Personal Essay

Present Glory

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I feel a lot older behind the counter. A few hours ago, I was a teenager with a backpack full of textbooks. I still am a teenager with a backpack full of textbooks. But now, the lady asks me why the pleats on her skirt aren't perfectly parallel. My dad's in the back, checking out the machine. I'm left alone to fend for myself. The reply has to come out within the next three seconds; I need to demonstrate competence. Something plausible, something sounding professional.

Hoping that my dad has come to my rescue, I take a quick glance over my shoulder. It is all me. I hear the time limit expiring. I give it my best shot: "You see, this acetate/rayon blend doesn't take the steam very well. So while it's been pressed properly, the fabric just can't fall exactly the way it should." I wipe off the look of doubt I sense growing on my face, and smile to feign some semblance of control. She falls for it. Inside, I am gloating. "We apologize, but there is really nothing more that can be done, you understand . . . Thank you . . .Yes, your other skirt will be ready this Friday." She retreats to the door. I emerge the victor.

Today is Wednesday, but the fatigue of Friday already looms over me. Yesterday's deliveries were particularly heavy; my right shoulder hasn't forgotten. I skim over the deliveries for tonight and do the math in my head. Two on 86th Street, three on 83rd, and four on 85th. One on Lexington and, to my dismay, one on Madison. All together, that is about twenty city blocks, going both ways. It's not the walking that gets to me, but the weight of the clothing. Lately, with autumn having made its grand entrance, the clothing has gotten heavier. Silk blouses and linen slacks are tolerable. Sweaters and blazers are a challenge.

My dad is tying all the clothes together. He has an intense look on his face. I've seen that same expression when he pays the monthly bills at the dinner table. His lips purse up a bit and his eyes slightly squint. He's blocking the rest of the world out so he won't make a mistake—so the 83rd doesn't end up on Lexington. So the seven dollars we charged to clean the dress

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doesn't end up being a hundred-dollar loss. He's a perfectionist because he has to be. He knows there is no one below with a safety net; *he* is the safety net.

Two paths diverged in high school, and I've taken the one less traveled. For my friends, high school naturally means long-awaited freedom. Stuyvesant is a good two-hour commute from Queens, and their parents have no clue what their fun-loving children are entertaining themselves with. And my friends use the distance to their advantage. Queens is largely residential, and Manhattan means a whole new world. With a couple of bucks, this world is theirs. Subway passes in their pockets, pool halls and clubs uptown or down prove within easy access. I, too, have grown intimately familiar with Manhattan. But my world is worlds away from theirs.

My Manhattan lies within the Upper East Side, in Yorkville—or, more appropriately, Yuppieville. My family's dry cleaners is in the heart of a largely homogenous community comprised of young white adults with white-collar jobs either on, or not far from, Wall Street. Following in the footsteps of my older sister and brother, I work here after school. A family of six is a big one and I look at this as my cross to bear.

The store is, at best, a modest establishment. Land, and consequently rent, is expensive in Manhattan. We make the best of the room we have, meaning that the store is rife with space-saving improvisations. With one draw of the curtain, a fitting room appears. The counter is really drawers in good disguise. The stain-removal station is nothing more than a metal table with a rack of chemicals hanging from the walls. The wall-to-wall mirrors make the store appear larger. It amazes me that these humble accommodations sustain the livelihood of six individuals.

The deliveries are ready to go. I can only do three bundles at a time; any more is too heavy. As my dad hands me the bundles and helps to drape them over my right shoulder, I unwittingly wince. The weight is more than I had anticipated. My dad immediately lifts them off. He winces with me, "Are they too heavy?" Just as immediately, I respond with an adamant no and gesture to him to hand the garments back to me.

He looks at me with the clothes in his hand. He is sorry to have to make me work. He is sorry that I cannot just go home after school with my friends and start my homework at a reasonable hour. He looks at me the way I look at him when I see him holding his breath so as not to inhale the fumes when he chemically treats stains. I look at the black linoleum tile my father stands on when he does the spot removals and notice how it has been worn to a dull gray. It cost him *(continued on page 31)*

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eleven years to fade that tile. He cleans hundreds of suits each week, but the only time he wears a suit is to go to church on Sundays, the one day he doesn't clean dirty clothes.

As I exit the store, the motion detector goes off. We installed it for the

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hours when I am at school and there is no one else in the store besides my dad. So that when he's in the back, he'll know when to run to the front to tend to a customer. My friends don't understand why I feel a duty to go to every single class, regardless of whether or not there's a substitute. The shrill of the beeper evaporates any impulse to skip class.

Delivery time is the end of the workday for those I'm delivering to. Men decked out in Brooks Brothers head-to-toe crowd me in the streets. They look just as tired as I feel. Their ties aren't as straight as when I saw them leave in the morning. Faint rows of perspiration line their foreheads as they rush to go home. I wonder if anyone on the street is one of the persons expecting my delivery. I want to race them to their apartment.

To an extent, I resent doing delivery. Why can't they just pick up their own clothes? Is it too difficult to merely run one's own errands? The doormen (who receive the clothing) and I have had many discussions about their eagerness to exploit blue-collar laborers such as ourselves. We dismiss them as lazy, only somewhat jokingly. A careful look at the working men and women heading home quells my frustration. They do their jobs, and I should gladly do mine. My father told me this a long time ago.

Dinnertime descends upon the city. The restaurants which line the blocks begin to fill. As I trudge past, waiters working the outdoor tables acknowledge me with a nod. They know the clothes are heavy. They also know that we are blessed to have work. In the third restaurant I pass, four doors down from my store, I spot Juan. Juan waits tables at the four-star Italian restaurant and has his share of stories about famous patrons he has had the honor of waiting on. He tells my father some of them each week when he brings in his daughter's school uniform to dry-clean. Juan and my father get along well. Both are immigrants, Juan from Spain and my dad from Korea. They know the bittersweet taste of responsibility. They both test the limits of their capacity every day.

After three blocks, the heavy load on my shoulders becomes more burdensome. I long for the days when I didn't have to work. The past is tempting in the face of present difficulties. I pass by a bum on a bench and wonder if he can identify with me. He looks like a veteran, perhaps of the Korean War. He seems the right age. He doesn't even notice me staring at him. He's reading *The New York Times*.

Seeing him, I feel guilty and grateful at the same time. If my assumptions are correct and he fought in my homeland, I owe him something. Even if he's not a veteran, I still feel guilty and grateful. Guilty because I owe him. There is a certain deference you grant to people simply because they are. Grateful because I have work that needs the doing. The present begins to appear less undesirable; I want to learn to embrace the present without resentment, but with diligence. He remains focused on the paper, enveloped by an imperturbable concentration: lips pursed up a bit and eyes slightly squinted. I wonder if he longs for past glory, or if he's content with the present.

My father was a calculus teacher in Korea, but now he is a dry cleaner who cleans other people's dirty clothes. And I am his daughter who carries their clothes, fresh and clean, back to them. That is our present glory.

The entrance to the building is a few steps away from me, but the management wants me to use the service entrance. It wouldn't be very attractive to have random delivery people strolling through their marble lobby. I quicken the remaining steps to the proper entryway. The doorman holds the door open for me, and I thank him. ⋆