

The Western Alienation Merit Badge



a novel

Nancy Jo Cullen

The Western Alienation
Merit Badge



Also by Nancy Jo Cullen

Fiction

Canary

Poetry

Science Fiction Saint

Pearl

untitled child

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A Buckrider Book

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For Mary Jane, Burke, Debbie, Sue, Mike & Danny,
my sisters and brothers

You will often come across things to do and learn that will relate back to things you have already done and learned.

The Guide Handbook, 1965

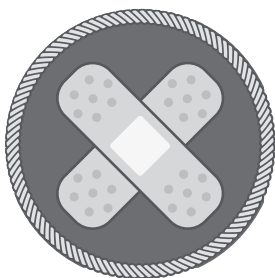
After the inland sea dried up and its beaches turned to sandstone and the plant life turned to coal and gas, the ice advanced and ground the stone to dirt, then later retreated from the riparian valleys, coulees and rolling plains where now a girl stepped through the rabbitbush, rough fescue and western wheat grass. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, pulled her six-shooter cap gun out of its holster, pointed the pistol in the air and fired. A loud pop and the choking smell of the burning cap, but nothing else. No other creature.

She pulled *The Guide Handbook* from the rear waistband of her cut-offs and turned the blue and white paperback over in her hands. She traced the cloverleaf with the letters GGC on the back cover, mouthed the words *Published by Girl Guides of Canada Guides du Canada 1965* and flipped it open to the foreword. At the bottom of the page she stopped on the sentences: “You are now a Guide Recruit. This book is for you.” The girl wiped her eyes again and, sick of crying, she spat on the page. She raised her arm to hurl the book into the field; let the ground squirrels and magpies tear up the pages for their nests. But, after a moment’s hesitation, she dropped her arm and tucked the pilfered book back into the waistband of her shorts. Fuck them. She was keeping it because this book was for her, right? Even if she was no goddamn Guide Recruit.

The background of the page is a detailed topographic map. It features numerous contour lines of varying thickness and spacing, representing different elevations and terrain features. The lines are drawn in a light gray color against a white background. The map shows a complex landscape with many peaks, valleys, and ridges. The text 'Autumn 1982' is printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font, centered horizontally and positioned in the upper-middle section of the page. The text is clearly legible against the intricate line work of the map.

Autumn 1982

Emergency Helper



Frances called home as soon as she got the letter, but Doris had been dead five weeks by the time she reached her dad. She could hear Bernadette in the background, all despair: “Dad, you can’t just shake your head. Frankie can’t see your face. Use. Words.” She sounded ready to blow.

Frances unfolded the letter, sent by her stepmother on July 19. It was written in Doris’s perfect script on both sides of a single page.

Dearest Frankie,

I’ll be brief. I’m afraid everything has taken a turn for the worse and the doctors haven’t given us much hope. I worry about your dad, how he’s going to cope after I’m gone. He’s very sensitive and he misses you terribly. He’s too proud to say so, but I know it to be true.

Bernadette has been a great help driving me to chemo when your dad has had to work, but believe me when I tell you that things have gone from bad to worse. Your dad was laid off. They

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gave him two weeks and a small package. To be honest, they've done the best they can and let your dad go so Brian, who still has three children living at home, can continue to work. Your dad and I both understand, so many people are losing their jobs, we're lucky he was able to get what he did. He'll have my pension, but it's not much and he'll still have to make mortgage payments. I suppose we should have thought about insurance but we just never did. We just didn't expect something like this so soon.

I know that I'm asking so much of you and I know you just want to be out in the world. And you deserve to be out there being young and free, but I love your father and I think he's going to need you when I'm gone. I wish you would consider coming home. I can't make you return and I wouldn't want to, but I am going to ask you to look into your heart and do what you feel is right.

When you consider what I am asking of you, think also of this: I don't know what the Lord's great plan is, but I believe He has a rationale for everything he puts in front of us. Remember, God doesn't make mistakes. I trust in God's will, and I trust you too, Frankie, to do the right thing.

I am so grateful to have had any time at all with your dad, and with you and Bernie. It's been an absolute pleasure, Frankie, thank you. Don't be afraid to pray for my soul, I'm sure I can use all the help I can get.

With much love and a willing heart,

Doris xo

As if Frances could stay away after that letter, let alone the bloody phone call with her dad all catatonic and Bernie so irate. The letter had taken nearly two months to reach her in Sagres. Working under the table, serving the endless stream of Brits that frolicked on the Portuguese shores had been fun. "For once," she muttered.

“What?” Reena turned her head toward Frankie. She’d been staring listlessly out the window, a cigarette burning between her fingers. Reena refused to stay in Portugal without Frances, refused to let her make the trip back to Gatwick on her own, but had barely spoken to her since she’d made the decision to return to Calgary.

“I’m not angry, Frannie,” she’d said. Then she’d kissed Frances and pushed her onto their small bed. “I’d just rather not talk.” And so they spent their last night together fucking and drinking sangria. It was a splendid finish to the Algarve, before the long journey by bus, train and ferry back to Gatwick for Frances’s flight home. Except now Frances was hungover and ravenous; Reena was chain smoking and punishingly silent, but not angry.

“Nothing,” Frances said. “Just talking to myself.”

Reena took a drag from her cigarette then crushed it into the ashtray.

“Shit got better when Doris came into the picture,” Frances said.

Reena nodded and lit another cigarette.

Doris was into peace and no nukes; she loved Dorothy Day and liberation theology. She even got Frances to read *The Long Loneliness*, hoping, Frances guessed, that it would turn her back into some kind of good Catholic. “But you quit the convent,” Frances would argue. “I quit the convent, not God,” Doris would say. Then Frances would say, “Well, I quit both.” They had that circular argument more than a few times.

Well Doris was dead now and, according to Bernie, their dad was drinking himself into a nightly stupor and crying whenever *Magnum P.I.*, or even an ad for *Magnum P.I.*, came on because it had been their favourite.

“You’re going to run out.”

Reena shrugged.

The train lurched northward.

On the Channel crossing they sat on the outside deck and Reena started to cry.

“Bugger it,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” Frances said.

“Well I’m not,” Reena snapped.

They parted awkwardly at Victoria Station. Reena wrote down Frances’s Calgary address and barely promised to write. They hugged briefly and separated. Because what else could they do? Then Frances was taking off and then the 707 was taxiing toward the Calgary terminal.

Frances glanced out her window, dark construction cranes stood in front of the Calgary Tower, hooks dangling. Red Square her dad and his cronies called it. So she was back, whether she wanted to be or not. Safely landed in Calgary, with its newly bankrupt oil barons, out-of-work rig hands, jobless heavy-duty mechanics and unemployed secretaries. *Yippee yi yo kayak.*

Signaller



“Nice army boots.” Bernie’s first words to Frances. “They go with the brush cut.”

“Thanks,” Frances said sweetly.

Bernie wrapped a single arm around Frances, pulling her close. “Sarcasm, sweetie.” She ran her hand across Frances’s flattop. “What were you thinking here?”

Frances swung her backpack with her free arm and headed toward the doors.

Bernie fired up a smoke as soon as they got into the car. “I’m trying to quit,” she said.

Frances unrolled her window.

“You’ll see why it’s so hard.” Bernie took a long drag on her cigarette.

They drove in silence. Barlow Trail rolled past, the mountains, already dusted with snow, marking the western horizon. Then the Sheraton Hotel, the Husky truck stop, the endless repair and service shops housed in dull beige buildings and, after the impossibly tiny

cars of Europe, trucks, all trucks, like the *Jimmy* they were driving, the brand name her dad couldn't resist.

"Poor daddy," Frances said.

Bernadette nodded. "But I have to tell you, he's not so easy to live with right now."

Frances bugged her eyes at Bernadette.

"Sure that shit with Doris was brutal, I mean really, really terrible. But hey, I lost a good job too!" Bernadette tossed her cigarette out the window, the better part of it not smoked. "And the guy I used to work for just died of a massive heart attack. He lost everything. Every fucking thing. You have no idea."

"Give me some credit, Bernie."

Bernadette raised her eyebrows and drove on, eyes on the road, hands tightly gripping the steering wheel, knuckles white.

"Okay, you can roll your window up now," Bernie said.

Frances rolled her window up. The sisters drove in silence toward their father waiting at home.

Jimmy was standing in the window. When Frances stepped out of the truck, he held his hand up – more like a stop signal than a wave. Jesus, he did look crazy. Frances offered a careful wave in return. Jimmy smiled and raised his other hand. He was holding a Pil; he tipped the brightly illustrated green and red label toward her, a salute of sorts, raised the bottle to his mouth and took a long swallow. Then he bent toward the sofa and disappeared from view.

"I know you thought I was exaggerating," Bernie said.

Citizen



Jimmy watched his girls retreat (at last!) into the kitchen. No he didn't want tea, thank you very much. He was trying to watch the news while they nattered on about wherever the hell it was Frankie had been. A guy could hardly hear with that racket. He stood close to the TV and stared down into the set until they got the message. Then he cranked the volume and flopped back into his chair.

Though he had to wonder why he turned the news on day after day. Each report was as bad the last, and sometimes worse. Everybody foaming around the mouth about jobless rates. And now, Jesus H. Murphy, this here election. But maybe Kesler and those separatist kooks would give Lougheed a run for his money. Jimmy swatted at the air. Blah, blah, blah, he wasn't voting anyway.

He didn't give a fuck about any election, or whatever fat cat represented him in Edmonton. Once a guy was in government he did just what he wanted anyway – those jackasses in Ottawa fixing the price of oil against all of Alberta were proof enough of that. Jimmy

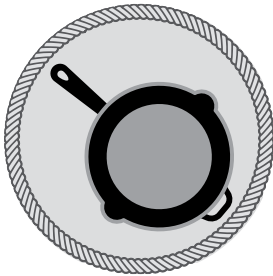
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snorted. Someone was getting rich, but it sure wasn't him. Lord, he wished he could just feel bad about shitty job prospects. It would be a blessing right now to only have to worry about not having a job, and this unnecessary Alberta election, and those bastards in Ottawa. Instead, all he could think about was his dead wife; all he could think about was everything they were never going to have again.

He needed a nap.

He left the TV blaring and went into his room.

Cook



Later, her body clock scrambled, Frances paced the basement, jangly with fatigue. Her dad built her a bedroom and rumpus room right after they moved in, so he and Doris could have privacy. So they could get it on, which she didn't ever like to think about – not then, not now. Jimmy also built himself a workroom that was so disused it was covered in grime. Inside the workroom was a table, and piled against the rear wall was an old tire, a space heater, some Christmas lights and a box of decorations. Frances drew a smiley face in the dust that covered her dad's worktable.

The rumpus room was equipped with her old record player and, next to it, a fourteen-inch black-and-white Toshiba she won in with a raffle ticket purchased from some Rotary Club guy on Stephen Avenue. Now that was a rare bit of good luck. She thumbed through her LPs then placed the Pretenders on the turntable and lay down the length of the navy blue sofa that Jimmy and Doris had scavenged from an alley. A spring pushed into her ass. You get what you

pay for – that’s what Jimmy would say when she complained about the sofa. On the windowsill sat a maniacal-looking papier-mâché gopher she’d made as a kid. Her stomach churned: meatloaf and the fucking strangeness of absolutely everything here.

Jimmy’s dinner plate was piled with meatloaf slathered in ketchup and baked potato smothered in butter and salt. He refused broccoli by spreading both hands, fingers splayed, above his plate.

“No broccoli, Dad?” Bernadette said, all fake chipper.

Jimmy shook his head.

“More for us then!” She tilted the bowl of broccoli over Frances’s plate and dropped a heaping mound next to the slice of meatloaf there. The veggies were limp and overcooked.

“Ketchup?” Bernie pushed the bottle toward Frances. “I hope you don’t mind, Frankie,” she said. “But you’re going to see a lot of Dad in the basement. He’s going to take up woodworking.”

Jimmy raised his head, blinked at Frankie and lifted his beer to his mouth.

“Sounds good,” Frances said.

“He’s had that room set up for years. It’s just going to waste, which is the last thing Doris would have wanted. Doris never believed in waste. Did she, Dad?”

Jimmy kept his head bowed over his plate.

“Well, she didn’t,” Bernie said. “Doris believed waste was a sin.”

Frances nodded.

“Waste is a sin. Don’t you agree, Dad?”

Jimmy cut slices of potato and meatloaf and stabbed them with his fork.

Bernie turned her attention to Frances. “You don’t like ketchup?”

“Not really,” Frances said.

“You used to love ketchup!”

“When I was eleven.”

“There’s nothing wrong with ketchup.”

“I never said there was.”

Jimmy speared another piece of potato, another piece of meatloaf.

“There’s ketchup in your meatloaf,” Bernadette said. “I use Mom’s old recipe: ketchup, HP, milk, egg and bread crumbs.”

“It’s very good,” Frances said. “Right, Dad?”

Jimmy nodded in agreement.

“Good luck getting him to talk,” Bernie said.

“Thanks for making supper, Bernie.”

Bernadette placed her hands on the table, reaching toward Jimmy and Frances as if in supplication. “It is so good to be together again,” she said. “I think it will be a healing time for us. It should be a healing time for us.”

Frances flipped onto her stomach, the wonky couch spring a punishing comfort. It was nice of her to try, but Bernadette was no Doris. Or it was weird of Bernie to try. Frances was undecided. Doris would definitely have said it was nice of Bernie. She would have said something like, “Chin up, today is the first day of the rest of your life!” You could always count on Doris to say something corny like that.

Frances would have liked to have said goodbye to her.

Be Prepared



Bernadette lay in the dark psychologically preparing for the next day when they were going to put Ken Oliver to rest.

(Down the road, in the late nineties, when she was outselling every other real estate agent in her office, she would shrug her shoulders and tell the other agents she was just lucky. But luck had only the smallest part to do with it; Bernadette had a system. She ran the scenarios in her head time and time again, until she felt prepared for any and every eventuality. Of course, one couldn't be prepared for any and every eventuality, but nine times out of ten Bernadette closed the deal, and she had the Million Dollar Club membership to prove it.)

Because times were so hard, tomorrow when she smiled she had to make certain it reached her eyes. She had to keep eye contact and she had to shake hands firmly. She calmed herself by rubbing the hard, round scar on her left palm and ran through the list of men, former co-workers, that she expected to see.

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Butch Keller hit the bottle hard after he lost his job and his wife finally left him, so Bernadette wouldn't ask after her. Ted Hardy had a new grandson – a little bit of something even guys down on their luck could celebrate. She would save a hug for Raymond and Glen, who had spent so many hours on the road servicing the rigs. Neither one of them had been able to find work yet and Raymond actually cried the last time she'd seen him. He'd come into the bar to say hi, and she poured him a rye and coke and told him it was on the house. That set off the water works. She wouldn't bring that up either.

There was going to be a reception in the church hall after the funeral, which seemed the ultimate insult to Ken Oliver, high-flying oilman that he was. Sandwiches and coffee, his ex must really hate him. But Bernadette would be extremely polite to Gloria Oliver because Ken would expect no less of her.

And then afterward Bernadette would see if some of the guys wanted to go for a drink, to raise a toast to Ken Oliver, reduced to nothing but the shirt on his back by declining energy values, fucking made-in-Canada oil pricing and a little unfortunate planning. Because Bernadette was still Ken Oliver's secretary, whether anybody knew it or not.

Needleworker



The house was silent and gloomy in the half-light of dawn. Jimmy switched on a lamp and opened his book, *Crochet for Beginners: From Simple Squares to Afghan Blankets*. Page six. It had turned his crank to watch Doris while she crocheted. There was a rhythm to her left hand (the raised index finger, the closed middle finger and thumb) that called to mind other things: her hand moving down his torso, and farther still. Even now it heated him up to think of her industrious fingers. But Jimmy shook off that line of thought; he made a slipknot with his practice yarn and dropped it over the crochet hook. After that, things got tricky.

The first chain, now that was pretty straightforward. It was just under and over and pull it through until he had linked twenty-one stitches. How in hell he was supposed to hold the damn yarn between his middle finger and thumb while supporting the yarn on his index finger – Christ, what did that even mean? – was the

mystery. His grip was so tense that his stitches came out too tight to insert the crochet hook for the next row. Jimmy closed his eyes, pushed his thumb into the bridge of his nose.

Not even the shit in this life that looked easy was easy. Bernadette thought he could make himself happy building birdhouses, and he supposed she meant well, but her constant harping was going to send him over the bloody edge. As if it had been his plan to bust his ass his entire life so he could end up out of work at fifty-three with another dead wife, and nearly homeless too, if it weren't for the kids pitching in. A humiliation those girls couldn't fathom.

The only fight he'd ever had with Doris had come on the heels of her saying that maybe it was a good idea to have a national plan for oil, to take care of our own first, and Jimmy had bugged out his eyes and sputtered, "Who the fuck is taking care of us?"

Doris turned away from him then. "I'm not saying it's perfect," she said, "but either we're a country together or a country divided."

"Oh, we're a country divided," he answered, "and you have your Frog boyfriend to thank for that."

Doris had just begun chemo and there he was going apeshit. What kind of an asshole was he? He apologized, and Doris held him close and said, "I don't know why things are so hard, Jimmy, but I expect we'll understand one day." Jimmy didn't say, yeah, when hell freezes over, but he thought it, and Doris slapped his arm and said, "You've got to have hope, Jimmy!"

"I do, baby," he told her, but already her pretty brown hair was coming out in chunks.

Jimmy tugged out his stitches and slipped a fresh loop over the crochet hook. He looked carefully at the diagram again, wrapped the yarn around the hook and pulled it slowly through the loop. Never, in all his days, would he have imagined himself sitting in his chair hunched over a crochet needle for all he was worth. He could pretty much hear what the guys at work would have said if they'd

seen him. They'd have given him a nickname – Grandma, or some such thing. Well, there was no chance of that now, and what a man did in the privacy of his own home was between him and God.

“Hey, Dad, what are you doing there?” Bernadette walked into the living room, tightening a robe around her waist.

Correction: what a man did in the privacy of his own home was between him, God and his daughters. Jimmy held up the thin line of his work for Bernadette to see.

“Crochet?” she squeaked. “Really?”

Bernadette just stood there watching him. Well bully for her.

She sighed. “Why don't we get you set up in the basement? You could make a birdhouse or something.”

Jimmy kept his head down.

“I'm going to make a coffee. Would you like one?”

He shook his head.

“Suit yourself,” she said. She marched to the curtains and yanked them open, “How about a little daylight, at least?”

After Bernie left, all decked out in her funeral attire, Jimmy made himself a bologna sandwich and a cup of coffee. Frances, wrapped in a blanket, wandered into the living room during *The Price is Right* and flopped down on the couch. By then Jimmy had pulled out his stitches again and begun a third time on his first granny square, and it was already looking a damn sight better than his earlier efforts.

“What do you got going there?” she asked.

Jimmy held up his growing square.

Frances laughed, “Way to keep it weird, Dad.”

Jimmy just smiled. Today he was going to be easy come, easy go.

Frances hunkered down in her blanket and in no time at all was back asleep. Jimmy would be lying if he said it wasn't good to see her again, but she was snoring on his couch, making it hard to hear Bob Barker.