PERSONAL HISTORY

LOVE IN TRANSLATION

Would I be a different person in French?

BY LAUREN COLLINS

I MOVED TO GENEVA to be with my husband, Olivier, who had moved there because his job required him to. My restaurant French was just passable. Drugstore French was a stretch. IKEA French was pretty much out of the question, meaning that, since Olivier, a native speaker, worked twice as many hours a week as Swiss stores were open, we went for months without things like lamps.

We had established our life together in London, where we met on more or less neutral ground: his continent, my language. It worked. Olivier was my guide to living outside the behemoth of American culture; I was his guide to living inside the behemoth of English.

He had learned the language over the course of many years. When he was in his teens, his parents sent him to Saugerties, New York, for a homestay with some acquaintances of an American they knew. Olivier landed at JFK, where a taxi picked him up. This was around the time of the Atlanta Olympic Games.

"What is the English for 'female athlete'?" he asked, wanting to be prepared to discuss current events.

" 'Bitch,' " the driver said.

They drove on toward Ulster County, Olivier straining for a glimpse of the Manhattan skyline. The patriarch of the host family was an arborist named Vern. Olivier remembers driving around Saugerties with Charlene, Vern's wife, and a friend of hers, who begged him over and over to say "hamburger." He was mystified by the fact that Charlene called Vern "the Incredible Hunk."

Five years later, Olivier found himself in England, a graduate student in mathematics. Unfortunately, his scholastic English—"Kevin is a blue-eyed boy" had been billed as a canonical phrase—had done little to prepare him for the realities of the language on the ground. "You've really improved," his roommate told him, six weeks into the term. "When you got here, you couldn't speak a word." At that point, Olivier had been studying English for more than a decade.

After England, he moved to California to pursue a Ph.D., still barely able to cobble together a sentence. His début as a teaching assistant for a freshman course in calculus was greeted by a mass defection. On the plus side, one day he looked out upon the residue of the crowd and saw a female student wearing a T-shirt that read "Bonjour, Paris!"

By the time we met, Olivier had become not only a proficient speaker but a sensitive, agile one. Upon moving to London, in 2007, he'd had to take an English test in order to obtain his license as an amateur pilot. The examiner rated him "Expert": "Able to speak at length with a natural, effortless flow. Varies speech flow for stylistic effect, e.g. to emphasize a point. Uses appropriate discourse markers and connectors spontaneously."

I knew Olivier only in his third language—he also spoke Spanish, the native language of his maternal grandparents, who had fled over the Pyrenees during the Spanish Civil War—but his powers of expression were one of the things that made me fall in love with him. For all his rationality, he had a romantic streak, an attunement to the currents of feeling that run beneath the surface of words. Once, he wrote me a letter—an inducement to what we might someday have together—in which every sentence began with "Maybe." Maybe he'd make me an omelette, he said, every day of my life.

We moved in together quickly. One night, we were watching a movie. I spilled a glass of water and went to mop it up with some paper towels.

"They don't have very good capillarity," Olivier said.

"Huh?" I replied, continuing to dab at the puddle.

"Their capillarity isn't very good."

"What are you talking about? That's not even a word."

Olivier said nothing. A few days later, I noticed a piece of paper lying in the printer tray. It was a page from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary:

> **Capillarity** noun ka-pə-'ler-ə-tē, -'la-rə-.
> 1 : the property or state of being capillary
> 2 : the action by which the surface of a liquid where it is in contact with a solid (as in a capillary tube) is elevated or depressed depending on the relative attraction of the molecules of the liquid for each other and for those of the solid.

Ink to a nib, my heart surged.

STILL, WE OFTEN had, in some weirdly basic sense, a hard time understanding each other. The critic George Steiner defined intimacy as "confident, quasi-immediate translation," a state of increasingly one-to-one correspondence in which "the external vulgate and the private mass of language grow more and more concordant." Translation, he explained, occurs both across and *inside* languages. You are performing a feat of interpretation anytime you attempt to communicate with someone who is not like you.

In addition to being French and American, Olivier and I were translating, to varying degrees, across a host of Steiner's categories: scientist/artist, atheist/believer, man/woman. It seemed sometimes as if generation was one of the few gaps across which we weren't attempting to stretch ourselves. I had been conditioned to believe in the importance of directness and sincerity, but Olivier valued a more disciplined self-presentation. If, to me, the definition of intimacy was letting it all hang out, to him that constituted a form of thoughtlessness. In the same way that Olivier liked it when I wore lipstick,

The moment for languid afternoons spent naming the knees and the eyelashes had passed. Our classroom was the kitchen.

ILLUSTRATION BY ELENI KALORKOTI

or perfume—American men, in my experience, often claimed to prefer a more "natural" look—he trusted in a sort of emotional *maquillage*, in which one took a few minutes to compose one's thoughts instead of walking around, undone, in the affective equivalent of pajamas. For him, the success of *le couple*—a relationship, in French, was something you were, not something you were in—depended on restraint rather than on uninhibitedness. Where I saw artifice, he saw artfulness.

Every couple struggles, to some extent, to communicate, but our differences, concealing one another like nesting dolls, inhibited our trust in each other in ways that we scarcely understood. Olivier was careful of what he said to the point of parsimony; I spent my words like an oligarch with a terminal disease. My memory was all moods and tones, while he had a transcriptionist's recall for the details of our exchanges. Our household spats degenerated into linguistic warfare.

"I'll clean the kitchen after I finish my dinner," I'd say. "First, I'm going to read my book."

"My dinner," he'd reply, in a babyish voice. "My book."

To him, the tendency of English speakers to use the possessive pronoun where none was strictly necessary sounded immature—stroppy, even. *My* dinner, *my* book, *my* toy.

"Whatever. It's *my* language," I'd reply.

And why, he'd want to know, had I said I'd clean the kitchen when I'd only tidied it up? I'd reply that no native speaker—by which I meant no *normal person*—would ever make that distinction, feeling as though I were living with Andy Kaufman's Foreign Man. His literalism missed the point, in a way that was as maddening as it was easily mocked.

For better or worse, there was something off about us, in the way that we homed in on each other's sentences, focussing too intently, as though we were listening to the radio with the volume a notch too low. "You don't seem like a married couple," someone said, minutes after meeting us at a party. We fascinated each other and frustrated each other. We could go exhilaratingly fast or excruciatingly slow, but we often seemed hard pressed to find a reliable intermediate setting, a conversational cruise control. We didn't possess that easy shorthand, encoding all manner of attitudes and assumptions, by which some people seem to be able, nearly telepathically, to make themselves mutually known.

I'm sitting at my desk one afternoon, surfing the Internet, when I come across a YouTube clip of Bradley Cooper giving an interview on TF1, the French television channel. He's trilling his "r"s as if he's gargling air. He even throws in a couple of *heins*.

The interviewer asks Cooper how he learned French. He says that during college he spent six months living with a family in Aix-en-Provence. TF1 calls him "*la coqueluche de Hollywood*," using a word that has the unique distinction of being a homonym for "heartthrob" and "whooping cough."

"Our viewers appreciate the fact that you spoke to us in French tonight," the interviewer says.

I click on another video, this one from an American channel called CelebTV.

"Who knew Bradley had this secret weapon for getting the ladies? He's totally fluent in French!"

Like the presenter, I'm impressed. An excellent command of French seems like a superpower, the prerogative of socialites and statesmen. I didn't have a passport until I was in college. The prerequisite for speaking French, I have always thought, is being the kind of person who speaks French.

I need French like a bike messenger needs a bicycle. I consider myself a fish. One day, I see a woman named Alessandra Sublet on television and pronounce her name "sublet," as in what you do to an apartment, achieving a sort of reverse Tar-zhay effect.

But there's Bradley Cooper, nailing his uvular fricatives on the evening news. I tell myself the same thing I do when faced with such challenges as doing my taxes: if that guy can hack it, I can, too. Maybe you speak French not because you're privileged; you're privileged because you speak French. The language suddenly seems mine for the taking, a practical skill. Herbert Hoover was fluent in Mandarin.

On a blustery morning in mid-March, I report for my first day of school. The entryway is shaded by a metal canopy, topped by a mint-green neon sign ("ecole-club"). Inside, a canteen offers

hot meals, eaten on damp trays. Sleepy-eyed students take their coffee at tables of teal linoleum. Smoking is no longer allowed, but its accretions remain, adding to the sensation of having enrolled in a laundromat in 1973.

I climb the stairs to Room 401. We're a dozen or so, sitting at four tables arranged in a rectangle. For the next month, we will meet five hours a day. The professor introduces herself. She is Swiss, in her sixties, with leopard-print bifocals and a banana clip.

"I am Dominique. Just call me Dominique. Not *Madame*—Dominique. I will *tutoyer* you. You can *tutoyer* me, too," she says, indicating that we're all to use the informal form of address. "I'm from Lausanne."

Lausanne, by train, is thirty-three minutes from Geneva.

"The *genevois*," she adds, "consider the *lausannois* very provincial."

The class is intensive French B1—a level into which I've placed after taking an online test. According to the diagnostic, I can get by in everyday situations, but I can't explain myself spontaneously and clearly on a great number of subjects. This is true: like a soap-opera amnesiac, I'm at a loss to articulate things of which I do not have direct experience. Still, I'm pleased that after eight months in Geneva my piecemeal efforts at picking up the language, which consist mostly of reading free newspapers, have promoted me from the basest ranks of ignorance. One day, when the front-page headline reads "*Une task force pour contrôler les marrons chauds*," I grasp that Geneva is about to sic the police on the venders of hot chestnuts.

"*Alors!*" Dominique says.

For our first classroom assignment, we're to conduct a conversation with the person next to us, and then introduce him or her to the group. We spend the next ten minutes chatting haltingly—an awkward silence passes over the crowd roughly every twenty seconds—before Dominique calls the class to attention.

"Lauren, you will be my first victim!"

A Hacky Sack, confirming that I have the floor, comes sailing across the room.

"*Je vous présente Lana*," I begin.

Lana, a twenty-six-year-old Bosnian Serb, likes gymnastics. She comes from Banja Luka, a town with a temperate climate, several discothèques, and a thirteenth-century fort. Lana is in Geneva with her husband, who works at a bank. She doesn't mention a job, but she looks like a salon model, with crimson fingernails and thick brown hair, plaited like that of a dressage contestant. She is the second of three sisters. She takes copious notes with a mechanical pencil that she produces from a plastic case. When she makes a mistake, she scrubs at it with a gum eraser, delicately blowing the leavings from the page, as though she were wishing on a dandelion.

It's Lana's turn to introduce me. "*Je vous présente Lauren*." Lana explains that I come from a village in North Carolina. I like books and travelling. Lana does an impeccable job, except that she says *magasin américain* instead of *magazine américain*, so everyone thinks I work in an American store instead of for an American magazine.

Supposedly, the best way to master a foreign language is to fall in love with a native speaker. Language, in delineating a boundary that can be transgressed, is full of romantic potential. For the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the erotic intention amounted to a "sublime hunger" for the other, the more foreign the more delectating. It is no accident that the metonym for language is a tongue, not an ear, an eye, or a prehensile thumb. A willingness to take one on—to take one in, filling one's mouth with another's words—suggests pliancy, openness to enticement. It worked for Catherine of Valois (Henry V, English) and for Jane Fonda (Roger Vadim, French). One can only hope that one day the hardworking farm boy from Rosetta Stone dazzles the Italian supermodel with his command of the *congiuntivo trapassato*.

Love is both the cause and the continuance of my commitment to learning French, its tinder and its fuelwood, but, pedagogically, I'm not having great luck with the soul-mate method. Olivier does not materialize at the tinkle of a handbell, as did Abdul Karim—a twenty-four-year-old table servant who became Queen Victoria's closest confidant, teaching her Urdu—or proofread my letters, blotting my mistakes with light pink paper. More prosaically, he is completely deaf in his right ear (childhood meningitis). He's freakishly adept at keeping up with conversation—even in another language, even at a fifty-per-cent disadvantage—but, in order to hear, he has to turn his head so that he's looking almost directly over his right shoulder, which forces him to speak out of the far left corner of his mouth, as though he's perpetually telling a dirty joke. Enunciation is not his strong suit. His syntax can be equally askance. He starts sentences and lets them trail off, circling back after he's put whatever he was going to say through another lap of thought.

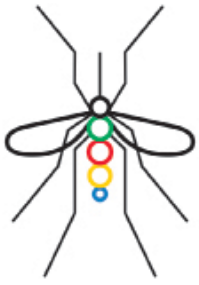
We don't speak French as regularly as we should. We try, but it's hard, with English at our disposal, to summon the will power to dial back to a frequency devoid of complexity, color, and jokes. Had my language skills developed in tandem with our relationship—the ability to say things mirroring my desire to say them—we might have got into the habit. But the moment for languid afternoons spent naming the knees and the eyelashes has passed. Our classroom is the kitchen after a long day, extractor fan howling. Olivier's uptight (he can't let a mistake go without correcting it). I'm impatient (the moment I make one, I cave). We can't seem to lower our inhibitions and just let the conversation flow, the way you're supposed to do to enter another language. When I try out a new word, I feel conspicuous, as though I'm test-driving a car I can't afford. It's hard for me, as someone for whom English is a livelihood, to embrace my status as an amateur in French. I'm the opposite of Eliza Doolittle: I don't want to speak like a lady in a flower shop; I want to speak grammar.

Despite its pretensions to clarity, French can be maddening. *Vert* (green), *verre* (glass), *ver* (worm), *vers* (toward), and *vair* (squirrel fur) constitute a quintuple homophone, not even counting *verts*, *verres*, and *vers*. (You don't pronounce the final "s" in French.) Folklorists have argued for decades over whether Cinderella's *pantoufles de verre* might have come about as a mishearing, on Charles Perrault's part, of *pantoufles de vair*. The subjunctive is a wish. Gender's a bitch. *Le poêle:* a stove. *La poêle:* a frying pan. A man's shirt, *une*

chemise, is feminine, but a woman's shirt, *un chemisier*, is masculine.

Linguists have attempted to make an objective assessment of the relative difficulty of languages by breaking them down into parts. One factor is the level of inflection, or the amount of information that a language carries on a single word. The languages of large, literate societies usually have larger vocabularies. You might think that their structures are also more elaborate, but the opposite is generally true: the simpler the society, the more baroque its morphology. In Archi, a language spoken in the village of Archib, in southern Dagestan, a single verb—taking into account prefixes and suffixes and other modifications—can occur in 1,502,839 different forms. This makes sense, if you think about it. Because large societies have frequent interaction with outsiders, their languages undergo simplification. Members of relatively homogeneous groups, on the other hand, share a base of common knowledge, enabling them to pile on declensions without confusing one another. Small languages stay spiky. But, amid waves of contact, large languages lose their sharp edges, becoming bevelled as pieces of glass.

Another way to try to rate the difficulty of a language is to consider its unusual features: putting the verb before the subject in a sentence, for example, or not having a question particle ("do"). Researchers analyzed two hundred and thirty-nine languages to create the Language Weirdness Index, anointing Chalcatongo Mixtec—a verb-initial tonal language spoken by six thousand people in Oaxaca—the world's oddest language. The most conventional was Hindi, with only a single unusual feature, predicative possession. English came in thirty-third, making it a third as weird as German but seven times weirder than Purépecha.



According to the Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. State Department, French is among the easiest languages for an English speaker to learn. It requires an estimated six hundred hours of instruction, versus approximately eleven hundred for Pashto or Xhosa and twenty-two hundred for Arabic or Mandarin. Thanks to the Normans, who invaded England in the eleventh century, somewhere between a quarter and half of the basic English vocabulary comes from French. An English speaker who has never set foot in a bistro already knows an estimated fifteen thousand words of French.

The challenge is figuring out which ones. Is "challenge," for example, something else entirely in French, or just a matter of Coopering out a "*shallonge*"? French is notably not a hospitable environment in which to try your hand. The thing that's tough about French is the thing that's exemplary about French, which is that French speakers across the board are language nuts. Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow write in "The Story of French," "Debates about grammar rules and acceptable vocabulary are part of the intellectual landscape and a regular topic of small talk among francophones of all classes and origins—a bit like movies in Anglo-American culture."

American politicians play golf or sing in barbershop quartets; French statesmen moonlight as men of letters. Charles de Gaulle was famous for resurrecting obscure bits of vocabulary, such as *quarteron* (a small band) and *chienlit* (a chaotic carnival), which had last been heard sometime around the sixteenth century. It took Olivier three weeks and a working group of twice as many relatives to settle on the French text of our wedding invitation, which read, in its entirety, "Together with our families, we request the pleasure of your company at a wedding lunch." The ideas of excellence and failure are so intimately linked in French that what passes for a compliment is to say that someone has *un français châtié*—a well-punished French. Olivier has fond memories of watching the grammarian Bernard Pivot, a national celebrity, administer the Dicos d'Or, a live televised tournament in which contestants vied to transcribe most accurately a dictated text—the Super Bowl of orthography.

Pivot's competition was inspired by the *dictée de Mérimée*. On a rainy day in 1857, at Fontainebleau, the royal country estate, Empress Eugénie asked the author Prosper Mérimée to concoct an entertainment. Mérimée gathered the party. He handed out pens and paper, instructing the guests to jot down the composition he was about to read.

When he had finished reading, the guests handed in their papers, and Mérimée tallied the results: in the course of a hundred and sixty-nine words, Napoleon III made seventy-five mistakes, Eugénie sixty-two, and Alexandre Dumas twenty-four. The winner was Prince Metternich, of Austria, with only three mistakes. Dumas, auto-chastising, turned to him and said, "When will you present yourself at the Academy, to teach us how to spell?"

Mondays, wednesdays, and Fridays, we have Luisa, a stout Venezuelan Frenchwoman with cantilevered gray curls. Luisa speaks quickly and correctly. She does not welcome questions. Every morning, she greets us—she's a *vous* woman—with a scowl.

Class opens briskly. We turn to Chapter 2, "Come to My House!" The topic of discussion is cohabitation.

Luisa zeros in on Satomi, a Japanese academic.

"Tell me about your living situation, Satomi."

"I live with my husband," Satomi says quietly. "He's American."

"Is he an ideal roommate?" Luisa asks.

"Yes, but sometimes he uses my toothbrush," Satomi says, daring to elaborate.

"That's an intimate violation!" Luisa barks.

Satomi withdraws as quickly as a slap bracelet.

Luisa turns to Scotty, who is from Alaska, which, she says, is "not really part of the U.S."

"Scotty, what are the qualities of the ideal roommate?"

"They have to be nice," she replies.

"And, for you, what is nice?"

"Friendly?"

"Friendly seems a little extreme," Luisa says, her eyebrow jerking up.

Scotty thinks for a moment.

"The ideal roommate shouldn't smoke?"

Most of the class nods in agreement. But there is sniggering from the corner where several Italians sit en bloc. "Yeah,

maybe for you," one of them says. "You're not our ideal roommate."

Carlos, a Spanish bellboy, chimes in: "Not someone bipolar."

"No!" comes a cry from the Italian corner. It's a woman named Cristina. "I'm an artist," she says. "This concerns me. One day I'm happy, one day I'm not. I was living in Norway. I was a little depressed. I didn't want to talk to my roommates, and they were the type of person that if they asked 'How was your day?' you had to say, 'I took the bus, I ate a sandwich.' After a week, we had to have a discussion about the fact that I wasn't very communicative. But their view of communication was exaggerated."

"Listen, it's a matter of respect," Carlos replies, fingering a black cord that he wears around his neck. "If you have a bad day, you don't have to put it on the other person."

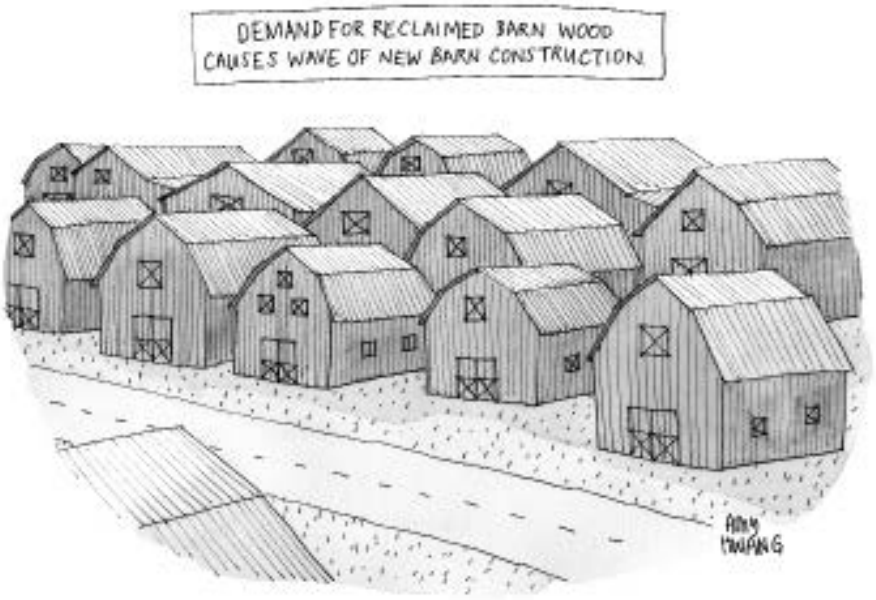
Carlos is right, but he's driving me nuts with his inability to stop actually answering the questions instead of merely demonstrating his ability to do so. You say tomato, Carlos says the problem these days is that when you ship food it loses its vitamins.

Lana raises her hand.

"My boyfriend—my ex—and I bought an apartment in Bosnia," she says. "But the problem was that we never fought. One day, a woman telephoned me and she said that she was with him. I told him about it, and he asked me how did I know it was true. I said that she had described our apartment—right down to the sheets on the bed."

Luisa, stone-faced, waits a minute before responding.

"*C'est la vie, non*?"



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Dominique says that we can absorb the language by osmosis. We should have the television or the radio on whenever we're home. I'm militant about following this piece of advice, as—in inverse relationship to my daily needs—I can read and write, and even speak, in French much better than I can comprehend it. But bit by bit the language is taking shape, definite articles and nouns and indirect objects and verbs and prepositional phrases hanging off subjects and predicates and predicate complements like a Calder mobile. Conjugations are coming along. To my delight, I know the difference between *un éléphant* (a male elephant), *une éléphant* (a female elephant), and *un éléphanteau* (a baby elephant of either sex).

My vocabulary is beginning to improve. I treasure each acquisition, remembering the exact circumstances—time, place, company—under which it was made. English is a trust fund, an unearned inheritance, but I've worked for every bit of French I've banked. In French, words have tastes and textures. They come in colors and smells. *Ruban* is scarlet and scratchy, the stuff we bought before a costume party to tie a letter "A" around my neck. *Hirondelle* will always be an easy hike on a gray day in May. We're ticking off the Stations of the Cross, which a Savoyard devout has installed on the rocky slope we're scampering up, Olivier becoming the first man to ascend a pre-Alp while carrying a golf umbrella. "*Une hirondelle ne fait pas le printemps*" ("One swallow doesn't make a spring"), he says, citing a typically gloomy French proverb. The sky rips open as we reach Calvary.

But French—for me, at least—is an exceedingly tough language to crack by ear. If English is difficult to pronounce, French presents learners with the opposite problem: easy to say, hard to hear. Every syllable is accented equally, making it difficult to figure out where one word ends and the next begins. French words are connected by the liaison system, in which a word ending in a consonant links to the next one if it begins with a vowel. They're impressionable, a little bit fickle, behaving differently depending on whom they're with. A French word, if all its friends did, would definitely jump off the Brooklyn Bridge.

As for Dominique's suggestion that we could become fluent by watching TV, I find sitcoms and reality shows—with their fast, slangy dialogue and serial plots—extremely hard to follow if I don't already know what's happening. I decide to start with the radio, which in elocution makes up for what it lacks in context clues. Every morning, while I'm getting ready, I turn on Radio France Internationale. At first, I listen to the previous day's news in *français facile*, following along with the transcript that RFI posts on the Internet, for learners around the world, every afternoon.

Français facile is in fact quite difficult. In "Eight Months on Ghazzah Street," her novel about an Englishwoman who moves to Jeddah with her husband, Hilary Mantel—an Englishwoman who moved to Jeddah with her husband, in 1983—describes the protagonist's efforts to learn Arabic. "Andrew took her to the bookshop at the Caravan Shopping Center," Mantel writes. "She bought a language tape, and a book to go with it, and during Jamadi al-awal she pored over this book,

and set the careful slow voice of the language tutor echoing through [the apartment]. 'Good morning. Good morning, how are you? Well, praise be to God. Welcome! Will you drink coffee? How are your children? How is your wife?'" Despite her intelligence and industry—she's a cartographer by trade, with a surfeit of free time—the woman is strangely impotent. Arabic won't take.

Her frustration resonates with me. My efforts at French leave me at once inert and exhausted, as though I've been dog-paddling in a pool of standing water. But as the weeks go by the liaisons begin to sound less murky. I drop the script and start tuning in to the correct morning's broadcast, *le sept-neuf par Patrick Cohen*.

Trying to understand Patrick Cohen is an almost physical challenge—I have to concentrate my mental energy and then push with all my might, straining to make out the words the way one would to lift a dumbbell. Listening to one of Cohen's guests speak about the need for more women in positions of power at companies, I think how universal that conversation is. As I'm nodding along, the thought occurs that I've missed a feint or a negation that actually renders the entire argument the opposite of what I've understood it to be. Maybe I've got the right topic but not the stance, and the guest is actually *anti*-women executives. An unreliable auditor, I can't trust what I'm hearing.

A few weeks later, I stumble into the bathroom, pulling the phone out of the pocket of my robe in my usual bleary routine. I put it on the counter, swipe to the RFI app, and press Play. First four words: *nid d'oiseaux chanteurs*. No preamble. Patrick Cohen, I know immediately, is talking about a nest of songbirds.

That night, Olivier's brother calls. Usually, their conversations pass me by—I've missed years of ambient commentary, overheard plans—but this time little fragments of dialogue sing out, as though someone has fiddled with the volume knob on the background music to our life.

"*Elle n'est pas très mobile, quoi*," I hear Olivier say.

I don't know whom he's talking about, or why she's incapacitated. He seems to be saying *quoi* a lot. Even as it dawns on me that I may have pledged lifelong fealty to a man who ends every sentence with the equivalent of "dude," I'm taken by an eerie joy. Four years after having met Olivier, I'm hearing his voice for the first time.

SCHNAPSIDEE—THE WAY a German would describe a plan he'd hatched under the influence of alcohol. *Pilkunnussija*—Finnish for "comma fucker," a grammar pedant. In Mundari, *ribuy-tibuy* refers to the sight, sound, and motion of a fat person's buttocks. *Jayus*, in Indonesian, denotes a joke told so poorly that people can't help but laugh. *Knullrufs* is Swedish for "post-sex hair." *Gümüş servi* means "moonlight shining on the water" in Turkish. *Culaccino* is the Italian word for the mark left on a table by a cold glass.

Words like these are marvellous. We make lists of them, compile them into treasuries, trade them over any dinner table at which holders of various passports have convened. (The German, armed with *Kummerspeck*—"grief bacon"—will always win the day.) They're fun to say. They're funny to think about, in their Seinfeldian particularity. They expand and concentrate the world, making it bigger-spirited while at the same time more specific. In Russian, you can't call the sky "blue." The language obliges its speakers to make a distinction between *siniy* (dark blue) and *goluboy* (light blue), so that what is in English one color becomes in Russian two.

We like to think that the lexicon of a language reveals broad truths about its speakers. The wine will flow, and the Japanese guest will mention *komorebi*, the sunlight filtering through the leaves of trees, and the Frenchman will offer *l'appel du vide*, the urge to jump off a cliff, and there will be collective acknowledgment of the aesthetic qualities of the Japanese and the nihilistic ones of the French. But the idea that untranslatable words prove that speakers of different languages experience the world in radically different ways is as dubious as it is popular, originating from "the great Eskimo vocabulary hoax"—the notion that Eskimo has fifty or eighty or a hundred words for snow.

Eskimo is not a language but a group of them, comprising the Inuit and Yupik families, spoken from Greenland to Siberia. Nor, as the linguist Geoffrey Pullum explains, are Eskimo languages actually especially rich in snow terminology. What they are rich in is suffixes, which allow their speakers to build endless variations upon a small base of root words. (If you're tallying derivations, Eskimo languages also have a multitude of words for sun.) Sticking strictly to lexemes, or minimal meaningful units of language, Anthony C. Woodbury has catalogued about fifteen distinct snow words in one Eskimo language, Central Alaskan Yupik—roughly the same number as there are in English. A cartoon, mocking our credulity, features two Eskimo speakers. One asks the other, "Did you know that in Hampstead they have fifty different names for bread?"

Even if Eskimo speakers did possess a voluminous vocabulary for snow, or Hampsteaders for bread, it wouldn't prove that they were subject to some separate reality. Lepidopterists have terms for the behavior that butterflies exhibit at damp spots (puddling) and for the opening of the silk gland found on the caterpillar's lower lip (spinneret). Architects can distinguish between arrowslits, bartizans, and spandrels, while pilots speak of upwash and adverse yaw. New words are created every day by people who are able to comprehend their meanings before they exist. Novel language can be a function of time as well as of space. Czech speakers came up with *prozvonit*—the act of calling a cell phone and hanging up after one ring so that the other person will call you back, saving you money—because cell phones were invented, not because they were Czech. Even if some languages express certain concepts more artfully, or more succinctly, it's precisely because we recognize the phenomena to which they refer that we're delighted by *knullrufs* and *Kummerspeck*.

A language carries within it a culture, or cultures: ways of thinking and being. I spoke American English with the people to whom I was closest (with the exception of Olivier), who spoke American English back to me. For most of my life, I had assumed that Americanness agreed with me, because I had never questioned it. My alienations were localized, smaller-bore. In North Carolina—my parents had migrated there

from Philadelphia and Long Island, rendering us lifelong newcomers—I craved the immensity of New York. In New York, I longed for the intimacy of North Carolina. It wasn't that I didn't like either culture. I loved them both. Yet I felt that I could claim neither place as fully my own. In North Carolina, I was an arriviste; in New York, some part of me would always be a bumpkin, marvelling at the existence of "doorman buildings" and thinking the phrase "plus one" a little mean. In some way, I felt that I had already learned a new language, "picked it up," like Zadie Smith, "in college, along with the unabridged *Clarissa* and a taste for port."

"Why do people want to adopt another culture?" Alice Kaplan, the French scholar, writes. "Because there's something in their own they don't like, that doesn't name them." For me, French wasn't an uncomplicated refuge. I was coming at the language, I think, from the opposite direction: I had accidentally become the proprietor of a life suffused by French, and, for all its charms, there was something I didn't like in it.

In French, the grid was divided differently, between public and private, rather than polite and rude. At first, I felt its emphasis on discrimination, its relentless taxonomizing, as an almost ethical defect. French—the language and the culture—was so doctrinaire, so hung up on questions of form. The necessity of classifying each person one came across as *vous* or *tu*, outsider or insider, potential foe or friend, seemed at best a pomposity and at worst an act of paranoia. The easy egalitarianism of English tingled like a phantom limb. French could feel as "old and cold and settled in its ways" a place to live as Joni Mitchell's Paris. One day, I bought a package of twenty *assiettes à grillades* and ached for America, where you could use your large white paper plates for whatever the hell you wanted.

Like Mark Twain—who translated one of his stories from the French back into English, to produce the thrice-baked "The Frog Jumping of the County of Calaveras"—I at first found the language comically unwieldy. In its reluctance to disobey itself, it often seemed effete. One French newspaper had a column that recapitulated the best tweets of the week in more characters than they took to write. The biggest ridiculousism I ever came across was "*dinde gigogne composée d'une dinde partiellement désossée, farcie d'un canard partiellement désossé, lui-même farci d'un poulet partiellement désossé*"—that is to say, turducken.

Even if *muruaneq*—a Yupik word for soft, deep fallen snow—was basically powder, the question tantalized me: Does each language have its own world view? Do people have different personalities in different languages? Every exchange student and maker of New Year's resolutions hopes that the answer is yes. More than any juice cleanse or lottery win or career switch, a foreign language adumbrates a vision of a parallel life. The fantasy is that learning one activates a latent alter ego, righting a linguistic version of having been switched at birth. Could I, would I, become someone else if I spoke French?

It's a Friday class. We're listening to a Mauritanian folktale on tape. There is a wise old man. He notices that his daughters have lately been wearing more revealing clothes. He summons them and seats them around him in a circle, and then shows them his hands. The right one is open. In it, he holds an ounce of gold. The left one is closed.

"Choose one," he tells his daughters.

Without knowing what's in it, they all select the left fist.

"But you see that in my right hand there's an ounce of pure gold while you don't know what's in the other one," the man says.

The daughters still want whatever is in the left hand.

Thus bidden, he opens it. There's nothing there but a lump of coal.

"You see, my children," he declares, "man always prefers that which hides itself from him."

Luisa presses Stop on the tape deck and scans the classroom.

"What do you think?" she says. "Lauren?"

"I think the Mauritanian folktale is pretty sexist," I reply.

"Is that so? But why? There's a profound philosophical lesson here—that people should have a hidden side."

"Why doesn't he tell his sons that, then?"

"It's not sexist to say that a woman should have more mystery."

"I think that's sexist."

"It's *not* sexist," Cristina, the artist, says, cutting in. "It's about tradition versus modernity."

Luisa, warming to this interpretation, turns to Cristina and asks her to continue.

"Too open is not interesting," she says. "That's the moral of the story."

Carlos can't help himself.

"Man and woman are not the same!" he cries. "That's reality."

It's a pile-on. I know I should probably fold. But now, like Carlos, I can't

help trying to articulate my feelings.

"Reality can be sexist," I say, fixing Carlos with a stare. "What if this was Saudi Arabia instead of Mauritania?"

Carlos is, for a millisecond, speechless.

"Ladies," he says, regaining his composure. He opens his chest to the room, like a lawyer addressing a jury. "Do you prefer a man who shows it all or who keeps a little hidden?"

"I think people should wear whatever they want," I say.

"No, but what if a guy is walking around in *collants*?"

Merde, what are *collants*? I whip out my little dictionary app like a gunslinger in a saloon fight.

"What do you think of a guy," Cristina is yelling, "who wears tights to show his intimate form?"

My pistol requires a password. I can't type fast enough.

"It's not the same for a man or a woman," Lana says, raising a manicured hand.

Carlos replies, "That's why I asked what you ladies think."

"Women aren't the same as men," Lana continues. "They care what we wear. I care what he feels, what he thinks."

After class, Cristina approaches me in the canteen.

"That was very American of you, what you said."

"Thanks," I say, sawing away at my veal cutlet.

Repeating "I think that's sexist" doesn't exactly qualify as rhetorical pyrotechnics. But I'm pleased that I've managed to say something that sounds reasonably like myself. I've thought of learning as something passive. I've been hoarding words as though they were rare doubloons, tucking them away in the velvet pouches of my cerebrum. But they're worthless, I realize, out of circulation. A language is the only subject you can't learn by yourself.

THE CRAZY THING is that once you've internalized the vocabulary you have to figure out how it goes together. In a language with sixty thousand words, there are approximately a hundred billion trillion ten-word combinations that make grammatical sense. Knowing which permutations work is, to some extent, intuitive. But fluency is also a function of familiarity, as grammar offers few clues as to the parts of speech that are not so much idioms as loose affinities. How is one to know that inclement almost always goes with weather; that aspersions are cast but insults hurled; that observers are keen; that processions are orderly; that drinks, as someone apparently decreed sometime in the early years of this century, must be grabbed and e-mails shot? In English, I strained to avoid such formulations. But in French conformity was my ambition. Speaking

offered a sense of community, the rare chance to crowdsource my personal thesaurus. I was trying to join in, not to distinguish myself. I wasn't a writer but a speaker. I wasn't an observer but a participant. It was such a happy thing to strive for a cliché.

Bilinguals overwhelmingly report that they feel like different people in different languages. It is often assumed that the mother tongue is the language of the true self. In many ways, it remains the primal vehicle. A person who has spoken English most of her life is always going to speak English when she stubs her toe (or, according to spycraft, at the moment of orgasm). But, if first languages are reservoirs of emotion, second languages can be rivers undammed, freeing their speakers to ride different currents. People are more likely to say they'd push a man off a bridge—in order to save five other people about to be hit by a train—when the dilemma is presented in their second language.

The linguist Dan Jurafsky writes of a phenomenon called semantic bleaching, in which words, most often in the affective realm, lose their power with the passage of time, so that the "awe" fades from "awesome" and "horrible" becomes merely unpleasant. French, for me, was semantic baking soda, reinvigorating my expressive palette. "Fun" and "excited" were out, having no obvious equivalent. I realized how many fun things I was excitedly calling "the best" once it became clear that the formulation didn't really work in French, because French speakers took it literally. Tell a francophone, "This is the best *tarte au citron!*," and it will come across less as sincere praise than as an asininity. She'll go silent as she tries to figure out what you're comparing it with, whether you've actually sampled all the *tartes au citron* the world has to offer. It was hard to accept that, in French, a compliment resonates in inverse proportion to the force with which it is offered. Much better to say the tart is "*bonne*" than "*très bonne*." Discrimination was a higher virtue than effusiveness.

In "Giovanni's Room," James Baldwin describes French as "that curiously measured and vehement language, which sometimes reminds me of stiffening egg white and sometimes of stringed instruments but always of the underside and aftermath of passion." I liked how Baldwin captured the relationship between the obliqueness of French—the under and the after—and its erotic charge. Its formality, paradoxically, heightened its potential for feeling. Shedding superlatives, I felt as though I were enacting a linguistic version of Coco Chanel's dictum that before leaving the house a woman should remove one piece of jewelry. I wondered if perhaps the Mauritanian folktale—what is hidden is desired; to conceal certain parts is to keep them sensitive—had actually been about French.

French is said to be the language of love, meaning seduction. I found in it an etiquette for loving, what happens next. My acquisition of the language had been a sort of conversion, and, in the same way that Catholics valued the Latin Mass for its grandeur, French represented to me a sacred medium. Where I had once interpreted Olivier's reticence as pessimism, I now saw the deep romanticism, the hopefulness, of not wanting to overstate or to overpromise. *Vous* and *tu* concentrated intimacy by dividing it into distinct shades—the emotional equivalent of Russian's two shades of blue. I understood, finally, why it made Olivier happy when I wore makeup; why he didn't call me his best friend; why, in five years, I had never heard him burp. Love was not fusion. "*Je t'aime*" was enough. ♦