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“Unimaginable Riches”

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A hermetic seal enclosed my childhood in an Irish and Italian Catholic neighborhood near Philadelphia. But for a smattering of grandmothers who spoke their native Italian, English dominated. Cultural assimilation prevailed. Uniform-clad children streamed daily to St. Dorothy’s School to sit in straight-backed chairs and diagram sentences, then to our street to play kickball. My father applauded both realms: the neighborhood teeming with children, and the nuns’ focus on grammar. He was devoted to family, home, crossword puzzles, and all things language-related.

Every summer, I spent two months with my mother, five siblings, and my grandparents in Fair Haven, Vermont. My father joined us when he could escape work at the Campbell Soup Company. There, in my mother’s hometown, we belonged. When we lifted the phone receiver, we’d ask Polly the operator to ring the Spardellas or the Wilsons. At The Wooden Soldier, waitress Patty Stile called us by name. The sense of being known is a seduction so real that I still feel its pulsations. Belonging meant familiar boundaries: family, place, language, and culture. Belonging centered on the parish where I received Holy Communion and was confirmed as a Catholic. These enclosures ensured our safety in 1950s America. On the other side of the seal — the otherness of Russian-speaking Godless Communists. In the hierarchy of evil, Khrushchev ranked just above the devil.

In a photo of my father, circa 1952, he leans on a dun colored stone wall above a canal. The entire tableau is gray: the color of his suit whose pockets hide one hand, the smoke from his cigarette, and the buildings behind him. I can’t decipher the German letters emblazoned on one

wall or the expression on my father's face. Why the half-smile? He's far from home, stationed as an intelligence officer in Germany during the Korean War, where he will miss the birth of his first child, my older sister. Years later, he will talk about how Germany changed him. His stories of interrogating attempted border crossers in this new language thrilled us. The spy element melded to his passion for German, settling like river sediment. My father's years overseas ripped him from his own parochial upbringing in Irish Catholic Boston. At thirteen, when I transferred from Catholic to public school, I learned the meaning of that term: "parochial - derived from 'parish'; narrowly restricted in scope or outlet; provincial." The seal of enclosure was also imprisonment.

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In Madame Cooper's French class, we'd just completed our explication de texte on Paul Claudel, a Catholic writer to whom Madame was in thrall. Structured analysis of symbol, image and other elements, Madame explained, revealed the meaning of the whole. Before lunch, I cracked the blue tome of French literature to a page Madame had not assigned. Baudelaire's paean to Paris electrified me: "Je t'aime, ô capitale infâme! Courtisanes/Et bandits, tels souvent vous offrez des plaisirs/Que ne comprennent pas les vulgaires profanes." The French enveloped me, bypassing English. I rolled the words in my mouth, tasting them for the first time. Thinking in another language felt like falling off a ledge into a well, its cool water slapping me awake. Later, I found an English translation of Baudelaire's famous epilogue to *Les Fleurs de Mal*: "I love thee, infamous city!/Harlots and Hunted have pleasures of their own to give/The vulgar herd can never understand." I searched English for my own analogs to the French, equally thrilled by the process and the passage's illicit message. If thinking in another language pushed you off the cusp, translation let you climb back up. Savoring the precipice offered its own rewards.

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At midnight in a deep December darkness, I left the B&B bar in Kodiak, Alaska with my boyfriend, a crab fisherman. The moon rose luminous above the blue onion dome of the Russian Orthodox Church. I'd recently moved to Kodiak after graduating from college, where I'd studied French and Russian. The Cyrillic alphabet and Russian verb endings had stretched my linguistic boundaries. Living on Kodiak pushed me to other edges – geographically far from home, culturally into unknown terrain. Everything about this island in the Gulf of Alaska seemed other – gigantic bears lumbering across the interior, bush planes parked like cars on Lily Lake beneath our condo, photos of Alutiiq people with facial tattoos in the local museum, gun-toting hunters I waited on in a harborfront restaurant. As we walked from the B&B that night, a monk with a waist-length white beard emerged from the church. His black robes edged the snow, backlit by the moon. The apparition stunned me, melding otherness into a single image. The next Sunday, I wandered into the Orthodox Church, savoring the smoky incense, icons of long-faced saints, and sing-song Church Slavonic. If language was the gateway, this was where it led: to a world where the differences I had been taught to fear as a child converged. In that place, I found not deeper fear but the productive discomfort of the boundary between familiar and strange.

Another midnight nearly a decade later, I rolled out my sleeping bag on the floor of the school library in Akhiok, Alaska. In the industrial kitchen, I heated milk for the insomnia that plagued me when I did fieldwork. For more than five years, I'd been coming to this village on Kodiak's southern edge from Philadelphia, where I studied folklore and anthropology. Scenes once strange – thick slabs of salmon drying on lines in front of ramshackle houses, kids on three-wheelers screeching down the dirt path to the airstrip – now formed the seamless core of daily life. The Alutiiq people welcomed me with salmon and homemade bread. Still, staying in this

windswept village continued to unsettle me. Some nights, loneliness chilled me as rain lashed the school windows. The restlessness of studying difference, of never truly being at home, brought both physical and cultural insomnia. Yet that sense of constant wakefulness was just what I sought when I moved from exploring languages to cultures.

Ethnography rests on the pursuit of practiced outsiderhood. I learned to simulate belonging in order to see another point of view, to coax meaning from something foreign - a cultural explication de texte. But reading another culture is precarious. Just when I thought I understood something, I'd founder: mispronounce Alutiiq words, confuse family relationships, misinterpret the meaning of *sua*, the spirit inside every plant and animal. We never see as others do yet the attempt brings us closer to people otherwise unknown or feared. "Ethnography," wrote anthropologist, linguist and Oregon native Dell Hymes, "has the potential for helping to overcome a division of society into those who know and those who are known." In an ideal world, it would not be a privileged few trained to be participant observers. All of us would learn to inhabit, however imperfectly, another way of thinking and being.

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Last summer, my husband Bob and I returned to Vermont. As my parents aged, the cross-country distance seemed to grow. Sometimes, my father would ask when I was coming "home," though I've lived in Oregon for nearly twenty-five years. I wondered: did he wish Bob and I lived closer, the enclosure of family again complete? Each visit felt more precious. We'd often sit at the kitchen table and tease out the crossword puzzle, our shared love of language an enduring bond. When my father hit a foreign word, he'd ask Bob and me or call one of my siblings. He had bequeathed his passion for language; the payback was puzzle assistance in our scattered knowledge of Russian, French, Spanish, Greek and Latin. One afternoon, Bob and I

headed for the Wooden Soldier, where Patty Stile had advanced from waitress to owner. “Oh,” she beamed when she saw me, placing one of her famous bran muffins on a plate. “You’re one of Jeanne Grace’s daughters!” I almost wept for the comfort of being known. But her words were also a knife to the heart, for I have spent my life in flight from the ease and the danger of belonging.

During that last Vermont visit, we sat one night on the back porch shucking corn for dinner. My father told stories of his high school years at Boston Latin School. “You know,” he said reaching for his wine, “I think I would have loved being a Latin teacher.” Corn silk puddled at my feet as I dropped the bag. For a moment, I understood how much he’d sacrificed so that his children could pursue their passions. What other longings had he silenced?

When my father died last October, we shared copies of collected family photos. I perused them to frame a few for our house in Portland. For the living room, I chose one of my father with his arm wrapped around my mother’s shoulder. The photo taken in Germany during his stint in the intelligence service now graces my office. Just beyond the frame lay all that had yet to happen – his struggle and eventual success at his job, the tireless effort to support a family, the thrill of business trips to Russia and places he never thought he’d see, languages he didn’t imagine he’d hear.

The photo rests on my desk. All that I don’t know about my father fills me with grief. I cannot ask the questions that rise like smoke after a death, the ones that press upon us in our dreams. I run my finger across the grainy black and white, searching for clues, a direct “explication.” He appears about to speak, his half smile beckoning. “See how inviting it is?” he seems to say. “For all that we yearn to belong – to a home, a family, a place, a language – for all that we fear the otherness beyond the known world, there are riches here that you can’t imagine.”