

Silver Arts

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Down East Senior Games

“The Meat of the Matter”

Life Experience

Nancy West-Brake

“The Meat of the Matter”

Kids. To them, Life is a grand Adventure: so many places and things to explore. I hit the jackpot at age eight: Uganda, East Africa, where my mom and dad were hired as nurse and professor, respectively, at Uganda College of Commerce, under Columbia University’s Teacher Education in East Africa (T.E.E.A.) program, from 1967-1969.

I remember my dad asking me, just before bedtime one night, if I could go anywhere in the world, where would it be? When I’d replied Africa, his smile widened. I was incredulous when he said we were going there. Images of a youthful Tarzan swinging through the jungle evading lions filled my head, driving away any chance of sleep.

I was initially disappointed that Kampala, Uganda, looked nothing like Tarzan’s Africa, although the bright red clay soil and the spectacle of people catching huge grasshoppers for consumption at the hotel were worthy of attention. The college campus where we came to live was devoid of lions, but it did have an abundance of chameleons and other reptiles. The chameleons were easily found and could be plucked from bushes, arranged on one’s finger, and aimed at flies, which, if done correctly, would result in their tongues flicking out lightning fast to secure a meal. The quota per lizard was two or three at most, and then they’d be full. It was also utterly fascinating to me to see them change color and shade, and I no doubt stressed my first few to the max by lining them up against chairs, tables and walls to wait for the ensuing changes.

There were wild turtles to be found, also, and snakes: but those were deadly. East Africa is home to a number of highly venomous snakes, including Spitting Cobras

and Mambas, both Black and Green. My parents warned me not to climb in any trees that were thick with foliage, and to watch always where I put my hands.

In general, though, my life in those days was one grand adventure, where I would set off each day after school, accompanied by my pack of dog friends (none of which were mine), to explore. I was forbidden to go outside the campus grounds, clearly delineated by a high fence with elephant grass on the other side, so I complied, mostly. My parents said they could usually find me by looking for the three dogs, Tiger, Queenie and Princess, who would be lounging around the base of one tree or another, while I was in the branches above.

One of my favorite places to visit was the “Field House,” a large, usually vacant building next to the college soccer field. That was where I learned not to play with fire after burning my finger illicitly lighting stick matches. I’d lit a deflated red balloon and the rubber blackened and melted, dripping onto the side of an index finger. I didn’t dare tell my mother. I have the scar still.

I and a pair of British sisters my age would also play hide and seek there among the chairs and tables, racing as fast as we could towards “home” to touch before we could be caught. I had no way of knowing that an innocent game could result in life-threatening injury.

I’d seen Julia, who was “it”, spy me in my hideout, so I mustered breakneck speed to try to reach home, which was on the veranda outside the hall. One obstacle loomed between me and safety: tall, iron-wrought doors with multiple panes of glass. I approached them full speed only to realize they were closed. Putting up my hands to ‘bounce’ off, I impacted the glass and my left hand and arm broke through.

It didn't hurt at first. I looked down, clinically, at the gaping hole in my inner arm where none had been before. I remember seeing a flap of skin, askew, atop a mouth-sized crater containing a mix of red and white. Alarm blossomed and I took off for home, holding my left arm as I ran, yelling for my parents.

It must have been a weekend, because both were home, enjoying a rare nap. They mobilized as a team, my dad revving our car and backing it from the garage while my mom held my arm under the faucet of the tub to wash away glass fragments. I remember the streams of blood funneling into the drain. Mom wrapped my arm in a towel and we headed to the hospital.

As my pain and fear both began to ratchet upwards, my clever parents hit on a distraction. I was asking about stitches. Would I have stitches? My mother said yes, I probably would, whereupon my dad added that I would be the first person in the family to get stitches.

"Really? I'm the first one?" And just like that, the ordeal became one of adventurous pride.

I don't remember the rest of the trip, nor what the hospital looked like, nor any admission, but whatever happened, happened fast. As I was being hustled through something like a lobby, there were lots of people waiting to be seen. One, in particular stuck out: a little African boy, close to my age.

He wasn't crying. I noticed him because of the bright red wound in his head, which contrasted starkly with the black of his hair and skin. I was both horrified and fascinated, because he had a crater in him, like I did.

It was then that I realized that I was not waiting, like the boy, or like all the other people in the lobby. I was being fast-forwarded to care. The people waiting were Black. I was White.

Was this supposed to happen this way?

I think I asked something- something about the boy, or about waiting- but my question was brushed aside. My parents were no doubt focused on getting my bleeding stopped. The cut had come close to the artery. In any case, I had internal conflict: the boy needed care, but so did I.

The next thing I remember was being in something like an operating room, sans parents, with an Indian doctor. He had me lie on my back and put my injured arm, elbow downward and laceration exposed, on a rolling table to the side.

“You don’t want to watch this,” he said.

“Yes, I do,” I said, and was resolute. There was no way I was going to miss this. With resignation, he acquiesced, and I watched with fascination as he carefully injected some kind of local anesthetic in four precise locations around the hole, one at each corner. He commenced to sewing, using a curved needle and what looked like blue plastic thread, making knots as he closed. When the stitches were later removed, I kept some, scotch-taping the knots in my diary.

Back at school, I was a celebrity, with the kids examining my cast- I think it was a cast- and initially enjoyed the oddity of being excused from gym class. In the years to come, the amusement of showing my bite-shaped scar, complete with individual punctuation marks of needle entrances and exits, never faded. I would sometimes tell

people I'd been bitten by Pygmies, since it happened in Africa; they'd examine the scar and almost believe.

But one part of the story remains open, its questions unhealed. What happened to the little boy with the wound on his head? What had he thought, when our eyes met? Does he still remember, now, the little white girl who was rushed ahead? Did he get another wound that day, because of me?