An In-Between Place: To Tokelau by Boat

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Invited to the Slaughter

At first I was angered – I still had a good three or four meals worth of the finest tasting pork ever.... But after a few minutes I came to my senses. Clearly whoever stole from my windowsill was in some kind of need, and they likely had no idea of the kind of bounty they were snagging at the time. Although Slovakia has never been immune to degrees of poverty within society, the gap between the rich and the poor is certainly greater today – twenty years after transitioning to a capitalist democracy – than it was under the Communist regime. As Slovaks continue to emulate American consumer culture, focussing less on the collective and more and more on the individual, and on the convenience of shopping for their food rather than playing an active role in producing it themselves, the gap between the poor and rich only continues to widen. Ján and his family could easily afford to buy all of their food at any one of Šurany’s hypermarkets (Tesco, Terno, or Lidl, for example), but they still made an effort to participate in the traditional practice of “killing a pig.” Even if only for the benefit of his North American guest, Ján’s act of performing this element of Slovak culinary tradition was at once a subtle display of resistance to consumerism and an act demonstrating that what was good from the collective Slovak past is not yet forgotten. And although I can only guess what the socio-economic circumstances of my pork thief were, I only hope that he/she took that tasty and carefully prepared pork home to a hungry family and had a small party in celebration of the fine food they had happened upon.

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Notes

1 Literally, “beer brandy” – a homemade liquor distilled from barley. This drink is somewhat similar in strength, if not in taste, to the “official” Slovak spirit, slivovica, a plum brandy.
2 Our pig was never weighed, but its liver was – a method that with some calculation is remarkably accurate, so I am told.

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36 hours to nowhere. 36 hours to nowhere. Not but a dot on the map, not but sandy beach and a few palm trees surrounded by the vast ocean. The Japanese dreamed, green with envy, of the fat yellow tuna that populated the waters of Tokelau. I imagined feasts of coconuts and roasted pigs as I boarded the Tokelau 223 with 49 other passengers. Imposing islander bodies were scattered over two decks, most of them lying on foam mattresses in order to claim their sleeping spots. I kept staring at their toes, each one as fat as a hotdog, spilling out of their sandals and onto the deck. Their toes and their necks, linebacker necks, rugby player necks – men and women alike. I was overwhelmed by their corporeality: even their shadows had a certain weight that engulfed me, pressing down on my lungs and making me disappear. At first, my husband, Isaac, and I sat on the lower deck, but we quickly realized that although it was protected from potential rain, there was no airflow. The smell of damp, slightly rotting vegetables became noticeable. On the upper deck, I looked out upon a sky dark and pregnant with rain, and watched as veterans of the voyage lay out plastic tarps below their bedding. I was sitting on a bench trying to claim our sleeping space, but when Isaac left to go to the bathroom a huge Samoan man with fleshy arms and multiple tattoos sat down in his place. I looked at him warily, wondering if he wanted to take my spot. The tattoos curled off his arm and wove themselves into my hair; their geometric shapes left us bound together, my pale body pressed against his brown corpulence.
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The boat was a lot smaller than I had envisioned considering that we were going to be on the open ocean for 36 hours. Most of the other passengers were Tokelauans who used the twice-monthly boat to travel to and from Western Samoa for medical emergencies, to pick up supplies or to visit family. Tokelau, a group of three remote atolls that are protectorates of New Zealand, can only be reached by boat. The captain appeared on the upper deck and outlined the safety rules: he pointed to a life raft, called out a list of names and then had his assistant put on a worn life jacket with multiple ties at the sides. In the case of an accident the unlucky soul that failed to tie the jacket well would slip out and be borne away by the currents. We were headed out to open sea—one of the few places where it was still possible to get lost, to fall of the electronic map and to imagine being eaten by a shark. There were reefs surrounding the harbor, and in the distance the crashing waves made it seem as if the water were too shallow to allow the boat out to sea.

Everyone was lying down. I realized why as soon as the boat started to move and nausea overtook me. A teenage Tokelua girl motioned for me to lie down, and I immediately felt better. Isaac, on the other hand, wanted to watch as the boat went out to sea, and within minutes, he was vomiting over the side. "I have a stomach of steel," I shouted to him. While I lay down two Hungarians on a bed near me introduced themselves. They were working on a project related to remote radio communication, and Tokelau would be the 42nd Pacific island they had visited.

I made a niche for myself next to the railing, and imagined that if I fell asleep I would roll into the sea and the waves would eat me up. Around me imposing Tokeluan men and women—tall, big-boned and muscular—slept. The exhaust from the boat flew in my face, and I suddenly realized why no one else claimed my corner. I wondered how many times the other passengers had made this trip, and if they were still in awe of the journey.

I walked to the railing and stared at the water, wondering if I had ever seen anything so bewitching. From the top deck the water appeared deep cobalt, while around the boat it frothed, boiled and bubbled into a brilliant turquoise. From the lower deck, when I was no more than ten feet above the water, it was a fierce indigo that defied classification. I wanted to jump in to test the true color of the water, to take possession and be possessed by something so intense. The ocean beckoned to me, and the urge to throw myself overboard was sickeningly strong. I stepped away from the edge of the boat. To jump in I knew that just for one moment I would have to abandon all reason, and make a leap that would leave me floating far behind the boat in the embrace of the indigo sea. I envisioned the moment of elation, the embrace of the water and then the grip of terror as the boat became distant. Sharks. Sharks. Sharks. Equal parts frightening and fascinating. Of course is that how I imagined my end in the ocean. Sharks.

The boat captain, a short light skinned man with a jolly paunch, attempted to reel in, over a period of 45 minutes, a swordfish. He called for his strips, some giant suspenders that would hook him to the boat. Someone brought him a chair, and two other deck hands took turns helping him hold the fishing pole. The fishing line was so long I couldn't tell how far out it extended: where the horizon met the water, the line became indistinguishable. I looked out in the distance and saw the waves rolling endlessly, eating up the line and giving the struggling swordfish a sense of comfort. At some point, all three men hung onto the fishing pole, their faces stretched in concentration. The two deck hands were large Samoan men wearing flip-flops half the size of their meaty feet. Their toes oozed onto the wet deck as they slipped about. The captain, muscles bulging, held onto the fishing pole, eyes lost in the distant waters.

As the fish tired and was reeled in, the men grabbed a large spear and took three boards from the side of the boat to create an opening that would allow them to drag the fish onto the deck. The swordfish's iridescent skin glittered in the water, each silvery scale burning itself onto my retina. I mentally willed it to escape, feeling young and naive as I did so. Moments later, they stabbed the flailing muscle of a fish and threw it on deck. It fought tenaciously, smacking the weight of its six-foot body against the deck in hopes of propelling itself back into the water. That ferocity was met with several sharp blows on the head, but the swordfish maintained its fury. I drank in the violence. Whack. Whack. Whack. Three men descended upon it with blows; a river of blood ran from its gills as it finally lay still. In the next instant the swordfish was beating the deck again, but it stopped in the blink of an eye—it's momentary resurrection the last muscle spasms of the recently dead. The men began washing blood off the deck and then picked up the fish to move it closer to the hose. At any moment, I expected the fish to smack them with its mighty tail and flip back into the water. Or, at least, that was what I envisioned as a happy ending until I realized that the fish would be my dinner, which was also a pleasant thought.

Immediately there was talk of how to divide up the meat and what to cook. I heard Oka mentioned, a traditional Western Samoan and Tokelua dish consisting of raw fish, coconut cream, cucumber, onion, tomato, salt and pepper. They cut up the fish in no time flat: slit the belly, pulled out and cleaned the entrails, found a whole fish inside the swordfish's stomach, and cut the meat into filets. The captain handed me the swordfish's head, and laughed as he said, "You can hang this on your wall at home." I took the wet, partially bloody head in my hand, but all I could think of was the swordfish glistening like a metallic rainbow, flushing from life to death as it fought to escape the blows of the deck hands and return to those mesmerizing indigo waters. I left the head on the lower deck, but carried the vision of it with me.

We arrived on Atafu, a bite-sized atoll with a population that fluctuates from 400-500, with rubbery sea legs. I walked off the boat and flopped onto the ground. After closing my eyes for some time, I sat up and began to explore my surroundings. Not far away I spotted a slim figure in a bright sari. Only as I began to look more closely did I realize that despite the long hair decorated her head, and laughed as she set the table. We did our best to convince her that we would eat anything, regaling her with stories of our eating adventures on Western Samoa. "That's right. It's not important what you put into your mouth, but what comes out. That's what can hurt people," Vie affirmed.

Isaac spent his days learning about the construction of the traditional vaka outrigger canoe. I tried to navigate the social mores of island life and find a place for myself in the
community. The rules of the island included: All women had to wear a hat to church, preferably handmade. No watching TV, no listening to music, no playing video games or eating ice cream, no swimming and no running around on Sundays. In fact, all the people who sold ice cream, sweets or other goods from their home shut down on Sundays. To be sure, Sunday was my most difficult day. I was tempted to catch up on the news, and I craved ice cream. One Sunday I was watching news in the living room when a next-door neighbor whose house was only a few feet away walked in, turned it off and scolded me for not being properly pious. "I don't share your religious views," I said, but that was a concept that didn't appear to exist on the island. There was only one church, and everyone went to it.

In addition to the many prohibited activities that seemed a bit silly to me, there was a whole list of darker activities that were sanctioned by the community. These included alcoholism and wife beating, and, as I would later find out, child molestation. The suicide rate on the atoll, taking into account the tiny population, was one of the highest in the world. In fact, I remembered reading an article in the New Yorker about Tokelau in which the author described teens who committed suicide by getting into metal dishwashers and motorizing off into the ocean, never to return. Despite the palm trees and turquoise waters, there was a feeling of suffocation that sometimes came over me, and I imagined that I was not the only one who experienced it. There were secrets on the tiny islands. In the dark of night rocks rained down on select houses or harsh words pierced the silence. The story slowly unfolded over my six-week stay.

A person’s whole spatial conception is changed by island life. I could walk the whole length of the island in 30 minutes, and did this at least two times a day to prevent myself from going stir-crazy. On one end of the island were houses clustered together no more than a few feet apart. Most didn’t have curtains, and it was clear to me from the level of gossip that everyone knew, down to the minutest detail, the facts of other peoples’ daily lives. At the opposite end of the village were the pigs, hundreds of them, surrounded by beautiful stonewalls. I loved visiting the pigs, and especially liked the really fat ones. As I walked to visit the pigs, I was often stopped and asked where I was going. My reply shocked people and prompted them to reply, “But that is so far away.” One person even offered me their motorcycle. On an island so tiny I was surprised to find that there were two motorbikes, one flatbed truck, one golf cart, a mini-backhoe and scores of bicycles. I tried to imagine having lived my entire life on an island so small, and I began to understand how their conception of time and space might be entirely different from my own.

In terms of time, everything moved much more slowly. Many islanders began their mornings swimming in the lagoon or sitting in the water eating raw fish and coconut. On most days everyone worked communally, and tasks were divided by gender. I worked with the women on tasks that generally involved cooking gaggantuan amounts of food. In addition to breakfast, the Tokelaunans had a 10am “tea time” which consisted of a feast of eggs, cakes, meats, fresh fruit and fried foods. The first time I participated in cooking food for “tea time” I became confused. “What is all this food for?” I asked. “For a snack at tea,” was the reply. The Tokelauan diet had changed drastically in the last 20 years due to more frequent visits by supply ships which dropped off cases of coke, beer and, most ironically, canned fish. Diabetes and obesity are serious problems for the community of Atafu because, although modern conveniences have arrived, the accompanying health education and health care have not. However, many islanders also maintained elements of the traditional diet of fresh fish, coconut and other seafood.

The main island where people live is surrounded by a ring of other smaller islands, which are home to the coconut crab, a crab whose mighty claw can cut off a finger. Stan, one of Veo and Teleti’s sons, invited us to go coconut crab hunting. Stan and his son, Stan Jr. motored us across the lagoon to a grove of coconut trees. Once there, they began walking around and poking the ground with a stick, looking for the den of the mighty cobalt and periwinkle beast. Once they found its lair, young Stan would reach his arm into the hole and pull out a coconut crab. He then broke their necks. The crabs, fierce fighters the size of a human head, had a huge sack on their tail end that seemed to be filled with some kind of liquid. “That is the best part for eating,” said Stan as I examined the crab. Big Stan began to collect coconut fronds and pile them together. Then he threw the crabs on top and covered them with more fronds. He lit the whole pile on fire as I laughed at the simplicity of the whole procedure. “How do you know when they’re done?” I asked. “When their shells turn bright red,” replied young Stan.

We sat down in the sand and cracked into our crabs and ate them with fresh coconut. “It tastes like peanut butter,” said Big Stan as I stared at the crab’s liquid sack. He opened it for me and I dipped a piece of coconut into the caramel colored liquid. It was creamy and rich, a nice contrast to the crisp sweetness of the coconut.

Perhaps both my best and worst memories involved food. The richness of raw yellow tuna, fresh coconut cream and roasted pig are burned into my memory. We were generously included in community life and piled with food. Our first pig roast took place at sunset and kids played in the water, women wove coconut frond crowns and men drank bottles of beer while roasting whole pigs over an open fire. I will not soon forget the sight of those pigs skewered in the position of running, crisping and sizzling in the flames. This was a gathering of extended family to celebrate children being home from university. The women were weaving crowns on a mat near the shore, and invited me to sit down. They measured my head with a fibrous ribbon of frond and then tied a knot to hold the circular shape. I folded leaves in half and tied them on, slowly making a thick, green crown. The sun set, its rays striking out across the water like flames. Baskets of raw tuna and coconuts full of soy sauce and wasabi were passed around. Isaac and I were handed fresh coconuts, and men offered us palm frond baskets of BBQ lamb and chicken still hot from the fire. Men and women brought out guitars and ukuleles and began to sing. The night was warm and the wind softly carried the rising voices out into the lagoon. The pigs were taken off the fire and leaned against a tree to cool. It looked as if their charred bodies were trying to run up the tree. The meat was sliced up and passed around. I watched the men cut through the crispy skin as fat dripped down. They gave me a browned layer of skin and fat; it was as rich as cream, as smooth as butter. People sang and danced as they waited for the moon to appear; it would provide the necessary light to navigate the boats around the corals and back to the village.

My negative experiences with food involved canned fish, spam, coke and other processed foods. I remember working with the village women one morning to make gravy that consisted of 8 bottles of vegetable oil and some flour. This gravy was poured over spam and given to the men for their lunch. A heaping plate of it was also offered to me, and I tried to eat as much as possible. However, the Tokelaunans were generally not impressed with my appetite and often insisted that I eat more food until my “no” became hollow and
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exhausted. I remember seeing babies drinking bottles filled with Fanta or Coke and other carbonated beverages and wanting to take the bottles away and lecture the mothers. Obese children. Too much TV. Junk food. On some days it was easy to romanticize island culture, but on others I was reminded of the fragility of their traditional way of life.

For Isaac, the complexities of modernity on Tokelau could be summed up by looking at the situation of the traditional outrigger canoe, the vaka. "Look at the lengths we go to in order to accommodate our machines," Isaac said to me as we stood among the numerous metal dinghies that dotted the beach of the lagoon. The vaka, when well maintained, lasted one hundred years. However, it was so heavy that it had to be moved and manned by a team, which meant that fishing was a communal activity. The dinghies were lighter and allowed individuals to go fishing, a practice that eroded the traditional inati system of dividing all food caught among members of the community. The aluminum dinghies also became so hot under the Tokelauan sun that fishermen had to carry ice boxes in order to keep the fish from spoiling. This was unnecessary in the vaka whose wooden sides remained cool despite the heat. In addition, there was the need to buy gas for the dinghies, the problem of motor accidents and the issue of how to dispose of old dinghies at the end of their seven-year life span. The use of the dinghy also inspired a particular acrobatic ritual in which men in snorkels jumped over the side of the dinghy and swam away from it. Then they took day-old fish from a pouch around their waists, chewed it up and spit it into the water. This attracted bait fish, which the fishermen then hooked with tiny poles while underwater and stuck in another pouch around their waist. All of this was necessary because the sound of the water slapping on the dinghy scared fish away, something that had not been a problem when the vaka was used. "Who am I to tell them not to take advantage of modern conveniences?" Isaac asked me. "What right do I have to romanticize their traditional way of life?" For that, I had no answer.

It is over fresh fish that Isaac and I had lunch with the preacher and his wife, who lived across the street from Isaac and me, no more than a few feet from our house. He was articulate, thoughtful and calm, one of the few islanders who would discuss the problems of modernization on Tokelau with me. At the same time, as I sat there looking at him, I knew that he had been accused of child molestation. He was the man creating the schism in the community, the one accused of acts that disgusted me. There were those in the community who said that God believed in forgiveness, and they choose to forgive the preacher. However, in the minority were some families who believed that the preacher should be removed from his position and punished by the law. I had looked at him with mean eyes from afar, but when I was talking to him, I didn't know what to think. There was such beauty and intelligence housed in the same body that had done the unspeakable. I saw this in the village as well, acts of great beauty and others so sad, ugly and thoughtless that I wanted to weep. Some days I raged against injustices and others I saw life as a whole range with the good and the bad bound so tightly together that it was almost impossible to separate them.

I found myself in Atafu surrounded by turquoise waters and palm trees but crying every day. Sometimes they were tears of joy and sometimes I simply wept. When a 30-minute walk takes you to the end of the world, where can you go to escape? After six weeks of living on Atafu I found out that Tokelau 223 saw both swordfish and islanders through the rites of death. Manu and Tessa, friends who had included us in their lives and spent Saturday afternoons diving off a piece of upturned coral in the lagoon, had lost a baby. It was sick with a fever that refused to lessen. A baby with a fever, a child with a severe kerosene burn, an adult with appendicitis – either they survived the 36 hour boat ride across an unending in-between, or they flushed from life to death like the swordfish.