

From Part I — LIFE, BEFORE

Chapter 1 — Wistfully Looking at the Sea

An opportunity for me to join the Foreign Service on my own had surfaced, as friends of my husband worked out what was called a “compassionate appointment.” I thought it better just to close the book on the world of diplomacy—it would never be the same without Jim.

Still, it wasn’t smart to dismiss the possibility out of hand. The pay was good. It was a life I knew. I expected to sit on the terrace of the ambassador’s residence in Port-au-Prince, looking wistfully out at the sea while I considered my future. There was no doubt in my mind that the final answer would be a regretful no.

Nancy and I flew to Haiti, where I again met Ambassador and Mrs. Clinton Knox and the embassy officers Jim had written me about. His secretary took me to visit the elegant mansion where my husband and daughter had lived, and I met Digby, the lovable black Labrador who came with the territory.

I was sipping coffee on a screened porch of the Residence, exulting in the languor of a tropical morning, when an embassy car pulled into the ambassador’s driveway. As usual, telephones were not functioning. The driver informed me I was due in fifteen minutes at the palace of Haiti’s president, Jean Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, the pudgy teenager who had replaced his father, the hated “Papa Doc,” as head of the government. The president wanted to express his personal regrets over the loss of my husband.

I threw on a dress and sandals. We passed by the Embassy to pick up Ambassador Knox, who heaved himself into the right rear seat of his limousine and rode, with me beside him, to Duvalier’s gleaming white palace. The driver stopped at the entrance and held the door open for his chief and then for me. A red carpet stretched from the gate through a courtyard to dark, heavy doors in front of which a presidential aide awaited.

The famed Duvalier henchmen, the *ton-ton macoute*, stood menacingly in the back of the president-for-life’s personal reception room, machine-guns at the ready. The stolid figure of “Baby Doc” remained seated behind a wide mahogany desk. He greeted Ambassador Knox, who then introduced me.

“*Bonjour, Monsieur le Président,*” I said hesitantly, hoping my half-forgotten French would be up to the job of conversing with a nineteen-year-old chief of state. “*Vous êtes très aimable de honorer mon mari....*”

The Haitian president nodded enigmatically, then picked up a photograph already inscribed to the wife of his *ami*, *Monsieur James Carson*, and handed it to me. He and Ambassador Knox exchanged a few words. The aide raised his eyebrows and we bade our farewells.

That night, I attended a cocktail party with the Knoxes where, wine glass in hand, I chatted with an elderly Haitian. He had a face like a tobacco leaf and a knowing way with a woman who had just lost her husband. Amazed, I realized he was flirting with me.

I’d had a good time at a “ladies lunch” the day before, too, and the summons to the palace was certainly memorable.

My older children had reminded me that Nancy would not have the advantages of foreign living, as they had had, unless I made it possible. (*Yes, kids, that’s what you said.*)

I began to consider my own future. *Perhaps my life wasn't really over. Maybe there was something out there for me—an adventure of a different sort, not romantic, but still worth exploring. And wasn't the Foreign Service the place to find it?*

After we returned to Washington, I called the State Department's personnel office and asked when I could begin.

From Part II — INDIA

Chapter 12 — Field Trips

When the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service found suspicious items on requests for permanent residence, they occasionally forwarded them to the field. I was asked to check them out.

With maybe fifteen or twenty such requests for a background search, I arranged to be out of the office for approximately a week to verify the would-be immigrant's background. Most of the individuals under scrutiny came from the northern area of Punjab in the villages surrounding Amritsar or Ludhiana, 200 or more miles from New Delhi.

The embassy agreed that my Indian assistant, Kirpal Singh Rai, would accompany me and that Sufa, a dependable driver, should operate the embassy car. I took a cooler full of Cokes and beer, baloney sandwiches, and Oreo cookies, all from the embassy commissary. We stopped at a kiosk in Greater Kailash, across the road from my house, to pick up a chunk of ice to keep the food and drinks cold. I took a couple of bed pillows along so that I could doze between destinations.

I loved these trips. Consular officers at other posts dreaded them and found reasons not to complete them. But I was adventurous.

Ordinarily, I didn't think much of Indian food. I'm not much on lentils and I dislike cilantro, one of their favorite spices. But on the road, I ate buffalo kebab, curds, and *naan*, the tastier north Indian bread puffed up with yeast. In my mind, I was roughing it, but I knew that American food, hot water for my bath, and air conditioning awaited me when I got home. . . .

I learned about the lives of people in the area and grew to understand why they loved the land but were still, for economic reasons, so desperate to leave it. I grew to appreciate Punjabi wiliness and the Sikhs' inventive ways to circumvent their fate.

At the end of the day on our first trip to Amritsar, Rai asked if I'd ever seen the Sikhs' Golden Temple. To be honest, I'd never even heard of it or seen a picture.

Sufa deposited us at the Ritz Hotel (the Indians pronounced it RIT-uz HO-tul) and then went off to drink tea, as Rai negotiated the hiring of a "bicycle rickshaw" to take the two of us to the temple. We sat side by side on a buggylike seat while a bony old man pedaled the three-wheeled vehicle forward. After twenty minutes or so, we climbed a low rise. I looked beyond the old man's heaving, muscular shoulders and saw before us the temple dome glowing in perfect splendor in the late afternoon sun. There has never been a more dazzling sight. It was gaudy, but it was glorious.

Rai and I walked across a bridge over a shallow moat surrounding the temple. The magical moment passed. The water was turgid, a thick greasy scum on top, with swarms of fine green gnats hovering. Lurid paintings of revered Sikh gurus hung on the walls inside. The dome was hardly golden, just shiny, dented brass, gleaming only when low sunlight bounced off it straight

into my eyes. But I'll never forget when I saw it the first time, with the Golden Temple appearing like an apparition in front of me. . . .

Chapter 17 — Crossing the Khyber Pass

Bruce [Flatin] took our kids and me on a picnic to some nearby ruins on Thursday, the beginning of the weekend in this land of Islam. A servant packed our lunch of ham and salami, which, in this Muslim country was a product of the American commissary. There were crusty rolls from a neighborhood bakery and apricots from a more southern clime.

We traveled by embassy van to the hills outside of Kabul, where I delighted in the bright green grass and waxy flowering trees that told me it was really spring. In Delhi, winter turned in one day to scorching summer. I enjoyed wearing a sweater. We ate lunch on crumbling marble steps that were the remains of a summerhouse in a long-ago dynasty.

Bruce said he had to stop by the embassy briefly to send a cable. Some Afghan communists had been arrested the night before. He thought Washington ought to know about it.

The van took Bruce to his office, Nancy and Mark to the high school, and Paul and me to the Flatin home. I settled in a sunny corner to read a book.

Excited servants burst into the room a short while later, telling me that a local broadcast said bad things were happening. Then the radio had gone off the air. The telephone no longer functioned. They were going home.

An American Air Force wife and her young son, who lived in the house behind the Flatins, soon joined Paul and me and his rabbit. They were afraid to stay in their home alone.

As a security measure, the embassy had previously instituted an internal radio network. Private American homes were given call signs in the names of birds. Bruce treasured his descent from ancient Norsemen and had personally selected his own code name of Viking.

The receiver in the upper front hall began to cough and crackle.

“Viking calling Chickadee. Chickadee, Chickadee, please respond.”

Bruce was on the line, telling me over muffled background noise that the innocuous arrest he had referred to so casually had escalated into a coup against the government. Mohammed Daoud, the Afghan president, was already dead. Embassy observers were seeing tanks and soldiers in the streets and hearing reconnaissance planes overhead. There would undoubtedly be bombing attacks during the night. A curfew had been declared.

He was glad to know that the Air Force wife and her son were with me. He would advise the woman's husband, who was on a different radio network.

Bruce said there was no way for Nancy and Mark to return home that night. I couldn't speak directly with my daughter (telephone lines had been cut,) but I was not to worry. The embassy's central radio had made connection with a private home on the other side of town where the students from New Delhi were staying. I trusted his judgment that she was safe.

“Fill the bathtubs,” he advised, in the event that water mains were hit. We should stay on the ground floor of the house during the night to come, preferably under furniture that would protect us from flying debris during any explosion.

The Air Force wife and I dragged mattresses from the beds upstairs down into the living room. We placed coffee tables in strategic positions, so that we could get under them if there was a low-flying bombing attack.

As the twilight deepened and it was clear we had no electricity in the house, we lit the logs in the fireplace for light and warmth. A large wood supply allowed us to keep the fire burning most of the night.

It seems a little nutty, now. *A bathtub full of water? Cowering under a coffee table?* I was excited but not particularly afraid. It all seemed unreal. Knowing Nancy was with a group, out of harm's way, I focused mainly on the drama of it all.

I stretched out on my stomach, the mattress comfortable beneath me, and gazed at flames licking branches of firewood. And then I fell fast asleep.

"Wasn't *that* a night?" the Air Force wife asked the next morning.

A bomb had exploded half a block away. The noise was unbelievable.

"You mean you didn't hear it?" my housemates asked.

"Nope," I said, cursing a tranquil nature that had allowed me to miss such an experience. Grabbing my camera, I went out to survey the damage.

The ornate, inlaid towers of the Blue Mosque were unharmed at the end of a street that ran perpendicular to ours. A thirty-foot crater yawned in the intersection only a few hundred yards away, however. Large, snub-nosed Soviet-made tanks were stationed at each corner of the square where the mosque was located.

I walked closer. As I approached, I saw armed Afghan soldiers, the only people not hiding behind closed doors in the whole area. They were positioned near each tank. The soldier closest to me squatted on the sidewalk, his gun resting beside him. His uniform was rough, of cheap greenish wool. He wore no cap. His head, bent over as he lit a cigarette, was covered in coarse, straight, shiny black hair.

I continued towards him.

"Picture," I said, smiling inanely. I pointed to my camera.

The man stood up to his full height of more than six feet, an AK-47 now pointed directly at me.

"Go," he said in English, gesturing with his gun. "*You go.*" . . .

From Part III — HONG KONG

Chapter 20 — Another New Beginning

It was important to me to reach out to a huge resident American community and to deal with the trickle of tourists then visiting the colony. (The number of tourists would become a flood within the year, after mainland China was opened to American visitors.)

I joined the American Chamber of Commerce, "the Am Cham", and worked with what was then the only overseas branch of the League of Women Voters, preparing a brochure outlining the services the Consulate provided for Americans.

I did a "Week That Was" report to Consul General Tom Shoesmith, describing my most interesting American cases. It was a blatant grab for recognition and I'm sorry to say, written in such an arch and adolescent tone, I'm surprised that Ed permitted it and that Mr. Shoesmith let me distribute it to other sections of the Consulate.

I continued my practice of attending court hearings whenever an American citizen was involved.

Unlike courtrooms in India, the British-run legal services of Hong Kong were highly proper, efficient, and stylized to the point that judges of the higher court wore white horsehair

wigs and sat on a platform behind a desk on which there was a small gold crown bearing Queen Elizabeth's E-II-R inscription.

My first court appearance was in support of Angela Weiscroft, a woman of sixty-plus years who had bought tiger-eye beads from a vendor near the wharf. On returning to her cruise ship she displayed her purchase to fellow passengers. The string broke and beads scattered all over her stateroom floor. Friends persuaded her that, as in America, the merchant should be made to stand behind a product that was obviously of shoddy construction.

She returned to the vendor and asked for her money back. At the least, she insisted the necklace be restrung or replaced.

The flinty little Chinese woman who sold her the beads leaped across the counter and bit the American on the hand, then motioned to a nearby police officer and charged her customer with assault.

Mrs. Weiscroft came to the Consulate to report her bizarre experience and to ask for advice. I reminded her that she was subject to local laws, had no special standing as an American, and advised that she retain an attorney. If she wished, I would attend the hearing as an observer.

The Chinese woman insisted in court that she was the aggrieved person. Mrs. Weiscroft gasped and held up her bandaged thumb. The British judge ruled that since there were two versions of the events that had taken place and the vendor asserted she had witnesses, a full hearing was required. His docket was crowded. He scheduled the case for a date six weeks hence.

The American woman was required to post a bond guaranteeing her future appearance.

Contrary to my advice, Angela Weiscroft had not retained a lawyer. She looked beseechingly in my direction and I impulsively jumped to my feet.

"Your honor," I said. "I am the American consul."

The judge's head, bent over a stack of papers, snapped to attention.

"You have no jurisdiction in this courtroom."

"I know. But sir, I don't believe you understand that this woman is a tourist here. Her ship sails tomorrow for Singapore. There is no way she can be here on the date you have proposed."

"Madam," the judge sighed. "Mrs. Weiscroft has been asked to post a bond of one hundred and fifty Hong Kong dollars. As you know, the value in U.S. currency is considerably less."

He looked down at me.

"You appear to be an intelligent woman." Pausing, he added, "Use your own judgment."

"Obviously," I whispered to Angela, as we left the courtroom, "he expects you to deposit the money with the clerk and never come back."

"I don't know."

"I'm sure that's what he meant for you to do."

"Well, maybe." Her voice wavered. "But I don't know what my late husband, *the judge*, would ever say if he knew I had *jumped bail*."

She sailed the next day, still pondering the possibility of flying back from the United States for her trial. Common sense apparently prevailed over anguish at the thought of a dead husband's disapproval: I never heard from her again.

From Part IV — MEXICO

Chapter 29 — The Russians Are Coming

It was imperative to get noncombatants from the Eastern Bloc out of the country, but only American planes were allowed to land in Granada's capital city and Aeroflot was the only airline acceptable as further transportation for the Soviets and their hangers-on.

A neutral location was required for the U.S. plane to land and deposit its passengers and also permit Aeroflot to pick them up. Originally the transfer point was to be Jamaica, but when that government learned there were North Koreans involved, they withdrew landing rights. The next closest airport that would accept both planes was in Mérida.

Aeroflot had not yet arrived. The Mexicans placed Cubans in the departure lounge and Koreans in the transit lounge and reserved the arrival area for the Russians. The Russians appeared to be a sizeable group. They were technicians and construction workers rather than diplomats. They spoke neither Spanish nor English; most of them sat grumbling quietly among themselves.

The governor's aide pointed to a high-level Mexican diplomat he identified as the secretary for Soviet affairs in the Mexican Foreign Ministry. The official was in Mérida to observe the passenger transfer.

The Soviet Ambassador to Mexico also came from the capital. Yucatán's governor was due shortly. Journalists and photographers from Mérida's several newspapers dashed around the airport. All of the local television stations had crews there as well.

Alpuche Pinzón's aide asked if I'd like to meet the Soviet ambassador. Startled, I said, "Sure." Followed by newspapermen and cameras, he walked me over to the Soviet envoy.

"*Por favor, Señor Ambassador,*" he said. "*Quisiera presentar-se le consul de Los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica.*" He would like to present the consul of the United States of North America. The Russian was not at all interested in talking to me. But, taking note of the press surrounding us, he could not just brush me off. Pointing a finger directly in my face, he said in a firm voice, "*Guerra es Guerra. Pero la paz es la paz.*" War is war, but peace is peace. *No dispute there*, I thought. Mutely, I nodded my head.

His voice shaking, the ambassador went on to say that the United States had no right to treat his diplomats in a despicable way. The United States ought to be ashamed. He continued to glare at me. I had no idea what we had done to his citizens or anyone else in Granada.

"*Entiende?*" he asked, finally. Did I understand?

"*Si, entiendo.*"

There being nothing either of us could add at this point, we turned away.

The aide motioned me to a seat of honor where folding chairs had been hurriedly set up along the wall for the important guests. The Soviet ambassador had already found his designated place.

I was seated between the Mexican expert on Soviet affairs and Governor Alpuche Pinzón, who clutched a small bowl made locally out of cottonwood. It was the usual gift from a Yucatán official to a distinguished visitor. I had been given several of them as I made my initial calls.

Television cameras whirred as the governor and then the ambassador said a few words about the importance of the occasion and their as always undying friendship. Thankfully, the Mexican diplomat and I were not asked to speak.

Aeroflot arrived and took on passengers, some of whom would disembark in Cuba. The majority would continue on to Moscow, while a handful of North Koreans would make the long journey to Pyongyang.

Don and I drove back into town. I was surprised to note that it was only 8:30 a.m. The Consulate was not yet open to the public.

I called the embassy and recounted what had happened, including my conversation with the Soviet ambassador. That afternoon we received an unclassified cable sent worldwide from Mexico City to all American posts providing general background plus details of our airport events.

Thrilled to be where the action was, even for a couple of pages, I was disappointed to see I was described as “Mérida consul” and not by name. How were my friends in the State Department and various embassies around the world to know that it was I, Ginny, playing a small role in the Cold War?

Mérida’s two major newspapers mentioned my name, however, and the *Diario de Yucatán* included a front-page column that referred to the brusqueness of the Soviet ambassador’s remarks. It commended U.S. Consul Ginny Carson de Young for “diplomatic cool” in the face of his assault. That term often means, I then realized, that you just keep your mouth shut.

From Part V — ROMANIA

Chapter 37 — Comes the Revolution

The first news of dissent came on December 16, from Timisoara. I heard it on VOA via the portable radio in my bathroom as I was putting on my eyebrows before leaving for work.

I couldn’t believe it. *Had Romanians actually defied an order from their government and refused to leave a Protestant church?* Churchgoers were mowed down. Hundreds of people died. The Ceaușescu government had weighed in and stopped them cold, just as everyone knew it would.

This information, reported in the worldwide press, later proved to be highly exaggerated, but undoubtedly encouraged other dissidents to follow suit.

The dictator, in a show of nonchalance, left the country for a scheduled trip to the Middle East. He maintained close ties with Arab nations and particularly with Arafat, the Palestinian leader.

Interviews with *tovarasul* Nicolae Ceaușescu were reprinted from Iran or Kuwaiti newspapers in *Scinteia*—literally a “spark”—or one of the other newspapers that slavishly printed the same, adulatory Romanian news.

Ceaușescu’s aides apparently reported some of the bad news to their leader; abruptly, he returned home and gave a televised speech the next day.

At the ambassador’s residence, a few of us watched Ceaușescu on a small TV set in the den. Other Americans were gathered around the Greens’ indoor pool, sipping wine and bourbon, the women dressed in red satin or green velvet. It was the night of our staff Christmas party.

A massive rally was scheduled to take place in Bucharest’s University Square the next day.

As usual, only four or five people were in the Consulate waiting room that morning. . . . From my window, I saw people surging from the square after abandoning the signs they’d so triumphantly carried a few hours earlier.

“Close and lock the doors.” The message came over loudspeakers from our security office. We quickly complied. . . . Marine guards in combat attire entered the Consulate. They yanked impatiently at window curtains, cutting off any line of sight. Before the draperies closed, I saw rows of police backed by military troops lined up, blocking the boulevard facing the central square. They formed a solid wall. No unauthorized person could cross the line. . . .

That day was the beginning but not quite the end of a nightmarish chapter of Romanian life . . . that had lasted more than forty years and brought misery and death to so many of its citizens.