



Love Is A Strange Country

Jim Johnson

Author's note: I grew up with stories. Stories of my Finnish immigrant grandparents, Hilda and Gusti, and recollections told to me by my father, Eino, about homesteading in Montana, working in the mines, farming during the Depression, and cooperating with Native Americans. Stories take on shape as real as the people who made them. A reality that becomes legacy, history, and a binding force to know one's self. The excerpts below are from a manuscript in progress, Whitebird: A Family History.

Love Is A Strange Country: The First Letter

Red Lodge, Montana
October 1883

Hilda dear

I came here broken my past boarded up my life
eroded a bad land a windswept hill a fence tries

to sneak across it seems all you get in this life is a horse that runs or a dog that doesn't someday there will be a farms families all along this creek I want you to come when two meet they are really three where this prairie meets the sky there is an ancient sea you are across another sea sometimes I wake at night the moon out and get to thinking about you don't get the wrong idea about the moon sometimes it comes up in the afternoon there was a time when the sky never touched the earth except at night and the earth never said love is a strange country here the night comes first in the ravines the undersides of stones and in the valleys when you come there will be so much to tell I think of the layers and layers built up like the walls of a canyon it takes all morning for the sun to shine.

Yours, Gusti

Coming To The Homestead

When she first saw the house, her heart sank. She said it wasn't like all the rest. It was worse. It was small, a bunkhouse just.

The floor was dirt. It wasn't much better when they did get a floor. So cold in the winter that the mop froze to it. Everything was hand-made. An old door on two sawhorses for a table. Chairs of crooked cottonwood sticks. The bed rough-sawn. The tick made of Montana feathers. Water was carried from the well by the road. In the outhouse the wind found a crack between every board.

They lived many years in the bunkhouse, one room with a cookstove, table, such as it was, and chairs, one bed. The Old Man and Hilda slept in the bed, the girls under the bed, we boys in the root cellar. In the summer Gusti plowed the bottomland and planted it with oats. The crop was big enough to fill the root cellar so we boys had to sleep outside.

Then the older ones filled the wagon full of oats, and Hilda, Hilda my mother, told Gusti, my father, who we called The Old Man, to go to town to buy shoes for the boys. Of course, she knew then already what would happen, but she sent him anyway, as if he wouldn't be he, just as if she wouldn't be she, that somehow this one time it would be different, and, of course, it wasn't. I suppose there wasn't much else for her to do, so she just got on with it.

In the morning the horses brought the wagon back, and in the wagon box was Gusti asleep like he was an old man. Even in those days he was The Old Man even though he must not have been that old then. Nevertheless, the way he was he always was, to the older ones as he would be to us younger ones. So the older ones then unhitched the horses and carried him to bed like they would do so many times, like I would eventually do so many times and you can bet they hated it too. That night my mother slept on the floor with the girls. We boys were back in the root cellar.

In those days there were always prairie chickens and jackrabbits to shoot. Occasionally a deer. Their carcasses skinned, split and quartered with an ax, hung from the branch of a cottonwood. Later salted and wrapped in a tarp. We only grew potatoes and turnips. When Old Man Jalonen asked Gusti, How was the garden? Gusti replied, Fine except for the potatoes and turnips. They both

laughed and laughed. I don't know why. Milk was poured into a lard pail and lowered into the well with a piece of rope. We killed potato bugs and got the cows and learned to cuss in English.

In the winter Gusti went back to Red Lodge to work in the mines. Sometimes sheepherders gave us lamb and, occasionally, cans of peaches. Otherwise, we would have starved.

Love Is A Strange Country: The Second Letter

Mullen, Idaho
May, 1884

Hilda dear

In my sleep I watch you sleep I was perched on the only tree for miles and miles there I watched you I watched you sleep on a hill it rose on both sides a ravine between the grasses had not grown up yet near the slope of the creek I saw the curve of your shoulders the swell of your breasts and forgive me your belly I let my hands graze your breasts like horses across the white hillsides they loved you like a strange country the prairie flowers had blossomed though there is now the chance of frost I know you even though I have never really met you all these years I have lived only for you waiting for you to come and I know you were living only for me waiting all these years for me to come to you only I know where your rivers flow when they run dry how the antelope come out of your shoulders ducks fly from your eyes and I ask you when will we ever love is a strange country.

Yours, Gusti

Eino Tells How Hilda's Journey Became His Own

She was a cupper, a *kuperi*. Her long journey began in the old country where she had been raised an Old Believer. Gusti always doubted a god who favored the rich over the poor by excusing them from work, though there were those, like myself, who never saw The Old Man do any actual work. But back to my mother who in the old country was an Old Believer. She believed in a god somewhat helpless, though opinionated, who just happened to create this earth. She also believed all that was needed for healing was here on this earth if on you knew where to look and what words to make it appear. Because my mother was an immigrant, an *ulkomaalainen*, she did not always know where to look but she did know the words, even though they were in Finnish. I could translate, however, and because I was always around, she sent me to the Crows who knew how to find what she needed. Sometimes they had their own opinions, and my mother listened when I explained the new theories and showed her the roots and leaves and barks they had sent. She didn't mind second opinions. She knew they had sent what they could. So what else could she do but apply them and pray to the old man God of hers? The Crows too had conditions they could not cure. Like the smallpox they knew was brought to them by the white people, The Upside Down People, they called them, although they

never blamed our family. They even called us Ones Who Are Like Us, us being them, of course. This was because my mother knew how to help them and appreciated the help they could give her. I knew she couldn't do much for the smallpox. You didn't use cupping on an illness like that.

I was eight-years-old and home alone the first time I ever saw them. It was a cold sun-shining day in November. When I heard them come, I crouched down by the stove. Two came to the window and flattened their already flat noses against the cold window pane. The others came inside. They just walked in. Everyone did that then. They asked for my mother.

Ma, they said. *Maa* means land in Finnish, as in *ulkomaalainen*. One who is in a strange land. I was an *ulkomaalainen* in my own house. *Paa* means head. Of course, they didn't want my father. Even if he had been there; he wouldn't have been any use. I don't know when he ever was. I don't know why I was thinking about those things at a time like that. I didn't know where she was. She never told me where she went.

If they had been cowboys, *rembus* or range bums, I knew enough to put on a pot of coffee. But what do you do when the Crows come to call? I just didn't know and I don't know now.

I looked. Looked at their long black hair braided and feathered. Their dark faces. Long noses. Necklaces of shells and elk teeth. Their soft deerskin quilled and beaded. Their large moccasined feet. I knew enough not to look into their eyes.

I wasn't afraid. I felt awkward not knowing what to do. Yet I felt there was something about their presence, something I could not find the name for so I don't know what it was, something that wanted to go out with them and never came back. Something wild, I guess. It didn't make much sense. But I wanted to follow them to the creek, down the creek, all the way to the river. It was as if a voice called to me and I could have followed that voice to the river. Into the cold November morning, the smell of the resin-stained branches of the cottonwoods, their yellow leaves fallen to the ground.

Yet I stood by the stove and waited.

Love Is A Strange Country: The Third Letter

Red Lodge, Montana
November 1884

Hilda dear

This was my dream it was the first time we met
you wore a white dress I was so afraid you would
wear a black dress but you wore a white dress we
ate fried venison steaks rye bread and beans at the
Soppard Hotel then I bought feed for my horse
maybe you wonder how long you will love me I will
take your right hand in my right hand and your left
hand in my left hand and as my right hand does not
tire of my left hand and my left hand does not tire of
my right hand my right hand will not tire of your right
hand and my left hand will not tire of your left hand
my heart will not tire of your heart my lips will not
tire of your lips now let me kiss across thousands

of miles of prairie across thousands of miles of sea
your lips if your finger touched my finger I would
stop what I am doing and let your river flow into mine
it would be green with spring and it would break
into ripples I now realize nothing is more important
than my hand touching your hand or a river in spring
love is a strange a country.

Yours, Gusti

Eino Talks About the Mines

The East Side (or Sunrise, which if you worked the day shift was all you ever saw of the sun), the West Side (or Sunset, which was a more accurate picture of how it was), and the Rocky Fork Mines were all coalmines. In the coalmines the shaft followed a seam of coal, which in the Rocky Fork was at a 20-degree slope, and the miners rode down into the mines on empty coal cars. At the end of the shift they rode back up on the loaded cars.

The miners were responsible for doing their own timbering, and when contracted by the ton, some miners didn't want to take the time to safely timber their area. The coalmines were in less substantial matrix and often difficult to assess.

And the coalmines in Red Lodge never ventilated properly. The deeper the mine, the more shafts, the more complicated the problem. The mine became a labyrinth. Up-air shafts. Down-air shafts. Cross shafts. Connecting shafts. Hollows blasted between shafts. Water-filled shafts. Shafts in the dark heat of the earth.

It was impossible to understand it all.

Then there was the gas. We called it the damp. I don't know why. Anyway, there was white damp and black damp. You know your candle went out you were in black damp and you better not go any farther. There was a rope you pulled to signal above.

White damp was different. It made the candle burn brighter and brighter. If you didn't know you would keep on going, your head getting lighter and lighter. It was like drinking moonshine. The more you drank, the more you wanted to go on.

It was the white damp that got Gusti. I was just a boy then, but I remember reading the story later in the newspaper. A fire had broken out in one of the shafts, and Gusti, Old Man Reikko, Gabriel Luoma, and ten Irishmen were sent to put it out. Then another fire broke out behind them. It was written in The Rocky Fork Picket that businessmen were ready to roll up their sleeves and go in after them, I never believed that, but then four ragged bodies stumbled to the top. Later mules and cars carried the others out.

This is how it was. My mother was told there were nine men killed, and Gusti was thought to be one of them, so she was needed to identify the body. At the morgue nine men all covered with blankets were laid out on the table. He was the eighth. When the coroner lifted the blanket, she could see: his clothes were black; his face, his moustache, even his eyelids, his hands folded across his chest, all were black, black with dust, black with death. Yet she could see. When my mother touched his forehead, rubbed it, rubbed it until the black turned blue, she looked up and said, He's not dead.

Then Sulo and John, my older brothers, carried him out to the wagon and they brought him home. My mother sent me to the Crows for moonwort and yarrow. There were no other flowers.

Going To The Crows

Nyt, poikka. You go to the Crows.

Why do you want them?

I knew she was a cupper. And I knew she should have slapped me. I had no business asking at a time like that. Instead she explained: Sometimes we use our medicine, sometimes theirs. Now it is time to use theirs.

Remember, she said to me, how to act. Do not look into their eyes. Even their faces. Or stand too close to them. Do not sit in the back of the lodge. Sit by the door if no one tells you where to sit. The back is where the medicine is and they don't want any spirit contamination. Ask permission to speak. When they give it to you, tell them your father is hurt. He may be dead, but if he is your mother is going to bring him back. She needs their help. Ask for Medicine Cow. Then give him this. She gave me a can of Sir Walter Raleigh, the kind of can I preferred for worms because it fit so well in my back pocket when I went fishing.

Tell them I need dogwood, lodgepole, yarrow, and moonwort, but I do not know what words to say.

She told me this in Finnish knowing I would tell them in English.

They also spoke some French. At the time I didn't know any Crow. But she trusted that I would know what words to say.

And if they offer you the pipe you must smoke it. And take sauna. I was hoping for the pipe.

I knew she meant the sweat lodge, which was a small wigwam, not a lodge, into which they carried rocks. We had a *savu* sauna, a smoke sauna, by the road. We built a fire in a barrel stove that held a tray of rocks on the top. There was a hole cut into the roof for the smoke to escape just like in the sweat wigwam or in any wigwam. After it burned down, Sulo and John built the new one with a chimney down by the creek. It's still there.

We were alike in many ways. They knew the land better than we did, we who had been given the land that had been theirs even though they believed no one could own the land, but they knew we honored it too. They tried to be friendly. In their own way, of course. And they thought my mother was a healer. Maybe she was.

So I took the saddlehorse and rode into their camp. I had been there before and knew where to find Medicine Cow's wigwam.

I was wondering if I needed to knock at the wigwam door and how would I knock on buffalo skin, but he stepped out of the wigwam before I was even off the horse. Barking dogs all around me. It's funny how you worry about something happening and then when it comes time, what you worried about never happens, but what didn't worry about happens and that gets you. At the time I was so afraid of failing my mother and that she would fail that I never thought I would be successful and she would be successful and that our successes would be our failure.

Medicine Cow stood before me as if he had expected me. He was a tall man dressed in a black three-piece suit, a piece of lariat for a belt, a silver dollar strung on a chain for a tie, black boots. His hair was black, long, and straight though I didn't look anywhere near his face. I was looking at his hands trying to see if he had seven or was it eight fingers, I knew he didn't have ten, when I asked permission to speak and presented him with the tobacco.

I told him my father was hurt. He knew, of course, why my father was sick, he drank too much, and to the Crows this was important. They knew drinking brought on supernatural repercussions. I knew too and this was another way in which we were alike, even though a mine explosion seemed like an accident.

Si vous plait, was all he said.

So I entered the wigwam and sat down by the door, and he began preparing the prescription. Those Crow wigwams always smelled of smoke and bear fat, but his smelled of sweet grass and cottonwood pitch and rimrocks also. After he filled a buffalo skin pouch with two bundles of four sticks each bound together with a root, and two stacks of leaves—four in each different shaped stack—and four branches of sage, he stirred with a square nail a gumboed concoction that had been boiling in a black iron kettle that had been sitting on two black rocks beside the fire in the center of his wigwam, this I knew was the center of his world, then poured it into a glass vial and corked the vial with a stick. After he placed the vial and pouch in the back of the wigwam, he sat down beside me.

After we smoked the pipe, which looked to me like it had been made from Yellowstone mud, we waited. It seemed to me we waited a long time. As I wondered if my mother would know the rituals these medicines would require, a drumming began. Louder. And louder it grew. Louder. Louder until I felt the wigwam begin to shake. Back and forth. Back and forth the smoke hole between the lodgpoles swayed. The center of the world was definitely moving. I later learned this was a sign that spirits had entered the wigwam and flowed into the pouch and into the vials transforming the medicine.

Then I heard voices taking. Speaking in Crow, of course, so I wouldn't understand.

A Few Notes On The Contents Of The Buffalo Skin Medicine Bag

While the bones of any fowl are useful for crossing over from the living to the dead and back again, goose bones because of their size and strength are especially desired. Willow leaves are commonly chewed like aspirin to relieve headaches. Drinking dogwood bark tea brings effective relief of fever. Crushed moonwort roots are usually placed on cuts and wounds, as are green yarrow leaves. The inner bark of the ponderosa or lodgepole pine is very sweet, though usually eaten in the spring when it smells like vanilla, and used as a substitute for sugar. Sage was important as a purifier and frequently used in ceremonies of all kinds.

Bringing Gusti Back From The Dead

My mother understood. She bathed Gusti where John and Sulo had laid him on the top bench in the sauna. She bathed him in the sauna just as she would have if she had prepared his body for burial. But she knew he wasn't dead.

After she had washed him with pine tar soap, she only washed him once even though she told me the Crows would have instructed her to do this four times as once was good enough for him, she took out the buffalo skin pouch and the vial. I wanted to know what these medications were so I didn't mind that my mother wanted me to help her. I didn't exactly like the idea of Gusti coming back to life, but I was curious.

First she placed a branch of the sage in each corner of the bench. This was merely ceremonial she later told me. It could have had a psychological effect or have been used once to throw imposters off the track. Then she took out the bones she told me were goose bones. She placed the four bones into her mouth and sucked them while she hummed over Gusti's naked body. His old man's body. The moustache drooped as if dead.

When she had sucked out what she thought was a sufficient amount of the marrow, she put her mouth on his chest, her lips really, but to say she kissed his chest was so disgusting to me that I don't want to use that word with my mother and my father and luckily there wasn't any other occasion to do so, but that's what she did, placing a bone on The Old Man's naked chest. She did this again and again and again until the bones were situated on his chest like points of the four directions. This could have been a compass and his body the land, a treeless land like his hairless chest, and then she would have known in which direction to proceed. She told me later that the better shaman would swallow these bones and split them back up one by one as needed but she herself didn't believe that was necessary especially since Gusti was not at that point conscious.

Next she took the vial. This I learned was a mixture of boiled yarrow and goose grease. With this she massaged his entire body. It seemed to me as she did his skin seemed to soften and glisten. Maybe that was the point when life began to come back into him. It's hard telling when a line is being crossed. We used fences. There's a sign now between the North Dakota and Montana border, but that's only beside the highway. Otherwise how would you know? I know my mother knew. The more she massaged and rubbed the grease into his skin, the more she must have felt the life oozing back into him, and the more she must have felt that life the harder she must have rubbed.

He wasn't conscious yet when I returned from the house with a cup of hot water into which she placed the four sticks, dogwood wrapped and moon-wart root, to steep while she continued to massage The Old Man.

Her strong fingers moved now as if she was forcing the life back into his body. After what she thought was a sufficient massage, she asked me to place a buffalo skin robe over his body. Then she lifted his head and took the cup. She held it below his nose letting the vapors steam into his nostrils. Then she touched the cup to his lips and tilted it slightly so the liquid would touch his lips and brought it away. She did this again and again and again and it was the fourth time she did this, I swear it was the fourth time she did this, and I saw it. What had never been a pleasant sight for me. Except this one time. I don't know why. But I saw it. And I'm sure she saw it. The moustache quivered.

When she tilted the cup back that fourth time, most of the concoction dribbled off his lips and lost itself in the moustache, but she knew. If she ever had any doubts, and I doubt that she did, she knew. He's not dead, she said as if I had not seen what I had seen. The next day Gusti lay yet on the top bench of the sauna and my mother had taken off the buffalo robe and turned him onto his

stomach. There were cow horns in graduated sizes all shaped like the Beartooth Mountaintops laid out on the lower bench. The tip of each was cut off and a small bonnet tied over it. And a knife. A knife so sharp it edged with a shine that shined like morning against the black steel blade. The knife was enough to shush me and I sat down on an overturned bucket. And she proceeded.

The first two fingers of her left hand she placed against the skin of his back and touched the skin between them with her knife. Blood flooded the coulee made by her fingers. She removed them and placed an appropriate size cow horn over the reservoir of blood. She repeated this until all the cow horns were used up. His body then looked like a flat wide valley covered with teepees, like Medicine Cow's, or even the village Custer saw on his last morning on earth. After she had removed the horns and washed the body with the pine tar soap, I couldn't see where any incisions had been made even though there might have been twenty or more. Maybe the skin had already grown back together. I had to feed him pushing small pieces of the inner bark of the lodgepole pine into his mouth so he wouldn't spit them back out. Then I had to give him small sips of the dogwood tea which he seemed able to sip. With the tea I gave him pieces of willow bark. I was to do this every four hours.

Twenty-four hours a day.

This went on for two weeks.

After that second week he was hollering so much no one would go near him. Even though I think he liked the taste of bark. But she brought Gustii back from the dead. I'm not sure why she wanted to, he was always dead in my way of thinking, so I wasn't exactly impressed with what she did.

Two Horses

The pines are lean along the ridge rocks. The creek dry. Beyond the fence lines two ruts of dirt as straight as Wyoming. In the grass a tractor rusting. Logs, once a building, collapsed on three sides. A roof that couldn't hold up the sky. The country so big so much is given up: her washboard, his anvil. The price of cattle for the price of feed. Cartridge casings in the grass. The only things that ever mattered are always left behind. Like square bales left in a field. To live is to live like two horses standing together in opposite directions, tails flicking flies from each other's eyes.

Jim Johnson has published eight books of poetry, most recently *Yoik* (Red Dragonfly Press). He was twice Poet Laureate of Duluth, Minnesota. This excerpt is from *Whitebird: A Family History*.



