

2020 Wind & Water Writing Contest
Honourable Mention
NON-FICTION AND FICTION

Swinging Sticks, Sliding Doors

By Nora-Lyn Veevers (Non Fiction)

On a Sunday morning in October, 1971 – the air is crisp and full of oxygen, the sun sparkles through trees still clutching their leaves – Stacey and I meet on the main thoroughfare along the banks of the Rhône River in the centre of Lyon, France. We decide to hitch-hike to the family château of a fellow French student about an hour outside the city. Out our thumbs go and, hurrah, the first car along – a beige-coloured late model Peugeot – pulls up along the curb beside us. I open the front passenger door. The driver is a middle-age olive-skin man, well-groomed, expensively dressed in casual European style and, yes, going right by the village where we are headed. He could drop us at the château in the country-side. *Do I hesitate for a moment, questioning my bravado; judging our safety?* I hop in the front seat and Stacey follows my lead, sliding in the back.

Stacey has broad Texas vowels, blond hair that hangs straight down her back and swings with the confidence of an American high-school cheerleader. We met in a language class for foreign students at the University of Lyon. In a sea of students from diverse areas of the globe, the one Canadian girl and the one American girl clicked. I am twenty and taking a year away from university to study in France. When Stacey reveals that she is sixteen and has finished high school early, I marvel that she has parents who allow her the freedom of foreign travel. I imagine a maturity in my new pal beyond the typical high

school kid of small-city Canada. Big sister to five siblings, it is natural for me to keep a watchful eye on the younger one of us.

The Peugeot driver asks if we know hitch-hiking is not allowed in France.

I steal a sideways glance at his face - lips pursed, eyes narrowed watching the highway straight ahead; his palm lifts from the steering wheel and thumps it for emphasis.

Did we talk about being on our own away from our families?

Did he tell us about himself? About his family? Did he tell us anything?

Did he ask why we were hitchhiking as we sail by village after village heading south?

My tongue tingles, my fingers prickle, my brain buzzes with noise as his voice grows louder and his breath explodes in agitated *humphs*.

Perhaps I wonder what is in the glove compartment as my eyes search his face, Stacey's face, the car for details like where the door handle is.

He steers the car down a remote shrubbery-lined lane and a camp appears at the cul-de-sac. Pots dangle from tripods set over outdoor cook-fires. Children scamper after each other, swinging sticks and laughing. Tents dot the landscape of caravans. Woods edge the back of the campsite like a scaffold to this surreal setting. Several men rise to their feet as our car stalks the gravel. Shoulders back, caps pulled down on foreheads, eyes tracking. One man stands in front of the others at the edge of the laneway bordering the camp. I

watch as his gaze rests on the driver. The sun-baked face is not unkind, not menacing.

What my dilated pupils take in is an authority that questions the driver beside me.

Perhaps mistrusting his intrusion into their revered space. Perhaps suspecting the motives in conveying two young women down a remote lane. His eyes interrogate the driver, not me.

Cowed by the unexpected stares, his mood shifts to wariness, perhaps he feels the folly of his detour into unwelcoming territory. He quickly circles the cul-de-sac; steers the car back up the lane to the nearby village. Sensing deflating interest in – what? kidnapping us? stranding us? or worse? – I determine this is our opportunity for escape. I clutch my handbag with my left hand; with my right I locate the door handle. My muscles tense ready to spring.

I don't remember how I get him to stop the car once at the village square. Maybe there is a stop sign. Maybe I shout orders at him. Maybe he notices the gendarme and the priest talking on the corner as church-goers make their way to their home or to brasseries dotted around the square, for the midday meal. Maybe he wants to be rid of us. I open the car door telling Stacey to get out hers. The driver bellows at me, saliva spewing, arm gesturing menacingly, finger pointing *Il est interdit faire la pousse en France! (Hitch-hiking is not allowed in France!)*.

Stacey remains stock-still in the far corner of the back seat. Her face unreadable; her eyes staring unseeingly. In one motion I fling open my door, open the back-seat door, reach across and grab her arm, drag, commanding, again, "Get Out." I don't remember

slamming the doors shut. I should have left them open. I hook my arm in hers and we hike across the tranquil village square to the gendarme and the priest as the car speeds away. The two models of civil authority gaze at us as I gush my foreign-accented attempt to describe our abduction. They shrug and point to the bus station down the cobble-stone street. We make our way, Stacey and I, to the château by bus for lunch and after back to Lyon by train.

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Nearly fifty years after I was a student in France I look at news reports in the Guardian, the BBC magazine, the internet and lament the bleak photos of Roma campsites in France being torn apart by police. Only to re-establish within days on empty land nearby. One young man reports he has been evicted a thousand times. He says that before dawn the police came; they said *everybody out, we're going to smash this place*. I read that France has the harshest policy in Europe towards Roma immigrants. That evictions are doubling every two years; that it is the only EU Country that has such a policy of rejection.

During my time as a school principal in Ontario we welcomed many Roma families to our school when Canada opened immigration to Roma refugees beginning in 1997. The brush I paint them with is this: friendly, agreeable, smiling, musical, evasive to questioning, protective of their children, agreeable to homework so the kids could “catch-up”. Then disappearing shortly after to Texas, or Kansas, or Venezuela for a musical concert.

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In 2012 my husband and I are on a six-week holiday in Paris. Roma musicians stroll the subway lugging amplifiers, playing guitars, accordions and singing. T. feeds them coins in appreciation of the entertainment. The other passengers ignore the spectacle and stare at the blackness out the window. I remember them moving in on us, smiling, playing to our presence before scurrying out the sliding doors ahead of the police.

I have wondered over the years if our escapade on the way to the château prompted Stacey's return to her home in Texas shortly after. And I wonder, if I could talk to that twenty-year-old I was, would I urge her to stay in France for an optional second year? Maybe the small flame of romance with that young man in Lyon would have sputtered out anyway. Maybe I would urge her to take the bursary offered for a year at the Sorbonne and return to France. I would urge her, certainly, to take hold of the agency that is hers to have. To make decisions without parents' or others' approval. To consider the sliding door moments that present themselves in our lives. I remember thinking I could come back to that choice at some point.

And I will always remember the man in the camp when I was a young student in France – clad in brownish grey pants, shirt, jacket, cap and sun-baked face.

His rebuking gaze saving us from an unknown calamity.