

Milda De Voe: There is no weirdness New York cannot absorb



Photo from personal archives

## MILDA DE VOE: THERE IS NO WEIRDNESS NEW YORK CANNOT ABSORB

### Introducing North American Writers of Lithuanian Heritage

Over the following months, this series will introduce North American writers of Lithuania heritage who write in English but maintain ties with Lithuania and honor and reflect on their Lithuanian heritage. This series defines writers of Lithuanian heritage as people who have ancestral roots in Lithuania, whether their religious faith is Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Pagan, or agnostic. It is not necessary to have 100 percent Lithuanian blood to participate! We live in a global era and while Lithuanian-born Lithuanians are traversing borders and can be found on virtually every continent and in every time zone, Lithuanians born abroad are coming home—either in a cultural sense or literally and physically—to the Homeland. All this movement makes for some very interesting writing that I hope to explore in this series. In a word, this series aims to break down the traditional barriers of who is a Lithuanian writer and what is important to Lithuanian writers. I do not profess having any definitive answers, but instead my goal is to ask a lot of questions.

I will ask writers over the next few months to share about their ties to Lithuania and to reflect on what it is in their writing that is uniquely Lithuanian, and whether it is even possible (or relevant) to seek such a definition. To better understand North American Lithuanians, it is useful to become familiar with an overview of Lithuanian emigration to North America. There have been three major waves of Lithuanian migration to North America over the past three centuries. The first wave took place in the mid to late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century when both Christian Lithuanians and Litvakes (Lithuanian Jews) began immigrating to North America while Lithuania was part of the Russian Tsarist empire. The second wave of emigration to the United States and Canada took place at the end of World War II, when Lithuanians escaping Soviet terror and Lithuanian Jewish Holocaust survivors sought refuge in the democracies of the West. The third wave of emigration from Lithuania into the United States, Canada, and elsewhere, has been taking place since Lithuania reinstated its independence in 1991.

Laima Vincė

### Interview with Milda De Voe

By Laima Vincė

Photos from personal archives

**Laima Vincė:** Tell me about your Lithuanian heritage?

**Milda De Voe:** I was born to Lithuanian parents, both of whom were born in Lithuania. My mother was born near the border with Latvia in a tiny town called Skaistgirys near the border of Latvia to the Viliunas-Tijunėlis family and my father was born in Kaunas. My father's mother was Izabelė Blauzdžiūnaitė-Motekaitienė, an opera singer in Kaunas. My grandfather was in the Lithuanian military. He was a physicist and worked on weaponry in the Lithuanian army. Both families emigrated separately. My parents met in Chicago and got to know each other well at the Lithuanian summer camps, especially at *Ateitininkai*, the Catholic youth camp. They dated and they married in Chicago. Almost immediately after they were married, they left Chicago because of the race riots in the 1960s and moved to Texas, and that's where I was born. They wanted a safer life for their kids. My father was a chemistry researcher, and he got a position at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. He was a chemistry researcher my entire life; he only became a professor late in life. We were raised to speak Lithuanian, and as far as we knew, we were the only Lithuanian family in all of Texas.

**Laima Vincé:** Did your parents ever talk about their life in the displaced persons camps?

**Milda De Voe:** Very little, and not at all when I was small. As I got older and started demanding information, they talked about it only glancingly. My mother would say, “It was hard” and nothing more. My father said nothing. They were each very young then, particularly my mother.

**Laima Vincé:** Would you say it was a traumatic experience for her?

**Milda De Voe:** Extremely traumatic. After living in the DP camps, my mother never felt that friendships were permanent. Any person she would befriend in the camps would soon disappear forever. Even when I was little, when I would say, “I want to go home with a friend,” she would say, “Friends are not important, family is the most important. That’s all you can count on. You can’t count on friends.” Being uprooted as little kids was definitely a life-changing experience for both of them. Their insistence on our family speaking Lithuanian at home seemed incomprehensible to me when I was little, but now I think perhaps it was quite valiant.

**Laima Vincé:** Does your Lithuanian heritage have any relevance to your writing and if so, how?

**Milda De Voe:** It does. So, as I mentioned, I grew up in Texas speaking Lithuanian with my family. I am the oldest of four. My three brothers and I were forced to speak Lithuanian at home even though outside of our home there was nobody at all who spoke the language. We were this isolated, quirky family. When I was little, I thought that every family had its own secret language, and our common language was English. Because my friends were also university people, I had friends from Holland, I had friends who were Chinese, I had friends from Peru who spoke Spanish. I really thought that every family had its own arcane family language and English only existed so we could all get along in society. As a consequence, this “Lithuanianism” made me feel very much like an outsider. You can imagine that there aren’t very many Lithuanians in Texas and when I was growing up there were zero. When I was little, I wanted community so badly that I went through the Houston phone book to see if I could find any Lithuanian last names. In that entire big city, I found only one Lithuanian surname. I called and left a message in Lithuanian, but they did not call me back. I sometimes wonder if they would have returned my call had I left the message in English—and how I would have explained that to my mother.

Because I always felt like an outsider, I was able to see society from an outsider perspective. I think that this is the reason why my fiction has this dark sense of humor that sees everything as a little bit quirky, a little bit strange, and thinks, isn’t that ironic. I find that I notice irony a lot more than most people do, certainly more than most Americans. My most recent collection of short stories has been compared to Kafka but from a feminine perspective. It is about society and relationships, but it still has that Kafkaesque perspective where you want to fit in, but you can’t fit in, and the society just sweeps you along, trapping you in its bureaucracy and madness.

Most of my writing is not set in New York or any actual small town. My settings are generic places and that’s because the world changes so quickly. For example, I’ve been to Lithuania quite a few times. Each time I arrive in Lithuania it’s an entirely new country. The first time I visited Lithuania was in 1985 and it had its own special qualities. The next time was in 1999, representing a theater festival. I went for a wedding a few years later, then I went again in 2006, and then in 2019 and 2022. Each time the culture, of the people, of the society, of the personality of the place, was so extraordinarily different. Architecture, foods, everything that was considered important in the culture, had undergone massive change. It was like visiting a new country every single time. Luckily, I could speak the language and kind of catch on. But even the language was transformed. The first time I went to Lithuania, the language was Russified with a lot of Russian words blended in. Now, I find so much English when I’m in Vilnius. My kids had no trouble getting by with English in Lithuania. There is so much anglicization in the vocabulary, that I don’t even know what’s allowed anymore and what’s not. The culture has absorbed a lot of

anglified terms in fields like business, law, computers. I spent many of my childhood years trying to excise the English from my Lithuanian language. Now many of the most contemporary words in everyday Lithuanian are English words with Lithuanian endings. When I was growing up, if I didn't know a word in Lithuanian, I'd say it in English and add a Lithuanian ending and that was not at all acceptable. People called it barbaric. It's a delicious irony that the language has changed to embrace what I was taught to avoid as a child. I don't think there's anything right or wrong about that. It's just funny, and that's okay.

**Laima Vincė:** Do you think that our Lithuanian names can be a hindrance in our writing careers in America?

**Milda De Voe:** I think that all names can be a hindrance, not just Lithuanian. Having a different alphabet letter is a big problem but so is a space in your last name. Still, some of the most beautiful Lithuanian names, like Živilė or Džiugas, are not names you could ever use for a character in an American novel. In the States, having a foreign name was always a problem for me, especially going back and forth between cultures. The Lithuanian endings were a problem, and I had a hard time reconciling Motekaitytė and Motekaitis. When I got married my name became De Voe, and it doesn't work with Lithuanian declensions, so that's a problem among Lithuanians. Initially, when I tried to sell my novel, the immigrant sound of my name made it hard to sell. I ended up using Milda DeVoe as my acting name, since it was the name registered to my stage union membership, so to distinguish myself as a writer, I use M. M. De Voe. If anyone asked what M. M. stands for, I tell them, Milda Motekaitytė. Recently, I learned that "MM" stands for love in French. Isn't that interesting considering Milda means the goddess of love in Lithuanian?

**Laima Vincė:** I had the same problem with my surname, Sruoginis. When I was at Columbia, Alice Quinn, who was the Poetry Editor at *The New Yorker* at the time, pulled me aside and said, "I really like your poetry and I'd like to publish it in *The New Yorker*, but no one can pronounce your surname. Think of a pen name." I didn't want to adopt a name that felt fake. I thought about it, and I went back to my birth certificate and took a look at my full name, Laima Vincė. I was given the name, Vincė, for my grandfather, Vincas, who died a few weeks before I was born. So, that became my writer's name.

**Milda De Voe:** I've always felt connected to my name, but I have relatives who've changed their Lithuanian names.

**Laima Vincė:** At some point you think, do I want to integrate into society and have a career or do I always want to be tagged as an immigrant and be on the outside? In Maine, when my daughter was born, every time I checked in at the doctor's office, the receptionist would look at my name on my chart and ask the nurse, "Does she need an interpreter?" I'd say, "I'm an English Professor at your local university, if you please." You are always marginalized. It was so true in the nineties. Now you can have your ethnic name.

**Milda De Voe:** Now your ethnic name can help you if you're writing in an ethnic way. If you're writing about your nationality. There's a sort of second wave of accepting immigrant names, an "own voices" movement.

**Laima Vincė:** When I interviewed the writer and actress Audre Budrys for my book, *Vanished Lands*, she said something that really struck me: "[...] in terms of seeing yourself reflected in American culture, well, all the stuff I watched growing up, it's fun, it's great movies and this and that, but I didn't see myself reflected in it because we knew we lived this dual life. We spoke Lithuanian at home and had our Lithuanian special traditions, like *kūčios* (Christmas Eve). Who we were as a community was never reflected in pop culture. Any small thing was a big deal, like the Simas Kudirka movie in the 1970s."

**Milda De Voe:** That's definitely something that is being addressed in American culture right now. There are so many people from so many places, and everyone wants to see themselves reflected back to them.

**Laima Vincé:** Kęstutis Nakas said in his interview, that he kept his name working in theater, and his name is a difficult name for Americans.

**Milda De Voe:** It even has a *nosiné!*

**Laima Vincé:** Nakas said, "In Lithuania never have I been, and never will I be, thought of as a Lithuanian. In American, in a sense you could pass through white privilege. But a lot of us kept our Lithuanian names. I kept mine. I kept that division, and it might be because I don't fully identify as an American. At moments I do. But I don't think your average American sees my name and thinks of me as an American. So, you're really not one or the other. You are a something else. You're in that category that's partly both. A hybrid."

**Milda De Voe:** I've come to realize that being unique is what I like. When I was acting, it was disturbing to walk into a room and see 14 women who looked like me. I am so used to being the only one who is like me.

**Laima Vincé:** Tell me about coming to New York. You are a Texan. Why New York?

**Milda De Voe:** I came to New York to go to acting school, but the minute I stepped foot in this beautiful city, I realized that I fit in here because this is a city made up of individuals. There is no weirdness that this city cannot absorb and accept. You don't have to change to be like your neighbor. The fact that you are different from your neighbor means you are in the right place. I love that. I belong here. New York is delighted to have a Lithuanian Texan writer who used to be an actress, who has kids, and writes novels that have queer characters and dark stories with monsters in them. New York loves that. And if I change my mind and want to do something else tomorrow, that's fine too, New York doesn't care.

**Laima Vincé:** New York absorbs everybody.

**Milda De Voe:** New York doesn't absorb you by making you the same as everybody else. When I was in Chicago, I always felt like an outsider no matter where I was in that city. It was a patchwork of different nationalities and if you didn't fit in with the identity exactly, it wasn't okay. I feel that even now in Chicago: which wave of immigration you are a part of really matters. And that is upsetting because I think that we can learn from each other. It makes a much richer tapestry to have more and more difference.

**Laima Vincé:** Having grown up in the New York metro area, the first time I went to Chicago as a college student for a Lithuanian event, I was shocked when I approached a group of Lithuanian girls, and they wouldn't talk to me because I wasn't part of their group. I was snubbed and spent the entire weekend by myself because I didn't fit into any clique. I wasn't Catholic enough, I wasn't this or that, I just kept thinking: get me back to New York!

**Laima Vincé:** I'd like you to say a few words about your acting career.

**Milda De Voe:** I was an actress in New York for ten years. I was in theater rep companies, I did Off Broadway, Off-Off Broadway. It was awesome. I loved it. I'd like to go back to it one day when I'm old so I can play the old crone.

I have to get through this middle stage where I'm too old to play the young ingénue and too young to get into old crone land. But, as soon as I get there, I will do it again because it's fun. I still do Lithuanian voice overs.

**Laima Vincé:** Tell me about your new short story collection.

**Milda De Voe:** Sure! Thanks for asking. It's a little Kafkaesque, a little dark. It hovers between realistic literature and horror. There are dead things, ghosts, but there is no graphic violence. It's about the dark side of society. It has many different styles. It touches all kinds of writing. It shows that I was looking for my voice for the last 20 years. I've realized that I can look at society as an outsider. I use genre as a lens. There is a story in the collection that's called, "Cake." It's a story about a family where the father is in the house, but he is an absent father. The children take after the father. The story is portrayed through a horror genre lens, but it is really about the fact that in some families as a mom you don't get any help. But at the same time, the story is weird and quirky and funny because that's who I am.

**Laima Vincé:** Who is your publisher?

**Milda De Voe:** Borda Books. They are located in Santa Barbara, California. They found me. They also publish a literary magazine called *Santa Barbara Literary Journal* which published two of my stories. The editor had been doing anthologies and solicited me to write a short story for a Halloween collection. Then a different editor asked me for a story. The two of them started this series called, "Bold New Voices" in which they publish story collections by a single author who does not have a novel out. They asked me to assemble a collection for their consideration. At first, I sent them a short story collection I'd written about various East European immigrants living in the United States. They wrote back and said, "This is too literary and beautiful, we want your weird stories." So, I did as they asked, and they were much happier.

**Laima Vincé:** Tell me what is most important for you as a writer?

**Milda De Voe:** Getting readers. I want people to read my work. I think people like my personality and want to talk to me rather than reading my fiction. I have a blog and I can see that people are reading my blogs, but they don't click the links to read the fiction. I don't know how to get people to read the actual fiction, but once they do read my stories, they really like them. I love talking about the written work. I can talk about process, but I really like talking ideas. I'm the type of person who can stay up all night talking about an idea—philosophical, political, cultural, or how to make the world a better place, how to raise children to be better people. Any big idea—that's what I love to talk about. So, partly writing for me is a way of incentivizing those kinds of conversations. I really like the idea of people reading my stories and having a late-night conversation over wine about what the story means.

**Laima Vincé:** How many books have you published?

**Milda DeVoe:** I've published two books. My first book was a nonfiction guidebook for writers who have children. It is divided into different ages of a child, and it has exercises to help the parent writer be productive and produce work and be creative while they raise the child.

**Laima Vincé:** You founded the organization Pen Parentis. Tell me about Pen Parentis.

**Milda De Voe:** Pen Parentis helps writers stay creative after they have kids. The book I just mentioned is actually partly a memoir about how I came to this idea. I had two children, and they were very young, and I was emotionally torn because I had this very expensive degree from Columbia University that said I was a good writer and I wanted to be able to prove it to the world by publishing a book. It was very difficult, I found, not just to write—that was not difficult—but all the business-end of being a writer in the United States. It's always very hard to get an agent, get a publisher, market your book, make sure people read your book. All of that is already extremely hard and becomes exponentially more difficult when you have a child, or two children. The organization came about partly out of my own need and the needs of my friends. We presented the new work of writers who had kids and also had great literary careers and we asked the writers how they did it.

**Laima Vincé:** And how did they do it?

**Milda De Voe:** The answer is: in very different ways. You create in any way you can! Don't feel bad about it. Guilt stops many mothers from writing. They feel there is a right and a wrong way to be an artist and to be a parent. If you get caught up in "the right way and the wrong way" of doing things you stop doing anything.

**Laima Vincé:** Have you ever had people in your group where the spouse does not allow their partner to be a writer after they have a child.

**Milda De Voe:** Yes, I've had that and later they get divorced. Sometimes one spouse doesn't think it's appropriate for their spouse to be a writer while raising children, but often the writer themselves feels that it is not appropriate to continue writing after having a child. Often, it comes from paying too much attention to their social media feed. They see other parents who claim that they are devoting one hundred percent of their time to watching their children without a break, and these people claim to be very happy. That influences mothers and fathers who think they should be doing more, and it is very unhealthy. You really shouldn't compete with other people about parenthood.

**Laima Vincé:** It's not only that, but the sheer physical exhaustion of raising children. I had three kids and no support, and I know it's very hard to write, and impossible when the children get sick.

**Milda De Voe:** And the birthday parties, and the math celebrations at school, and the volunteerism, and showing up to things so that the other parents don't think you're an absent parent. There are many layers. But, if you really love your job, you can do both. As long as you are a happy parent, you will probably be a good parent.

**Laima Vincé:** You must enjoy the camaraderie of Pen Parentis. You've built a community of writers.

**Milda De Voe:** The writers are very tight with each other, and I love seeing that. I love to see how they help each other. We've built a literary community where writers are no longer competing with each other but are helping each other. That's such a rare thing. This community of parent writers lift each other up and that's a beautiful thing.

**Laima Vincé:** Do you babysit for each other?

**Milda De Voe:** They do something better—they read for each other. They are each other's literary community. They are honest with each other about their work. Our salons are online. People can access them on

YouTube.com/PenParentis They are very interesting. Authors talk about literary craft, and they also talk about practical aspects of parenting and writing.

**Laima Vincé:** Tell me about the process of studying at one of the best Master of Fine Arts programs in the country and was it worth it? Could you have done it without the degree?

**Milda De Voe:** Before the degree, I had zero experience as a writer. I had only my own journal writing, and I'd won a poetry contest. I'd been writing for fun. When I decided to go back to college and get my degree, I chose Columbia for a dumb reason. I chose Columbia because I got married on that campus and it was a beautiful campus.

**Laima Vincé:** That was when I was a student at Columbia!

**Milda De Voe:** You were a student at Columbia, and I'd seen the campus through you. It was such a nice campus. I didn't know there were better schools or lesser schools. I just knew it was close because it was in New York. When I went there it was a big shock because it was very intense, and I'd never done a writing workshop and that workshop experience was hardcore. We sat around the table, and everyone read somebody's writing and then we discussed it, tore it to shreds, said how bad it was, and named all the things that needed to be improved. Almost all my workshops were led by very famous authors. It was pretty intimidating, but I refuse to be intimidated by anything. The very first workshop I put myself up to go first to be workshopped. Everybody was like, "Oh, okay." And they tore my story to pieces. But I didn't actually mind. I don't mind being told when something is wrong and when something can be improved, as long as they tell me concretely what I can change. I think that's very helpful. I also want to know why. I don't mind harsh edits and partly that's because of the trial by fire at Columbia. But I did love it. I did have amazing teachers who helped me tremendously. I was there for two years for classes and three years writing my thesis and I grew enormously as a writer.

**Laima Vincé:** Let's talk about mentors. Was there a professor at Columbia who you feel mentored you as a writer?

**Milda De Voe:** I had heroes, not mentors if you will. I really looked up to Michael Cunningham. He was my teacher and I hung on every word. I didn't really take advantage of him in terms of a mentor relationship. When I think of a mentor, I think of someone you go to for direct help and career advice, writing letters of recommendation and so forth. I didn't regard my professors as mentors, but as writers I looked up to and could aspire to.

**Laima Vincé:** When did you graduate?

**Milda De Voe:** I graduated in May 2001. My dad died two weeks before my graduation. It was very sudden and surprising. It was a heart attack. He was 61 years old—not old enough to die. He had airline tickets. He was going to come see me graduate. My husband and I bought our first apartment in May 2001, and my dad never got to see it. We closed on our apartment two weeks after my graduation. Then September 11, 2001, happened.

**Laima Vincé:** And you lived right across the street from the Twin Towers.

**Milda De Voe:** Yes, right across the street.

**Laima Vincé:** Do you want to talk about September 11th? I still remember what you told me then. Your husband Lawrence wet all the washcloths and towels you had, knocked on all the neighbors' doors, told them to put the washcloth over their nose and mouth, and organized getting everyone out of the building safely. People were in a state of shock. A woman had a two-year-old and Lawrence carried the baby to safety on his shoulders.

**Milda De Voe:** You remember well! The first plane hitting the towers threw me out of bed. We realized something bad was happening. Papers were flying everywhere—you know, the 8 x 11 office paper. There were so many papers in the sky that it looked like it was snowing. It was a beautiful blue-sky day like today and then the sky went completely dark. Black.

**Laima Vincé:** I remember you telling me there was something poetic about how all that paper was slowly floating down out of the sky as all this chaos reigned around you.

**Milda De Voe:** I was taking pictures of it. I wanted to put it in my head as a memory. I didn't want to just remember the fear, but all of the images...

**Laima Vincé:** You were so young facing that level of tragedy.

**Milda De Voe:** We did not have children yet, but we'd been married for ten years, so we knew each other.

**Laima Vincé:** You walked all the way uptown.

**Milda De Voe:** When the first plane hit, we were upstairs at home. After the second plane hit, we decided to leave our building. The first tower collapsed and that was when the sky went black. This was terrifying. We left as soon as we could and while we were in the street, the second tower collapsed, so we ran ahead of the dust cloud. The dust cloud from the tower was shooting down Maiden Lane. It was like an Indiana Jones movie with the dust cloud rolling behind us chasing us. We ducked around the corner like cartoon characters. We ran around the corner to escape the dust cloud and this man was waving us inside. So, we ran inside an office building. It turned out that man was a volunteer fire warden. He gave us water and masks. We had the craziest thinking. We knew the Pentagon had been hit. We did not know what else was going to be hit. All we could think was that they were hitting all the landmarks in the country. So, what we were doing was trying to figure out how to get to my mother-in-law's apartment on 77th and Lexington without passing any tall building that was going to get hit. So, we were saying, "We can't walk on Fifth Avenue because of the Empire State Building, we can't pass Grand Central Station, we can't walk past the United Nations Building, and so on." We finally ended up walking up 2nd Avenue because that was the only avenue we could think of that didn't have a major landmark.

**Laima Vincé:** My brother worked in the World Trade Center neighborhood at the time. He emerged from the subway just as the first plane hit. Our two younger cousins had just moved to New York from Alaska, so he found them and took them across the Hudson River by ferry to New Jersey to get them to safety. Have you ever written about your experience during 9/11?

**Milda De Voe:** I have, and my story was published in the *Oklahoma Review* on the five-year anniversary of 9/11. It was a fictional story about a filmmaker making a retrospective of the World Trade Center. Her marriage was falling apart, and she was deciding whether to have an affair as the World Trade Center was collapsing. I do like the juxtaposition of a relationship falling apart as a natural disaster is happening. I have a 9/11 story in my new

collection, *A Flash of Darkness*, as well. It's called "The Mayor of Flashback" and it takes place about 20 years after the collapse of the towers. The main character is a married man living in the South Street Seaport area and this woman from his past shows up. He goes out with her in the shadow of the window where his wife and child are, and he has an idea that he will have an affair, and then things happen that have to do with 9/11.

**Laima Vincé:** But you survived 9/11.

**Milda De Voe:** I did. I think it made me feel that things can always change and not to take anything for granted. But also, that you can overcome anything. I think 9/11 took away the idea that bad things only happen to bad people and good things happen to good people. There is a randomness to events.

**Laima Vincé:** I remember reading an early novel of yours that describes your trip to Lithuania to 1985 for the first time.

**Milda De Voe:** I love that novel and I hope that it gets published someday. It was a great trip, and the novel is just what you said.

**Laima Vincé:** I'll tell you what I remember about that novel. One of the themes is how these young teenagers are placed in a political situation that is way above their heads. They're going as naïve westerners into a communist space, they're drinking a lot of alcohol, and there is no adult supervision, and the adults who are around are questionable.

**Milda De Voe:** Yes.

**Laima Vincé:** You've got these older men sitting around drinking with fifteen-and sixteen-year-old girls, putting their arms around them, kissing them. I think your novel is a coming-of-age story about growing up too quickly, like super quickly, as in, the course of one week. You never published that novel. Why not?

**Milda De Voe:** I just never found a publisher for it in America. It's considered too Lithuanian. It's just not American enough. When I was first trying to sell it, I would get comments like, "Try to write something more American." I still would like to sell it one day.

**Laima Vincé:** I still remember your novel all these years later after reading it over twenty years ago.

**Milda De Voe:** Do you remember on our trip to Lithuania in 1985 how we ran into Kernagis on the train to Klaipėda and we were all singing with him?

**Laima Vincé:** I still have his record with his signature on it. But do you remember how we were pulled into smuggling Bibles and medicines into Soviet-occupied Lithuania?

**Milda De Voe:** And seeds.

**Laima Vincé:** I was asked to bring cancer medication for political prisoners who needed medicine and couldn't get it and Bibles to give to the church. But just think about your own kids at that age and imagine being put into a

situation like that with serious consequences.

**Milda De Voe:** It wasn't our idea to smuggle things. It was the adults who organized it.

**Laima Vincé:** Recently, I was reading through my diary of that trip. I wrote about how Father Dėdinas gave me three New Testaments in Lithuanian and asked me to bring them to a church. That turned out to be very complicated. I had a friend from Uruguay, Diana, a lovely person. She took a big risk together with me to run away from our tour handlers and get to a church and to deliver the Bibles. We found a woman in the church who would help us. Two other Lithuanian American girls were tagging along, but we didn't tell them what we were up to. The woman took us to a secret door that led to a back room to meet the priest. I describe in my diary about how the moment these two girls realized what Diana and I were doing, they looked at me with eyes filled with hatred and fear. They realized we'd put them into a dangerous situation. There could have been serious consequences at that time. The two girls turned around and left. After I finally gave the Bibles to the priest, I met up with my cousin, who told me I was a fool, that the Bibles would be traced back to me, that the priests were corrupt and will sell my Bibles on the Black Market for money. We had a crash course on a cynical world.

**Milda De Voe:** It was a world where you could trust nobody. Every single person had a horror story about what was going to happen to you. The core of my novel is about a political marriage, an arranged marriage between one of the teenage American boys in the group and a local Lithuanian girl. That is based on a true story that was shared with me.

**Laima Vincé:** I remember in high school you were dating a Litvak from Israel originally from Lithuania. Here we were, in a Lithuanian heritage high school, and we had no idea that there were Lithuanian Jews from Lithuania. We were taught nothing.

**Milda De Voe:** I obviously knew he was Jewish, but I didn't know that Lithuania had this enormous Jewish history. We'd never been told about that history. It is so separate from the Lithuanian history that we were taught that it took me many years to meld the two sides of this history together.

**Laima Vincé:** I wonder how he had to feel that his culture was never mentioned.

**Milda De Voe:** I don't know. We never talked about that. In my most recent trip to Vilnius, I was delighted to see that the Litvak history is being addressed. There were some informational placards on the walls of the former Jewish ghetto and people were giving tours about the vibrant Jewish history of the city. I hope that acknowledging the violent history of our country can help all people heal. I would love to live to see humanity as a whole evolve. I do not believe in secrets or denials.

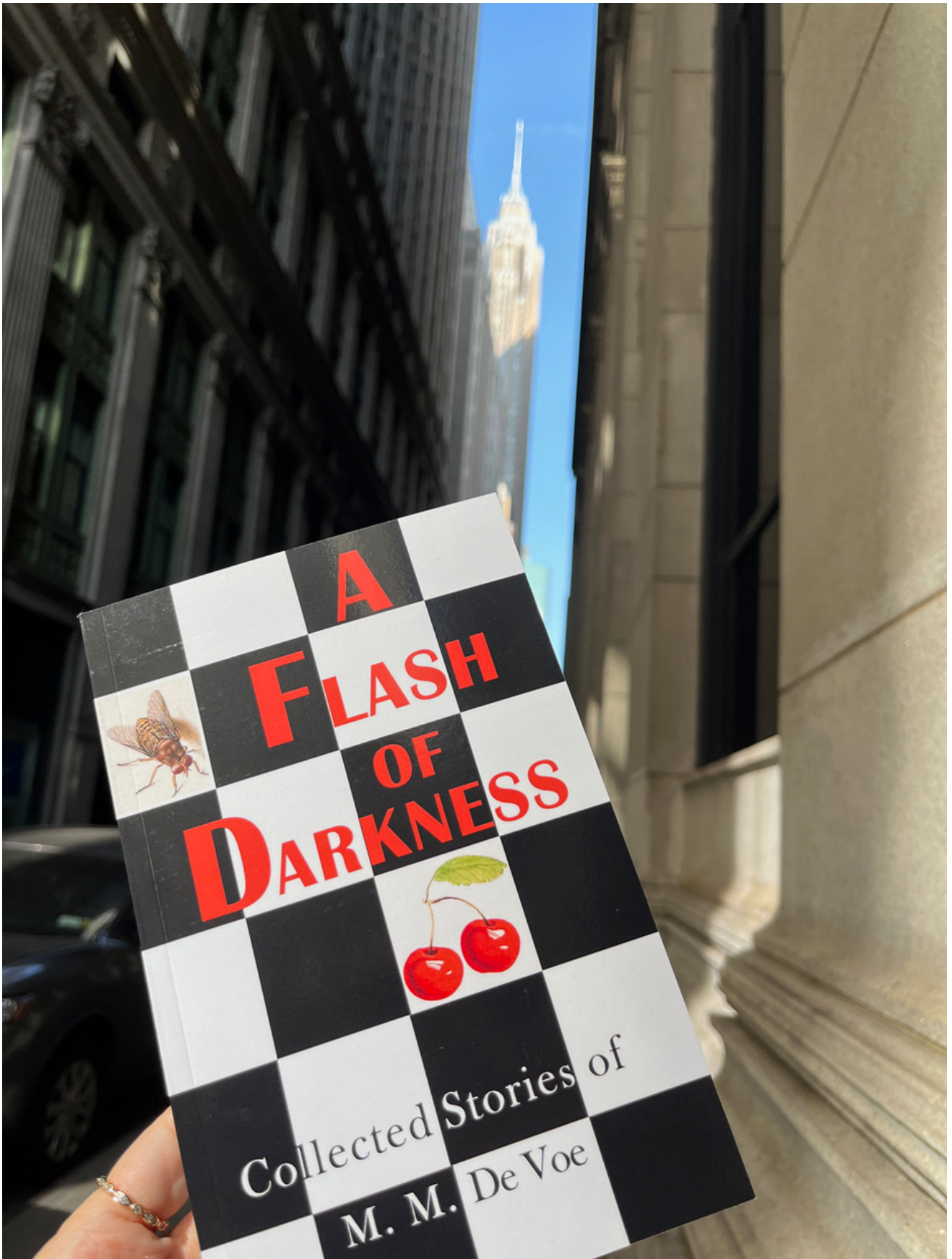


Photo from personal archives

**Sigita Washes**

By M. M. De Voe

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Sigita learned to walk by hanging onto suitcase handles. Later, her mother taught her to hide without moving whenever anyone said *Nazis* or *Russians* in a particular, half-whispered, half-strangled tone of voice. For two years and six months, her home was a textured city of heavy crates, bulging suitcases and piled-up boxes sealed in preparation for an imminent exodus.

“*Lietuva* will survive, she is strong,” her mother often said, as if the country were a person with a name who could hold a door shut against an intruder. Sigita’s mother had smuggled small Bibles into the school where she taught arithmetic and handed them out to the students instead of homework. Her name was on a list at the governor’s office.

On April 14th, 1944, before the first potato had been peeled for dinner, Sigita’s father opened the thick wooden door of the three-room cottage and announced, “We leave.” He had not been home in four days. His broad cheeks were ruddy, but Sigita made out a dark spot under his eye that was new. Sigita’s mother lowered her to the wooden floor and told her to stay close. The youngest aunt stopped wringing out linens and threw them, still wet, back into the laundry basket. Uncles, aunts and cousins of all sorts poured through the door. Sigita clutched her brand-new cornhusk doll to her ribs until pieces of the dried skirt flaked to the floor. The electricity had been shut off for weeks, but someone blew out the oil lamp, and in the dusky light of early evening, the family assembled into a long line.

Sigita backed into the corner.

Rimas, the tall uncle with the tickly black beard, did not swoop down to lift her high over his head and call her his long-legged good-luck stork. He walked by and picked up a box that his brother handed to him. He never even looked at her. Fat Auntie Gintarė, wearing all of her thick ropes of amber beads at once without irony, did not pat her on the head nor ask how she had gotten so big. Her fat sausage hands were curled around a fraying suitcase handle, dragging the tattered green bag out the door while she huffed and puffed between tugs. The twin cousins did not surround Sigita and pull her freshly washed hair and call it dirty and limp. Their barbed tongues were quiet; their perfectly matched hands and arms lifted boxes that seemed too big for them. Sigita examined all the familiar faces from the shadows. Friendly Grandma and her pink, toothless smile nowhere to be seen. If only the family might dance or sing, she thought, if Cousin Morta had remembered to bring a big ham, if someone would just light a candle or two, it could almost be like Christmas Eve.

Led by her mother and father, the relatives began to load the crates while Sigita tried to understand. Ten minutes ago, her mother had been magically creating a doll from a dried cornhusk, a needle and some thread. Sigita had been sitting in the safety and warmth of her mother’s lap while together they had made a bonnet for the doll from a scrap of bright blue cotton. They sat at the big wooden table, the late afternoon sunlight shining on her mother’s smooth brown braid. Sigita had laid the braid flat on the table and stroked its soft end, as if it were the tail of the old tabby cat that sometimes came around. Sigita’s mother had drawn wide black eyes on the doll’s yellow face with a laundry marker, and Sigita had asked for a smile to be drawn as well. It came out a bit crooked, but the doll still looked happy. The smile seemed out of place now that the house was being carried out of itself.

Sigita turned the doll’s face towards the human chain in hopes that its round black eyes would help her to comprehend the activity. Together, she and the doll watched adults and older children hand off sealed suitcases and boxes. When they were all loaded, the women began to fill the wagon with items grabbed as an afterthought—a basket of linens, a brass lamp, the lace curtains—shoved in between pre-packaged valuables. The men argued about space for passengers. The two horses snorted and stomped. Sigita wandered off to find the old brown tabby.

She was surprised when her father swept her up in his arms from behind. The tabby fled from her fingers with a yowl and Sigita reached her arms towards its vanishing tail. Her father yelled down at her, sour breath pouring from his wide wet mouth.

“Where have you been?” he shouted. He twisted her around to face him. Sigita wrinkled her nose against his foul breath. When she made the face, her father abruptly stopped shaking her and a big tear slid through the dust on his face, ending up in the corner of his mouth. His tongue licked it away. Sigita was so surprised that she hiccupped.

He hollered to the family that Sigita was found and then continued to cry and holler and hug her until she thought her ribs would be crushed like her corn-husk doll. Flakes of her fragile home-made friend trailed off behind her as her father carried Sigita feet-first towards the wagon, deposited her into a tall linen basket, and assigned the youngest aunt to guard her. Sigita giggled when her father dumped her in with the wet linens. She laughed when her aunt closed the cover for the first time, turning the red sunset into slivers of light. It was a while before she became afraid that they would never let her out again.

They traveled from Lithuania across Poland and into Germany in a caravan of wagons led by oxen and horses, one behind the other, leaving a trail of things that lost importance with distance: books, paintings, clothing, knick-knacks, mirrors. Occasionally, the caravan would stop to allow everyone to run into the bushes to void themselves. People were sometimes left behind. People were sometimes shot.

Sigita’s personal guard, the aunt who later died of a cough in Germany, shoved Sigita’s head under the wet linens so often that the soap which had never been rinsed from that load of laundry left raw red spots on her chin and cheeks. When the caravan stopped, the aunt dragged her into the bushes and watched with hawk eyes as Sigita squatted over the grass and the little white clover blossoms. Then it was the aunt’s turn, but when Sigita tried to watch her, she would slap the little girl’s arm and tell her to turn away. So Sigita stared at the sky and the swallows and felt her aunt squeeze her arm in apology, and listened to her aunt’s animal grunts, always worrying that her aunt might be shot, still clasping her arm.

At special times, when the air was quiet, Sigita was allowed to poke her head out of the basket. No one would talk to her, not even her personal aunt. Sigita wanted to know who was in charge of the wagon train, how they had all assembled so swiftly, where they were going, and when they would be back. When she asked, her aunt clucked and closed the lid. Sigita sat in the damp darkness and pretended the tabby was with her. She stroked the towels. When the itching became intolerable, she scratched the red marks on her cheeks, her legs, the palms of her hands, her arms.

At the DP camp, her mother shaved three sharp-smelling slivers off the bar of homemade soap and sent Sigita to the pump to wash the rash. Sigita rinsed her sore face and arms in the well-water and stared at the slivers of soap in her hand. They smelled like the basket, like the towels. She looked around. Her heart raced as she deliberately dropped the soap shavings into the dirt. No one had seen her. Her father would hit her if he knew. Soap was valuable. She stared at the waxy yellow slivers lying on the ground and kicked dirt over them until they were invisible. Soap went away like everything else.

As the weeks went by, the other children began to call her names in their own languages. They held their noses when she walked by. They giggled and ran away when she tried to approach; their sneers were enough to make her wish she could touch soap again. But whenever she raised a lather, her eyes would tear up from the smell until she couldn’t see, and she would freeze, trapped once again in the suffocating memories of the small dark basket.

She was excluded from the “school” meetings that the kids set up with each other to learn as much English as possible while they waited in the camp for the boats to take them and their families away. There were twenty

families in Sigita's tent, each separated by a clothesline and a sheet. At night, sounds of love and hate scorned the stained cloth walls and their illusion of privacy. She learned to un-hear in the two years that passed at the camp. There were many sounds for the child to ignore: not just the sighs and sobs and soft foreign nicknames from behind the sheets. Often airplanes would buzz the camp, their sound more a roar than a buzz. Drunk men crashed into song at times; wives shushed them and got slapped for their efforts. Babies cried and were ignored by their own parents as well as Sigita. If she had not learned to ignore the sounds of her world, she would have been wakened every night by the popping sounds outside the fence. Even in peace time there were guns—every night, the American soldiers stopped by trying to impress the older girls.

One such soldier offered Sigita a bottle of strawberry perfume in exchange for a series of kisses on his body, all of them sweet and chaste. He told her to say, "God loves me like this," before each soft kiss. She gladly kissed his rosy cheeks and rough hands, but when he asked her if she wouldn't mind kissing his knees, Sigita hesitated. He did not press her, but neither did he give her a piece of gum. That day she confided in a white-haired Polish girl who spoke a bit of Lithuanian. The Polish girl explained to her that so long as the kisses were really for God, then it couldn't really matter where they landed.

The soldier had to leave before giving her the perfume, but Sigita kept the twenty-five pieces of gum and the three valuable cigarettes she collected from him rolled up in a sock. She traded them at last to a girl with a wide pink scar which split the skin of her arm from her elbow to her shoulder. The older girl was from a rough voiced, dark-haired country, Algeria or Romania or Croatia. By using hand signals and gestures, Sigita traded her valuables for a doll with eyes that opened and closed. Big brown eyes. Eyes that slept when instructed to. Eyes that could stand to look at people who would do anything for food and worse for a ticket to America. Eyes that could watch her mother visit other tents and could watch her father wait for her return.

Sigita had just turned eight when her father maneuvered her by the shoulders onto the boat, and again she watched as their crates and boxes and suitcases were shoved along. Again, half was left behind to forget. Her mother walked in front of them, back straight, head high and Sigita tried to mimic her stoicism. For three weeks at sea, Sigita suffered the bad weather and the terrible tossing of the ship in silence.

"It is unnatural for the child to keep so still," her mother whispered to her father when they thought she was asleep.

"It means she's strong," her father answered, ending the discussion. Sigita hugged her doll closer to her chest, proud that he had noticed. The hours ran together. There was no sunlight to mark the days.

Then one day, Sigita woke to find a rat gnawing on her doll and something broke within her. She began to howl, and when she had no more air to howl, she slept. When she woke, she howled again. Her father yelled at her, humiliated and angry at her crying. But Sigita found that even though she wanted to obey her father, she could not stop her screams. Finally, her father slapped her across the mouth. Her mother grabbed his arm.

"Do not hit her again," she said. Sigita sobbed into her mother's wool skirt, stuffing the thick material into her mouth, trying to hold back the noise. She was afraid it would be her fault if her father hit her mother and it would be her fault if he hated them and it would be her fault if she never stopped crying and he was forced to kill her. Her fear emerged from her throat in a long shrill vowel.

"Make her stop that noise," her father said, and he turned his back on his family and moved to a far edge of their moldy mattress, trying to ignore the eyes of the others in steerage. When Sigita had exhausted herself, her mother enfolded her. Sigita rested on the scratchy wool blanket and clutched the brown-eyed doll to her tiny heaving chest.

“My poor little stork,” her mother murmured, kissing her on the head, “Things will be better in America.” She watched Sigita’s fist tighten around her doll’s chest. Sigita’s father grumbled something about never wanting to leave *Lietuva* in the first place.

In steerage, the air itself was an illness. Around them, passengers were sick from the incessant rocking of the boat. Once in a while, a deckhand would come down to mop the floor, only to have someone fall ill a moment later. Many had fevers; one had a gangrene infection on his foot. He showed it to Sigita only once. She pressed her face into her doll’s knitted skirt, into the raw yarn which scratched her nose and cheeks but smelled like cut hay. She was afraid she might use up the delicious smell, so she took shallow breaths until she felt dizzy. When he put his sock back on, she told the man his foot looked like the piece of pork that her mother had left out of the icebox for too long, and it smelled twice as bad. The man and his bad foot disappeared a day or two later.

Everything on the boat was rationed. In steerage, each passenger was allotted seven pieces of hardtack, a piece of cheap meat, two green potatoes, a handful of rice, half a quart of oatmeal and a half bucket of water per day. The family pooled its food, and Sigita received less. She told her mother, in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, that she was proud to be the one to give her father enough food. Secretly, Sigita hoped she would starve to death so that her father would feel bad.

Before going to sleep, she whispered to her doll that anyone in the boat could have her whole portion of food if she could only get one piece of peppermint, like she sometimes could get in West Germany. Peppermint had such a nice smell. Nicer than cut hay.

Water was the rarest commodity, but Sigita had long since forgotten what it felt like to be clean. She drank her water drop by drop, sometimes lapping it like a cat, until one of her parents saw her and told her to stop wasting things. She sometimes wanted to spill her water ration on the floor of the boat, just to see what they would do. And then one day, her mother took her by the hand and led her up from steerage to the deck along the slippery metal staircase.

It was sunset, and the red and gold streaks across the blue sky blinded Sigita after the dim belly of the ship. Shadowy ships of many sizes surrounded the boat. Some had lights that looked like bright jewels. The water was a deep ink with a single path of golden light leading across the darkness from the boat to the setting sun. The air felt like a salt cleansing after the smells belowdecks. Sigita breathed deep and suddenly the people around her exploded in cheers. Voices laughed and cried on every part of the boat. Someone hugged her mother, and her mother released her into the arms of the stranger. She was passed like this, from hand to hand, from stranger to stranger, so swiftly that she had no time to become truly frightened. She clutched her doll, swept along in this monster of human relief as they screamed and hugged each other and lifted her above their heads, until the little girl ended up panting and weeping far away from her mother.

Sigita clutched the cold iron railing of the ship with one hand and her doll in the other and yelled Mama, while around her, the fervor mounted. Everyone was laughing and pointing at a protuberance on the horizon. They were dancing on the deck. They were running below and returning with their belongings, shirts and socks dribbling along behind them. Music was played on homemade instruments, and men stomped along with the joyous tunes. Soon Sigita was also dancing. She forgot her mother and danced with her doll, spinning around until her eyes hurt.

A woman threw her suitcase into the ocean. Another.

Soon, everywhere Sigita looked, there was a shower of possessions falling into the Atlantic. In the path of golden light, waterlogged pants began to sink. Shoes floated, skirts ballooned, suitcases looked like tiny fishing ships with no lights. Sigita laughed; it was a game, a celebratory game. Sea gulls swooped down in ecstasy to peck at the floating debris; they looked like angels to the child.

“We are in the land of opportunity!” a teenaged boy shouted at the golden clouds and a thick book spiraled from his hands and landed in the water with a splash.

“We will need nothing!” a deep bass voice from across the boat echoed.

“We have arrived!” someone else shouted. Everywhere there were shouts and laughter followed by splashes in the water that the Lady of Liberty protected.

Sigita looked up at the serene face of the crowned queen who held up her fire and stared into the sun, and she cast her doll at the feet of the calm statue. As her fingers released, Sigita reconsidered the gesture; too late. She reached towards the water, her stomach flat against the wooden deck, her empty hands flailing after her only friend. The doll’s eyes winked closed as she bobbed in the golden water. Sigita was still screaming when her mother found her and led her by the hand to her father who was busy collecting their few remaining things into a pile.

“Be silent,” he said to his wailing child. Sigita stared at him, needing to release the loss trapped in her throat, but unable to disobey him. Her arms had never felt so empty.

In the cold waiting room on Ellis Island, surrounded once again by luggage, her mother told her a folk tale about a wolf and a silver bear while Sigita hugged her knees to her thin chest and wished the hard wooden chair was more comfortable. Her father looked angry. The folk tale’s moral was never to follow the crowd, but to Sigita it made no sense. When her mother stopped talking, she slipped off the chair and leaned out the window to look at the flag that had caused all the fuss. It waved over the water, but Sigita was unimpressed. It was bright, happy, and new. It didn’t seem nearly as dangerous as the yellow, green, and red flag that her father had removed from its secret compartment in the floor of the old house, gently kissed, and stashed into the bottom of a suitcase.

A grumpy woman in a white coat took Sigita from her parents and led her off to a room filled with other girl children where a younger woman covered them with a chemical-smelling white foam that spurted from a large canister, burned her eyes, and made her spit in a very unladylike manner. Then she was hosed down with cold water until her skin smarted. The air was icy and she was ashamed to be so pink next to all the children with skin like toast or hazelnuts. She crossed her hands in flat overlapping pancakes to hide her privates and stood there, naked and shivering, waiting for the rest of her life.