

Wanted: RCMP With Employable Wife

by Janice Salkeld

L'auteure raconte son expérience particulière de femme d'un policier de la GRC lors d'une entrevue concernant

"Look, I want to go north, just like we've always talked about. But I won't have the RCMP telling me what job to take, and when. I've just landed the job I really want here at the high school."

l'obtention d'un poste d'enseignante dans le nord du Saskatchewan.

Teaching was my profession, and as a newlywed in 1973, I had been fortunate to obtain a job within driving distance of the town of Rosthern, Saskatchewan, where my RCMP husband was stationed. After a harrowing winter of driving back roads to the little village of Alvena, I was able to get a closer job in the Rosthern School Unit, in the staunchly Mennonite village of Waldheim. After a year, a position to teach English at the high school right in Rosthern came open, and after a gruelling two hour interview, I was accepted.

I was delighted, and told my husband that I had good news, but he had news, too.

"Jan, the RCMP wants to transfer me North to Buffalo Narrows, Saskatchewan, if you're agreeable."

I was immediately suspicious. "What do you mean, if I'm agreeable? Since when has the RCMP ever consulted the wives about a transfer?" My husband had been stationed in LaLoche, ninety miles north of Buffalo Narrows back in our dating days, and I had journeyed up to see him once, in an adventure-packed trip. He'd been stationed all over

northern Saskatchewan, and I knew that he'd been transferred on as little as 24 hours notice. There had never been any consultation with him about these moves, and whether or not he wanted to go. So why the sudden change?

Bill cleared his throat. "Well, you'd want to teach, wouldn't you?"

I nodded, eyeing him carefully. "Goes without saying."

"They'd like you to go for a job interview."

"Who's 'they?'"

"It's all set up with the school administration and the local school council."

"I repeat, who's 'they?'"

Bill looked straight at me this time. "I thought you'd always wanted to go north, Jan."

I nodded again. "I have, but you haven't answered my question?" Bill was definitely pussyfooting around, and I figured something was up.

"Dave Foster's all set to fly us up. He'll use his own plane, but the Force will pay for the trip. It won't cost us anything."

"You mean Dave set this up? Cst. Dave Foster from Buffalo Narrows suddenly wants me to teach up there?" I could tell by the look Bill gave me that he was going to have to break down and tell all.

"Now don't get mad. The fact is, the RCMP wants to transfer me up there, and they arranged for a job interview for you."

I refused to relent. "Bloody nice of them. First they refuse to give us permission to marry, and we had to postpone our wedding until they changed their minds, and now they want to act as my employment agent?

Since when do they go around arranging job interviews for the wives when there's a transfer in the offing?"

Bill finally snapped. "All right. All right. I won't get transferred if you don't get the job. See, they're expanding the number of members in the detachment, and there isn't enough housing available right now for any more RCMP, so..."

"So they need a wife who can get a job that supplies the housing?" I finished for him.

"Something like that," he finished lamely. "But Jan, don't be mad. We've always talked about going north, and this is a real chance for us."

"Something like that? You mean *exactly* like that." I thought I'd better make my position immediately clear. "Look, I want to go north, just like we've always talked about. But I *won't* have the RCMP telling me what job to take, and when. I've just landed the job I really want here at the high school. I'm not about to start all over again in another school unit teaching all the subjects nobody else wants just for the sake of a convenient transfer for the RCMP." The look on Bill's face told me how disappointed he was. I thought about all the times we'd talked about going north. After a quiet moment, I relented a bit. "All right, fine, I'll go for the job interview, but even if it's offered, I'm not saying I'll take it!"

"That's fair, Jan. All I'm doing is asking you to go and have a look. Have the job interview and just see what happens, O.K."

The following weekend found us flying north in a small Stinson plane. Both Bill and I were accustomed to flying in small aircrafts, but I'd never flown into bush country before, and it was beautiful. The lush green was offset by an almost endless chain of shimmering water. We set down on a small, dusty runway, after "buzzing" the RCMP detachment a couple of

times to let them know of our arrival.

No one came for us right away, but since Dave was stationed in Buffalo Narrows, he led the way. I was immediately enchanted by the wooden boardwalks, the lake beckoning in the distance, and the huge areas of bush between brightly painted buildings. We were just approaching the RCMP detachment, a graciously sprawling white building, when the RCMP four-by-four came wheeling up in a

I was impressed with the well-cared-for yard at the RCMP compound, and the nice sergeant's quarters. Joan did indeed have a lovely lunch for us, and talked at length about what a positive move it had been for them and their three children. I was encouraged by this, but the pre-interview jitters had set in, and I only half-listened. I wanted this interview to go well. I began to think how embarrassing it would be if I'd made such a fuss with

Bill, and then wasn't even offered a job. What if I wasn't good enough? I tried to conjecture some possible questions. There was sure to be a lot about

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cloud of dust. The sergeant, Dick Waller, was extremely apologetic because he'd missed hearing us land. As he had been stationed in Rosthern before Bill and I were married, no introductions were necessary.

I was interested in what time my job interview was, but everyone else was interested in sharing details about policing the small community of 1200.

"Job interview?" Dick asked with a puzzled look. "Oh, I'll call and let the chairman know you're here. See," he waved out the window, "that's the single men's quarters, office, and cells all rolled into one." He turned back to me. "Then it'll depend on how long it'll take her to round up a few of the people." He interrupted himself once more to point out the liquor store and the hotel with the bar. "That's where most of our work comes from," he said with a shake of his head. Then picking up his former train of thought he added, "they're expecting you, though. We'll eat first, the wife's laid out a nice spread." With this airy dismissal, the three men went back to their intense conversation about guards, cell space, types of incidents most frequently reported, and all the hundred and one things that policemen the world over can discuss at the drop of a hat.

cross-cultural issues.

Another phone call confirmed that the job interview would be at "about 2:00 p.m." Dick translated for me, "That means it'll be at least 2:30 before everyone's there. I'd make it at least 2:15 before I went over." I nodded, but felt extremely uncomfortable about showing up even 15 minutes late for a job interview. I shuddered to think what the School Board in Waldheim or Rosthern would have thought about a tardy appearance at the job interview.

After lunch we walked around a little, and poked our nose in the only store, the Bay. It was a quaint general store, with a little bit of everything at prices exorbitant by our southern standards. Dave quickly assured us that it was always out of whatever specific item you happened to be looking for, and always tempting you with items you didn't really need.

Finally it was close to 2:00 p.m. I wanted to head in the direction of the principal's house, even if it was "too early." Dave and Bill walked me to a single row of houses just in front of the school. "Those are the 'teacherages,' and the one in the middle is the principal's house. He's pretty unusual in these parts, been here about four years now, double the span of most administrators up here. You'll

like Joyce, the chairman, she's a really good-hearted woman. See," he pointed across the schoolyard. "That row of trailers is for teachers and nurses and a couple of other government workers."

By this time I'd had it with the guided tour. I just wanted to get the darned interview over with. I was trying to go over the likely questions and answers in my mind. "Have you ever taught in a cross-cultural setting before? How will that experience be applicable to here? How will you become knowledgeable about the local culture? What plans do you have to make curriculum relevant to the students here? How will you deal with any biases you find, either in your teaching or the materials you find in the school?" And so on. No doubt about it. This was bound to be one tough interview. Bill wished me luck, and eagerly departed, telling me he'd be back in an hour or so, as we'd have to fly out soon after that. I thought again of the intense two hour interview I'd had in Rosthern, and hoped an hour would be enough. I nodded agreement, squared my shoulders and walked up to the house.

The principal, Ed, answered the door and introduced himself.

"Come on in. There's only the vice-principal here yet, everything sort of runs on its own time here. Oh, there's Joyce coming now." He nodded in the direction of a figure in the distance. "Want a cold beer?" The shock I felt must have shown. "I've got some pop or tea if you'd rather."

"Tea, thanks." I managed to stammer, suddenly feeling out-of-place prim and proper. Each new arrival was introduced, casually accepted a beer, and arranged themselves on the floor and the chairs in the front room. Discussion about the weather ensued, followed by questions about the road conditions. When I told them we had flown up with Dave, they all told me how lucky I was to have avoided the rough, dusty, gravel road. They told me a little about the ferry that connected Buffalo Narrows to the road, and how frequently there were delays getting in or out of town because of it.

I began to wonder if someone had forgotten to tell them the purpose of this meeting.

Finally, they got to the point. "So. Your husband's an RCMP."

Although it was more a statement than a question, I nodded and said "Yes."

"How do you think he'll like it up here?"

"Well, he's been stationed in the north before. He's been in LaLoche,

There was an awkward silence. Finally I began to rattle off the grades and subject areas I'd taught, but Joyce waved me off. "Long as you've got experience. That's the main thing. Ever been fired?"

"No. As a matter of fact I've just been offered a job right in the town of Rosthern, teaching high school English."

The principal smiled, and said, "English. That's good. We'll take that into account when we look at your teaching load."

Before he could say any more, the doorbell rang, and Ed opened the door to reveal Bill standing

there. He looked at the roomful of people and said, "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt your interview, but Dave wants to fly out soon."

"Nah, we were about finished anyway," they unanimously agreed.

"So how do you like our little town?" Ed asked.

"Good. It's great."

"How long have you been in the RCMP, and are you going to stick with it?" shot another one.

"Going on six years now?" Bill grinned, "and I'll stick with it as long

I turned to Ed, and asked, "How long do you think it'll be before I hear whether or not I've got the job?"

He looked at me a bit oddly, and turned to Joyce. "Janice wants to know how long before she hears if she's got the job."

I began to explain that I felt obligated to let Rosthern know what my answer would be in the next few days, but Joyce didn't appear to be listening. "You got the job, dear."

I licked my lips. "Do you want to ask me anything else?"

"No." She shook her silvery head. "Glen here," she waved in the direction of the vice-principal, "can show you around the school a bit if you need a few minutes to think about it." Her attention turned back to the conversation that was now swirling around Bill, and Glen reluctantly disengaged himself.

"Thank you, Glen," I said, again feeling a bit prim and proper. We went out of the neat little house and down to the school. I stalled, asking a few more questions.

Sensing my uncertainty, Glen finally offered, "This is a great place to work. The kids'll test you a bit, but once they know you're going to stick around, they'll be fine. Ed doesn't ask many questions at these interviews, he wants the Council to make their own decisions. Don't worry. It might seem casual, but they've asked around

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Sandy Bay, and Creighton."

This brought smiles and nods of approval, along with another question. "How do you think this place will stack up in comparison?"

"I...I don't know," I stammered. "We weren't married then."

"How long do you figure you'll be stationed here?"

"Well, it's Bill that's stationed here, not me." I could sense a tensing in the room, and I hurried on. "I don't know. I understand two years is pretty standard." Again, this brought smiles and nodding heads.

Joyce looked directly at me. "You got any questions for us?"

I blinked, then asked a few questions about the number of students and grades, and the grade levels or subject areas they were looking for. When these questions were answered in a perfunctory manner, I began to feel desperate.

"Were there any questions you wanted to ask me?" I queried, anxious to get the worst over with.

"Yeah," Joyce said. "You got any teaching experience?"

"Yes." This was more like it. "I've taught for four years."

They beamed at me, and I caught phrases like "my, my, four years already."

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as they'll have me."

"How long will you be posted here? Is that right it'll be two years?"

"That's what the staffing officer says, but you know how that goes."

This comment was food for lots of side conversations, and I heard snatches of information about sudden transfers, the single RCMP, the road construction, and so on. Finally

about you. Got most of their information from Dick and Joan Waller, and they really like them. Dick especially asked for you two, and they know he wouldn't want you and Bill up here if they didn't think you'd fit in. They put more stock in that than in a lot of résumés and references. And we know you've taught at the junior high level. If you can handle

those kids, you can handle ours.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said. “Do you think I could possibly look in the school?”

“Don’t have my keys, and I’d have to walk all the way back to the house to get them.”

“Oh, of course. Why don’t you go on back in and visit a bit. I need a little time to think.” He smiled and strolled off. I looked across at the sandy beach and blue lake with the little dot of an island. I took a deep breath of the pine fragrant air. The place was working its magic on me. What did I really have to lose? After all, we had always wanted to move north. It was a wonderful opportunity for something different. I’d never been exposed to such a casual lifestyle before, and it stood in stark contrast to the rigid formalities in Waldheim and Rosthern.

I had to be honest with myself. The biggest reason I wanted to turn down the job was to spite the RCMP. The

biggest reason I wanted to take the job was to challenge myself, carve a place for myself. I wanted to prove I was more than an appendage of Bill, just “the wife of an RCMP.” Now that would be a challenge! Besides, if I supplied the housing, I had a little more control over the situation. If I hated the place and quit the job, the RCMP would have to transfer us. I looked at the modern school with the bulge of a gymnasium at the end. Sure. Why not?

I walked back to the principal’s house, and was motioned in through the screen door. Bill cocked one eyebrow at me. Before I lost my nerve, I said, “Thank you for your offer. I’ll accept the position.”

“Good, good,” Joyce said. “We were just discussing which trailer would be the best for a married couple.” This time, her comment didn’t really surprise me. I was adapting already.

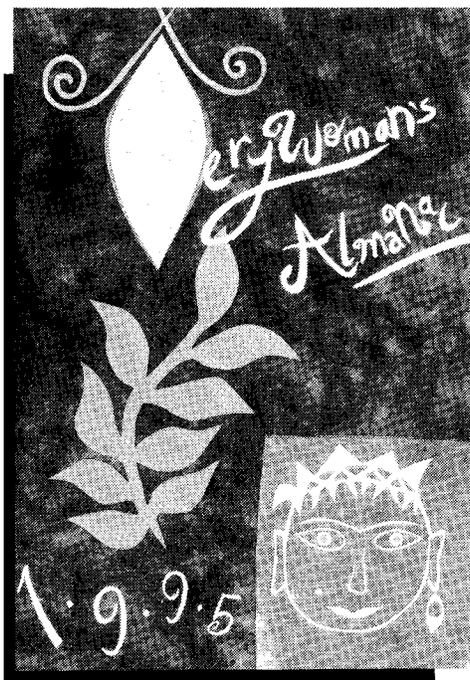
Note: It was a good decision. We

spent the two mandatory years there, and begged to be allowed to remain for a third. Permission was granted. (This was virtually unheard of at that time.) After that, we moved to the Northwest Territories, but that’s another story!

Janice Salkeld was born and raised in Eston, Saskatchewan. She received her Bachelor of Arts and teaching certificate from the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. She has taught in various locations in Saskatchewan, the N.W.T. and Yukon. She has also worked at a variety of other jobs from cook and bookkeeper at Bear Rock Lodge in Fort Norman, to jobs in early childhood intervention. She currently teaches at F.H. Collins Secondary School in Whitehorse. She has had a short story published in the anthology Writing North, and poetry published in a special literary issue of The Northern Review.

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