entire family grows more weary and distraught over the multiple surgeries and the harsh reality that Shiva will never fully return to normal, Krystal wants to know why her mother and grandmother have such wildly divergent emotions for him. One evening, she finds a way to question her mother.

*Secrets We Kept* is the story Krystal draws out in her gentle interviews with her mother and grandmother. The story is brutal and nuanced and unfortunately, timely. In the first pages, I am immediately reminded of the Rob Porter domestic abuse scandal in the White House, the #metoo movement, and even my own family's history we avoid thinking and speaking about—those times when our father beat the crap out of our mother and us, and how that treatment made life and love of him so confusing.

**Q: Did you have any idea that the release of your first memoir would come at a time when the topics it addresses would make it so political? Even if that timing wasn't taken into consideration, there must be some feeling that it lands when conversations around it bring it into a political space. How does that make you feel? What if any reaction have you had from it in this caustic political time?**

**Krystal:** It's both fortunate and unfortunate that this book comes out during such a politically charged time. Unfortunate because, as human beings, we are still viciously fighting about things like immigration, domestic abuse, and women's

rights and health; and fortunate because since there is still so much silence and inequality, a book like this helps sharpen the focus on important discussions and hopefully laws around these topics.

Now looking at it as a work of art in this particular political sphere is maddening. Arts and humanities are being obliterated across the US and so it makes it extremely difficult for books that deal with issues like violence against women and children, immigration, colonialism, race, and class to make it into the hands of the right people. The political climate we're caught up in right now is detrimental to the arts from every angle and so it's important we all fight for it. Art, at its most micro level, is a voice being heard and we need to make sure we never squelch that.

**Q: When I think of a Caribbean island, I imagine the beauty as a place to go to as an escape from the harshness of everyday life. That picture might serve as somewhat of a metaphor for the relationships your mother and grandmother lived. Strong, beautiful women who make choices they think will most help them escape the poverty of their circumstance, but instead land them in ugliness they cannot escape. Is that an accurate way of seeing this story?**

**Krystal:** That's such a lovely insight! Can I use that as though I'd planned it the entire time? I'm just kidding. It's very interesting hearing and reading how others interact with the characters and the islands, what readers bring to the table and what they thought my intent was.

Having lived in America now for more than half my life, I see how people here view the Caribbean. From here it is this place of intense beauty, a place you want to escape to, not from. And Trinidad *is* a beautiful island, the kind of beauty that absolutely takes your breath away, the colors so vibrant you wonder if what you're seeing is actually real. But the islands—both Trinidad and Tobago—are so much more than that

and so I wanted to use the island as both a character and a backdrop. While divine in its appearance, here was this island where horrific things happened and these horrific things were never spoken about except when passed from mother to daughter, this cycle of storytelling that's never been broken but also never recorded. And I think that's what bothered me the most about this—is that the stories of women *by* women were always lost in the Caribbean while men were the ones who dominated and dictated history and we, as women, didn't take our rightful place in the history of the Caribbean, of Trinidad and Tobago.

Questions like this is so fantastic for a classroom setting because it explores a body of work on multiple levels. My students and I often discuss the reader's interpretation of literature versus the authorial intent. How you manage those two becomes a very individual choice but I strive to find some kind of harmony there when I read books, balancing the author's purpose with my own response and history as a reader.

**Q: Some would read this story as a cautionary tale about the violence of men and yet, in the second to the last sentence in the acknowledgements of your memoir, you write; "My beautiful partner, my husband, Pawel Grzech, I love you. Thank you for creating a beautiful family with me." That line makes me believe that you have been able to carve out a loving and respectful relationship with your husband which is so different from that of the older women in your life. How did their experiences help or hinder the family life you now have?**

**Krystal:** I have indeed been able to find love; respectful, honorable, egalitarian love, and the person with whom I spend my life with is everything I've said. While people often tell us we're lucky, I don't think luck has anything to do with it. I am with him for many reasons—too many to ever list—but my grandmother's and mother's stories played a vital role in my decision when I chose my life partner. Their tales were, as you've said—cautionary. As much as we were working together to

write women into Caribbean history, their first instincts were to arm and warn me. My grandmother didn't want to settle for what was prescribed for her, shunned to the outskirts of society, so she left and spent her life paying for her decision but she was able to make a choice, one that was completely hers and that is what she shared with her daughter. I won't give anything away from the book but those moments where Arya bears witness to her mother time and time again, are isolated and incredibly important because those are the moments that shape Arya and influence the decisions she makes when choosing a husband and then later on as a mother.

I very much feel as though I owe these women and the women before them, my life. This book, a small gesture in the grand scheme of things, is to honor and thank them for helping me become who I am today and allowing me to have choices, to grow up in a space where I don't feel forced into a decision because it's the best one at the time. They've endured everything for me and while there are narratives and lives that follow unbreakable and inescapable cycles, they've worked their entire lives to make sure I'm outside of that. That kind of altruism is powerful.

**Q: I grew up in a household where my father's violence made loving him extremely complicated. After my parents divorced, they both became happier people, but it was difficult to square the man he became without remembering the man he was, especially since he never admitted the violent and terrifying world he had created. After hearing the stories, how would you describe the emotions you have for your grandfather and father now?**

**Krystal:** Thank you for sharing that with me. I need to acknowledge your story because our voices and stories as women are often separate and though many of us hail from different cultures and places, when we come together, we realize how universal they also are.

My emotions for both men remain complicated. Even after writing this book and writing through some very difficult questions I found myself asking and attempting to answer, I've come to understand that we are not only shaped by our experiences but by that of our family members as well. That is something I would have vehemently disagreed with twelve years ago but now I bear the burden of inherited violence, history, and loss. At the same time, I've learned to step back and allow my mother and grandmother to narrate the experiences and relationships they've had with my father and grandfather. Those experiences have helped to mold me through their re-telling but cannot define or influence my thoughts completely. Just as I give them space to be, they must understand that as a being wholly separate from them, the same people we've known throughout our lives can be very different to each of us.

I feel like I need to say I love my father dearly. We have a wonderful relationship and a very unique bond, quite similar to the type of bond I have with my mother but that can't come through in a book like this because in this book I am part historian, part daughter, part granddaughter, part storyteller (to name a few!), and there are only so many perspectives I was willing to take on. Our story—mine and my father's—is for another time.

**Q: Not only is this story about the highly charged domestic violence issue, it touches on the equally charged issue of immigration. By the end of the book, you ask your mother if she ever thinks she would live in Trinidad again. She answers with one word. Never. I know you wrote a piece that was published by the New York Times, *When Agents Came Knocking.* As an immigrant in the U.S. today, how does the current climate make you feel about the America?**

**Krystal:** As an immigrant, I'm terrified! The US is not a very welcoming place right now and because I am a first-generation immigrant, I constantly feel as though I'm a part of several worlds which doesn't help because I don't feel completely

anchored here. But then I remind myself that the people who are making immigrants feel this way are no more native to this land than I am. Sure many of them were born here but their history with this place is much more explosive than mine ever will be. They are the descendants of immigrants and it's a fact that they keep forgetting. The only natives America has are the Native Americans. These two groups of people (one of which I am a part)—Native Americans and immigrants—are being attacked, murdered, mutilated, and forgotten. The thunderstorm of immigration, as you so poetically put it, is something that should touch us all. What is happening in this country right now has happened in other parts of the world throughout history and the reason we study history is to understand, learn, and prevent, something we're clearly not doing at the moment.

As someone who has lived here as an undocumented immigrant for a long time, I do feel a particular responsibility to others, especially to the DREAMERs. I could easily be them and they are frightened. Circumstances and political climates change but the fear of a child being left behind, a mother being ripped from her children, a father being torn from his family, remains the same. No one would want that for themselves regardless of how they came to be in that desperate situation so instead of carelessly throwing around blame, we need to stand by immigrants and Native Americans. As a race—the human race—we need to rediscover our humanity because I think we're losing it.

**Q: The cruelty of the violence is sometimes displayed as something through which the men experience pleasure. There are hidden smiles and other indications that these are not just bouts of temper. Have you come to any conclusions as to the source of this violence? Any opinions of what Trinidad or even the US can do to reduce or prevent such violence in men?**

**Krystal:** I have some theories. My grandfather was a product of the time, culture, society, history and that's not said to

excuse him in any way. He was also mentally unstable. It's just that no one was equipped with the language or skills to name it or treat it at the time. Acts of violence like beating your wife and children are things that are taught at home because children see their father or uncle or brother doing it. But my grandfather did it tenfold, with a grotesque intensity and satisfaction that no one should try to *understand* because then you run the risk of empathizing with his actions and his actions are and will always be wrong. He needed help and because of his status in the society he lived in and also the time, no one could offer that to him.

In Trinidad, the US, anywhere in the world, the only way to prevent or reduce violence is to always have a conversation about it. And that is definitely something I adore about the US—there is always open dialogue. Sometimes that dialogue can get a bit crazy and out of control but the freedom to have those conversations is always there. We need to provide a safe environment to address these conflicts and situations way before college. Women and gender study departments are crucial but they come too late in education. As a student who minored in that area my mind was blown when I realized that these things are talked about and studied. And now as a teacher of that as well, I can see my students feel the same way I did and I don't want that for them.

The key is in the literature. Choosing engaging and important texts that speak to our students and their experiences is one of the best ways to tackle this issue of violence and I know I'm not alone when I say we need to change the way schools are structured right now—to move away from testing and toward critical thinking. A step in the right direction is to change the assigned reading materials. Get some more diversity for one. That's always been lacking but also choosing books and texts that deal with the world we occupy. It's one way but I am certain it will make an impact and a difference. I see it in my own classrooms every semester.

**Q: All of the dialogue in this book is written in complete island dialect. While at first it helped set the flavor of the story, it also made it difficult at times to understand what was being said. In a space where we are often told to stay away from dialect, how did you come to the decision to handle the dialogue in this way? Did you receive any pushback from your editors?**

**Krystal:** You're actually the first person to say it was difficult to read at times. And your reaction is what I expected every time someone came into contact with my dialogue. I kept waiting for someone to object or try to change it but it never happened. In the meantime I studied Caribbean authors like Edwidge Danticat, Junot Diaz, Audre Lorde, Zadie Smith, Jamaica Kincaid, and Andrea Levy alongside African American authors like Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston all of who paved the way for me to feel free when writing dialogue. I read and studied these authors and many more like them while at school and then I taught them to my own students. These writers teach us that our voices are important and they come in all different forms and should be celebrated.

I teach in the most diverse city in the US—Jersey City—so my classroom is a rainbow of faces, representative of my true America and I get to observe how my students react to language in these texts. They played a large role in helping me decide how much of it I wanted to use and where. For example, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* remains one of those books that changed my life from the language to the characters to the plot to the masterful storytelling. I accepted this as a fact until I taught the book years after reading it for the first time. Some students just couldn't read it the way it was written so they turned to listening to it and even then couldn't immerse themselves. I had to respect that this book and the way it was written was not for everyone. There were choices I would have to make about

dialogue that would alienate some. In the end I wrote it the way I did because the most important thing was the voices of the women. I couldn't claim to give voice to the voiceless if I didn't allow the women to speak for themselves.

**Q: Food plays an immense role in this story. Every major scene is laced with spices and flavors that stick to you in the same way the smells must conjure up so many memories for you. It also starkly illustrates how Indian and Hindu your family's culture is, something many people probably don't understand about Trinidad. I found myself wanting the recipes. How did food influence the writing of this story?**

**Krystal:** Food makes the world go round! At least my world. My mother loves to cook. It's like meditation to her and I understand this because she's passed that on to me. If I'm in the kitchen cooking up a storm my husband will ask no questions until I'm all finished and then reap the benefits of whatever was bothering me.

People often bond over and around food. Enticing and intoxicating, food takes away inhibitions and once I understood this, I helped create this environment for my mother and grandmother so they could tell me their stories. This proved the most effective way for me to help them open up. And along the way, I learned tons of new recipes.

Now I find it very interesting that you say it's definitively Indian. It's true that a lot of the food is Indian because it's just a fact of what they cooked but at the same time it isn't. Trinidad's cuisine, like many other places around the globe, is unique because cultures have come together to create something new and I was mindful of this. Many of the dishes I write about are the product of Indian, African, French, Spanish, English, etc. coming into contact in one place over time. Examining any one dish on the island from the way it is seasoned to the way it is prepared, then cooked, is fascinating because sometimes that one dish can have as many

as five cultures coming into contact with one another.

As for the recipes, perhaps that's a future project. Wink. Wink. (Though I'm not sure who I'm winking at).

**Q: Are there any other questions I didn't ask that you wish I had? Topics you would like to cover?**

**Krystal:** You didn't ask if I had any fun! Because while this was one hell of an emotional roller coaster ride, it was also so much fun. The characters you read about are people I created with so much care and they are people I hold close to my heart. As serious as this book is, it is also reflective of the life and desire and fun that exists in Trinidad and Tobago.