

Me Talk Pretty One Day

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AT THE AGE OF FORTY-ONE, I am returning to school and have to think of myself as what my French textbook calls “a true debutant.” After paying my tuition, I was issued a student ID, which allows me a discounted entry fee at movie theaters, puppet shows, and Festyland, a far-flung amusement park that advertises with billboards picturing a cartoon stegosaurus sitting in a canoe and eating what appears to be a ham sandwich.

I’ve moved to Paris with hopes of learning the language. My school is an easy ten-minute walk from my apartment, and on the first day of class I arrived early, watching as the returning students greeted one another in the school lobby. Vacations were recounted, and questions were raised con-

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cerning mutual friends with names like Kang and Vlatnya. Regardless of their nationalities, everyone spoke in what sounded to me like excellent French. Some accents were better than others, but the students exhibited an ease and confidence I found intimidating. As an added discomfort, they were all young, attractive, and well dressed, causing me to feel not unlike Pa Kettle trapped backstage after a fashion show.

The first day of class was nerve-racking because I knew I’d be expected to perform. That’s the way they do it here — it’s everybody into the language pool, sink or swim. The teacher marched in, deeply tanned from a recent vacation, and proceeded to rattle off a series of administrative announcements. I’ve spent quite a few summers in Normandy, and I took a monthlong French class before leaving New York. I’m not completely in the dark, yet I understood only half of what this woman was saying.

“If you have not *meimslsxp* or *lgpdmurct* by this time, then you should not be in this room. Has everyone *apzkiubjxow*? Everyone? Good, we shall begin.” She spread out her lesson plan and sighed, saying, “All right, then, who knows the alphabet?”

It was startling because (a) I hadn’t been asked that question in a while and (b) I realized, while laughing, that I myself did *not* know the alphabet. They’re the same letters, but in France they’re pronounced differently. I know the shape of the alphabet but had no idea what it actually sounded like.

"Ahh." The teacher went to the board and sketched the letter *a*. "Do we have anyone in the room whose first name commences with an *ahh*?"

Two Polish Annas raised their hands, and the teacher instructed them to present themselves by stating their names, nationalities, occupations, and a brief list of things they liked and disliked in this world. The first Anna hailed from an industrial town outside of Warsaw and had front teeth the size of tombstones. She worked as a seamstress, enjoyed quiet times with friends, and hated the mosquito.

"Oh, really," the teacher said. "How very interesting. I thought that everyone loved the mosquito, but here, in front of all the world, you claim to detest him. How is it that we've been blessed with someone as unique and original as you? Tell us, please."

The seamstress did not understand what was being said but knew that this was an occasion for shame. Her rabbity mouth huffed for breath, and she stared down at her lap as though the appropriate comeback were stitched somewhere alongside the zipper of her slacks.

The second Anna learned from the first and claimed to love sunshine and detest lies. It sounded like a translation of one of those Playmate of the Month data sheets, the answers always written in the same loopy handwriting: "Turn-ons: Mom's famous five-alarm chili! Turnoffs: insecurity and guys who come on too strong!!!!"

The two Polish Annas surely had clear notions of what they loved and hated, but like the rest of us, they were limited

in terms of vocabulary, and this made them appear less than sophisticated. The teacher forged on, and we learned that Carlos, the Argentine bandonion player, loved wine, music, and, in his words, "making sex with the womens of the world." Next came a beautiful young Yugoslav who identified herself as an optimist, saying that she loved everything that life had to offer.

The teacher licked her lips, revealing a hint of the saucebox we would later come to know. She crouched low for her attack, placed her hands on the young woman's desk, and leaned close, saying, "Oh yeah? And do you love your little war?"

While the optimist struggled to defend herself, I scrambled to think of an answer to what had obviously become a trick question. How often is one asked what he loves in this world? More to the point, how often is one asked and then publicly ridiculed for his answer? I recalled my mother, flushed with wine, pounding the tabletop late one night, saying, "Love? I love a good steak cooked rare. I love my cat, and I love . . ." My sisters and I leaned forward, waiting to hear our names. "Tums," our mother said. "I love Tums."

The teacher killed some time accusing the Yugoslavian girl of masterminding a program of genocide, and I jotted frantic notes in the margins of my pad. While I can honestly say that I love leafing through medical textbooks devoted to severe dermatological conditions, the hobby is beyond the reach of my French vocabulary, and acting it out would only have invited controversy.

When called upon, I delivered an effortless list of things that I detest: blood sausage, intestinal pâtés, brain pudding. I'd learned these words the hard way. Having given it some thought, I then declared my love for IBM typewriters, the French word for *bruise*, and my electric floor waxer. It was a short list, but still I managed to mispronounce *IBM* and assign the wrong gender to both the floor waxer and the typewriter. The teacher's reaction led me to believe that these mistakes were capital crimes in the country of France.

"Were you always this *palicmkrexix*?" she asked. "Even a *fiuscrsza ticiwelmun* knows that a typewriter is feminine."

I absorbed as much of her abuse as I could understand, thinking — but not saying — that I find it ridiculous to assign a gender to an inanimate object incapable of disrobing and making an occasional fool of itself. Why refer to Lady Crack Pipe or Good Sir Dishrag when these things could never live up to all that their sex implied?

The teacher proceeded to belittle everyone from German Eva, who hated laziness, to Japanese Yukari, who loved paintbrushes and soap. Italian, Thai, Dutch, Korean, and Chinese — we all left class foolishly believing that the worst was over. She'd shaken us up a little, but surely that was just an act designed to weed out the deadweight. We didn't know it then, but the coming months would teach us what it was like to spend time in the presence of a wild animal, something completely unpredictable. Her temperament was not based on a series of good and bad days but, rather, good and bad moments. We soon learned to dodge chalk and protect our

heads and stomachs whenever she approached us with a question. She hadn't yet punched anyone, but it seemed wise to protect ourselves against the inevitable.

Though we were forbidden to speak anything but French, the teacher would occasionally use us to practice any of her five fluent languages.

"I hate you," she said to me one afternoon. Her English was flawless. "I really, really hate you." Call me sensitive, but I couldn't help but take it personally.

After being singled out as a lazy *kfdtinvm*, I took to spending four hours a night on my homework, putting in even more time whenever we were assigned an essay. I suppose I could have gotten by with less, but I was determined to create some sort of identity for myself: David the hard worker, David the cut-up. We'd have one of those "complete this sentence" exercises, and I'd fool with the thing for hours, invariably settling on something like "A quick run around the lake? I'd love to! Just give me a moment while I strap on my wooden leg." The teacher, through word and action, conveyed the message that if this was my idea of an identity, she wanted nothing to do with it.

My fear and discomfort crept beyond the borders of the classroom and accompanied me out onto the wide boulevards. Stopping for a coffee, asking directions, depositing money in my bank account: these things were out of the question, as they involved having to speak. Before beginning school, there'd been no shutting me up, but now I was convinced that everything I said was wrong. When the phone rang, I

ignored it. If someone asked me a question, I pretended to be deaf. I knew my fear was getting the best of me when I started wondering why they don't sell cuts of meat in vending machines.

My only comfort was the knowledge that I was not alone. Huddled in the hallways and making the most of our pathetic French, my fellow students and I engaged in the sort of conversation commonly overheard in refugee camps.

"Sometime me cry alone at night."

"That be common for I, also, but be more strong, you. Much work and someday you talk pretty. People start love you soon. Maybe tomorrow, okay."

Unlike the French class I had taken in New York, here there was no sense of competition. When the teacher poked a shy Korean in the eyelid with a freshly sharpened pencil, we took no comfort in the fact that, unlike Hyeyoon Cho, we all knew the irregular past tense of the verb *to defeat*. In all fairness, the teacher hadn't meant to stab the girl, but neither did she spend much time apologizing, saying only, "Well, you should have been *vkkydyo* more *kdeynfulh*."

Over time it became impossible to believe that any of us would ever improve. Fall arrived and it rained every day, meaning we would now be scolded for the water dripping from our coats and umbrellas. It was mid-October when the teacher singled me out, saying, "Every day spent with you is like having a cesarean section." And it struck me that, for the first time since arriving in France, I could understand every word that someone was saying.

Understanding doesn't mean that you can suddenly speak the language. Far from it. It's a small step, nothing more, yet its rewards are intoxicating and deceptive. The teacher continued her diatribe and I settled back, bathing in the subtle beauty of each new curse and insult.

"You exhaust me with your foolishness and reward my efforts with nothing but pain, do you understand me?"

The world opened up, and it was with great joy that I responded, "I know the thing that you speak exact now. Talk me more, you, plus, please, plus."

Jesus Shaves

“**A**ND WHAT DOES ONE DO on the fourteenth of July? Does one celebrate Bastille Day?”

It was my second month of French class, and the teacher was leading us in an exercise designed to promote the use of *one*, our latest personal pronoun.

“Might one sing on Bastille Day?” she asked. “Might one dance in the streets? Somebody give me an answer.”

Printed in our textbooks was a list of major holidays accompanied by a scattered arrangement of photographs depicting French people in the act of celebration. The object of the lesson was to match the holiday with the corresponding picture. It was simple enough but seemed an exercise better suited to the use of the pronoun *they*. I didn’t know about the rest

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of the class, but when Bastille Day eventually rolled around, I planned to stay home and clean my oven.

Normally, when working from the book, it was my habit to tune out my fellow students and scout ahead, concentrating on the question I’d calculated might fall to me, but this afternoon we were veering from the usual format. Questions were answered on a volunteer basis, and I was able to sit back and relax, confident that the same few students would do most of the talking. Today’s discussion was dominated by an Italian nanny, two chatty Poles, and a pouty, plump Moroccan woman who had grown up speaking French and had enrolled in the class hoping to improve her spelling. She’d covered these lessons back in the third grade and took every opportunity to demonstrate her superiority. A question would be asked, and she’d race to give the answer, behaving as though this were a game show and, if quick enough, she might go home with a tropical vacation or a side-by-side refrigerator/freezer. A transfer student, by the end of her first day she’d raised her hand so many times that her shoulder had given out. Now she just leaned back and shouted out the answers, her bronzed arms folded across her chest like some great grammar genie.

We’d finished discussing Bastille Day, and the teacher had moved on to Easter, which was represented in our textbooks by a black-and-white photograph of a chocolate bell lying upon a bed of palm fronds.

“And what does one do on Easter? Would anyone like to tell us?”

It was, for me, another of those holidays I'd just as soon avoid. As a rule, my family had always ignored the Easter celebrated by our non-Orthodox friends and neighbors. While the others feasted on their chocolate figurines, my brother, sisters, and I had endured epic fasts, folding our bony fingers in prayer and begging for an end to the monotony that was the Holy Trinity Church. As Greeks, we had our own Easter, which was usually observed anywhere from two to four weeks after what was known in our circle as "the American version." The reason has to do with the moon or the Orthodox calendar — something mysterious like that — though our mother always suspected it was scheduled at a later date so that the Greeks could buy their marshmallow chicks and plastic grass at drastically reduced sale prices. "The cheap sons of bitches," she'd say. "If they had their way, we'd be celebrating Christmas in the middle of goddamn February."

Because our mother was raised a Protestant, our Easters were a hybrid of the Greek and the American traditions. We received baskets of candy until we grew older and the Easter Bunny branched out. Those who smoked would awaken to find a carton of cigarettes and an assortment of disposable lighters, while the others would receive an equivalent, each according to his or her vice. In the evening we had the traditional Greek meal followed by a game in which we would toast one another with blood-colored eggs. The symbolism escapes me, but the holder of the table's one uncracked egg was supposedly rewarded with a year of good luck. I won only once. It was the year my mother died, my apartment got

broken into, and I was taken to the emergency room suffering from what the attending physician diagnosed as "housewife's knee."

The Italian nanny was attempting to answer the teacher's latest question when the Moroccan student interrupted, shouting, "Excuse me, but what's an Easter?"

It would seem that despite having grown up in a Muslim country, she would have heard it mentioned once or twice, but no. "I mean it," she said. "I have no idea what you people are talking about."

The teacher called upon the rest of us to explain.

The Poles led the charge to the best of their ability. "It is," said one, "a party for the little boy of God who call his self Jesus and . . . oh, shit." She faltered and her fellow countryman came to her aid.

"He call his self Jesus and then he die one day on two . . . morsels of . . . lumber."

The rest of the class jumped in, offering bits of information that would have given the pope an aneurysm.

"He die one day and then he go above of my head to live with your father."

"He weared of himself the long hair and after he die, the first day he come back here for to say hello to the peoples."

"He nice, the Jesus."

"He make the good things, and on the Easter we be sad because somebody makes him dead today."

Part of the problem had to do with vocabulary. Simple nouns such as *cross* and *resurrection* were beyond our grasp,

let alone such complicated reflexive phrases as “to give of yourself your only begotten son.” Faced with the challenge of explaining the cornerstone of Christianity, we did what any self-respecting group of people might do. We talked about food instead.

“Easter is a party for to eat of the lamb,” the Italian nanny explained. “One too may eat of the chocolate.”

“And who brings the chocolate?” the teacher asked.

I knew the word, so I raised my hand, saying, “The rabbit of Easter. He bring of the chocolate.”

“A rabbit?” The teacher, assuming I’d used the wrong word, positioned her index fingers on top of her head, wriggling them as though they were ears. “You mean one of these? A *rabbit* rabbit?”

“Well, sure,” I said. “He come in the night when one sleep on a bed. With a hand he have a basket and foods.”

The teacher sighed and shook her head. As far as she was concerned, I had just explained everything that was wrong with my country. “No, no,” she said. “Here in France the chocolate is brought by a big bell that flies in from Rome.”

I called for a time-out. “But how do the bell know where you live?”

“Well,” she said, “how does a rabbit?”

It was a decent point, but at least a rabbit has eyes. That’s a start. Rabbits move from place to place, while most bells can only go back and forth — and they can’t even do that on their own power. On top of that, the Easter Bunny has character. He’s someone you’d like to meet and shake hands with.

A bell has all the personality of a cast-iron skillet. It’s like saying that come Christmas, a magic dustpan flies in from the North Pole, led by eight flying cinder blocks. Who wants to stay up all night so they can see a bell? And why fly one in from Rome when they’ve got more bells than they know what to do with right here in Paris? That’s the most implausible aspect of the whole story, as there’s no way the bells of France would allow a foreign worker to fly in and take their jobs. That Roman bell would be lucky to get work cleaning up after a French bell’s dog — and even then he’d need papers. It just didn’t add up.

Nothing we said was of any help to the Moroccan student. A dead man with long hair supposedly living with her father, a leg of lamb served with palm fronds and chocolate; equally confused and disgusted, she shrugged her massive shoulders and turned her attention back to the comic book she kept hidden beneath her binder.

I wondered then if, without the language barrier, my classmates and I could have done a better job making sense of Christianity, an idea that sounds pretty far-fetched to begin with.

In communicating any religious belief, the operative word is *faith*, a concept illustrated by our very presence in that classroom. Why bother struggling with the grammar lessons of a six-year-old if each of us didn’t believe that, against all reason, we might eventually improve? If I could hope to one day carry on a fluent conversation, it was a relatively short leap to believing that a rabbit might visit my home in the middle of the

night, leaving behind a handful of chocolate kisses and a carton of menthol cigarettes. So why stop there? If I could believe in myself, why not give other improbabilities the benefit of the doubt? I told myself that despite her past behavior, my teacher was a kind and loving person who had only my best interests at heart. I accepted the idea that an omniscient God had cast me in his own image and that he watched over me and guided me from one place to the next. The Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, and the countless miracles — my heart expanded to encompass all the wonders and possibilities of the universe.

A bell, though — that's fucked up.

The Tapeworm Is In

“WHAT DO YOU WANT to do, my friends? Go out?”

“Go out where? Go out to the discotheque?”

“No, go out to a restaurant, to the House of Butterfly.”

“The House of Butterfly! Is that a pleasant restaurant?”

“It is not expensive, if that is what you mean.”

“Oh, good. The matter is settled. Let us all proceed to the House of Butterfly!”

Before leaving New York, I enrolled in a monthlong French class taught by a beautiful young Parisian woman who had us memorize a series of dialogues from an audiocassette that accompanied our textbook. Because it was a beginning course, the characters on our tape generally steered clear of slang and controversy. Avoiding both the past and the future, they embraced the moment with a stoicism common to Buddhists