



Fragments From a Mobile Life

Margaret Sullivan

Rolling stones, they say, gather no moss. Perhaps. Those of us who are human rolling stones gather moss of sorts: memories, objects, stories, lessons, values, meaning, purpose. These provide continuity and context to lives lived as sojourners in many places and times. Our “moss” meets us in odd moments and unexpected locations.

The goal, that years-ago afternoon in a Flemington, New Jersey, antique store, was a piece of cut glass for our daughter’s tenth wedding anniversary present.

Something else drew my eyes down: a small, much-walked-on carpet. In traditional Chinese blues and taupes, it depicted trains of camels making their way toward a walled-city gate. The rug had been made in China about the same time in the 1930s that I had been.

Suddenly, I am not yet four. We—my mother, next sister Harriet, and I—are in a rickshaw going out of Peking’s walled city toward Yenjing University.

At the city gate, a train of camels, two-humped and shaggy, plods past us from the Gobi desert. Our rickshaw continues along the flat, dusty road lined with poplars.

Many years later, a train carries me from Mongolia toward Beijing, past the familiarly gray, rural north China countryside, for the first time since I was six. Out the window, not the camels but a similar line of trees welcomes me home.

The rug with its camel trains and city gate guards my office—a cherished bit of my “moss”; a talisman of first memories and life lessons.

... Shandong had been blisteringly hot and parched that spring and summer. To usher me in, a storm thundered through, breaking the heat and ending a long drought. The letters announcing the arrival of first grandchild Margaret Ellis Winfield took six weeks to get to Mississippi and Missouri. In another six weeks, rejoicing responses reached Jinan.

One of Daddy’s colleagues gave me a *mingzi* (Chinese name), written in the order of family name first: Wen Meilian. Wen, the Chinese family name already given to my parents, similar to the first syllable of Winfield; Meilian, my personal name, means “beautiful lotus blossom.” Another colleague welcomed me with an auspiciously red, baby-sized padded-silk cape and diminutive cap decorated with silver good-luck charms. Mother kept the cape and cap until they disappeared somehow but saved the charms. I made those into dangly earrings that ring as I move my head.

My baby book has snapshots of a round, dark-haired, big-eyed infant in a screened crib with a lid that closed to keep out bugs. Others photos show that same squirming dumpling being bathed in a small tin tub. In one of life’s quirks, as an adult, through a totally non-China connection, I met Joan Green, who, when she was four or five years old, had come with her mother to help with my first bath.

From the time I began talking, I must have been bilingual, though I wasn’t aware of it. I just learned to talk. It’s funny how language evaporates, yet lingers. I no longer speak Chinese, haven’t since I was six. I know some words, daily phrases, and a song or two. If I hear someone talking Chinese I sometimes understand the gist of what’s being said. The muscle memory that links tongue and mouth to sound clearly remains. The distinctive *rrrrrrb* formed off the back of the tongue comes effortlessly. So do the tones that differentiate meanings. If I ask a Chinese person how to say something and easily repeat it, they say, “You speak Chinese.”

When I broke my arm as a twelve-year-old and was asked to count as the anesthesia took hold, I scared the doctors by flipping from English, “one, two...” to Chinese, “san, si...”(three, four). Or so they told me later, as they tried to figure out what had happened.

In the same way I don’t remember learning Chinese, I don’t recall learning to use a fork and spoon or chopsticks. I just learned to eat—forks for some foods, chopsticks for others. I’ve since learned to eat appropriately with the fingers of my right hand, another story all together.

The Japanese invaded our part of China in 1937, when we must have been in the States for a short furlough. After the occupation, every time we went through the gate to the medical school or other parts of the old city, we had to stop at the checkpoint manned by Japanese soldiers. Many of them, most likely missing their own children, talked with us. One always had small gifts for us; Harriet still has a string of stuffed, two-humped camels he gave us.

“*Lai, lai* (come, come),” Cook and Amah called urgently, hurrying us into the house. A dust storm descended with a strong wind and a menacing yellow-gray cloud. They covered our faces, bandit-like, with wet handkerchiefs. Mother lit candles. (We had electricity at night, but I don’t remember daytime lights; maybe the campus generator was off in the daytime.) Daylight turned into dust- choking dark as we waited out the storm. How long I couldn’t say. It

seemed like an extremely long time until it passed and we could see again. In its wake, Amah faced inches-thick dust to sweep out of the house.

All told, our “curiosity bumps,” as Daddy called our desire to know about the world around us, were well nurtured. There was always something to see or learn. We sometimes put snails on our arms to watch them crawl, leaving slime trails. Daddy helped us find lovely crawling shells or tiny fish in the tidal pools at Beidahe. He made up stories about a “water dwarfey” that “talked” to the mosquito larvae or dragonflies in a freshwater lake he had worked at in America. Mummy used grown-up words with real meanings, never baby talk; we did too. Thus our curiosity about the world around us was nurtured and valued. *Why? How? What’s that?* Those were good questions, with proper answers to be given or found.

Being inventive went with curiosity. Daddy happily told his sister in a letter in August 1940: “...Margaret is in an inventive mood these days. She made a Kodak out of an ink box—holes to look thru—a button to press—a tripod to rest it on while she takes pictures. She goes running around to get good pictures of people or scenes. Then she draws the pictures she has taken.”

By December 1940, war was looming. Suddenly Mummy, Harriet, and I were going back “home”—whatever grown-ups meant by *home*—to America, wherever that was. I learned later that the State Department had commandeered three ships to evacuate American women, children, and “unnecessary men” around Asia.

Daddy, like so many men who considered themselves “necessary,” was staying to continue teaching. The family took the train to the port city of Tsingtao. We blew kisses and waved goodbye to a disappearing Daddy as the tender went further into the harbor. Mother, Harriet, and I climbed aboard the *S.S. Mariposa* to cross the Pacific. I was six. Except for three months in 1943, we didn’t see our father until the war was over. By then, I was twelve, almost a teenager.

With that voyage, I had crossed the Pacific to a new life. I was no longer a Cheeloo campus child. Abruptly, I was living in America, a remote place where, essentially, I felt out of step. Although I doubt I could—or would—have put words to it, in a way I hadn’t before, I “disappeared.”

I didn’t know then, either, or for a number of years, that I was an American—whoever that was (and is). Labels, more amorphous identities, were added later. I only knew myself as Margaret Ellis Winfield. It was exciting to know my complete name, including my initials MEW, like the sound of a cat.

Harriet and I were plopped in the middle of a huge family: grandparents, great aunts and uncles (many of them until then just names attached to stories or pictures or Christmas packages) as well as neighbors and a church community—all strangers to us, even though they knew who we were. In fact there were two groups of “family strangers,” Mother’s and Daddy’s.

When we got to the States that December 1940, we went directly to Mother’s people in Springfield, Missouri. Sister Nancy was born in April. By the following August, we moved to Magnolia, Mississippi, to live with Daddy’s parents. In both places, rather than being campus children, we were our grandparents’ grandchildren who had returned from some strange place. For the first time in my life I consciously felt different.

This new world smelled somehow bland. Sometimes there was a whiff of the sweetness of rain or cut grass or sharp car fumes or frying onions. But for the most part it was just...flat. There was none of home’s comforting, heady mix of cooking fires, food, and sewage. But...we could go barefooted, eat raw vegetables, and drink and brush our teeth with water straight from a tap. *That* took getting accustomed to.

Even though everyone spoke English, it sounded peculiar. We hadn’t been in Springfield long when Aunt Gertrude, mother’s sister, mimicked my “Mummy,” exaggerating the British pronunciation I must have used.

“You sound so funny, Margaret.”^[SEP] “I’m funny? I’d never thought of that. I felt even more out of place.

“Debts?”^[SEP]

“No! ‘Trespases?’”^[SEP] In Miss Challis’ fifth grade, we absolutist ten-year-olds argued all year about which to use when we recited the Lord’s Prayer each morning. The Baptists knew it was “debts”—that was simply what it was. We Methodists were equally adamant that “trespases” was the way it had to be. That’s what *we* were taught. We had all learned in our families and Sunday School that “God is love.”

These verbal battles were something else entirely—not about the loving God we had in common but a question of whose *way* was “right.” It never occurred to any of us to each say what we knew and not argue. Most of us weren’t even aware that Catholics, at that time, said the same prayer in Latin and stopped before “our” ending. Nor did we consider that Henry, our one Jewish classmate, must have felt excluded.

Although such childhood squabbles are just that, discussions roiling the United States today have led me to see our little arguments in a larger context—as precursors of the “my way” religiosity that is being promoted more broadly.

At Phelps Elementary School in Springfield in 1944, classes began with prayer. There was no “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance—as far as we knew, the words we learned were what the Founders intended. (“Under God”

was added to contradict communism during the '50s. My past-eighty-year-old tongue still stumbles to remember the addition. In the early '60s, courts struck down school-sponsored prayer, declaring it an infringement on religious liberty.)

In elementary school American history, we learned that the first settlers risked crossing the Atlantic to escape religious persecution. They came to worship according to their own beliefs, unhindered by an established church's rules. We were not sure what "established church" meant but assumed that being free of it meant something like "no one can boss you around about religion." President Roosevelt, meanwhile, spoke about freedom of worship as well as freedom of speech and freedom from want and fear.

I began to understand that religious freedom, the bedrock of American society, meant that the government could not interfere with religion. For many Americans' the commonly held assumption is broader: No one—not the government, not faith communities, not individuals and, looking at the present time, not corporations—gets to boss anyone around when it comes to religious beliefs.

I still hear Dad's voice that winter night in 1950 as he sat Harriet and me down after dinner to tell us what might happen. I was sixteen.

"If Senator McCarthy has another list, I will be on it," he said, matter-of-factly.

The United States was engulfed in Cold War hysteria, enflamed by Congressional witch-hunts for Communists purported to be infiltrating the government and media. Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-WI) was a bullying, much feared demagogue with a five o'clock shadow and an accusatory voice. Almost daily, he fulminated against people he contended were Communists. "I have a list," he blustered, shaking a sheaf of papers.

Each new list was presented without sources or substantiation. Many of the people he named were, as our father was, China Hands: government employees, journalists, and other specialists who had lived in China and impacted US policy. Experts in the language and culture, they knew both Chiang Kai Shek's nationalist government and, in many cases, the Communists who had taken over in 1949.

During the war, Dad had been in Chungking in Free China, working for the US Office of War Information. Because he was fluent in Chinese and knew China well, he had developed material to support the Chinese and Allied cause against the Japanese. His office had produced a cartoon filmstrip that was widely distributed within China and reprinted in *Life Magazine*. The Americans were portrayed as helmeted eagles; the Chinese were valiant sparrows. Both were swooping to attack the Japanese, depicted as blackbirds. Turtles—a serious insult—fitted in somewhere, perhaps representing Japanese tanks.

When he returned to the States after the war, he wrote what, at the time, was one of the prime books on the country: *China: The Land and the People*. That book, in fact, was my future husband's first contact with our family. Several years before we met, he bought it as an assigned text for a college course.

In addition, Dad had written about China policy for various journals. He knew and worked with many of the people whose lives and careers were in tatters because of McCarthy's accusations. Truth wasn't the point. McCarthy was preying on people, fanning fears of Communism primarily for his own aggrandizement.

Dad wanted us to be forewarned, in case.

As [my husband] Dan's tag-along and a Foreign Service Wife—a "two-for one-er" or "two-fer"—I made nine international moves in twenty-nine years—roughly half my adult life. First adding children, then peeling them off, we circled the equator, always landing in post-colonial, independent nations with strong Muslim components: End-of-the-emergency Malaya. Newly independent, last of the Brits Nigeria. Suharto's New Order Indonesia. Martial-law Philippines. Pre-bloody civil war Sierra Leone. Late Lee Kwan Yew Singapore. And four stints in Washington, where we started, mixed in.

Life in the Foreign Service was richer and more complicated than the formal diplomatic protocol laid out in the Wives Course. Foreign Service culture had been mainly East Coast Ivy League elite and Eurocentric prior to World War II. The Service we entered in the late '50s was changing, as was American society more broadly.

... we were in Kuala Lumpur. Something must have been in the water that first year since almost all the young wives we knew, both in the American embassy and the larger expat community, got pregnant. I hadn't been there long before our third Whoozits was on the way, much sooner and closer to the second than we had planned.

By the time I met Venice Lamb she was also pregnant. The Lambs had come to Malaya from England so Venice's husband could do his doctoral research. She and I were on the same young-expat social and play-date circuits. We got even better acquainted as partners on the altar guild at St. Mary the Virgin, the old Anglican cathedral in the heart of the British colonial city.

Our duties involved following strict guidelines on caring for the altar linen. The Guild's dear but imposing Chinese and Indian ladies—cut from the same imperious "grande dame" cloth as some of the old guard British members—instructed us that we were to always wash the altar linen ourselves. Our non-Christian house staff (read:

heathen) should never handle it. The water in which the linen was washed should always be poured directly onto the ground.

I didn't think God cared how we handled the linen. Just the good ladies did. So I didn't pay attention to their rules: The amah washed and ironed the linen with better care than I was capable of. Since we lived in a second-floor flat, the water went down the drainpipe to the ground. The linen went back to St. Mary's crisp, clean, and lovely just the same.

Venice and I were responsible for cleaning the altar each Saturday morning, then vesting it for Sunday services. The inside of St. Mary's was absolutely English Victorian Gothic: dark, old carved wood (perhaps imported English oak) with the altar pushed back against the elaborate reredos. This was the tropics, so unless such wood was regularly, vigorously wiped down, it grew a thick coat of white mold. Because of the altar, there was no possible way to get a ladder close enough to the reredos to do the job.

Rather than let it grow mold, we got there early each Saturday morning and took matters into our own hands. After closing the doors and taking off our shoes, we—two young, increasingly bulbous foreign women—climbed clumsily up onto the altar to give the reredos a good wipe down. We devoutly hoped none of the pious ladies would arrive early to fix the flowers or that no parishioner would come in for quiet contemplation. They would have been beyond shocked at two pregnant ladies dancing on the altar. God, we figured, is practical, with a well-honed sense of the ridiculous, and wouldn't mind at all.

In February, Walter Peyton Sullivan was christened in front of that well cared for, danced-upon altar.

We'd been in Kaduna about a year and were used to having perm secs [short for permanent secretary, the professional heads of the provincial government departments] bringing their wives to dinner. Nothing, therefore, prepared us for the time the new aide to the still-British governor of Northern Nigeria (the first Nigerian to hold that position after his British predecessor left) regretted a dinner invitation for him and his wife: "Because I have two." Some of the others had four (the Muslim maximum), but we never got that response. Those men would bring the youngest, most outgoing, and best-educated one, or would alternate between wives.

We sent the next invitation to the aide and his *wives*. Both came, dressed in matching pink satin wrappers and head ties, and sat next to each other all evening. (Two months later they both left him at the same time, too; I never knew why.)

We were even less prepared when the Emir of Zaria, the ruler of a small emirate a short distance from Kaduna, informed us on about three hours notice that he would come to our house that afternoon for tea. When our ambassador and his wife had come up from Lagos earlier, Dan and I had escorted them to call on the Emir in his elaborate, traditional mud-brick palace.

After the men's call ended, the Emir had taken the ambassador's wife and me to his harem, where his wives and many concubines stayed. We met his four wives. Each had her set of rooms on one of the four corners of the compound. The ceilings were covered in brightly enameled tin platters. A customary warning system as well as decoration, they would clatter to the floor if the mud-brick roof were about to collapse. The senior wife was clearly a love match. He had kept her for many years even though they had no children. The youngest wife had a newborn that the Emir happily showed off. "See, he's mine," the proud father asserted as he placed the tiny hand next to his large one, pointing out that they both had a sixth finger.

The next time he came down to Kaduna, the Emir chose to call on us. We didn't do British tea. Given the short notice, Micinyawa, the cook, and I decided to serve homemade ice cream, which he could churn quickly, along with home-baked cookies, which we always had on hand. (I had hepatitis, so was only up for short periods of time. After organizing things, I collapsed back in bed. I missed the actual event.)

When the entourage arrived, the Emir, a regal man in flowing white robes (think Othello), and his primary aides joined Dan in the walled patio. The accompanying truckload of red and green clad retainers sprawled around the back of the house in the shade, happy for the two cases of Coke that we happened to have.

Micinyawa, a tall man with his own stately bearing, brought the bowls of ice cream and the cookies out on a tray. He stepped into the patio, dropped to his knees, held the tray above his head and moved on his knees across the patio with grace and pride to serve the Emir. He knew what was appropriate.

When I heard about it later, what seemed like respect to him and servility to me was hard on my egalitarian American sensibility. If I'd been there, I'm not sure what I might have done. Just as well I wasn't. Even so, I learned a valuable lesson about showing deference properly on someone else's turf.

The early storm surrounding Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* blew past me. In February 1963, when it was published, we were living in Kaduna, Nigeria, nearing the end of Dan's second overseas tour in the Foreign Service. I was twenty-eight, married eight years, a college graduate, and mother to three children: six, four, and just-turned three.

Being young and adventurous, and having help in the house for our gaggle, I was finding living in the newly independent Third World a demanding, exciting, satisfying education.

That June we moved back to the States. Dan was assigned to the State Department as an Assistant Staff Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of State for United Nations Affairs. Mainly he was a paper pusher, no diplomatic striped-pants about it.

We bought a house in Virginia and began to settle into what was then the outer fringe of suburban Washington. There was much to adjust to and catch up on: well-stocked grocery stores with innumerable unfamiliar brands; water from the tap we could drink; dependable electricity; television; driving on the right side of the road instead of the left.

Friends we hadn't seen in two years asked: "What was Africa like?" Almost immediately, without even listening to the start of a response—such questions were more "make nice" than real interest in the totally foreign—they went on to ask us if we had seen, say, *West Side Story*. We, however, hadn't seen a new American movie in years. Nor had we read books or articles that addressed ideas that, in our absence, were being embedded in the American consciousness.

This included *The Feminine Mystique*. Freidan's book laid out the problem that "[had] no name": bored suburban housewives who were unhappy with their lives and needed, just like men, to find fulfilling, meaningful work.

When we got back I had no time to read it or any book, for that matter. I was relearning how to manage a household on my own. There were children to keep up with, a house to clean, groceries to shop for, meals to cook, and laundry to do. I had a husband who worked sixty-hour weeks, not including the time he put in some Saturdays and the occasional Sunday.

By the time John Kennedy was assassinated that November, I was pregnant again. With a new baby plus three active, inquisitive older children, the next winter was horrible. Strep throat bounced from child to child so often I could smell it. There were days when I didn't talk to another adult. The children ate early, we read stories, and they went to bed. To figure out when to have Dan's and my dinner ready, I listened to the six o'clock news. Had there been a political disaster—say, Tonkin Gulf or Cyprus? Such incidents often required an emergency late night Security Council meeting in New York, which meant that all the UN Affairs support staff in DC would have to pull another late-nighter. This happened often enough that the kids were saying, "Good night, Dad" when Dan left for work, if, indeed, they were up when he needed to be out the door.

Even so, in odd moments I found time to paint. (I'd begun painting seriously in Kaduna after a British woman asked me to join a small group that worked together regularly.) I contemplated writing a book; about what, I can't remember. I was learning, that for me, planning such projects, even with no time for them, was an aid to sanity. That dreadful winter gives me great sympathy for mothers who, overwhelmed, go mad.

The Tet Offensive started in our bedroom in Jakarta.

Jakarta is roughly a thousand miles due south of Saigon. On good nights, after dark—when radio waves shot farther, traveling in a straight line, bouncing off the ionosphere, and caroming from Saigon beyond the Earth's curve to Jakarta—we could pick up Armed Forces Radio. On January 30, 1968, we went up to bed at ten or so. As we often did, we flipped on the radio to catch up with the American world before we turned out the lights. Usually we heard Stateside news and sports commentary designed to make those far from home feel less remote.

Not that night. "Something seems to be up," a man's voice said urgently. "We're getting reports of action.... Keep alert."

We'd never been to Saigon and didn't know the streets we were being told to keep away from. Clearly whatever was happening was widespread, serious, real—and in our bedroom. Alert followed alert, each one more specific—and urgent—than the last, warning listeners to avoid certain areas and ordering units to return to post. Transfixed for a while, plunged into the middle of the chaos, we listened from the distanced comfort of our bed. Relieved for the calm of our night, but nonetheless rattled and worried, we turned it off. We went to sleep because we could. We were a thousand miles away.

Vietnam was one of those enormous "might-have-beens" for everyone in the family.

In 1950, my Dad had taken a position with the precursor of USAID. He was to be part of a small team that went to what was still French Indochina to lay the groundwork for a rural development program. The team would be working in tandem with the military advisors President Truman had sent to assist the French in the First Indochina War. In the early fall, Dad had flown to Saigon to start the project. He was coming back to take us there in January 1951.

"Margaret," she said, her voice over the phone turning to ice. "Whose career do you care about, your husband's or your own?"

Gulp. Forty-two years later, I still mentally hear N's (as I'll call her) question with a combination of disbelief and affront—and a rueful laugh. It seemed wrongheaded at the time. It's even more unbelievable today.

My caller that morning in late 1970 was Dan's boss's wife. She was a woman who had been a friend—not a

close one, a friend nonetheless—for nearly twenty years. Our husbands were serving simultaneously in the American embassy in Jakarta, marking the third iteration of our relationship.

N and I first met in Rangoon in early 1952. I was on a nine-month break between high school and college. She and her husband, L, as I'll call him, had arrived at the embassy with their dumpling of a toddler daughter. He was a junior Foreign Service officer on his first posting. As a not-quite adult, I was on the outer fringes of their lively young social circle. They knew my parents better than they knew me.

Though my memories are vague, I recall that they were fun-loving and active. Tall, with her long hair swirled in a loop on the top of her head, she wore flat shoes, stooping slightly so as not to tower over her otherwise larger-than-life husband. A bit of a free spirit, her earrings were long and dangly instead of small and "proper."

When Dan and I arrived at our first Foreign Service post in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, in 1959, N was on the tarmac at the bottom of the airplane stairs to meet us—carrying out a Foreign Service tradition of caring for new arrivals and old friends. (I counted as both, even though she had not yet met Dan.) Their daughter was a not-quite teenager with long braids. Our two children were under three. L was a middle-ranking officer serving in the political section. Dan, assigned to the consular section, was a Third Secretary and the most junior officer at the recently opened embassy. For much of our tour, Dan didn't work directly for her husband. As was usual for first assignments, he rotated into the political section before we left. Regardless, we were in the same small circuit so our paths crossed regularly.

We'd been in Jakarta for nearly two years when L was assigned as head of the Political Section and Dan's boss. Someone else from the section was designated to meet them at the airport. I went by their house the next morning to welcome them in a neighborly, old- friend way, carrying food and volunteering help as they settled in.

N looked basically the same, graying a bit, still slender, slightly stooped, wearing her trademark dangling earrings. When the USAID family planning program got a shipment of faulty IUDs, she liberated a handful and bunched them into striking earrings. Since most people had never seen IUDs they weren't generally recognized, but she would point it out with great glee. From time to time, I invited N to a ladies lunch, always making a point of serving an onion tart. She loved onions, but her husband was seriously allergic to them. She didn't have an opportunity to eat them often.

Even though she was full of gusto, she was also a "by the book" Foreign Service Wife. The morning of the phone call, N was going down the list of "her" wives to tell us that the Political Section wives would be paying a formal call on the new Deputy Chief of Mission's wife the following Tuesday at 10:30 a.m. I should be there. Command performance.

"I am so sorry, I can't. I teach at the university that morning," I replied. "I'll make an appointment to call on her early next week."

I was a rarity in a world where Foreign Service Wives were adjuncts to their husbands and expected to give priority to helping support their husbands' careers. The prevailing ethos—imposed by the State Department, senior wives, and the limitations of diplomatic status—normally precluded the possibility of a wife working for pay. She could be a teacher at the international school or have some job in the embassy, if there was one. Otherwise...

Soon after martial law was declared in September 1972, Dan had to fly to Manila unexpectedly. The consulate [in Cebu] had no secure phone line and he needed to get information to the embassy urgently. Charley, then eight, had buddies sleeping over. The staff went home after supper, leaving the boys and me alone in the house. The night watchman was outside.

At about 9 p.m., the phone rang. The caller identified himself as a colonel in the Philippine constabulary. His name was familiar. "I need to speak to Consul Sullivan," he said.

"I'm sorry, Colonel, he's gone to Manila. He can call you tomorrow when he gets back."

"You're the consul's wife. I need to know now. *You* can tell me then: Does the consul have guns in the house?"

Under martial law, the constabulary was seizing privately held guns all over the country. (They had confiscated an armored car with a bazooka on top from a warlord on another island.)

I knew we had no guns. We never had had guns. (If I felt I needed protection when Dan was gone I kept a nine iron by the bed.) The night watchman's gun had already been turned in (to my vast relief, since it was locally made with a barrel that would shoot in who- knew-what direction).

I also knew I should not answer this question.

"Let me reach the consul in Manila. I'll get back to you. What number should I call, Colonel?"

"You know what number." He slammed down the phone.

I waited a minute, then picked up the phone to call Dan. The line had gone dead. Disconcerting. I checked the boys. Asleep. I went outside to the night watchman. Also asleep. I woke him. "Stay awake, I'm going next door to use the phone." My neighbors were out. The maids let me make the call. I got through to the Marine Guard at the embassy, and asked them to find Dan and have him call me. In the dark, I went back down through the hedge to our house. I woke the night watchman, again.

I checked. We had a dial tone. I settled in to wait. At almost 11 p.m., Dan called: ^{SEP}Phone the colonel. Tell him

that, as I have told the general, the consulate has no guns.”^[SEP] I found a number for the constabulary. The colonel was out on duty. “Please have him telephone the American consul’s residence as soon as he comes in.”

I waited some more. The colonel called eventually. I delivered Dan’s message as firmly as I knew how.

“Yes, Mrs. Sullivan. We *know* you have no guns,” the colonel said, extremely puzzled.

“Didn’t you call me earlier?”^[SEP]

“No, Mrs. Sullivan.”^[SEP] Someone knew I was in the house alone. The colonel was as concerned as I was. He told me the constabulary would go by the house regularly. I woke the night watchman—again—and ordered him to keep his eyes open, literally.

I reported back to Dan. “Call Joe and tell him,” he instructed. Joe, the vice consul, was out, the maid said. Because of the curfew imposed with martial law, he would be back by midnight.

“Today, please have him call me as soon as he comes in,” I said. On the stroke of midnight, Joe rang: “I’ll come check on you.”

“Dan told me to tell you not to go out after midnight on your own. Get a police escort.” The consulate didn’t have late night passes yet. Joe could be jailed for breaking curfew. He grumbled but agreed to do as “Sir” said.

Exhausted, unnerved, I turned out the lights and crawled into bed under the windows we always kept open to let the cooler night breezes in. About half an hour later, there was a terrible racket. I heard constabulary cars screech to a stop—and Joe: “Wake up.” From the upper west side of Manhattan, Joe was endowed with an amazingly colorful vocabulary, all of which he expended on the night watchman and his maternal ancestry more than once at the top of his lungs. Then silence.

A repeat performance roused me from a fitful sleep before six the next morning. A few minutes later, the phone rang: Joe. He was off to a neighboring island to see about an American in jail.

“I came by twice last night to check on things.”

It was years before I told Joe my windows had been open, and I had heard it all. He blushed.

In 1972 (a decade after the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*), I had been a Foreign Service wife, part of a diplomatic team, for sixteen years. As the American Consul’s Wife in Cebu, I clearly, unquestionably—not totally unquestioningly—was a two-fer.

Like other wives abroad, I was attentive to the burgeoning women’s liberation movement roiling in the States. My friends there were finding new careers or expanding volunteer work into paid professional positions. Women working at *Newsweek*, some of them married, had sued the magazine, demanding to be hired as reporters, a position that until then only men held. These women lived in the United States and could both work and maintain families.

For us, the situation was different. Our Foreign Service husbands served abroad. We “served” with them. How could we be our own professional persons (or just in charge of our own time) when we had to go wherever, whenever our husbands were sent? When we were caught in a two-for-the-price-of-one culture? An increasing number of Foreign Service wives were no longer content to follow the traditional expectations. Many, by no means all, were resentful of “abuses”—real and, more often, perceived—at the hands of the “senior wives” and the system itself. As much as many loved large parts of their lives, they—we—wanted to have the option of careers of their own.

Developing serious, usually unpaid, portable pursuits at each post was my way of partially addressing this dilemma—for me that worked. Nonetheless, I’d already had my Jakarta run-ins over a paid position at the University of Indonesia.

I wasn’t alone. Near the end of our time in Jakarta, a strongly credentialed urban planner had confronted bureaucratic roadblocks as she sought professional consulting positions outside the embassy. She was angry (in a way I never was). She had understood before she decided to join her husband that she could work for whomever.

In the Philippines, I enjoyed a twenty-something wife, an interesting person. She had come to Manila with her first-tour husband using her own last name, not her husband’s. Skittish about doing the “diplomatic thing,” she often hung out with “the wrong people.” Her undiplomatic outspokenness could be inappropriate. However, she was as typical of her generation of younger wives as the older, traditional “by the book” wives were of theirs.

American society was changing—we were representative of those changes. What was the State Department to do?

In late 1968, that question was raised at the Secretary of State’s Open Forum, a vehicle for bringing substantive issues to the Secretary’s attention. The Under Secretary for Administration initiated a discussion of policies and procedures with a view toward modernizing the Department as a whole. The resulting report, issued in 1970, made scant mention of women, either as employees or as wives. This caused a furor. A group of women in Washington, mainly officers, established the Women’s Action Forum. Following discussions, the Forum produced a series of papers about what was needed that were presented to the Department.

In response, on March 22, 1972, the State Department issued the Joint State-AID-USIA Policy on Wives of Foreign Service Employees. The gist: Wives of Foreign Service officers are private individuals, not government

employees. As private persons, they are free to follow their own interests, subject to laws of the host country and the US government. Most importantly—best of all—wives were no longer to be graded in the husband's efficiency report.

Effectively, wives were no longer required to do the bidding of more senior wives, and senior wives were not free to require or even ask for the help of lower-ranking wives. Officers were still responsible for representational activities. The practicalities of how these duties would be carried out were not addressed.

Each place [my photographer partner, Lisa, and I visited in Sierra Leone], we called on the local chief to request permission to talk with his people before we started interviewing and taking pictures. We also presented the appropriate gifts: twelve kola nuts and a box of sugar. Culturally, this was how it should be done. We were demonstrating that even though we were outsiders we knew the proper way of showing respect and deference.

Because I was visibly an American, driving a car with diplomatic plates, there was a secondary reason. With rumors of increasing American aid floating around, I needed to make it clear that Lisa and I were not there in any official capacity (read: no aid would follow). Our purpose was quite the opposite: We wanted them to help us so we could learn from them.

In a rural district where most people were Temne, we planned to talk with basket makers. We stopped first at the district chief's village several miles from where they lived and worked. The chiefs and elders in their regalia assembled to greet us in their official pavilion. Lisa and I had been seated at one end. The Paramount Chief and his Talking Chief took their places at the other. The elders sat on both sides in long lines perpendicular to us.

Speaking to the Talking Chief, I introduced us and extended greetings. An assistant chief, sitting off to the side, translated my English remarks to the Talking Chief into Krio—the lingua franca, derived from a combination of old English and various West African languages, but based on Yoruba (a Nigerian language) construction. The Talking Chief in turn repeated my remarks (or so I assumed) in Temne to the Paramount Chief, a small, elderly, wrinkly-faced man with great bearing.

We presented our gifts, which were passed among the elders who murmured surprised approval. Getting down to business, I explained we had come as women hoping to learn from them about the skills of their community, particularly their well-known *suku blai*.

The Paramount Chief must have understood Krio as well as Temne (but perhaps not English). In any case, he responded via the same circuitous route. "I am glad you have come as women. When things need doing and changing, it is the women who do it." He continued: "In this international year of the woman..."—his remarks clear acknowledgement of the power of women—and of the shortwave radio.

The elders gave their blessing for us to visit the people we wanted to see: men who made *suku blai*, coiled baskets, unique to the Temne, that they used to store all sorts of things. (South Carolina's Gullah people—descended from Sierra Leoneans who were captured, enslaved, and brought to the United States—are also well-known for sweet grass baskets made the same way as *suku blai*.)

We spent several hours at the row of shelters along the highway where these basket-coiling men made and sold their wares. They cooperated willingly as we observed, asked questions, took pictures, and bought baskets.

Everywhere we went, the craftspeople were glad to show us what they did and how they did it. Outsiders had rarely asked or shown much interest. Over time, in various places, we were hiked off into the bush to see the sources of raw materials, such as rattan and traditional and commercial dyestuffs for raffia and palm leaf. When we needed a place to stay overnight, villagers welcomed us.

We spent a weekend in a relatively large village, going there to experience its rhythms and absorb its sounds. We helped women plunge pounding sticks into wooden mortars to husk rice; followed some men beyond the village to tap the palm wine; listened as children bounded down a hill to carry back water; visited the fields the men were clearing; breathed the evening whiff of cooking fires.

While we were there, a young woman's time came for birthing her first child. The old women gathered, sweeping us up with them while they shooed away the men. In the simple clinic, the mother-to-be was seated on the table, her legs spraddled. Her mother stood close behind her, providing a backrest. The rest of us circled around in support. The midwife gently eased out the wet black-capped head as the baby's still slippery body slithered into the world. A girl. Crying lustily. We all clapped. The old women sang in welcome.

One of the advantages of being raised as a rolling stone is exposure to various countries and cultures and acquiring the adjustment skills that go with that. However, children who grow up that way also need a period of what is nominally home-place stability. Sorting out where they belong requires time "at home" when they are old enough to absorb what that means and how it fits with their emerging adult mobile personas.

Reentry shock—adjusting to what is supposed to be "home," yet in important ways is not—is difficult. Coming to the United States as a not-quite adult, essentially on your own without the family unit you have always been a part of, compounds things. "In many ways, I was alone in the world," is how Jerry puts it.

Back in the States, he quickly learned, as I had, not to talk about where and how he had lived. His dorm head asked what he had done over summer break. “I told the truth,” he said, telling me about his experiences much later. “I said I had been to West Africa. The dorm head’s face fell. He’d been to Pennsylvania. Americans don’t like feeling lesser.” Jerry continued: “Another time, earlier, I was asked where my parents lived. ‘The Philippines.’ ‘Oh, where is that?’ ‘About a thousand miles this side of Vietnam.’ That last they knew.” He also fielded other questions, like whether “folks there” wore clothes. His conclusion: “Better to keep one’s mouth shut, or become an anthropologist.”

Ruth Useem and other academics who studied families like ours used the term “Third Culture Kid” (TCK), to refer to children who were raised in a culture outside of their parents’ for a significant part of their developing years. These children have internalized some combination of their parent’s culture and the cultures of the places where they have grown up. Or, as I heard once, being: “Too foreign for home, too foreign for there.”

Our children fit that description of a TCK. So do we. I’m not sure, though, that the term completely applies to second-generation rolling stone families like ours. Dan and I each started with our own unique move-around-the-world identities. As a result, our children were both their own unique brands of TCKs and an extension of ours, living in what was the family identity. I prefer to identify us as American intercultural migrants at home in the world.

December 26, 2004, began—I assume—as mornings do in Banda Aceh. The day’s first call to prayer was the initial note in what became the polyphonic harmonies of many mosques repeating the call. The sky faded to lighter and lighter shades of lavender tinged with pink, backlighting the still inky roof-scape punctuated with palm fronds. The night quiet and pre-dawn birdsong gradually dimmed as people kick-started their scooters. After prayers, coffee shops filled with men gathering to drink the rich, dark brew and talk. Cooking-smoke invaded the scented tropical air. Abruptly, cool dawn turned to full, hot daylight.

At 6:58 a.m., the morning tranquility shattered. The world tilted. A magnitude 9.3 earthquake rocked Aceh for nearly ten minutes. The undersea mega-tilt—centered shallowly in the sea some thirty miles off the city—lifted parts of Sumatra and sunk others as one major tectonic plate slid under the other. Sumatra moved northward several inches. The world skewed marginally on its axis. Time changed by a fraction of a second. The Acehnese were only aware that the earth rolled and rolled, as walls cracked and crumbled and roofs pancaked.

“We ran outside, afraid,” one man told me later. “Then, after it stopped and we finally felt safe to go back in the house, we heard the water coming.”

The first of three gigantic waves roared ashore. Walls of water rushed in, demolishing buildings and throwing together debris, cars, trees, and people. A barge housing a huge generator buried six houses after it was deposited three kilometers inland.

People ran for their lives, grabbing floating coconut trunks or whatever else they could, desperate to hold onto something. Those who could, scrambled to second and third floors, even roofs, to get above the water. The courtyard around the main mosque farther inland filled with smashed cars and debris.

“We had just built a good, new two-story house,” an acquaintance recounted. “Seventy of us ran in our house and up the stairs. We all lived. All seventy of us up there for two days and two nights.”

“I don’t know why I am alive and the others are not. I had no choice,” another person wondered. “Allah’s will.”

The power of the water sucked children from their mothers’ grip. Six weeks later, a young mother still reached for her two small ones who were swept away.

After the earthquake fractured buildings, the tsunami scoured two to three kilometers inland along the west coast of the Aceh Province on the northern end of Sumatra, Indonesia—the epicenter of the disaster—around the tip and a short distance along the Straits of Malacca. Whole communities were swept away, leaving a hundred seventy thousand people dead and half a million displaced (out of a pre-tsunami population of more than four million) in Indonesia alone. Some three thousand schools were destroyed and two thousand five hundred teachers died. About a thousand civil servants, the backbone of the provincial and local governments, were lost.

The power of the earthquake sent the tsunami waves sweeping up into Thailand and across the Indian Ocean to India and Sri Lanka and ultimately to the coast of Africa, leaving devastation in their wake. News of the destruction in Aceh did not get to the rest of the world for several days.

A week or so later, the phone rang in our condo in Alexandria, Virginia: “Margaret, have I got a deal for you.” That “deal,” offered by a friend who was the president of the United States–Indonesia Society (USINDO, a bi-national educational organization), started me on a journey of nineteen trips to Aceh over five and a half years. My friend wanted me to do a needs assessment for USINDO. The goal was to find an education project that would serve as their part of the tsunami rehabilitation effort. Once I found the project, I would coordinate the implementation team.

Not knowing what to expect, two months and a day after the tsunami, on Sunday, February 27, 2005, I flew into Banda Aceh, the capital of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (the formal name of the province), with two Indonesian colleagues-to-be. They were from the Sampoerna Foundation, an Indonesian educational foundation already running

tent-schools there.

The power of those first impressions remains as if they were happening today, becoming more painful as time passes and other disasters occur.

The top critter-story of them all harks back to 1960 and our first post in Kuala Lumpur. The British Deputy High Commissioner and his wife, with whom I had worked at a well-baby clinic, were hosting their own farewell reception. Dan and I were invited.

That night we were far and away the most junior of the otherwise senior diplomats and government officials who attended. I could sense the puzzled disapproval of our “by the book, rank conscious” ambassador’s wife when we paid our courtesy greetings to her. After speaking with the ambassador’s wife, we made our way across the room to the ambassador, who was talking with the jovial Brit who was still head of the Malayan navy.

Several months pregnant, I was wearing an elegant, natural linen, loose-from-the-shoulder dress. As we stood in the middle of the crowded reception talking with them, I felt something crawling up what I thought was the outside of the back of my dress.

“Dan,” I whispered, “please brush the back of my dress.” He did unobtrusively. The sense of something crawling up my back continued. “Please reach inside the neckline and find whatever it is.” He did. It was a huge cockroach—the flying kind.

While he rushed it to the open veranda door, I continued chatting calmly (at least I was calm on the surface). The ambassador was less than amused. The head of the Malay navy, however, smiled broadly, fished a coin out of his pocket, and presented it to me: a Royal Medal for Not Screaming: Bravery Above and Beyond.

I was born into a world of Western imperialism and financial collapse, was a child in wartime and an adolescent in a time of recovery and revolution. I became an adult amid the flowering of newly independent nations in the hot zone of the Cold War, and a world locked in competition between capitalism and communism.

When I was young, ships took three weeks to cross the Pacific. After World War II, propeller planes took two days to go half way round the world. Today I can fly eighteen hours, non-stop, from Newark to Singapore.

At my birth, it took three months to receive an answer to a letter from China to Mississippi. Today a phone number tapped in Washington rings immediately in Canberra. A face on a screen here talks in real time to a face there.

I remember the death of Franklin Roosevelt, lived through Joseph McCarthy, Kennedy’s assassination, and Watergate and Richard Nixon, celebrated the installation of Barack Obama, and voted for the first woman almost elected president. I know precisely where I was when Pearl Harbor, the Tet Offensive, and 9/11 happened.

I first heard news on a round-topped wooden radio, later saw it on a tiny black-and-white TV, and now watch talking heads and British mysteries on a huge, colored flat-screen or on a cell phone in my palm. What once took days and hours is now available twenty- four/seven.

I began writing by hand and continued with a typewriter. Now I compose on a computer, sending the results into cyberspace.

I came of age when most people assumed I would be a homemaker, but I became a two-for-the-price-of-one Foreign Service wife, and had my world expanded by the *Feminine Mystique*. Starting with portable pursuits, I found my own ways to develop skills and change expectations—mine and others’—in order to come into my own and break glass ceilings.