

The Anthropologist Problem

In the official texts that the villagers had permitted me to read, there was never a strict age requirement. What mattered was that the candidates were *elders*—re-tellers of stories, slow morning walkers, birdhouse watchers, coin-behind-your-ear jokesters, narrators of the way things had been before the war. For years the favored leaders were in fact veterans, and after they were all dead the villagers seemed to groom candidates who'd worked in the mines, probably because they were squinty and hunched but still young enough to survive a few elections.

The word *election*, I should add, could be considered a false cognate. While it's similar to the word they use, *contest* or *deathmatch* might be more accurate translations. There's no clear scholarly consensus yet.

The subtlety of the nomination process stood in contrast with the election itself. A few simple asides—*Oh Gert, you're so wise! And healthy as a horse!*—and an elder would know to challenge the incumbent. It required perception, in the way that good conversationalists know how long to let silence stretch before speaking. This was my interpretation, at least. It was tough to get a true sense of what the locals thought of anything political, because discussing current affairs was associated with a kind of taboo that can be best compared to sexual promiscuity. The word they have for talking politics translates to “slutting around the issues.” Interestingly, discussing historical events was fine. I heard a villager once refer to a past leader as “barely even an elder,” because he'd ridden a bicycle and had 20/20 vision. To say that about Sally Dent, the incumbent, would be scandalous.

The gist of it was that Alleghenia had honed a politik of intuition and brutality, a nation at the mercy of whichever Hank,

Burt, or Tammy happened to take the most Vitamin C before their trip to the quarantine trailer. For an ex-pat, like myself, the enigma was part of the fun. It was useless and unhip to try to imagine the future. You had to live life three inches in front of your face.

Most of the ex-pats I palled around with were wry slackers or burned-out artists who drank at this old farmhouse that we called the old farmhouse. It had no electric and no heat but we brought solar lights and wore puffy coats, our noses red and dripping half the year. A local kid set up in one corner of the parlor selling cups of the regional booze, Slosh, which his ancient grandpa brewed. I liked my Slosh served the Northern way. Hot, with a chunk of honeycomb and a dash of pepper.

So that's where I was, and what I was drinking, on the fourth election run-off between Delbert Johnson and Sally Dent. I'd never seen Delbert—he was from up near Sinnemahoning Creek, where they didn't even speak the reformed dialects—but from what I knew of Sally I wasn't surprised she was still kicking. Tight-skinned, tanned, and still very upright, she looked like she could lick a rat and not get sick.

The village had been without administration for six weeks, since Sally and Delbert first entered the quarantine trailer together. I'd hardly noticed the difference, other than the blackouts and the reek of burning trash, so acrid it stung your nose. The trash smell wafted clear to the farmhouse, where I stumbled around, eleven cups of Slosh deep. Because the windows had long been broken out, the stink moved through easily and some orange leaves skittered on the floor. I liked to step on them and twist my foot, so they'd shred against the planks. A fellow anthropologist, in country for some fieldwork, had told me that the farmhouse was at least two hundred and fifty years old, pre-dating even the quarantine trailer by more than a century. After the war, Alleghenia's founder, Elderman Bob, had moved everyone into trailers in the villages, leaving farmhouses like this one dotting the countryside.

Sometimes we paid local fiddlers to play at the farmhouse, but they were all at the ceremony, so the ex-pats filled the space with election chatter. I was talking with one of them, Kayleigh, a British social media manager that the village improvement coalition had recently trucked in to spearhead a campaign for dental health. She had the personality of a smartphone, smooth and bright. Her face was the same way, with symmetrical Chiclet teeth. Maybe that's why they hired her. I wanted very badly to kiss her all over.

Kayleigh was planning to go to the edge of the unveiling field and watch the villagers funnel out after the conclusion to the election. As foreigners, we weren't allowed in the corn spiral, but when I was new to Alleghenia I'd go to the field often to watch the parade. And sometimes, on weekends, I'd climb the hill on the south side of the village to see the view. The path within the cornfield coiled snakelike, concentric and tightening to the traditional doublewide trailer in the middle, the corn groomed to resemble the head of a snake, devouring it. Ultimately, because the nature of the election *required* quarantine, and because, like the villagers say, "what happens in quarantine stays in quarantine," I could never really finish my research.

"Are you planning to go?" I asked Kayleigh. "They don't let us see much."

"It's the energy of it I like." She had a voice like lithium.

I told her I'd go along and bought us hot Sloshes for the long walk.

For me, Alleghenia was only supposed to be temporary. I'd gotten a permit to do my dissertation fieldwork in the village, and some university funding to boot, but six months turned into a year, into two. The funding dried up. The fieldwork was all there, a hundred interviews and months of observation, but I could never make the pieces fit. Was the primary function of the unusual election process to assess strength, or build humility? Now, it'd been four years and all I'd learned for certain was Alleghenia was a cheap place for me to live, so cheap and so shameless, and I had a cushy job teaching Edited American English and a decent singlewide next to the river. Every year I stayed, it got a little harder to repatriate.

The villagers needed foreigners, but they didn't particularly like us. Inter-marriage occurred occasionally, but when it did the ex-pats became locals fast, disappearing from the farmhouse and the fishing hole where we skinny-dipped in the summer. You'd see them after that occasionally at the market—the men with their flannel shirts, bushy beards and man-buns, or the women in their bright jumpers and asymmetrical haircuts. They'd make small talk, but that was the extent of it. Us ex-pats really had our own scene. The bohemians, the truth-seekers, the do-gooders, a few academics—we all intermixed and interfucked. There were bad breakups and constant drama. Something about being between cultures lends itself to broken promises. As far as I knew, Kayleigh hadn't been involved in any of that juice yet.

We walked the dirt road from the farmhouse to the village, kicking fallen acorns back and forth and swapping gossip. At the footbridge over Moccasin Creek, we stopped to spit from each side and silently curse our ancestors for continuing their bloodlines, as per the custom. With all of the villagers at the ceremony, the night was so quiet I could hear my saliva slap the black water. Kayleigh's, too. There was something vaguely erotic about it.

Just then somebody called "Hey" from down the road. "Wait up."

It was Henry, a fuckboy linguist brimming with research funding.

"Heading to the field?"

"Yes," I said, and stepped closer to Kayleigh.

"I wouldn't miss it," Henry said.

"Is this part of your research?" she asked him.

He said, "What isn't? I work in multiple fields of study. And of course social upheaval relates closely to linguistic shifts. So, who knows, tonight we may see the seeds planted of some new words, new metaphors. It's thrilling, no?"

"For sure," Kayleigh said, her warm cup of Slosh cradled like a baby duck in her hands.

Henry said, "In fact, there were profound language changes in Alleghenia in the generation after they decided to switch to

bacterial elections, for example. So many of the metaphors had been viral in nature, and soon the villagers just had no context for them.”

He bent down, grabbed a fallen leaf, and handed it performatively to Kayleigh. It was heart-shaped, coral-colored. Fuckboy bullshit.

“I take issue with some of that,” I said. “The whole framing you have is off. The Alleghenians didn’t *decide* to switch to bacterial inoculants. The international community strong-armed them.”

“That’s hardly my point.”

“No, but it’s mine. From the jump, you normalize cultural colonialism.”

“Hey. I oppose colonialism.” He glanced at Kayleigh. “I’m anti-colonialist, obviously. But intervention saved a lot of lives, here and on the outside. That’s not me, that’s the scholarly consensus.”

I stopped in the road, finished my Slosh, tossed the cup into the river (local custom), and mashed the honeycomb in my teeth. “You sound like a tankie, you know that.”

He’d been talking to Kayleigh, even when he was talking to me, and now he made it obvious. “A tankie is the type of person to take the side of the tanks during unrest,” he told her. I knew Henry wasn’t a tankie, but I hoped that she didn’t.

She said, “I know what a tankie is.”

I said, “That’s the kind of definition a tankie would give, Henry.”

“Fuck off,” Henry said. “You and your anthropologist problems.”

“Pfft.”

“You guys!”

We walked in awkward, hamstrung silence through the village with the trailer windows glowing, five candles in each. Leaves trilled the roadside. The burning trashcans flickered, tentacles of fire rising from the tops. Eventually dogs came out from under the trailers to sniff us. Kayleigh stopped to pet a floppy-eared hound. I watched her as she looked over her shoulder to make

sure that Henry passed. Then she doubled back toward me, just a few steps. We sagged back; he kept his pace. I’d played my card and it was working.

The villagers had hung lanterns from the trees (the power was out, again) and everything felt cinematic and strange, a funhouse version of the *National Geographic* photo series of Alleghenia I’d seen as a kid. The long brown ridges, like corrugated tin. The riverside fields where tackle football was still legal. The ore carts, the countless dogs, the barn-wood coffee shops where locals bartered with *actual* cash. My parents had been livid when I’d told them this was where I would do my fieldwork. With my immune system?

“It’s just over the mountains,” I’d said. “We’re still practically one society.”

The newbie magic had lasted three days. Then, I got sick from the water and nearly shat myself to death. It happens to everyone on arrival. Ex-pats used to call it The Great Purge, but that became culturally insensitive, so now we called it The Internal Revolution. It took me two months to recover. By that time, Alleghenia had started to feel like home.

“So what happens if they’re both still alive?” Kayleigh asked.

“Well, the tradition is usually thought to be twofold, in terms of purpose: ensuring a leader of strength and humility.”

“What’s with the lecturing? You can talk to me without lecturing.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Your guess is as good as mine. They don’t really have any other cultured bacteria to try. They could double up, maybe. In one of the early books, there’s a reference to throwing candidates in the river, but the translation’s disputed, and the water’s too low anyway. My fear? They’re going to push for a return to viral elections and the UN suits are going to freak and enact some travel ban, which will force us in or out. To be honest, viral elections scare the shit out of me. But I guess it’s not my country.”

“The ex-pat conundrum. It’s privileged to have an opinion, and privileged to shut the fuck up.”

“Neither in nor out. It’s such a convenient catch twenty-two.”

“I hate to admit it,” she said. “But I love it. Social engagement is exhausting.”

“When did you learn to read minds?”

“Psst.”

We were almost to the unveiling field at the edge of town. I could hear the fiddle music, the children singing their high and lonesome melodies. We passed the library trailer and school trailer and some coffee stands and the healing trailer, two snakes circling a miner’s pickaxe on the sign out front. I took a big breath and reached for her hand.

I said, “Kayleigh. You know I’m into you, right?”

She pulled her hand away. “No shit, Jake. I’m the new girl.”

By the time we reached the check station, Henry was already through the turnstile, standing in his PPE at the field’s edge. He waved at Kayleigh with a big rubber mitten. His undying confidence in himself really was inspiring.

The setup was half-assed, like usual: a wave of ancient stanchions led to a pop-up shelter with a UN logo on the tarp roof, underneath which a noisy generator powered the makeshift lab. The UN monitor was named Kellen, a lanky British guy who smuggled in his own booze whenever he came to town. Sometimes, we’d barter. “Jake,” he said. “How’s the research coming?” He swabbed my nose until my eyes welled.

“You know,” I said, sniffing. “It’s slow. Very slow.”

“It’s been what, three years?” He dropped the swab into the machine. It resembled a printer with a toilet lid on the top.

“About.” It’d been almost that long since I looked at my files. The machine beeped three times and a bright green OKAY appeared on the screen. I handed him my papers, which he stamped without looking.

“Still doing the full PPE?”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s just a legacy law at this point. But hey, compromise is king.”

“I thought the UN was king.”

He flipped me off and asked, “Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Oh,” I said. “This is Kayleigh. She does outreach for the village.”

Kellen said, “Outreach for the village. Sounds like the beginning of a very inappropriate joke.” He swabbed her and stamped her papers and said he hoped to see her at the farmhouse tomorrow; he’d love to hear more about her work; he had some nice gin she might like; they could swap stories about Britain; she had very lovely teeth.

We crossed the turnstile, the first chrome thing I’d seen in a year, where we unbagged and donned our white PPE—gowns, gloves, goggles, gas masks with their long spooky trunks—and walked the dirt track to the field’s edge, where the corn spiral started at an enormous arch made of deer antlers, thousands of them interlocked, slathered red with river clay by the village kids. Why didn’t I bother with the ceremonies anymore? Lately I’d been thinking that maybe I understood Alleghenia less than I had a few years ago, that I was getting farther from the culture instead of closer. Why the children, why the clay? Most days now, I just shrugged and went on with my life. It’s not that I objectively knew less; it was that I thought less. The little differences between my old way of life and theirs, the ones I’d once been so attuned to, had all slowly slipped from my consciousness.

“I wonder why they paint the arch,” I said.

“What?!” The masks got in the way.

“The arches. Why the paint?”

“Maybe because it looks nice!” she yelled.

“Maybe!”

There were ten other visitors near the arch. The torchlights reflected back on our white gowns, each of us glowing orange like old-fashioned deer hunters, flames glinting in our goggles, our masks drooping, elephantine and macabre. The tradition had been rendered so much more bizarre with the PPE mandate. It had become cloaked, impersonal, animalistic. And the significance felt different. Now, the villagers didn’t share the risk of infection in the same way. Now, it was the two candidates, feverish and swollen,

emptying their insides in a dank and moldy trailer. They suffered alone. If an anthropologist saw the ceremony now, they would have a completely different take on it than an anthropologist who had seen it before the UN intervention. Such are the limits of personal experience.

The drums began. The children sang louder. Fiddles, more droning. You could see the glowworm of torchlight moving through the corn spiral. Next to me, Kayleigh's excitement was physical. She clasped her hands together and fidgeted with her gas mask. She didn't project even a trace of irony. The first thing I had learned in graduate school, I remembered, was that authenticity isn't real. Culture was by its nature constructed, cosmopolitan, non-essentialist. But with Kayleigh next to me—her enthusiasm communicable, even infectious—something snapped into place, a feeling I'd once had and had long been missing. Authenticity might not be real, but the feeling of it is.

The miners crossed the arch first. You could tell by their bent backs. The loggers followed, tall and husky. Then came the schoolteachers, the farmers, the stonemasons, the cooks, the executives, the lawyers, all of them singing in dialect. The children and elders came last, arm in arm, the kids bouncing and bored and whipping each other with uprooted corn stalks. Once they crossed the arch, they planted the torches in the dirt and fell silent. The torches sizzled, the children were pinched into submission by the elders, my breath sounded broken and strange inside my mask. I looked at Kayleigh. She bounced on the balls of her feet to stay warm. I gave her a little elbow and a hand motion for stillness. Stillness was a virtue in Alleghenia.

Long minutes passed. You could see that a few of the children had to pee, squirming with their legs crossed. A torch went out, then two. If they were both dead, I thought, we would know by now. There would be no singing, only the fiddles. I thought of my parents, back home in the Federated States. Would I be there when they died? And what would that teach me—strength, or humility? And how would our death rituals influence the legacy of—

—The villagers bellowed their applause!

Sally Dent emerged from the corn spiral, pushing the

traditional wheel-cart, wormy and rotten. Delbert Johnson's arms swung from the sides, his legs hung over the front edge, nearly touching the ground. He'd lost a boot, and one sock dangled half off his foot. From our angle, we couldn't see his face, which gave me relief. The losers were usually quick to bloat.

Sally agonized getting him through the arch of antlers. Her PPE was stained with mud from when she'd fallen. There was a moment where I thought she wouldn't make it, where the tension was thick and viscous in the air, but she gave it one last heave and crossed the line. We roared inside of our masks. Forgoing protocol, she tore off hers and dropped it in the mud. This happened every time, and no UN monitor had the courage to admonish her for it. Then Sally collapsed onto Delbert's dead body and wailed for him as if he was her own flesh and blood. They had spent so much time in quarantine together, and everything between them had died with him.

Sally was now the longest serving leader in Alleghenia history. Some had begun to whisper that she killed her opposition in their sleep in the quarantine trailer. Others thought that she'd built up bacterial resistance—maybe that which hadn't killed her had, in fact, made her stronger. But me, I'm not sure. Her neck was red and oozing from where she'd been scraped to ensure the germs took. She looked brittle now, slower, smaller, eyes bugging, as if she was drawing in on herself, puckering like fruit. Humility, strength—maybe it wasn't about attributes at all. Maybe it was just something people did to ensure change.

We beat the crowd towards the checkpoint; only the children stayed for Delbert's pyre.

Unexpectedly, I began to weep. Genuine tears filled the bottoms of my goggles. Kayleigh saw it, hers were the same, and so she took my hand and patted it. Separated by our thick rubber mittens, I had no idea what it meant. But it didn't matter—it meant what it meant what it meant. So I just nodded my head to her in gratitude for what she had shown me, my gas mask flopping pleasantly against my blatant heart.