

From the memoirs of Jean Cooke

LIFE BEGINS AT FORTY

It was late August 1976 and I was going to turn 40 in a few months. They say life begins at 40 so what should I be doing to prepare myself?

I was different than most Moms. I hated it when the kids went back to school. All those papers coming home, helping with homework, projects and books lying around the house. I have 5 kids and if they each had three projects to do in a year that meant fifteen for me. Why couldn't the summer last for 10 months and school two? There was always so much fun to be had and things we could do together without the pressure of school.

My husband was never home. I was typing research papers for him and doing his bookkeeping and billings at night. I was tired of cooking, cleaning, doing laundry and taking all the responsibility for the kids. That is how I looked at life. I was down.

One Sunday evening at the end of summer my husband was home and the seven of us were having a rare meal together. The younger ones were in grades 5, 6 & 8 and the two older in 9 and 10. I was feeling sorry for myself. I announced that I was fed up with school and housework and I was going to take a sabbatical. Little Derek, my youngest son, asked, "What is a sabbatical?" I told him that professors and smart people took a sabbatical from work and did what they wanted for six months or a whole year. The others were just looking at me and then all the children said, "Yeh, Mom that sounds like fun. What are you going to do?" "I don't know." I replied. I was just letting off steam.

We finished our supper and I started to do the dishes. My husband sat down to read the newspaper and the kids went outside to play. All of a sudden he said "Here is the perfect thing for you. A course at St. Lawrence College: 'Learn about outdoor living and wild life. It is one night a week; you could handle that.'" I didn't answer because I didn't want more to do but I started thinking about it. The seed was sown.

When I signed up I was told it was a survival course. Yes, every Wednesday night and also many weekends camping in the wilderness. I wondered how the kids would make out if I was away on weekends.

We learned a lot in class; how to dress for the outdoors, types of equipment to take, finding food, how to trap, and safety rules before you go hiking or what to do if you got lost. We went out winter camping almost every other weekend. I was a lot older than the other students. I loved it. We learned to make traps for animals, how to skin them, find weeds, roots and even bark that you could eat. How to find dry firewood no matter what the weather. We also learned how to rappel (going down rock faces with a rope) which I loved doing.

Our first written exam was how you would survive if your plane crashed in the middle of a desert. How would you make water? If you found an unbroken bottle of booze what would you do with it? How would you make a shelter from the sun? It was hard to think 'heat' when outside a snowstorm was raging and we wondered if we were going to make it home. At the end of the course we had to take our final exam, which was a practical.

Only about ten people out of thirty completed the course. It was April and the ice had finally left the lakes and only a few patches of snow were left. We drove up into the Mississippi valley onto Crotch Lake. We set up the base camp late Friday night. First thing in the morning our instructor took us by boat one by one and dropped us somewhere with only the clothes on our backs and our survival kits. I had a fanny pack with a candle, pills for purifying water, some matches I had waterproofed, compass, jack knife, a metal tin with a handle, fishing line and a couple of other articles. On my waist I had a folding swede saw and an axe. My instructions were to stay where I had been dropped and in a week's time, find my way back to camp.

First on my to-do list was to look for a place to build a lean-to. I found a nice piece of flat land only ten feet from the water. I cut the bottom branches off some Hemlock trees. I stripped the branches and with the forked pieces made the frame for my lean-to. I wove the boughs into the frame for the roof and two sides. I made a fire and put the needles of the Hemlock into my tin with water and hung it over the fire. Every time I returned to the fire I would drink my Hemlock tea. It was nourishing and I would not get dehydrated. The next day it started to rain and it was cold. I collected more branches and made a mattress for my lean-to. I collected firewood and put it inside my abode to keep dry. I found some fallen silver birch, cut it into logs and made myself a reflector wall so the heat of the fire would warm my new home.



A week later I took the family out to see my abode. This is my reflector wall and front of the lean-to. As we were told to do I took it all down so animals could enjoy it.

I was losing track of the days so made myself a calendar. I searched the woods for roots, bark and foliage and other edibles that I could add to my tin of water. I tried fishing but the fish weren't biting. I couldn't find much to eat although I set rabbit and squirrel snares with no success (I was almost relieved as I didn't really want to kill anything). It was cold and wet but I was enjoying myself. I carved a spoon and bowl and made myself a knapsack with birch bark. I made a chair using the same technique as the lean-to.

It was still raining and I was soaked right through. I decided to dry my long underwear by pulling one leg out at a time through the fly of my jeans and holding it over the fire. This worked very well but they got a bit scorched. My lean-to was so warm at night that I took my coat off and used it for a pillow and dried my clothes.

The only thing I was afraid of was another human being. One night when the rain had stopped a bright light appeared. I was petrified. I thought it was a car's headlight. I sat in my crude home with my axe ready. After a few minutes I realized it was a full moon just rising up and shining through the trees and anyways, there wasn't a road anywhere near me. I had a good laugh at myself. The first thing I did the next morning was to stand on a rock cliff and sing 'The Lord's My Shepherd' at the top of my voice. I can't keep a tune but it felt very good to just let loose with no one to hear me. The freedom of being on my own was heaven.

I decided to wash my hair. I went down to the lake and as I lowered my head, the biggest snapping turtle I had ever seen poked his head out and looked me straight in the eyes. I jumped back in utter surprise. He was at least two feet wide. I waited until he went and then dunked my head in. The water was freezing and I had an instant headache. So much for clean hair!

I looked at my calendar and was surprised to see that my days were up. Darn! I was having so much fun and I had a list of things I still wanted to do. I packed up and started back through the woods keeping the lake not too far out of sight. As I walked along something really stunk. Was it a dead animal? No matter how far I walked the stench was still with me. Oh, my gosh, it was me! My clothes smelled of smoke and although I had washed my hands, face and teeth, my hair was not combed, I was pretty dirty and I had been in the same clothes for a week. I was getting close to our base camp when another survival student caught up with me. I'm glad he did because I might have walked right by the camp as my mind was so full of things I had done.

When we all sat around the fire on that last night sharing our experiences, I was told that all but one other student had taken their sleeping bag because the weather was so cold. I didn't think that was allowed. I sure didn't need it. The two other girls had been picked up the first day, as they were not coping at all. Apparently, our instructor, unbeknownst to us, checked on us every day in his boat with binoculars. I passed the exam with an A++. The teacher was really impressed with my skills. But best of all, I enjoyed myself immensely.

Fortunately, no one was home when I arrived. I stripped in the garage and threw everything into the washer and had a long hot shower. Now I was clean again, a little slimmer and respectable, but certainly not hungry!

Well my year was turning into something novel.

When I was in high school, I always wanted to take shop instead of home economics. Now there is another thought. As well as doing the survival course I could do things I always wanted to do. So immediately after signing up for the survival course, I went over to the high school and found the Principal, Mr. Joyce. Bayridge High was new and only had grades 9 & 10 to start with. I asked him if it was possible for me to come as a student and take woodworking. He told me they had never had adult students in the daytime but to ask the shop teacher, Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell said he would love to have me as long as the boys in the class didn't mind. So that was how I started shop. The hardest thing was that I worked late at night and loved being a night owl. How to get to school on time? The kids had quite a job. "Mom, it's late. Your toast is ready. You are going to be late for school." They helped me.

At high school I was in my eldest daughter, Justyna's, homeroom class. I didn't realize that until she came home and asked me if my name was 'Jean Cooke' and why I

wasn't there for roll call. The teacher called out my name every morning but I never went to school until my shop class began at 9:30 a.m. We cleared that up with her/our teacher.

I decided to make a stereo cabinet. A fairly large one, with drawers and cupboards to store lots of things. The boys in shop were a little anxious having an older woman in class but we soon started to swap stories and they helped me use the planer and before long I was helping them as well. Mr. Bell was great and he often let me stay to join the next class as well. That meant I got to know even more students. We learned to use the table saw, the drill press, how to rip wood safely, sanders and all the other electrical tools and how to correct our mistakes. As I got to know the boys better, we soon shared stories and joked together. I heard all the latest gossip; when they got drunk at a party, broke up with their girlfriend or had a fight with their parents at home. I finished the stereo cabinet and brought it home. Derek and our friends were most impressed!

With my new confidence I began to make things at home as well. A dining room table from a piece of 4 x 8 plywood covered in wood-coloured arborite with the corners cut off at an angle. (It is still being used at Justyna's my eldest daughter's home). Perfect for homework, projects and seated eight for dining. I made shelving and started fixing other things. My talents were growing.

Knowing so many kids (especially the boys) made quite a difference when we started to have huge parties at our home. Justyna was in musical plays as well as in the band and the boys on various teams. For four years we hosted the cast and band parties at our home. When visiting bands, competitions, dances, plays, or some other school function came to Bayridge, we hosted them and there might be a hundred plus teenagers at our home. We would have shoes and boots piled high in the front hall. Because I now knew many of the kids they always behaved and if they brought beer they drank moderately. If they had more than one drink, they knew I would drive them home; if they smoked, they used ashtrays, and if the place was a mess, they would come back the next day and clean up. They policed the parties themselves. It was wonderful.

When the band from New Jersey came, the Bayridge teacher took the chaperones out somewhere and left me with the kids. A part of the chaperone's role was to keep the black and white kids from mingling and to make sure they all kept a curfew. What an eye-opener for the kids from New Jersey! First, they were all mixing freely at our place. They played the piano and sang and danced together. When the party was over at our home they all just walked home. No curfew? They had never done this before either. They were afraid at first but enjoyed the freedom and safety as well. We didn't have enough matching homes in our neighborhood for billeting so most of the black kids had to stay in white homes. Later, when our kids went to New Jersey they asked to stay with some of the black kids that they had met. This was very hard to set up as this just didn't happen in New Jersey.

I was loving the shop course at school and the social life that went along with it. When the parties were going on, my husband on the other hand usually stayed at the hospital!

At home I was making more changes. I started folding laundry and leaving it on the upstairs hall floor. It was up to the kids to put it away. (They didn't always do it but I just ignored that.) I made supper but was not always around to serve it. I told the kids I

wasn't going to clean their rooms any more. We made a list of big jobs and every other Tuesday, we would pick a job and the six of us would tackle it, for instance cut the grass and clean up the yard or clean out the garage, the rec room etc. Then after the task we went out to a cheap restaurant for supper.

I was still looking for more adventure. Along with my woodworking and survival course, I decided to sign up for an evening house construction course at another high school and a log house construction course at St. Lawrence College. Now I was learning to use a chain saw. I was becoming very accomplished. With all this wielding of axes, saws and hammers I decided I had better take a St. John's ambulance and Red Cross course as I was sure I would injure myself or someone else at some point.

The year I turned forty I learned a lot about myself: My house is to be lived in and not a show place and teenagers are the very best. I don't think the children enjoyed trying all the different weeds for supper but I think they liked the idea of Mom being a winter camper, a builder, making things around the house and, funnily enough they enjoyed taking part in our Tuesday job days.

Jean Cooke