Europe

(A testimonial)

I stood at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, looked out and whispered *I’m coming.* *Wait for me!* I was hired by our Federal government to cross the ocean to work overseas. I chose the State Department, among the other Federal job postings, to learn what’s outside my ken, my range, insight, knowledge and scope. I heard there was land outside the people of my home state, my home country. I went to see if it was true.

People back home would say they didn’t want the tourist version that a country feeds you; they want the skinny, the real-deal how do people live. I think you’ve got to be invited into peoples’ homes for that to happen and I can tell you when I did I was so ashamed of my palace in comparison to their humble digs I blanched. I didn’t invite them into mine. My language teacher told me she was invited to a school mate’s home. They didn’t live like her family did. The food and the home were palatial compared to hers. Her father once played a joke on her by giving her a banana. She didn’t know she was supposed to peel it.

Living in a foreign country is difficult and not faux ***tourista****.* Walking the streets I would look down at my feet and think *I’m just a farm girl from the Midwest and I’m in Europe, a foreign country.* Were it not for the State Department I would not be here. I applied to them, they hired me.

Bill Bryson wrote, at a certain bus station, “All the signs were in Cyrillic. Suddenly the idea of being innocent and free in a foreign land didn’t seem so exotic and appealing.“ The Foreign Service was a terrific **geography** lesson. I could name the capitol of every country in the world by the end of my term, but I entered the Foreign Service knowing more about Degas than de Gaulle. How naïve I was. During my **orientation** period in Washington, D.C., I visited towns along the Atlantic Ocean on weekends. And when I opened my kitchen cupboard doors in Washington, D.C., cockroaches would jump. The FS (Foreign Service) like MIL (the military) is rife with acronyms. I asked during an orientation session, “Will I ’TLT’ someday?” (*Talk like that*.) During my orientation time in Washington, D.C., I was invited to walk the Shenandoah Blue Ridge with a native of **Afghanistan.** He was able to climb like a hoofed mountain goat. I wondered if this was due to the high the Hindu Kish Mountains of in his homeland. I asked him to take me to his mosque—he said he couldn’t. I was a woman. His brother came to America to join him and was killed in a robbery of the all-night convenience store where he worked. The burglars’ take was $8.00. Michael Caine (aka James Bond) claimed that no one can win in Afghanistan; neither the Russians nor the Brits could. In his travel there, Robert Byron, circa, 1937, noticed they had no inferiority complex; that the east expected the west to adapt, and not the reverse.

The **inverse phenomenon** of the Foreign Service is that the nicer the posting the more squabbles. The greater the hardship the more the camaraderie.  This same phenomenon occurs in my home state with smiles, laughter, banter, even pride amongst strangers for having survived a dangerously cold Monday.

In any work in any job there are more benefits than just the paycheck. In some the paycheck is the only cause, but in the Foreign Service you start out eager, feel privileged. Be willing, flattered even to roll under the truck wheels and get up afterward without complaint with a smile for the privilege.The Foreign Service relish those hardship stories about having to boil the water or black mamba snakes.

“Honey, why is that rope hanging from the tree?”

“That’s not a rope. It’s a snake.”

The veterans would say, “We didn’t complain in the Good Old Days! We went wherever they sent us!” Then I hear about an incompetent who just got promoted. Or a man who was ‘brilliant and dedicated’ who gave his heart to the service and they broke it when they TIC’d [Time in Class] him out. Or an Ambassador's secretary who stomps into the room when you’re in the middle of something and y*our* things or people can just wait, excuse me.

I heard a guy assigned to Moscow say, “I sure hope I get a nice post next time--London, Paris.” ‘Funny,’ I thought, ‘that’s what they all say.’ “Don’t bid on a country that ends in *stan,”* someone said. “If they rename it Bahama-stan, don’t go there.” I once asked someone, “What does this sound like: *dirty, congested, polluted, noisy, and crowded?”* He named his last post. That wasn’t it. “That sounds like Cairo!” Someone told me, “That sounds like Athens!” It’s any big city, any large populous city in the world. Fill in the blanks. Plovdiv, Bulgaria isn’t big. Plovdiv is a sweet charming city away from our usual facilities in capitols, e.g., Sofia. Diplomatic corps are stationed near a country’s government.

In re the **Status hierarchy***: Strap hanger* refers to those of us not important enough to merit a seat but, grateful, humble even to be along for the ride. The front office held a party over the lunch hour with potluck and food ordered in.  The Foreign Service officers hunkered over the table shoulder to shoulder like cattle at the trough like lions around the kill. The support staff was unable to access, allocated to the hand-me-down (pot luck) and never got near the catered humus assuring us that in fact the hierarchy was in full force and effect. I see this deference in the steward to the pilot, the nurse to the doctor, the attorney to the Judge.

Staff consulted **staffing patterns** (seating charts) before bidding on a post to avoid a known jerk (“Look out for So-and-So!”) to be the only disparate denizen you could talk to for 2 years of confinement at post. It’s a crap shoot who’s at Post the same time you are, the particular mix of people, whether you’ll like them or they’ll like you. I believe some are positive and want to contribute; some are negative and want to destroy or overpower, and some do neither and neutralize their effect or presence. *Plays well with others*. The good news was that my AMB treated me with respect. Someone cautioned me**,** “If you don’t start going to parties, they’ll stop asking.” I celebrated privately when I reached my eleven month mark that meant just one month to go to reach a milestone: one year. I hadn’t bonded to anyone but my boss and the post (EFM) nurse and were I ever to axe myself away from them the ice surrounding me would be cold.

The bottom line is we couldn’t admit we can’t hack it because that would be some admission of weakness or failure. We can’t give up our chair, although I did hear of a disgruntled who threw hers out the window. Someone will take it. After all, being stationed overseas is exclusive membership in an exotic club. Others had more tours than you, more notches on their bedpost. We’re like war veterans who wear medals away from combat when what we and they have experienced is so alien to others that they cannot relate, but don’t let the secret out that you’re ever bored or lonely. The big secret is that this isn’t nearly as glamorous as I thought it was, but it’s a good thing, Barry Targan said, to have a big good thing to remember. The whole point, Bill Bryson wrote in A Walk in the Woods, “of the experience is to remove yourself so thoroughly from the conveniences of everyday life that the most ordinary things fill you with wonder and gratitude.” I agree. Climbing Mt. Vitosha resembled the central feature of the Appalachian Trail: **deprivation.** An American officer stationed in Kathmandu learned that people need to be rescued not climbing up, but coming down Mt. Everest. They are meticulous in the climb up to reach their goal. When I was posted to Southeastern Europe I climbed Mt. Vitosha. A 92 year old man met me on my way up and offered me half of his *banitsa,* a feta-filled pocket pastry. And what do things cost us as opposed to locals? We pay more. My boss laughed at me when I told him what I was paying at the *rinok* (farmers’ market) said I was being gouged. We heard tell a Russian woman fell to her knees and cried in grief for her country when she saw a modern grocery store in ours, paucity vs. plethora.

The claim is FS is the good life, and yet they’re the first to warn “Careful what you bid.” Some posts are MDS, (Most difficult to staff) some positions HTF (Hard to fill.) A good day is when the sun shines or I make bread and it rises, but I was homesick for color. A good day is when I can tell which coins to use at the market when the size even the thickness, the weight and denomination are not what we are accustomed to in America. To my imaginary audience back home on a bad day, I say, “Wanna’ see the world? Hire a tour guide.” To folks back home who watch reality TV shows I say*, “Try living in Albania!”*  The folks back home? “Their lives go on without you,” Paul Theroux reminds us. “Nobody loves me.” President Carter’s mother wrote (Away from Home: letters to my family) when she lived overseas. “I’m forgotten. Knowing someone cares is my only means of survival.” Her experience replicated mine in the Foreign Service and reading her path walked me down a path I walked too, e.g., a day sans USPS mail.

When the differences prove too difficult we withdraw into the Embassy community e.g., use the commissary vs. the local grocery store. What would occupy you in the United States, e.g., plant a garden, fix your basement is absent here. You divest of your divan, your desk, your dog. You don’t belong, you can’t invest in your billet, your housing is temporary, you are not involved in any long-term way; your duty- time in-country is limited in each tour. There was also your perception of threats to your health, e.g., Dengue fever, or a medicine for malaria that could alter your DNA. Beware if you are of childbearing age, someone warned me.

I can still see my desk, my 4th grade classroom, hearing about Alexander the Great and Constantinople; can still repeat the first words *gospodi po milo* I ever heard in a **foreign language** as a kid in an American St Constantine’s Ukrainian Catholic church. Sue Grafton reminds us, “Nothing is so humbling as being a dunce in a foreign language.” I had to defer; be humbled. When I asked a librarian there where I could find a book in English she answered, “The foreign books are over there.” I chortled. *Foreign.*

“What does *je ne sais qua* mean?” I asked a co-worker.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? You speak French.”

“That’s what it means*, I don’t know.”*

Being American is as much about freedom as the absence of its opposite: repression and restriction of choice. In another country I’m American, but I can’t speak as well as a 3 year old child. It shames me to think how bilingualI’m not compared to the Foreign Service Nationals who work in American facilities. Walk around the corner and wonder *why aren’t they speaking English?*  The FSN are the heroes: fluent **bilinguals**, but I have my Top Secret clearance entry to the Controlled Access Area. They don’t. (And about my background and security check? A friend told his family, “If she’s good enough for State she’s good enough for me,” about befriending me a stranger.)

The young Foreign Service national male employees at work in our American overseas facilities ask their **language teacher**, “What does ‘Whassup’ mean?” The first and most often requested word our American boys want to know while stationed in a foreign country is how to say ‘pretty.’ I was there a year and I still couldn’t read signs when the alphabet is one hurdle, the words another, the grammar another still. When I asked a German diplomat in my Southeastern Europe posting why her male comrade’s German sounded so harsh she told me they’re not speaking proper. They’re cursing. When I told a Language teacher I was quitting classes she said, “Rubbish!” An adult ESL (English as a second language) teacher once told me it was hard to keep the students’ class on task; they would rather gather to gossip.

Language teachers are sensitive to slights. Students prod them into arguments in order to put them on the defensive, distract them from the work. Language training is frightening, frustrating; it is failure; confusion, embarrassment, stress. Despite three years of assiduous study I was not fluent, but there are still a bevy of calcified words that pop up in pairs: both in English and in the Slavic vocabulary. A woman I knew walked out of language class, someone spoke to her and she couldn’t remember a thing, i.e., being confronted you freeze up analogous to stress to the body in fight/flight/fright response. You can lose extremities --that 2nd language-- and still function, but you can’t lose the vital organs, your trunk, your mother tongue. [In the emergency room the noisy ones “I’ve been shot!” will survive; it’s the quiet ones who are shutting down.]

I learned **anecdotal lessons** studying the worldby theState Department exposure. It showed me the reason I heard Armenians speaking Russian when I walked past their church. Later I would hear foreign journalists, sponsored by World Press Institute to visit America, speak at their closing event. “What is it with you Americans and your bottled water?! they asked. “You have perfectly good water. In our countries people defecate, wash clothes and drink the same water.”

The world under empires told me Sofia was under the Ottoman Empire’s yoke, but their citizens will tell you, “There was less harm in those 500 years than the 50 years under the USSR.” The Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1918, but Turkish music still plays on the Sofia tram drivers’ radios. The package of figs I was eating in Sofia came from Turkey. Turkey, somebody wrote, “was a country that defied definition and was almost impossible to comprehend.” The foul treatment of Turkey’s women was witnessed by our Sofia-switchboard operator firsthand. Movie stars dated soccer players; models were modern goddesses; but nakedness and porno in storefront magazines mirrored my Sofia experience. Istanbul, population 14 million, is a tourist horde, extravagant limos, and *the gods of money* alongside poverty and shantytowns; 75% of the buildings without legal sanction or permits. [ref: O.Z.Livaneli]

Overseas we fought over who got to sort the incoming American mailbag. One of our officer was posted to Turkey, but he liked Sofia and came back to visit. When a letter arrived from Harvard for that officer it surprised me. I hadn’t known, he never said. Most people would use Harvard for bragging rights. Cachet. He told me when his parents emigrated to America he learned English by watching TV. His desk was neat and clean like he was--rubble is a useful disguise-- I never found another like him.

In Sofia, Bulgaria a rooster crowed at all and any time of day. When I threw a cockroach off my 3rd floor balcony in **Sofia** I said, “Watch out! That first step’s a big one.” Sofia felt like a kinder, gentler Belgrade, Serbia. The former **Yugoslavia** was difficult for me to understand. Serbs will tell you it was Einstein’s first wife, a Yugoslav, who fed his ideas. The Serbs champion Nikola Tesla who discovered two-way transmission of electricity.” N. Dzozic wrote “When people would talk against the Serbs as if they were all the same, my mother would say, ‘Please don’t talk like that around me. They aren’t all the same.’” [This was not our war]. I read somewhere that Croat Catholics (formerly in the Austro Hungarian Empire) rebelled against the Serbian Orthodox. Clerics in black robes in Belgrade, Serbia were called *Metropolitans*. Where I come from *Metropolitan* refers to a city’s area and its populace. Before I arrived in Belgrade I pictured the men wearing harem type shoes with the curled up toe. When I looked over the compound wall I heard and saw Serbian kids playing in an empty appliance-size cardboard box just like American kids. Only the fates decide us. When I opened our answering machine in **Serbia** a cockroach staggered out. Stray street dogs in Southeastern Europe wait with the humans at street corners for the light to change “Nobody messed with them,” someone told me.

Working on the **Israel Desk** gave me insight and sympathy toward the Palestinians, but a Press man wrote that they held him hostage, suspected of being a spy when he could not present his press credentials. That office was closed when his plane finally landed. The State Department toldusthere were more draft peace proposals for Israel than any other country in the world.Edward Hoagland spoke of New Yorker’s attitudes (during the 1987 Intifada) that they believed “Palestinians weren’t quite human beings. Their grief, pride, courage, and feelings for home weren’t real.” When Yasser Arafat died in 2004, I heard a Jewish person sing, “Ding dong the witch is dead, witch old witch...” About the Middle East conflicts someone quipped, “If only Omar Sharif had gone into Politics.” When I approached the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C. to make a delivery there was a finger-length tool on the door that translates *A Jewish person works here.* I thought ‘we would never demand that in an American facility.’ In Warsaw with President Clinton I asked the hotel clerk where the Jewish cemetery was. She said, “They’re not the only ones who suffered.” I found myself sympathetic to the underdogs—the Chechens, Armenians, and the Kurds.

In our embassies worldwide, the **Marine Corps** are *Last out*, *lock the doors* should a critical event demand and require that. They are our 24 hour guard and it is a special duty they apply for. These young men (and women) come from all over the United States. One of them was originally from New Jersey and I asked what made him join the ‘Corps.’ He told me he didn’t want to end up still “sitting on the block” back home. He is still with me in spirit-- a result of our staying up late one night discussing the important matters in life. I never found another like him. And just about the time I’ve got all the dreaded combos memorized the Navy Seabees would circulate through embassies worldwide on schedule to change combos (combinations) on iron filing cabinets that contain classified cables. The Marines told me that men who were not allowed alcohol in their own country would drink in our Marine House. I noticed that the after-hours parties in the USMC House (United States Marine Corps) were populated mostly by Brits, Canadians or Germans guests. I wondered if this guest list were language or politics at play. Fraternizing with the locals could be a breach of Embassy security. The USMC men said that young women they might date warned that an outer shabby residence (due to the USSR influence) could be pristine inside (private ownership.)

When a KGB agent followed me in **St. Petersburg** I thought, I’ll just tell him, ‘I’m not that important,’ and he’ll respond, “That’s what they all say.” I hear it’s very cold in Siberia. I found out that in Russia while we were hiding under our desks, they were hiding under theirs. In St Pete I spotted a woman drinking beer from plastic liter size bottle on a city bus. A young Latvian woman said, “I thought we were through with all that,” on seeing the hammer and sickle bas relief on a building in the former USSR. When we visited a Russian orphanage at Christmas during my tour we brought our own Santa Claus along, one of our employees dressed as such. A little 3 y.o. girl in a dress came over to me and without a word climbed up in my lap. She said nothing during the entertainment portion, but when the Toys-for-Tots (distribution of presents) began she climbed down out of my lap to get her portion of the good-goodies. In private, later, I bawled. I, too, was an orphan once. I forgave myself for not taking her home. I knew I couldn’t. An officer I knew adopted two children from her tour in Columbia and told me they had major behavioral and learning trouble, problems and issues which made her wonder if the parents had illicit drug use. I once met a teenager back in the States who told me she was born in Russia, adopted in America. I asked did she want to find her birth parents. She told me that would not be possible. She was left on a doorstep. She could’ve been that little girl who climbed up in my lap. When Inga told her German mother she was going to America to find her American father, a soldier stationed there in WWII, her mother finally admitted that the story was so much prettier than the truth. “You won't find him. You'd be surprised what you’d do for a pair of silk stockings.”

The Foreign Service employees puff out their chests and say things like, “If I tell my spouse we’re going to such-and-such a post we’re going! Or else!” *Or else, what?* I thought. They ward off the boogie man this way and their fear that if their spouse said, “No,” they would have to face the ultimatum. Their bottom line wasn’t giving up; it was giving in, letting their spouse have their way. The EFM, (**Eligible Family Member**) be they husband or wife, got no respect, but they could cause havoc and their spouse knows that and live in dread of it. We were told they are the number one reason people leave the service. Note however that, “If you don’t do something for a living you’re nobody.” Chicago Sociology Professor Massey wrote, i.e., what of the spouse who is *not* the employee is *not* the hiree. What to do with their day. When I bid domestic (in contrast) to be near my husband they razzed, “Look at her bid list! She could practically throw a dart anywhere on the globe and choose! Hey, I wouldn’t give that up for my wife!” I could’ve bid Madras, but for the Whitaker Snake Farm and anywhere snakes abound below the equator. Managua, but I don’t speak Spanish; and Manchuria, but a child going into kindergarten knows 1,000 ideogram characters. I know none. And besides, my Minnesota is cold enough. Employees want the goods of marriage, but it comes with headaches, hassles and heartache, too. There’s a maxim, *If you want to know a male’s 1st posting look at his wife.* I heard one of them call So-and-So a ‘loser’ for being househusband, and yet whine: “I can’t wait ‘til I get to stay at home/retire and she has to work! I’m so jealous! Man, if that was me!” So, which is it? ‘Loser’ or ‘Wish It Was Me’? Oh? You want me to eat the line about this adventurous life, but you want out. Which is it?

American men that an American woman wouldn’t touch were flattered when pretty women in another country wooed them. They were **warned**. Your red *licna carta* and blue dip passport make you a target. “They’re staring at your dip plates. Now they’ll l ask you for a Visa.” When I told my boss about a young woman who helped me get my street bearings he warned me this was planned, her friendship a ruse. She was planted, using a hopefully naïve me as access to compromise both the embassy innards and classified (Secret) information. Even our FSNs (Foreign Service Nationals employed inside the Embassy) were using our *dip plates --*asking did we want to drive to Szeged on the Hungarian border on an off-work holiday to go shopping. A man approached me there in the women’s toilet demanding money. I couldn’t tell my husband. With his hair trigger temper he would’ve caused an International incident.

A result of this peak experience --working for the State Department-- never to be equaled, this stretching out, these broadened horizons this huge range, (*Important to you,* Wilt Chamberlainsaid*, irrelevant to others,)* was that I started to read the International Herald Tribune and the New York Times and listen to the BBC World News. I still do. *They’ve got me. They’ve got my stuff. They’ve got my ticket out of here.* I need a feasible way, held head up, but *I cannot leave here without their permission*. Knowing that made me kind of claustrophobic, trapped. In the end I lost my *raison d’etre*. This life lost its meaning & direction. *Ne bez prichina.*  (Not without reason) did I do what I’ve done; choices/decisions I’ve made, but the reasons behind choices dim with time. Regret accompanies the irrevocable: choices we can’t change, decisions we cannot take back. I didn’t feel I had options; didn’t feel I could continue.In my overseas work it felt as if, “Your actions and feelings have no worth and your joys have no meaning,” as Amos Oz wrote, “and even your life and death leave no trace.” I went home.

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