

Invasions by Marg Heidebrecht

As invasions go, the operation is restrained. Fewer than a hundred army personnel; a pre-fab garrison; panels to form a palisade. No rations, no bunks; short-sighted had the goal been to conquer instead of relocate. Unlike its massive precursor, the horse deposited inside the gates of Troy, this vessel weighs a scant two kilos. And the soldiers inside the box designed to hold size 9 rainboots? Plastic.

There had been no green mini-combatants stationed in my childhood home. My siblings were female; my father's best friend, a pilot, was shot down from the sky. But I knew of their existence; had stumbled upon them when making teacakes in a neighbour's sandbox. Crouching, kneeling, or mid-stride, they clutched weapons and steadied themselves on a thin, oval base. Military maneuvers began on the last day of school; Labour Day signaled a truce. The backyard was raked in an effort to abide by the dictum, *Leave no one behind*. Yet every spring, robins hopped over the helmets and binoculars of the few who had spent the winter buried under ice; hibernating, like lost mittens, until revealed by the melting snow. I remained an observer; perhaps a U. N. peacekeeper or a citizen of Switzerland.

Upon marrying a widower, I witnessed the aftermath of a different kind of battle; a family wading through grief despite a wife and mother's valiant effort and courageous struggle. Cancer. Domestic life was a minefield. A wise friend responded to my complaint that a teenager had turned on the dryer for a single pair of jeans. "Is this the hill you want to die on?" She knew how hostilities escalated. In combat, and in laundry rooms. The only blood shed that day was the result of me biting my tongue.

Given this context, I stayed tightlipped regarding household habits with which I disagreed. Most were unfamiliar, though not unreasonable. The volume of music (loud), the occurrence of snacking (frequent), the species of pets (rodentia). I had my own line in the sand when it came to weapons. I pointed out the window at the artillery stationed on the brick wall of the patio; at the explosion of mini-firecrackers that signaled an end to the ceasefire required by piano lessons and a paper route.

“We tried,” my husband shrugged, “to stay away from toys like that. Gave up when he chewed his toast into the shape of a gun.” It would take more than a grilled slice of Wonder Bread for me to hoist a white flag. But he was describing the 60s; the era when toddlers sat in the front seat and children walked to school. Alone.

Our big kids grew up; our little kids were born. Uno, Lego, Bingo all returned to active duty; the band of the brother’s brothers did not. By an order-in-council, mine, the squadron was redeployed to a concealed location beyond the reach of small hands “to keep them safe.” I did not correct the assumption it was the toys I was protecting; in fact, it was the other way ‘round.

For the past decade, base camp has been the wall unit where we keep games that made the cut during our last move. Fisher-Price, Brio; activities we rely on to occupy grandchildren on rainy afternoons, or in lockdown. But now my step-son, the original commander-in-chief, moves 2,000 kms due south; he asks us to ship the battalion to *his* young son. When they still lived nearby, this eight-year-old came for sleepovers. We spent hours in the garden; shoulder to shoulder; under attack. Him, by an advancing enemy line; me, by an advancing enemy vine.

Both of us rooting out infiltrators; celebrating our victories with ice-cream instead of a parade. Think parallel play meets generation gap. Gender gap too.

His younger cousins will not notice that the top shelf of the basement cupboard is bare. In spite of their propensity to use tree branches and tent poles for shooting hot lava, I stick to my own guns, so to speak, and place the army out of sight when they visit.

I gather up twine, packing tape, brown paper; place them beside the pile of soldiers on the kitchen counter. Unable to follow the traditional protocols that assess strength, agility, and reaction time, I examine the GIs for severed heads and missing limbs; any in this category are scooped into the garbage bin under the sink. When the zippered-sandwich bag proves too small for those that remain, I divide them into platoons, pull out another bag lest the over-crowding prevent them from breathing. (Breathing?) The infrastructure is inconsistent: a fort from 1812, a bunker from WWII, a farm house from, well, a farm. Had I paid better attention in history and updated my prescription for bifocals, I would realize that the soldiers are equipped for distinct settings that span decades. And more than one continent. I nestle the buildings into the reinforced corners of the cardboard box; a safety measure should the parcel slide off a fast-moving conveyor belt, or be shaken by a truculent customs agent at the end of a double shift.

The border between Canada and the USA is long and, in places, a challenge to identify. This led to a job when my husband was a student; he spent the summer surveying the forest in southern B.C. A team with machetes hacked new growth; a relentless effort to maintain a 20-foot-wide swath that could be seen from the air; a reminder for the states of Washington, Idaho, and Montana that they weren't in Kansas anymore. I assumed an aggressive crossing of

this undefended border would progress from south to north; motivated by our neighbours' desire for more elbow room, or water. But the direction is flipped.

From: Ontario, Canada. To: Florida, USA. I walk to the drug store, navigate the aisles of discounted confections and discontinued shades of lipstick towards a counter at the back. I fill in the expedited parcel form; toys, a gift, then sign my agreement that nothing inside is dangerous. According to the terms and conditions outlined by Canada Post, this is accurate, though my doubts remain.

Our home is, for the first time, a demilitarized zone. Part of me is relieved. Forty plus years of accommodating a station for troops made me a collaborator. I am ready to resign or receive an honourable discharge. But another part of me admits that there are many kinds of ammunition in addition to bullets and cannon balls; the invisible, insidious grenades we hurl at each other when skirmishes erupt. Reality cracks ideology. Forget the light getting in; that's how the malice trickles out. I endured my own court marshaling for a childhood incident of this sort. In a kitchen. With a bar of Dove. Ever the peace-maker, my mother overheard the words I was spewing during an argument. She reached for the soap, turned on the tap, and scrubbed the inside of my mouth. This was not in response to profanity, there was none, but to the slashing, the stinging, and the vicious tone aimed at one, or both, of my sisters. Without reading Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, I recognized the advantage of leaning into strength and exploiting weakness until my mother intervened with a weekday reminder of a Sunday morning lesson. Words, weapons; the log in my eye, the specks in the eyes of my opponents.

The parcel takes a detour through Chicago. It arrives at a sorting centre where the options are a five-minute hiatus or months in captivity. My guys get lucky; they reach their destination within a few days. 27°, partly sunny, a lanai with a gulf view. Mission accomplished.

Upon closing the tab for tracking packages, images from the news enlarge and dominate the screen of my laptop. Oligarchs, tyrants, despots. Was there no soap in the homes in which they were raised? Did no one notice when they descended from confident to arrogant, from self-assured to brazen? When they wolfed down the oxygen in rooms, puffed out their egos to fill every available space?

While I fret over war play, legions of grandmothers witness invasions in real time. Today, it's the babusias in Kyiv. The soldiers attacking them, the soldiers defending them are crouching, kneeling, mid-stride; they clutch weapons and steady themselves. Not on a thin, oval base. In rubble. When injured, these women and men don't melt and tip over. They bleed, and then they die.