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*This personal essay was created for my Principles of Style class, in which we were given a list of prompts to choose from and write a creative non-fictive piece. The prompt I chose was called “Family Heirlooms”, in which the writer is asked to write about something passed down through their family. I chose to write about traits that have been inherited rather than a physical object. This assignment shows more of my creative side and narrative writing.*

Family Heirlooms

When one thinks of a family heirloom, they may imagine a treasured piece of jewelry, a sturdy piece of furniture, or a rare antique. Other heirlooms sometimes are not physical items, but rather personality traits, interests, or habits. Although, whether of monetary worth or not, these items hold a greater value in their sentimental meaning. This is especially true of the heirlooms that I have inherited and cherish. Throughout my family history, I have seen the traits of resilience and determination be passed on from one generation to the next.

I am a third generation American, with my most recent foreign ancestors being from the former Soviet Union. We interchangeably say that we’re Russian or Ukrainian, as at the time it was neither really, but geographically speaking they were from an area of modern-day Ukraine near the Polish border. My great-grandmother, Karolina Kalasa, abandoned her small village as a young woman to move to the United States with her older sister as her sponsor. Soon after, her sister died from falling off of a ladder and Karolina had to learn to take care of herself in a foreign land.

My great-grandfather, her first husband, Jozef Dzenko (later to become John), arrived earlier than Karolina (who also Anglicized her name, to Caroline) and they met in Detroit. John had a fifth-grade education and worked as a laborer for Dodge; Caroline worked as a cleaner and a housewife. Despite the circumstances they were under— poor wages, stranded from family, English as a second language, discrimination due to the red scare—they still managed to provide a home environment in which their son, my grandfather, Edward, was able to succeed and eventually attend university.

Some people may be described like a prickly pear where they are tough and thorny on the outside, but with a sweet, soft inside. My grandfather was the opposite of that. He was a cherry with a squishy, pleasant outside and a tough pit at the core. Funnily enough my father’s favorite fruit is cherries. Edward was a robust man, surviving four strokes before a fatal fifth. Each stroke stole a bit of his memory and diminished his mobility. Refusing to go to an assisted living facility, he became almost completely reliant on my grandmother. Some may call this stubbornness, but I see it as strength. Even when in the crosshairs of Hurricane Katrina he refused to budge, choosing to bunker down in the laundry room instead of evacuating his home. Was this due to the hardiness he acquired as a soldier in the second World War? Or is it because the hereditary resilience running through his veins?

Due to my grandfather’s job as an engineer, my father was able to be raised in a middle-class household. He got a full-ride scholarship to the University of Michigan, but slacked off his freshman year, causing him to lose the money. This enraged my grandfather, who then made my father pay for his own education by working in both a steel factory and as a hospital janitor. These experiences have greatly humbled my father and has made him warn both me and my sister about the consequences of taking things for granted.

This hardworking drive is seen as a characteristic trait of Eastern Europeans; however, I find that it is present on my mother’s side as well. My mother’s family has been American for many, many generations. In fact, my aunt believes they were some of the first settlers in the United States. This isn’t too far-fetched though as I discovered that my mother’s maiden name, Merrifield, is a place-name for a small village in Devonshire, England, about 25 miles from Plymouth. I had the surreal experience of visiting the village on an ungodly rainy day this past summer, being the first of my family in hundreds of years to return to the area.

My mother grew up in an impoverished family of five kids, with an Irish housekeeper mother and an English barber father. Even from a young age my mother and her siblings contributed by babysitting and housecleaning so the family could get by. Generation after generation of the Merrifields and Boyles worked in minimum wage jobs, never seeking to escape. For them, they just accepted that was the life they were born into and the life they were destined to live. This is not to say they were lazy. They labored day in and day out to provide for their family but would never even think to aspire to more. This changed with my mother. She was the first in her family to attend not only college, but also to go on to pharmaceutical school. She worked at a local pharmacy to scrap together enough funds to attend the University of Michigan, all the while her family discouraged her, claiming she was wasting her time and money.

My mother transferred this energy and determination that she put into her education towards mine. In my own adulthood, most of the pressure I have is self-induced, however I certainly grew up with a “tiger mom.”. My parents set me up from an early age to be on top--attending a Montessori school and going to an educational daycare in the evenings while they worked late nights. As a child I hated always being the last one to be picked up from daycare, while all my friends got to take the bus home from school to their stay-at-home moms. My family moved to Connecticut from New York when I was a toddler so my dad could earn his PhD in neurology at the University of Connecticut. He took seven years to earn the degree, working six days a week and not graduating until I was ten. I despised him for this, as I only got to see him evenings and Sundays, but he was doing it so that he could get a better job than lab technician to support our family. I lacked appreciation for my parents’ hard work that they put in day after day so that I could attend a private school and live in a safe neighborhood.

Growing up most of my toys were educational, I was enrolled in the arts (music and dance), I tried a variety of sports (horseback riding, swimming, soccer, track and field), and yet I was never really good at one thing. I’ve always been kind-of-ok-somewhat-good at a lot of things but never excelled in a single area. This frustrated me as a child and still does to this day. What defines me? If I’m not the best at this one thing then why am I doing it? This mentality plus the hunger for perfection built up until I was completely debilitated. How can someone who had done so well in school, someone with outstanding testing scores barely graduate from high school? I had grown to a point where unless I was sure something was 110% perfect, I wouldn’t hand it in for fear that an imperfection would be a reflection on not only my intelligence, but also my personality and life. I was so overwhelmed and engulfed by this unrealistic perfection and the need to prove myself that I was actually doing more harm towards myself. Through therapy I was able to let myself accept my inadequacies, which then helped me become a better student.

Now how does my predecessors’ history affect me? I grew up in a cushy white upper/upper-middle class neighborhood in suburban Connecticut. I didn’t have to cross halfway around the world to a foreign land and figure out everything for myself. I didn’t have to settle for working as a laborer in a car factory. Or as a housekeeper. Or as a barber. Or as a pharmacy assistant, steel factory worker, or hospital janitor. But I acknowledge the sacrifices the people before me have taken to get me where I am today. I see that all they have done has led up to where I am now, and it has all been for my benefit.

Unfortunately, this also causes a great deal of stress within me as I worry about being inadequate. Every generation has elevated the next and I feel I have been lifted so high that I do not know what more I can reach upward towards. Isn’t that “the American Dream” –to do better than your forefathers and mothers? I try my hardest, but most the time it never seems enough. I feel as though I have so much to prove and that it’s my duty to do better. I’ve been raised up to this peak, but I don’t know how or if I can climb higher on my own. Falling back is not an option. Undoubtedly, my family will support me and catch me if I fall without hesitation or judgment. I don’t want to fall though, and as exhausting as it may be to stay up top, it’s something I feel obliged to do. I have to make their sacrifices and struggles worthwhile. I can’t de-evolve the lineage that has set the foundations to better their unknown future progenies.

My life has changed drastically from the end of high school three years ago to where I am now. My mentality on so many things has done a 180, but I’ve still kept my deterministic spirit. Through this I’ve been able to seize opportunities I’ve never dreamed of even doing, like moving halfway across the country and travelling abroad alone. Living so far from my family has required me to grow up very quickly and although it’s been difficult, it has made me far more mature. I do still call my parents when issues arise, however it is always met with a “we can’t help you from 2000 miles away.” It’s more for comfort than anything else—my safety net. I’ve learned that I can climb upwards and stay determined and focused, without sacrificing my sanity.