

PROLOGUE

A STRAW FENCE THE HEIGHT OF A MAN

by Michael Varga

Peace Corps Volunteer, Chad (1977-1979)

Outside, the bitter December winds howl, but inside the library at Saint Albans School for boys in northwest Washington, D.C., we are thinking about heat, sun. About Africa. I ask the sixth graders what comes to mind when they think of that faraway continent.

“Elephants.” “Apartheid.” “Jungles and deserts.” “Hungry people.”

As part of National Geography Awareness Week, returned Peace Corps Volunteers are visiting local schools to share stories about their experiences. Saint Albans is a school for the affluent, for the sons of members of Congress and other capital power-brokers. The point of the exercise is to impress on the students the importance of learning about other places and peoples. But I want to leave these students with something more than a quick travelogue about sub-Saharan Africa.

“In the summer of 1977, a few weeks after graduating from college, I found myself in an ‘animal market’ outside the capital of Chad, N’djamena.”

I ask them what they think an “animal market” is. “Are the animals alive or dead?”

“Dead.”

“No. They’re alive. Why are they sold alive?”

One student says, because people are there to buy pets. Another volunteers it’s because there are no refrigerators in Chad, so there’s no way to store meat without it spoiling. I tell them animals are sold alive so that they may be killed just before they’re eaten.

After describing how the animal market is organized, with herds of cattle and camels and goats and sheep all huddled together under the blazing sun, beaten close together by the herders, I recount how a crazed bull suddenly breaks away from a herd and charges me. I tell them how I freeze, how the other Volunteers tug at me, trying to drag me away from imminent tragedy. I tell them how the bull lowers one horn, seeming to aim for the heart of my heart. I tell them how paralyzed I feel. And how at the last possible moment some of the stick-bearing herds-men run alongside the bull and beat its sides, forcing it to veer off.

“How do you think I felt at that moment?”

“Relieved.” “Lucky.” “Safe.” “Scared.”

“What do you think I wanted to do?”

“Pray.” “Get out of Africa!” “Come back home!”

“Right.”

Some of the other Volunteers advised me not to make more of the incident than it was. Sure, there had been danger, but I hadn't been killed, not even wounded. I had come to Chad to serve, and having come this far, how could I let a random incident deter me?

“A few months later I found myself in my village, the only Peace Corps Volunteer sent to this particularly remote corner of southern Chad where there were no other foreigners, no running water, no electricity. I was to teach English, French, and mathematics in

the village high school. How do you think the villagers looked at me?”

“They were happy to have a teacher.” “Like an intruder.” “Like a white man.”

“They thought of me as this symbol of America, a place they had heard scattered stories about, a place rich and powerful with plenty of food. And they all—all the villagers—kept asking me for things. For food. For money. For books. How do you think I felt after a while? Always being asked for things?”

“Bothered.” “Hassled.” “You wanted to be left alone.”

“That's right. So one day some of my students offered to build a fence around my compound. They said it would keep the goats from eating the grass in front of my hut. Grass was something to be protected, and here I was just letting any old goat eat it away! So I paid them to build it. A straw fence the height of a man.

“Now in Africa, many people carry things on their heads. So once my fence was built, when people passed in front of my compound I often saw nothing but whatever they were carrying on their heads. Bottles and jars and piles of wood bouncing along just above my fence. And the fence kept people away from my hut. Now there were very few requests for food and money and books. I was quite content, sitting in front of my hut, fenced off from the villagers, watching the things they carried bounce along.

“Then one day I saw a woman trying to kick down my straw fence. How do you think I felt?”

“Angry.” “You wanted to kick her.”

“I ran to where she was screaming at me through the fence. I told her to leave the fence alone, but she kept right on kicking it and pointing at the ground. She was speaking very fast, in Ngambaye, the local dialect. I couldn’t understand what she was saying but I could sense that she was warning me about something. What do you think she saw?”

“A snake?”

“That’s right. She had seen a snake crawl under my fence. And she wanted to warn me about it.”

“Was the snake poisonous?”

“We never found out. Chadians believe that all snakes are dangerous and should be killed. So we found the snake and smashed its head, and I invited her to have some tea with me. How do you think I felt about her now?”

“You were grateful.” “You were happy.” “You wanted to give her something.”

“Did she know me?”

“No.”

“And yet, look at this, boys: A woman who didn’t know me, who probably had heard stories about ‘that white man’ and how he had closed himself off from the village and didn’t want to share anything with anybody, takes the time to warn me about danger. Incredible!

“Before she left, she handed me a charm made of

some animal skins. She said it carried some ‘magic herbs’ inside. She told me it would keep the evil spirits away from me.”

I pull the charm out of my pocket and hand it to the boys to pass around, so they can stroke the animal fur. So they can touch something from Chad, from that woman’s hands.

“I wondered about it keeping away any evil spirits. But why do you think I still carry this charm?”

“To remember that woman.”

“But why do I want to remember her?”

“Because you regret not marrying her.” “Because she saved your life.”

“Do you think I rebuilt that fence?”

“No.”

“That’s right. I didn’t rebuild that fence. And I carry this charm as a reminder to me that it’s very easy—especially when people are making a lot of demands on you—to try to close yourself off, to fence them out, to keep what you have just for yourself. But I had gone to Chad to work, to serve, to help. This charm reminds me that it is in keeping yourself open to others, to those who need your help, who ask you for perhaps more than you think you can give, that we really find satisfaction. We always have to fight that urge to build a fence.”

“But didn’t you give the woman anything?” “Didn’t you give her some money?”

“No, I didn’t. After we finished the tea and she handed me the charm, she got up to leave. She asked if she could take the snake’s body with her. Of course I said, ‘Yes.’ Later that afternoon she came back to my hut and we ate the snake, savoring it. She assured me that all the venom had been drained and there was no danger in chewing the flesh.”

“What did it taste like?” “Why did you eat it?”

“She had made a sort of peanut stew, and there were pieces of the snake swimming in the sauce with the peanuts. It was very good. Why did I eat it? Because for one thing, I was hungry. There really wasn’t much to eat in Chad.

“But more importantly, I ate it because it sealed the lesson for me. Our sharing the snake tied us together. We had first shared the danger, a bad thing. But she had forced herself through the fence to help me. Now, sharing the snake as food—a good thing—we were sealing our link to each other. By not allowing fences to be built to separate us, we could both benefit—escaping danger and being nourished by the sharing. Do you see it?”

“See what?”

“Do you see her? Picture that fence tumbling down. Taste that peanut snake stew.”

“Yuch!” “Do we have to?”

“No, of course you don’t.”

“So, did you see her again?”

“For the rest of my two years in that village, I immersed myself in her life and the lives of as many Chadians as I could. So that, while I didn’t give the woman anything that day the snake came crawling and wound up being our supper, we shared the gamut of life’s experiences for the rest of my time while I was in the village.”

“But why didn’t you marry her? Wasn’t she pretty?”

“She belonged to Africa, to Chad. And frankly, she wasn’t interested in coming to America. But while we didn’t marry in the way we think of marriage, her spirit remains bound up within my own. I have never been the same man from that day forward. You see what peanut snake stew can do to you!

“But seriously, boys, her charm has remained with me and evil has kept its distance. And if you try real hard, if you picture fences, all kinds of fences, tumbling down, crumbling—I think you can feel her spirit here with us in the library today.”

After his Peace Corps service, Michael Varga worked as a diplomat for the U.S. Foreign Service, primarily in the Middle East. His short story “Collapsing Into Zimbabwe” won first prize in the 1995 annual competition sponsored by the Toronto Star. He completed a novel in 2004. “A Straw Fence the Height of a Man” was first published in Notre Dame Magazine.