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“Make Yourself at Home”

by

Thomas Dolan

I woke up at the wheel somewhere outside of Beloit. This was the predictable last movement in a series of poor choices intended to take me home for Christmas, each of which—like a losing gambler’s—seemed to require the next. The plan was to drive without stopping from the University of San Diego to Milwaukee, taking a southern route through El Paso and Oklahoma City to avoid snow chains and the mountains. That this added ten hours to a thirty hour drive was irrelevant; so was the getting lost in West Texas that added another two, and never mind that I’d felt myself nod off two times before crossing the WI state line. The fact was that at each obstacle I was closer to home, and so when I woke up at 4am on I-43 North, just one and a half hours away, I figured I’d come too far to disappoint myself now. Neither my own death nor the death of another driver once seriously occurred to me, not even after I woke up straddling two lanes and with no memory of the past ten minutes. I was—obviously—nineteen.

Nor am I totally proud of what I attempted in order to stay awake. I listened to the entirety of Katy Perry’s “One of the Boys,” and then I listened to it again. I had several gallons of coffee. I won detailed arguments I’d lost several months ago, incorporating rhetorical gestures and laughing at my own jokes. And reasoning that there was possibly only one base urge more powerful than sleep, I had my hand down my pants through most of Illinois.

What didn’t motivate me, however, was actually being home—my only concern was getting there. Which isn’t to say that the realities of “being there” didn’t occur to me. How could they not, with my mother texting me hourly with poorly concealed worry? (I think she might’ve

gotten even less sleep than me during that trip.) This was the first time I'd truly ever come home, but I barely considered what I meant when I said it with a capital-H. I'd only been gone four months, after all, and so I was wary of melodrama, and reasonably confident that however I felt about home would be indistinguishable from how I felt two years ago and living there, or from two days ago and two thousand miles away. That didn't turn out, of course. I was—again—nineteen. But even now home looks foggy, if in a different part of the glass, and it seems as if its essential element will always be the sort of thing you can't explain or express or understand, but rather something that only somehow and slowly accumulates into itself, like the miles of the road do into destination.

* * *

I spent much of my childhood obsessed with the ambiguity of language and the possibilities that this held for doom. I'm serious, although when I put it like that it sounds far more sophisticated than it was. For example: I didn't understand the distinction between "priceless" and "worthless," and even though I knew one meant worth a lot and the other worth nothing at all, their difference felt far too arbitrary for the words to be used safely; I worried that I or someone else might slip and give diamonds away for free, or pay millions for a hot dog. Likewise, I'd thought that the difference between "homesick" and "carsick" was a matter of location, and so I spent the first grade alternating between a state of deep cosmic gratitude that I wasn't afflicted with homesickness, and a chronic fear that one day I might be. If they sent you home when you threw up at school, I wondered, where could they send you if you got sick at home? And then—although this one I thought of more as a joke than a threat of calamity—there was "Make yourself at home," which I always pictured as a process of literal self-assembly, wherein with only a screwdriver and a set of instructions you could build yourself, an IKEA-style

Frankenstein. I suppose that calamity-wise it didn't work out too well for Frankenstein, but part of me can't help but still hear it as a command: Make yourself. And where? At home.

The trouble, of course, begins right with the "where." I was born in Fresno. My father, doing something for Mannheim Auto Auction, was transferred from there to Bryan, Ohio, and then to Tucson, and then laid-off. In 2005, we moved to Milwaukee, the specific reasons for which are less important than the fact that this cross-country game of Pong seems pretty typical of the post-war generations; the idea of "home" as something that links your DNA to the patch of earth on which it's been and will be replicated has largely been severed, often at the whims of large corporations. My family is scattered across the continent. I know only two of my cousins. Funerals are sparsely attended.

My point is that "Home"—for me, but for many other 21st-century Americans, too—is not a place, and thus also without a meaning, that can be taken for granted as it could for the vast majority of all pre-modern humans. Don't think I'm nostalgic for feudalism—modernity's mobility has its advantages—but something bothers me. It bothers me that I cannot say "born and raised," it bothers me when people call Colorado, of all places, part of the "Midwest," it bothers me when the cashiers at the liquor store say "WisCANSin" after checking my ID and ask me about cheese, and it bothers me because I'm bothered when things are impermanent, misplaced, or, like my passport that says "California," misleading in their simple truth.

The rest of my family never much bothered about any of this. My father was content to call home wherever the couch and TV were, and my mother enjoyed the adventure of househunting and decorating too much to worry about things like deracination, and my sister moved to New York under a longstanding plan to do so as soon as she was "liberated." But I'm a

nesting animal, suspicious of things that are new and thus don't smell like me—or worse, smell like someone else.

* * *

It was about ten hours into my drive home that Christmas of 2017 when I was stopped at one of those dystopian Border Patrol checkpoints that are peppered around the American southwest. It was 3am and I'd been driving already for twelve hours. The checkpoint was harshly lit; the night was moonless, and everywhere else was as black and bare as the deep sea floor. German Shepherds sniffed themselves in circles around each car in the line, and I remembered smoking weed in my car two years ago with mounting paranoia and fear. This was a place designed to sort, to identify, and to prosecute. Fear was its design. I pulled forward at my turn, and the man asks me if I'm a U.S. citizen.

“Yes,” I say.

“What's your destination tonight?”

“Wisconsin.”

“Drive safe,” he says, and waves me on.

And just like that I accelerated east, knowing others had more to fear than I, but still incredulous at 3am in the southwest desert that such a place as “Wisconsin” even existed, and that I could be heading there, and that anybody would believe me if I told them.

* * *

When I talk about things smelling like me and the interlocking difficulty of making a self and making a home, I suppose I'm also talking about Brett Favre. Favre had been the Green Bay Packers' quarterback since 1992, and it's difficult to overstate how strongly people felt about him when we moved to WI in '05, and how weirdly alienating it was not to have an opinion. I

remember my father spending our first three months in the state complaining to anybody who would listen that “Favre” isn’t pronounced like “favor.”

I certainly didn’t think this way at seven, but now I think of Favre as how the Athenians must’ve thought of the Minotaur. Keep in mind that the Green Bay Packers are the closest thing Wisconsin has to a state religion: traffic is nonexistent during game time; Sunday homilies—seriously—often conclude with “Go Pack Go.” In this sense, like King Minos’ Minotaur, Brett Favre was the gatekeeper of an alien social order that failed to represent me, and in which my only participation could be suffering. Of course, the degree of suffering differs between one of the highest interception rates in the league and human sacrifice, but playing for the Vikings certainly doesn’t. And so, no matter how analogically tenuous, when Aaron Rodgers (a Californian transplant, too, I might add) took over as quarterback, he became my Theseus—and I, too, could wear a jersey to Sunday mass.

But there’s a chance Rodgers himself won’t retire a Packer, and this bothers me too. He calls it “business,” which I know it is, but it makes the whole franchise feel as mercenary and meaningless as Mannheim Auto Auction transferring my dad around the country. At least they don’t pretend to be invested in the loyalty of a community. Because what could something like your “home team” mean when the next season it could be comprised of players from former rivals? Or sold and relocated to a city with a better TV market?

Of course there were issues of identity more immediate than the Packers that occupied my attention growing up, but at some point I began to identify that same sudden, nonconsensual change as incompatible with making yourself. I thought that “home” necessitated sovereignty, that it was yours to shape and exist in as you would. By high school this ideation had mostly become an excuse to use tobacco products, but it had much earlier origins: the communal pencil

bin in the second grade had been particularly frustrating; things like rental cabins and free trials made me uneasy. I worry that some of these preoccupations and my solutions for them might sound vaguely fascist, but all the same what I recall most from high school was a deep longing for an apartment of my own—a chance to design a living situation whose proximity to the Edenic standard would rebuke the dumbass way my parents did things.

An example: My mother ran our household on an intricate, pseudo-liturgical calendar of seasonal decoration. For each holiday she chose to observe, there were corresponding mugs, refrigerator magnets, tablecloths, and salt and pepper shakers. The dish towels—embroidered herself with gourds and sleds and shamrocks—changed, too; so did the comic strips on the fridge, clipped from papers that’ve long since merged or folded. In October we drank coffee out of mugs with pumpkins and smiling ghosts on them; there were cornucopias and turkeys on the table through November; snowmen or Santa Clauses salted our eggs from the first day of Advent; rabbits, leprechauns, and those old-timey lace wall hearts got us through to Easter; and a flag motif and the patriotic color scheme saw the summer end. The Church in Rome had its calendar and so did American culture, but my mother—like a good medieval pagan—knew what she could incorporate from the Roman faith and what she could do without.

I thought that all of this was a waste of time. Not only did it mean that there were often weeks of holiday transition, wherein my sister and I could be expected to ferry boxes of decorations up and down the basement stairs all Saturday, but it meant that just when you got used to the heft and handle of a coffee mug, it’d be replaced by new, worse ones, selected from the inexhaustible supply. If that sounds petty, it was: one of my first acts of pubescent rebellion was to go down into the basement one September morning and bring up a Christmas mug to take my coffee in, defying the seasonal rhythms of my mother’s mug tree. Once this protest was

begun I had to go down and get the mug from the basement pretty much every morning, since even those times when I did the dishes or unloaded the dishwasher myself, my Christmas mug would find itself back in the basement, right in its place by the Rudolph one, whose nose changed color with a hot liquid. Every trek down the stairs I vowed that when I was in charge of my own home's diningware I would have solid colored plates that matched solid colored mugs, and you'd never be able to tell what month it was from my kitchen.

Because of this, part of me will always have a relationship with the white uniformity of a restaurant's plateware that borders on the fetishistic. I've accepted that. But since I've been living in my own apartment for two years or so now, I've realized that the way in which you acquire mugs and plates and forks and glasses and dish towels—not to mention all the other crap in your home—is a process of annual accumulation, arbitrary and inevitable, and that the task isn't to choose a system by which to acquire your stuff, but by which system you'll try to organize it. And I get it, I think: I own a mug tree, for example (if significantly less mugs), and in every apartment I've had since moving out, I've unthinkingly used the same left-to-right order in my silverware drawer as my parents did: fork, spoon, knife—and I'll do it like that until I die.

* * *

When I finally got off the freeway in the pre-dawn hours of December 23, 2017, I kept the Maps app running, even though I've taken this exit a thousand times. I see no other drivers. The streets are frozen, salt-stained, and snowless. I think for the first time about home, capital-H. I think: "Could this be it?"

In the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus finally arrives on Ithaca, dropped off by the magical Phaeacians, he's asleep, and wakes up confused and alone, unable to recognize it as his home island. I had always thought that this was a kind of literary device for reflecting the

psychological effect of so much changing during an absence. But now I wonder if it isn't saying something instead about journeys home in particular. What's surreal about homecomings aren't the things that are different, no matter how many or by how much, but the things that are still the way you described them, far away. And if you've been traveling long enough—or intensely enough—to finally arrive at the place you've called home almost all your life, you have to ask, “Could this be it?” And I asked it then not because what I saw didn't look like home, but because it turned out “home” didn't look much like anything I saw. I was expecting to see myself there.

Granted I was also sleep-deprived. I pulled into my driveway at 5am, shaking. Out of instinct I pressed the automatic garage door opener still clipped to my sun-visor, and when it didn't work I almost cried. I got out of the car, taking none of my bags with me. I entered the garage door code manually and walked through the laundry room and into the kitchen. The whole house was decorated for Christmas. The salt and pepper shakers were reindeer.

The Germans probably have a word for the sudden consciousness of your home's smell after a long time away. It's at once bittersweet and spooky, like seeing the gravestone of someone who shares your name. Or it's like that disorientation of Odysseus—the familiar rendered surreal. Something primitive inside of you suspects danger in a foreign scent at your nest; something modern inside of you suspects alienation from the roots of your own existence.

I stood in the kitchen, unsure of what to do. I'd spent the last 40 hours at an average speed of 75 mph, and in the sudden stillness of a suburban kitchen at 5am I was nauseous, dizzy, and faint—homesick, you could say. And I recalled the first time I returned to Wisconsin from California—a funeral—which was also the first time I remember encountering this smell. In the memory I am six years old, and my family and I walk through the same garage and through the

same laundry room, and I cannot believe that home, which has never had a smell before, suddenly does. I almost cried then, too. It may be due to the circumstances of that first association, or my general state of disrepair that Christmas of 2017, but I can't help but know that scent as the aftermath of death—the smell of a place that you had ordered and organized and slept in, but which has forgotten you nonetheless, no matter where it was, or what you called it.