

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

Vici Egan

It was a Tuesday in late January. I had gone into the village after school to pick up some bread and eggs when I spotted David Ozolua, my CUSO (originally Canadian University Service Overseas) Field Staff Officer. I was pleased to see him, until I saw the expression on his face. I remember the feeling of foreboding, before the blow. That earlier nagging, persistent fear that first lodged itself before I had even embarked on my African adventure was unfolding.

“Your sister has died,” were the words which fell from his mouth. They were arrows that would forever change my life. I felt I had been punched hard in the gut, but at the same time I was falling fast from a great height.

“Which one?” I finally managed to utter.

David’s mouth opened but words seemed to fail him. Everything was happening in slow motion.

“I have four sisters.”

“It wasn’t Mary Jane”, David stammered. “She called.”

OK, that left three.

“It was a fire.”

I fell further, faster. I’m not sure when the tears started; I know they took many years to stop.

David led me to his car. He had driven the eight hours from the CUSO Field Staff Office to deliver the blow. He had only learned the news after the long weekend via a note pushed casually under his door by a first year CUSO. She had been staying in the adjoining hostel and had taken the call. David told me that he would take me home to pack, then we’d drive five hours to the nearest telephone, where I’d learn which of my sisters I had lost and next he’d get me on the first available flight home. It was like

hearing voices while underwater. None of it was fully registering.

David dropped me off, and asked if I'd be OK on my own, while he went to collect Nancy, a dear friend and fellow CUSO, from her home a few kilometres away. No, I wouldn't be OK. I'd never be OK again, my brain was screaming. But I didn't share that. He left and returned with Nance. He might have been ten minutes or an hour. Time had become a foreign entity. I was in a trance, but I did recognize some comfort in Nancy's arrival. I didn't know what or even how to pack. Nance was in my closet, finding a bag, throwing things into it. I remember appreciating her competence while wondering if I had a black dress; though in the end, it wouldn't have mattered.

I remember taking a boom box with me. Whatever compelled me to do that is anyone's guess. The cassette player/radio, while old, boxy and bulky, had become my prize possession, after my last one, with all of my other belongings, had been stolen from my house. I obviously was not thinking rationally, but for some bizarre reason, I latched on to that machine and it accompanied me on my miserable journey for the next three or four days.

At the phone centre in Minna, you paid in advance for the call. It was expensive and my sporadic calls at three minutes apiece were always a splurge I couldn't really afford. The lines were never entirely reliable and you were often cut off before you'd spoken for the precious three minutes you had paid for, up front.

David splurged on a whopping five minutes! No one I knew had ever been so extravagant!

My oldest brother, Phil, answered the phone. I started sobbing as soon as I heard his voice. It took him a while to register that "who" was the only word that I was repeatedly attempting.

“Who?” back from him, in a shocked voice, was the last sound I heard before we were cut off. It was another hour before we could get through again.

I had already figured that it was Frances, my youngest sister. Moe, we called her, from a haircut gone wrong, Three Stooges style, from back when she was about four. The hair grew out but the name stuck.

So yes, even before I reconnected with Phil, and shortly after hearing the horrific news, I’d narrowed it down to Frances. I blamed smoking, as she was my only sister who smoked. My theory, which included additional conjecture, was pockmarked with inconsistencies, but I was right, regardless. Smoking wasn’t to blame. It was faulty wiring in her rented apartment, which made me feel somewhat better, knowing she had not been responsible. But it broke my Master Electrician father’s heart. Dad always checked the wiring in any of our rented accommodation, but Fran had just moved in. I also was relatively relieved, knowing she had been asleep. If she had been found anywhere but in her bed, it would have been worse, if that was at all possible.

David and I continued on to Kaduna and he took me to the home of a new Field Staff Officer. I’d never met her before and I felt so alone. I probably kept her awake as I cried all night, but if I had been her, I hope I would have been a little more supportive. She didn’t try to engage me in a conversation, offer a hug or any other comfort, not even a drink, which I certainly could have used. She just showed me to a room and left me. My brother had asked David to be sure I wasn’t left alone. I have no doubt that David thought he was doing the right thing.

But the hurt and isolation were only just beginning. I must have left the next day because I don’t remember another night in that solitary confinement. We had lunch at what I would have called a posh, fancy place

that at any other time I would have revelled in. I saw a couple of people I knew there and this was the beginning of the feeling that would soon become commonplace: that I was a pariah. Because people are uncomfortable with your sorrow and don't know what to say, they avoid you, like the plague. I hoped I had never done that and pledged I never would. Avoidance is not the answer. A hug, a kind word, a squeeze of the hand or the shoulder is. I don't recall much about the journey until I arrived at Heathrow. Looking back, years later, I realize it was an interesting but painful study in psychology. I remember being on the bus that was taking me from the plane to the terminal. I couldn't turn off the tears. I was alone, obviously distraught, and not one person approached me, asked me if I was OK, or needed help. Perhaps it was the preposterous cassette player I was carrying. Why hadn't someone in Nigeria taken that from me?

I had hoped that I could get an earlier connection at Heathrow. My sister's funeral was that day and I needed to be there. But it wasn't looking good. The Concorde was flying to Detroit and I tried, in vain, to get on that. I would have made it to the funeral if I had been successful in my bid, but it wasn't to be.

Finally onboard a later flight and knowing the hour of the funeral, I made the time difference calculations and ordered two drinks: a beer for Fran and a rye and Coke for me. I would quietly toast her at the right time. The tears started again. I was trying to be quiet, to be dignified. A man from across the aisle came over and asked if he could sit with me. The plane was only about one-third full. I hoped the Concorde was filled to capacity. I hated the knowledge that I was missing Moe's funeral. I forget the man's name and face but his kindness and compassion have stayed with me through the years. He was returning from his father's funeral, so he could relate, to a certain extent. Softly, he asked if I wanted to talk. I realized that

I hadn't talked to anyone in what seemed like weeks, but was, in fact, only days. My distress was like a scarlet letter; it had seemingly been sending off leper-like signals. Maybe only someone else grieving had the sense and ability to cut through. It had not occurred to me until now just how much I wanted to talk about Moe, to tell her story, to share the fun-filled memories, the unbearable pain and sadness of the news that still hadn't sunk in and wouldn't for weeks, even months. Eventually though, that slow, sick realization did kick in. We would never see Frances again. How would we ever manage – not seeing her beautiful face, that smile, or hearing her laughter?

I talked about how close we were. Fran was twenty-four and I was twenty-six. She was the youngest girl in a family of twelve – five boys and five girls. I often wonder now how my mother had done it, but when I was younger, that question never occurred to me. Mom always made it appear seamless. We are all two years apart: planned parenthood, Irish Catholic style.

Life in large families involves some rules – spoken and unspoken. We all knew we were responsible for the one just below us in age. Pecking order ruled! Fran was my charge and I took on the role with gusto. My older sister tells me that when Moe was a toddler, I was the only one who could understand her babbling, her requests and demands. It was my first translating experience but not my last. We played and fought together. We shared clothes, though not always willingly, which inevitably resulted in some of the fighting! As we got older, we also shared friends.

All this came pouring out. My companion was a great listener. I barely realized how much I was telling him. We drank, I talked, he listened, I cried, we laughed, and we toasted my sister at the time of the funeral. We also toasted my recently acquired friend's father. We decided they were

both looking down on us from their new homes. I didn't get the man's address so I was never able to let him know how comforting his company was to me, how much I appreciated his compassion and attention and how he was responsible for easing a flight that could have been as hellish as the Kaduna to London section had been, as well as the stint in Heathrow. I suspect, though, that he knew. I hope that his kindness is one day also returned by a stranger.

At the line-up to immigration in Toronto, I did something which still seems inexplicable. I could see Phil, my eldest brother, standing at the counter, looking for me. As a travel executive, he'd been admitted in. Instead of running to him, I ducked behind the people in front of me. The line took ages to move forward. When I got to the front and my brother's arms he asked, "Didn't you see me?"

"No," I lied, knowing I couldn't explain, even to myself, how I had actually been hiding. The only thing that makes any sense to me is that I was trying to make time stand still; as though if I could control the clock, I could somehow make time travel in reverse. I never told my brother that. I was probably still in shock.

Phil had left the funeral early to come and collect me for the three and a half hour drive. That's how close I was to making it. A family friend drove and Phil got in the back seat with me for the journey home. Everyone was at 269 London Road, the family homestead, awaiting my arrival. It is a sad fact that when you lose someone, you become closer to those suffering the same pain. We were already a tightly knit family, but Fran's death strengthened those bonds and we determined that she was not going to have died in vain.

We started a Frances Egan Foundation and as a family we accomplished a great deal. Fran had died in an unprotected home. We went

door to door, across the city to people we had never met, following an intricately mapped out plan, giving out free smoke alarms, adorned with a picture of Fran and our motto, "Smoke alarms save lives". We also lobbied City Hall and had a smoke alarm bylaw passed.

In the months that followed, Fran did save lives. The thanks we received gave us great comfort, as had the kindness given me on that last leg of the journey home.