

ONE

The stories of a free people aren't always smooth and orderly. It's sometimes hard to make sense of them when we see them side by side or one after the other. But if we look closely enough, we sometimes find a tie that unites them.

Stephanie Markham thought of herself as an innovator in the art of editing. She considered the narratives she brought together in this collection as testimonies not only about the bad side of life but to the hope that good will prevail, to use to use a phrase she cribbed from Sophocles. She began a preface with some words about herself:

I once worked as an editor for the publishers Wakefield and Drew. Troubles began when new owners with strong ties to a notorious cult called the Scythians came in and expanded the company's business – into films and TV shows and home entertainment products. It was exciting to be part of rapid growth until I learned they also had their hands in illegal gambling, prostitution, sales of drugs and weapons, idol worship, and so on – all for the purpose of financing a network of private militias.

One of the sequences in the patchwork quilt I'll unfold concerns a phase in the dismantling of this noxious cult. Another has to do with the descendants of a 17th century native warrior; a third describes scenes from one of our military exploits in Asia and its aftereffects on a single family. I'll be happy if I can tie these narrative skeins together. Other people will help me, and at times I'll crouch in the background. I'll do my best to have these disparate narratives flow smoothly. Nothing is perfect however, in art as in life.

What amazes me now is that we encounter many experiences, some of them in conflict with each other, yet we stay upright and sometimes we make sense of what takes place in our lives.

I begin in late April, 1994. I drove with my sister-in-law Chris Tapley, the widow of my brother who died in the Asian war I mentioned, from New York City to Botolph along one of the oldest stretches of the road that cuts through what was once a vast wilderness and is now a mosaic of towns and cities, industries and highways – a trip that once took days, now a few hours, even in the heaviest traffic.

I asked if Chris minded a detour. "I need to deliver a message."

We left the highway in central Sagadac, puttered along a winding two-lane road, and stopped at a state park, the scene of a battle in the 17th century war I alluded to, the bloodiest anyone ever fought in Sagadac.

I parked on a cinder path. We walked as quietly as we could to a low stone wall so as not to disturb a film crew at work.

"Most native people didn't want to be brought into the tapestry the white man wove in North America," said Michael Rainwater, two collections of whose children's stories based on native themes I edited for the old Wakefield and Drew. We remain friends. He brings me projects he insists I work on.

His grandson Nate watched through the viewing end of a movie camera. "Natives have been oppressed, maligned, forced to move, killed in wars. But we haven't always been silent. The long line of warrior leaders begins with this man." Michael gestured toward a bronze statue. "Sansonoit. You and I wouldn't always agree with him and many of us wouldn't like the people he fought against, but the story shows us the early days of a pattern that's still with us now. Can we change? Will we stay on the old path or find a new one?"

I heard in the dim distance of my auditory imagination – Stephanie wrote – the sounds of musket fire and war cries. I saw men attacking each other with knives and bayonets and smelled sharp gunpowder and could almost touch the flesh of a dying man.

Nate pointed his camera at the statue, the base of which was surrounded by brush and trees. "Not a lifelike image," Michael said. "White people put it up two centuries after he was killed. Fashions change, it's been neglected, but you can still see the determination of a fighter."

I imagined a lithe figure, stooping to avoid branches, leading a score of men through a stretch of trees and brush. They move faster and faster till they burst into the middle of the fight.

As Michael talked on, I spotted a group of low buildings between which people of both sexes flitted. They were part of a training camp for the cult I mentioned, some of whose hooligans had tried to disrupt a convention Chris and I had just attended in New York. I didn't see anyone from there looking our way.

Dark clouds glided in from the west. A few cold raindrops fell. "We'd better stop here," Michael said. The sound man and the lighting expert began to put their equipment in the back of a rented panel truck.

Silence after the fighting, bodies on the field – wounded, dying, lifeless. A few from each side try to relieve suffering and start to bury the dead. They keep on despite a sudden rainstorm and the possibility of another attack. I wondered if I would I have had their fortitude.

Chris and I stepped over the wall.

"Hello, Stephanie," Michael said. "Good to see you again, Chris."

"I'm afraid I have bad news," I said. "More delays. Wakefield and Drew's new owners aren't interested in native leaders, particularly Sansonoit. They're withholding funds for the time being, as the contract allows them to do."

"I expected something like that," Michael said. "The contract also says that if they back out, they'll release the property to me. Can you look into it for me?"

"I should have an answer in a day or two," I said. "Will I see you before you leave the area?"

"One of us at least," Michael replied.

Claiming the excuse of a busy afternoon, Chris and I went back to the highway.

"It was nice to see them," Chris said. "You sure dragged us away in a hurry."

“I have a pile of papers in my office that Michael gave me I need to get to work on. Part fiction, part family saga. Also scenes from our campaign against the Scythians. I want to get in some of the things you and I’ve been involved with.”

“I suppose you’ll want me do half your work for you – and all for free. I’ll have to think.”

“Your point of view will be invaluable.” I felt more confident of my work than I’d been. “I’m working with the idea of new life. “

“And what does that mean?” Chris asked.

“Getting rid of old troubles, for one thing, and starting over.”

“Does that actually happen? If you ask me, I say we carry everything along with us in an invisible backpack.”

“Maybe so,” I replied. “Maybe not.”

I saw Sansonoit in my mind’s eye and his men swimming in lake water to wash away their war paint. They wish they didn’t have to arm again, but they need to finish what they began or else their people will be slaves.

Stephanie and Chris entered Botolph during light, mid-afternoon traffic. Stephanie dropped Chris off at the radio station where she had a thrice-weekly interview show and picked up part of a collection of writings to take to a college on the North Shore where she would report on the convention of the futurist movement she and Chris had just attended. The delegates had elected her assistant director for research, responsible for archives, and she wanted collaborators to help compile her record of the fight against the Scythians. She decided to ask two faculty people to help her. One was Leonid Strogoff, an expert on cults and secret societies.

“I want you to tell your own story, too,” Stephanie said, “if you have the time.

“Of course, I have time to tell people about myself,” Strogoff replied.

This is what he wrote in his first pages:

April, 1994

I left my townhouse near Northside College and as had been my custom after three toughs assaulted me on my own campus, I looked from side to side, once, twice, before I darted to my car and drove off campus to pick up Selena Morgan, who waited for me on her front porch.

We went first to a faculty meeting, which we both found tedious, and then to a gathering of Nova Mundi at which Stephanie Markham reported to us about the convention in New York. Even though it seemed more promising than past meetings, we left early. After Stephanie gave Selena scores of pages from a diary whose author we both knew, we began the twenty mile drive to Botolph.

I asked where Selena would like to have dinner.

“Some place near the theater,” she answered with a preoccupied air.

“You look as if you have something on your mind,” I said. “Care to share it with me?”

“Leaving the school,” she said. “The North Shore Symphony asked me to be their music director. Six concerts a year. I could also start the choir I’ve been thinking about for years.”

“Northside will miss you.” Selena’s new thinking surprised me. I couldn’t say any longer that I knew what to expect from her.

“The time has come,” she said.

We fell silent. The late Saturday afternoon traffic was heavy.

“And then,” Selena said, “these papers Stephanie gave me. She wants me to go over them and add comments of my own. I doubt I’ll have time.”

After dinner, we went to see the Botolph Ballet in a version of the Arabian Nights that their eager new choreographer devised using old Russian music that enchanted me when I was a teenager. It was Selena’s first outing since her father’s funeral six months before. I hadn’t been to a ballet for forty years, it seemed. My parents used to take me to a theater in Moscow before they slipped away from the Soviet Union.

“Not bad for locals,” I said during the intermission and realized I shouldn’t have made a comment like that to a Sagadac musician. “Anyway, I’m enjoying the evening, as I hope you are, too. Perhaps we’ll be able to go out again before long.” We’d both lost spouses; Selena had been a widow for nearly two decades.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said. “I won’t sever my ties with the college completely. That means you won’t have to help me empty my office. And as for the papers Stephanie gave me. I’ll do something, though not as much as she wants, and I’ll still have to plow through Paul’s diaries. Of course, I’ll get you to help me.”

“I can help some,” I said. The lights went down. “When will your new adventures take place?”

“A rehearsal with the orchestra next week,” Selena whispered. “I can start with the choir any time, since I’ll base it on the one at St. Luke’s. You’ll join us, won’t you?”

“I can hardly wait,” I said.

We drove back to Twin Falls after the show and spread the papers Stephanie had given her on Selena’s kitchen table. “There’s a lot here,” she said. “Including jottings about a certain cult movement. Maybe you’d like to lend a hand.”

I riffled a sheaf of papers. “Another time, if you don’t mind.” I handed the papers back to her. “You’re better equipped than I am to comment on Paul’s private life.”

Selena frowned, partly from displeasure, partly from thinking hard, as if a plan wasn’t taking shape as smoothly as she wanted.

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Since his grandfather was busy with his film, Nate Rainwater went by himself to Stephanie's office two days later.

Just starting out as a professional photographer, he knew that only a few of the millions of pictures North Americans take every day become known and even fewer are remembered as long as a week. He showed Stephanie one of his folders of pictures – sunset on a Florida beach, September rain, the training camp the Scythians had set up near the park she'd visited the day before.

A handful of his photos had won awards, but he wanted to capture an image that spread around the country. He wouldn't rush and turn out sloppy work, but he hoped not to take the rest of his life either.

She showed him some of the stories Michael had persuaded her to work on. "Will you read them and get me some photos to go with them?"

"Grampa says I should make sure I get paid."

"Send me a record of your expenses. We'll talk about your fee the next time. You can tell your Grampa, by the way, that my employers agree to let him have the Sansonoit property in exchange for a percentage of the gross income – if there is any. I may think of other things for you to do."

Nate left and Stephanie saw a flickering image of the old pasture they'd visited the previous Saturday *Sansonoit and two others return to the battle scene to finish the work of burying their dead. They talk back and forth about what they'll do next.*