

Ana Maria Spagna

Potluck

Community on the Edge of Wilderness

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Contents

Potluck	9
Thirteen Percent Catholic	18
<i>La Linea</i>	30
Sand-calloused Spaces	40
The Fall Line	50
This, Jack London Reminded Me	67
What's Heaven without a Gate?	79
Lost and Found	88
Nature Is Our Cotton Ball Bunny	96
The Woman Who Gardens with Bears	106
Saw Chips in My Bra	115
Spawning in Mud	125
Defensible Space	137
Caucus	147
The Seam	159
Acknowledgements	175

Potluck



Tables—sheets of plywood, actually, set atop saw horses—line the center of the Stehekin Community Hall that on Sundays serves as the Pentecostal church. The tables are over-crowded with chicken enchiladas, Swedish meatballs, organic salad greens, pasta with sun-dried tomatoes, dishes as varied and predictable as the sixty of us who sit on wooden benches waiting to eat. We've gathered on this November evening to bid farewell to a family that's moving. The day has been gray, as have been the past several, ever since an inversion settled into the valley and effectively erased the peaks so that the conifers stand out darkly, nearly black, against the gray, and leafless hardwood limbs divide the gray into twisted foreboding shapes, and the river runs over gray granite boulders, and the sameness grows oppressive. We needed, all of us, to get out of the house, to get a little change of scenery, to share some food and company, to be together. The kids feel it, and they romp excitedly in the tree-hemmed parking lot in the slopover glow from the hall windows. And the adults feel it, too. The woodstove has heated the crowded room shirt-sleeve warm, and the mood is cheery if slightly restrained.

Between aged log posts, black-and-white photos dating back to the turn of the last century adorn the walls. They're posed community shots, grainy and indistinct. Some of the faces are younger versions of folks here tonight; others are ancestors of people here tonight whose camera-caught characteristics—large ears, toothy grins, a certain prideful tip of the head—identify

them easily. Others are long gone and forgotten, short-timers. Native Americans named this place Stehekin, meaning “the Way Through” because of the narrow mountain pass that facilitated east/west trade routes between tribes. The natives, according to archaeologists, only used the valley seasonally, and the legacy of transiency remains. Farewell potlucks, up here, are as common as week-long inversions, and this one has given us a fine excuse to gather on the grim cusp of winter.

Ours is doubtless the largest gathering—of humans at least—for a minimum thirty-mile radius in every direction. No roads go in or out of Stehekin. You can take a boat or you can take a float plane or in summer you can hike. But you can’t drive. This time of year, the boat runs only every other day, and a plane could not navigate this weather, so tonight we are effectively cut off. When I was a kid, my favorite play-pretend game was Lost on a Desert Island, and this, my adult home, is not so different from my childhood fantasy. Except that it’s decidedly not a desert, tucked into the famously wet Cascades: mosses and lichens, conifers and hardwoods, salmon and eagles. Not the stuff of Robinson Crusoe, this. You’d freeze in Tarzan garb. It’s not really an island either, just a small valley separated from the outside world by steep jagged mountains, a whole lot of them, and long skinny Lake Chelan, deep and cold and treacherously windy. Mountains, a lake, and I should mention, tradition. By now, people who live here do so precisely because there are no roads in or out, and if one were to be proposed, a furious uproar would ensue.

So here we are, about a hundred people who choose to live in comparative isolation. Like many other rural places, this valley has no stoplights, no fast food restaurants, no grocery stores. Like very few rural places, it has neither a church nor a tavern, though people do, of course, both worship and imbibe excessively. We do without some conveniences, sure, but not

many. We don't have telephones—land lines don't extend this far and cell towers are forbidden in designated wilderness—but we have Internet service via satellite dishes that began to sprout on cabins like mushrooms a few years back. We can't go to the movies, but we can rent DVDs from Netflix. We can't go to the store, but we can send an email order to Safeway or the Red Apple Market downlake and have groceries arrive at the boat dock. (We used to send a handwritten list and a blank check a week in advance. Now we live large.) We can't drive more than twenty-five miles per hour on the one landlocked road through town, but then again we don't have to battle traffic. In an ironic twist on *Lost on a Desert Island*, the only thing we truly can't do is escape one another.

When, at last, one neighbor carries a plate to the potluck table, we all follow suit. My partner, Laurie, and I fall in toward the end of the queue, behind a group of teenagers with new haircuts and a gang of three-year-olds snatching cookies while their parents are distracted with the casseroles. I look around at the crowd: a barge operator, a fabric artist, a music teacher, a retired engineer, a disabled vet, and at least one self-described inventor. Gone this time of year are the seasonal Park Service employees who most value the respite that a potluck provides from their own cooking. One guy I worked with on a trail crew, a seasonal worker from Chicago, mastered the art of simmering a pot of dried beans—cheaper than potato chips and easier to keep on hand—to bring to the frequent summer potlucks. He told me about the beans one day as we hiked down the trail.

"I never really had to think about it before," he said.

"About what?" I said.

He glanced at me, confused and incredulous, and it took me a minute to catch on.

"You mean twenty-two-year-olds everywhere don't go to potlucks three times a week?"

We laughed. After several years of living up here full-time, I sometimes forget what it's like to live in what people insistently call "the real world." Stehekin has no town council, which is probably one reason we manage to get along. A locally elected school board governs the one-room school, and grudges bred on the school board sometimes simmer for decades. Without an institution to tether us, our union is tenuous. You can tell by the looks of us: long gray beards and military haircuts, cowboy boots and sandals. We wear our cultural/ political beliefs literally on our sleeves as if we glean identity from the glossy catalogs in our post office boxes: wool vs. fleece, cowboy hats vs. ball caps, Cabelas vs. REI.

We spoon dollops of this, dabs of that onto paper plates, food that will likely meld in my gut later and set off alarms. I am not completely at ease here, I admit. Decorum rules the day, politeness born of our differences and our overarching respect for privacy. One friend's only son has recently gone off to college, and she is sad. Another friend is newly pregnant, uncertain and sick. Yet another teeters on the brink of divorce. Tonight we do not speak of such troubles. Here we are bound together by something more superficial, and also much deeper: a cold night, a family leaving.

This family is following the career path that requires upwardly mobile park rangers to move to a different park every three years or so. The idea is familiar: best to have professionals with broad and varied experience, able to apply big abstract management concepts to small places. In general, permanent Park Service families are earnest and dedicated, if a little neurotic. They get to see the prettiest places on earth, live there for a while, then move on. Many of them come to Stehekin as a stepping stone. They resent their tenure here and tick off the long weeks in purgatory.

In contrast, the family that is leaving this time liked it here, and they're leaving as much to be closer to their families back East as

for any other reason. The father is a law-enforcement officer of the Andy Griffith mold, who prefers a chat to a confrontation, and is well liked in the valley. His wife raises search-and-rescue dogs; we'd see her mornings on the road running the border collies, one who died here, and one who will move with them. Their daughter arrived as a long-lashed toddler and leaves now as a long-legged and confident girl who, in springtime, runs with packs of kids out on the wide mud flats at the head of the lake. The family would have liked to stay, but like major league ball players, permanent Park Service employees can't afford to get too attached to any one place.

This kind of life, ripe with heartbreak, is, of course, more norm than exception. Upwardly mobile or desperately downwardly so, Americans move an average of twelve times in a lifetime. Every place, really, is the Way Through. You bring what you have to offer. You fill your plate with what is there. You eat, and then you leave. There is privilege in movement: a richness of experience. (Another trail crew buddy once found a copy of the *Utne Reader* in his bunkhouse shortly after moving to the Pacific Northwest from Texas. "Well, I've been broadened," he said. And he had.) But there is disconnect, too.

I should know. I lived much of my adult life as a seasonal—moving semi-annually from place to place—and I remember how it feels to know you'll soon be gone: the less I do, the less I hurt. On the land. In myself. During wildfires, I remained coldly detached. Philosophy dictated my response: let it burn. Ditto for floods: let the wild river run. Ever since I decided to stay put, I no longer have that luxury. Now during natural disasters, I'm too worried about my neighbors' homes to ponder philosophy. If it's disconcerting, this weight of responsibility, this heavy plate of mix-and-match food, it's also comforting. My neighbors, after all, worry about my home too.

The room is growing warmer yet and more crowded as latecomers straggle in. A few Park Service mucky-mucks have traveled ten hours—six by car, four by boat—to be here for the farewell celebration. They arrive bearing plastic trays of veggies, chips and salsa, boxes of Franzia wine, though wine, usually, is a no-no in this sometimes church building. And the crowd seems genuinely glad to have them.

When I was a kid in the seventies, potlucks were a way of life. We had church picnics and neighborhood swim parties and annual potlucks in the school auditorium that offered parents the chance to meet and offered us kids the chance to eat Kentucky Fried Chicken from the bucket. We elbowed ahead in the line like Dickens characters, like starving orphans, when actually we were the precise opposite: we were safe and insulated, spoiled, and utterly uninhibited. It was perfect practice, I sometimes think, for living in Stehekin. Then again, potlucks happen everywhere. This morning I was listening to a radio call-in show from the small apple-orchard town downlake when a woman called about the annual high school football team potluck. She reminded listeners that there would be a lot of folks in attendance and that some of them would be football players—more than forty kids on the three teams: Freshman, JV, Varsity. Her message was clear: bring plenty.

Outside, thick icy sludge coats every limb. One crashed onto our new woodshed roof last night. Cottonwood leaves, spade shaped, playing-card sized, still green, stick straight up in the slop, melting now to ankle-deep pools. All night rain spattered on the cabin roof like the enthusiastic applause at a political convention, causing the icy slabs to slide off the dormer with startling irregular thuds. Around here in summer social life grows rich and abundant as the deciduous trees—maples, ash, dogwoods—and the lush gardens and wild berries. If I want to go to a potluck every night I can. I can bring a bucket of beer and

sit by a campfire, laughing and swatting mosquitoes. Summer is frenetic. In winter, silence pervades. You must get very close to the river, barely a trickle, to hear its flow. At home, we can no longer stand the buzz of the computer, or the freezer kicking on in the night, or the kathump of snow off the roof.

These things, the most real and raw, are what we share. I picture my roots intertwining with the others who are here tonight because, well, we are here. A few years back a job came open that required negotiating land trades and dictating land-use rules, and the managers told me frankly not to bother to apply, that I wouldn't be able to separate myself—untangle myself—from the community enough to make the right decisions. I knew it was true. I've become so entangled, in fact, that I'm beginning to think it's a good thing.

And I'm not alone. I recently took an informal email poll of friends in their mid-thirties like I am. Some live in big cities and some, like me, live in small backwoods communities. Some live in their home towns, having stayed or returned, and some live impossibly far, geographically and culturally, from where they grew up. Turns out they all attend potlucks or dinner parties at roughly the same rate as I do: for sports teams or book clubs, for church or for school. In our twenties, belonging meant searching out the places and the people that melded best to the version of life that we aspired to. And what joy in finding them. High jinks! Now wherever we are, we meld ourselves, or some part of ourselves, to the communities we find ourselves in. As best we can. When I was a kid, my stomach acted up at potlucks. I remember the familiar acid curdling that meant "I want to go home." Usually it was because there were too many people I didn't know. Nowadays, no matter how happy I am to be settled where I am, I sometimes want to go home from potlucks because there are too many people I *do* know.

The last eaters are interrupted by a loud shrill whistle. Time for the formalities. Speeches are given, brief but heartfelt. A couple that has recently acquired a tiny touristy outdoor-supply store comes forward with a new backpack for the eight-year-old. My trail crew boss, Phil Garfoot, a permanent park employee who's chosen to live here for thirty years, brings forward a hand-carved wooden arrowhead, the symbol of the National Park Service. A descendant of the original settlers, whose relatives crowd the photos on the walls, offers a wooden bow hewn from the plentiful local maple. The ranger thanks them, teeters on the edge of tears, and steps back into the shadows. His daughter doesn't bother with stoicism. She stands before us sobbing softly while her closest eight-year-old pals hover near the door, waiting for all this to be over so they can go back outside and play.

I'm moved by the scene. Who wouldn't be? I'm sad for the family, but I'm also humbled by the way my neighbors have learned over time the graceful art of making friends and letting them go. They invite new seasonals and summer folks to dinner. They make small talk in the post office even when maybe they'd rather—just once, for godsake!—be anonymous. They gladly welcomed the family that is leaving, and they are sad to see them go. I aspire to their combination of openness and steadfastness. That, after all, is the rest of the potluck story, isn't it? You bring what you have to offer. You fill your plate with what is there. You eat and then you leave. But while you're there, you hope for warmth and light, courtesy and generosity. And after a while, you learn to bring more than your share.

Eventually dishes are cleared and claimed. It's time to go.

Stepping out into the moonless dark, Laurie and I realize too late that we've forgotten a flashlight, so we navigate by the sound of nearby Rainbow Creek. This must be the right way, we think. No, this must. It's a guessing game, terrifying and hysterically funny, a lostness not too different from the long journey that

has brought the two of us, alone and together, to this potluck tonight. We drag our fingertips along slushy needles and twigs until we hit the ragged solid edge of asphalt. For now, we're sure where we are and that we're safe. Again. Still. So we get in the car, and we drive away.

“Ana Maria Spagna brings something new and important to the American tradition of writing about life at the edge of wilderness. Her stories are shaped by chainsaws and courage, but also by potlucks, unexpected love, hand-held radio calls, and the crazy sustaining friendships that create a community from everybody who washes up at the place where the river meets the trail. John Muir (alone at the top of a mountain) might be puzzled by her book, but Henry David Thoreau (planting beans by the pond) would love it. It’s rueful, funny, suspenseful, insightful, and altogether true.”

KATHLEEN DEAN MOORE, author of *Wild Comfort*

In *Potluck*, Ana Maria Spagna explores the enduring human connection to place, journeying from Tijuana to a California beach to Utah’s canyon country—and, always, back to the sparsely populated valley in the North Cascades that she calls home.

Potluck homes in on the everyday gatherings that, over time, define a community: a makeshift wedding, an art gallery opening, a farewell potluck, a work party, a campfire, a political caucus, a funeral. “What connects us?” Spagna asks, and she reveals, again and again, the gift of community—easy and uneasy, deep and enduring and essential.

ANA MARIA SPAGNA is the author of *Test Ride on the Sunnyland Bus: A Daughter’s Civil Rights Journey*, winner of the 2009 River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Contest, and *Now Go Home: Wilderness, Belonging, and the Crosscut Saw*, named a best book of 2004 by *The Seattle Times*. Her writing is widely published in journals and magazines, including *High Country News*, *Mountain Gazette*, *Oregon Quarterly*, *Orion*, and *Utne Reader*. She lives in Stehekin, Washington. www.anamariaspagna.com

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