

See You Again

Yesterday

I HAVE NEVER BEEN ONE of those Americans who pepper their conversation with French phrases and entertain guests with wheels of brie. For me, France was never a specific, premeditated destination. I wound up in Normandy the same way my mother wound up in North Carolina: you meet a guy, relinquish a tiny bit of control, and the next thing you know, you're eating a different part of the pig.

I met Hugh through a mutual friend. She and I were painting an apartment, and he had offered the use of his twelve-foot ladder. Owning a twelve-foot ladder in New York is a probable sign of success, as it means you most likely have enough room to store one. At the time, Hugh was living in a loft on Canal Street, a former chocolate factory where the walk-in coolers had been turned into bedrooms. I arrived at

his place on a Friday night and noticed the pie baking in the oven. While the rest of Manhattan was out on the town, he'd stayed home to peel apples and listen to country music.

Like me, Hugh was single, which came as no great surprise, considering that he spent his leisure time rolling out dough and crying to George Jones albums. I had just moved to New York and was wondering if I was going to be alone for the rest of my life. Part of the problem was that, according to several reliable sources, I tended to exhaust people. Another part of the problem had to do with my long list of standards. Potential boyfriends could not smoke Merit cigarettes, own or wear a pair of cowboy boots, or eat anything labeled either *lite* or *heart smart*. Speech was important, and disqualifying phrases included "I can't find my nipple ring" and "This one here was my first tattoo." All street names had to be said in full, meaning no "Fifty-ninth and Lex," and definitely no "Mad Ave." They couldn't drink more than I did, couldn't write poetry in notebooks and read it out loud to an audience of strangers, and couldn't use the words *flick*, *freebie*, *cyberspace*, *progressive*, or *zeitgeist*. They could not consider the human scalp an appropriate palette for self-expression, could not own a rainbow-striped flag, and could not say they had "discovered" any shop or restaurant currently listed in the phone book. Age, race, and weight were unimportant. In terms of mutual interests, I figured we could spend the rest of our lives discussing how much we hated the aforementioned characteristics.

Hugh had moved to New York after spending six years in

France. I asked a few questions, rightly sensing that he probably wouldn't offer anything unless provoked. There was, he said, a house in Normandy. This was most likely followed by a qualifier, something pivotal like "but it's a dump." He probably described it in detail, but by that point I was only half listening. Instead, I'd begun to imagine my life in a foreign country, some faraway land where, if things went wrong, I could always blame somebody else, saying I'd never wanted to live there in the first place. Life might be difficult for a year or two, but I would tough it out because living in a foreign country is one of those things that everyone should try at least once. My understanding was that it completed a person, sanding down the rough provincial edges and transforming you into a citizen of the world.

I didn't see this as a romantic idea. It had nothing to do with France itself, with wearing hats or writing tortured letters from a sidewalk café. I didn't care where Hemingway drank or Alice B. Toklas had her mustache trimmed. What I found appealing in life abroad was the inevitable sense of helplessness it would inspire. Equally exciting would be the work involved in overcoming that helplessness. There would be a goal involved, and I like having goals.

"Built around 1780... a two-hour train ride from Paris... the neighbor keeps his horses in my backyard... pies made with apples from my own trees..."

I caught the highlights of Hugh's broadcast and understood that my first goal was to make him my boyfriend, to trick or blackmail him into making some sort of commit-

ment. I know it sounds calculating, but if you're not cute, you might as well be clever.

In order to get the things I want, it helps me to pretend I'm a figure in a daytime drama, a schemer. Soap opera characters make emphatic pronouncements. They ball up their fists and state their goals out loud. "I will destroy Buchanan Enterprises," they say. "Phoebe Wallingford will pay for what she's done to our family." Walking home with the back half of the twelve-foot ladder, I turned to look in the direction of Hugh's loft. "You will be mine," I commanded.

Nine months after I'd borrowed the ladder, Hugh left the chocolate factory and we moved in together. As was his habit, he planned to spend the month of August in Normandy, visiting friends and working on his house. I'd planned to join him, but that first year, when the time came to buy my ticket, I chickened out, realizing that I was afraid of France. My fear had nothing to do with the actual French people. I didn't know any actual French people. What scared me was the idea of French people I'd gotten from movies and situation comedies. When someone makes a spectacular ass of himself, it's always in a French restaurant, never a Japanese or Italian one. The French are the people who slap one another with gloves and wear scarves to cover their engorged hickies. My understanding was that, no matter how hard we tried, the French would never like us, and that's confusing to an American raised to believe that the citizens of Europe should be grateful for all the wonderful things we've done. Things like movies that stereotype the people of France as boots and petty snobs,

and little remarks such as "We saved your ass in World War II." Every day we're told that we live in the greatest country on earth. And it's always stated as an undeniable fact: Leos are born between July 23 and August 22, fitted queen-size sheets measure sixty by eighty inches, and America is the greatest country on earth. Having grown up with this in our ears, it's startling to realize that other countries have nationalistic slogans of their own, none of which are "We're number two!"

The French have decided to ignore our self-proclaimed superiority, and this is translated as arrogance. To my knowledge, they've never said that they're better than us; they've just never said that we're the best. Big deal. There are plenty of places on earth where visiting Americans are greeted with great enthusiasm. Unfortunately, these places tend to lack anything you'd really want to buy. And that, to me, is the only reason to leave home in the first place — to buy things. Hugh bought me great gifts the summer I stayed home and he went off to France. He's not really that much of a shopper, so I figured that if he had managed to find these things, they must have been right out in the open where anyone could have spotted them. As far as I was concerned, the French could be cold or even openly hostile. They could burn my flag or pelt me with stones, but if there were taxidermied kittens to be had, then I would go and bring them back to this, the greatest country on earth.

There was the shopping, and then there was the smoking. Hugh returned from his trip, and days later I still sounded

like a Red Chinese asking questions about the democratic hinterlands. "And you actually saw people smoking in restaurants? Really! And offices, too? Oh, tell me again about the ashtrays in the hospital waiting room, and don't leave anything out."

I went to France the following summer knowing only the word for *bottleneck*. I said "bottleneck" at the airport, "bottleneck" on the train to Normandy, and "bottleneck" when presented with the pile of stones that was Hugh's house in the country. There was no running water, no electricity, and nothing to buy but the pipes and wires needed if you wanted to live with plumbing and electricity. Because there was nothing decent to buy, the people greeted me with great enthusiasm. It would be the same if a French person were to visit, say, Knightdale, North Carolina. "My goodness," everyone said, "you came all this way to see us?"

Had my vocabulary been larger, I might have said, "Well, no, not exactly." Times being what they were, I offered my only possible response. "Bottleneck."

"Oh, bottleneck," everyone said. "You speak very well."

They were nothing like the French people I had imagined. If anything, they were too kind, too generous, and too knowledgeable in the fields of plumbing and electricity. The house is located in a tiny hamlet, a Hooterville of eight stone houses huddled in a knot and surrounded by rolling hills decorated with cows and sheep. There are no cash registers, but a mile away, in the neighboring village, there's a butcher, a baker, a post office, a hardware store, and a small grocery

There's a church and a pay phone, an elementary school, and a place to buy cigarettes. "New York City!" the shopkeepers said. "Well, you're far from home, aren't you?" They said this as if I'd left Manhattan for a short walk and lost track of the time.

It seemed that if you had to be from America, New York was as good a place as any. People had heard of it, especially the three village teenagers who studied English in school and often dropped by to discuss life in what they called, "Ny." I tried to explain that the *N* and the *Y* were initials that stood for *New* and *York*, but still they insisted on joining the letters into a single word. Ny, they said, was what the insiders called it. Didn't everyone in Usa use that word?

The teenagers were under the impression that New York was a glamorous wonderland, a celebrity playground where one couldn't leave the house without running into Madonna and Michael Jackson sitting in the park and breastfeeding their babies. I thoughtlessly named a few of the stars I had seen in my neighborhood, and for the rest of the summer, when describing our house, you'd say, "It's the place with all the teenagers lying around out front." They stretched out in the middle of the road, flat on their backs, not wanting to miss anything should one of my celebrity friends decide to drop by and help me dig the septic tank. I was afraid that one of them might get hit by a car and that I would be blamed for the death. "Oh, don't worry," the neighbors said. "They'll grow out of it in a few years."

That is what I'm assuming they said. Without Hugh by

my side to translate, every interaction was based upon a series of assumptions. The kind butcher may not have been kind at all, and the grocer might have been saying, "To hell with you and your bottleneck. Go away now and leave me alone." Their personalities were entirely my own invention. On the downside, my personality was entirely their invention. I seemed to have reached my mid-thirties only to be known as "the guy who says 'bottleneck,'" the piper who convinces young people to lie in the road, the grown man who ignores the electric-fence warnings and frightens the horses with his screaming. Were such a person described to me, I'd say, "Oh, you mean the village idiot."

In this situation, pretending to be a soap opera character failed to help. When told, "You *will* understand me," the citizens of France responded with blank stares. I picked up a few new words, but the overall situation seemed hopeless. Neighbors would drop by while Hugh was off at the hardware store, and I'd struggle to entertain them with a pathetic series of simple nouns. "Ashtray!"

"Yes," they'd agree. "That's an ashtray all right."

"Hammer? Screwdriver?"

"No, that's okay, we've got our own at home."

I'd hoped the language might come on its own, the way it comes to babies, but people don't talk to foreigners the way they talk to babies. They don't hypnotize you with bright objects and repeat the same words over and over, handing out little treats when you finally say "potty" or "wawa." It got to the point where I'd see a baby in the bakery or grocery store

and instinctively ball up my fists, jealous over how easy he had it. I wanted to lie in a French crib and start from scratch, learning the language from the ground floor up. I wanted to be a baby, but instead, I was an adult who talked like one, a spooky man-child demanding more than his fair share of attention.

Rather than admit defeat, I decided to change goals. I told myself that I'd never really cared about learning the language. My main priority was to get the house in shape. The verbs would come in due time, but until then I needed a comfortable place to hide. When eventually developed, our vacation pictures looked as though they had been taken at a forced-labor camp. I knocked down walls and lugged heavy beams, ran pipes and wires, and became a familiar dust-masked face at both the dump and the pharmacy. My month of hard work was rewarded with four days in Paris, a city where, without even trying, one can find a two-hundred-year-old wax model of a vagina, complete with human pubic hair. On the plane going home, I was given a Customs form and asked to list all my purchases:

Two-headed-calf skull

Ashtray in the shape of a protracted molar

Somebody's gallstone, labeled and displayed on an elegant stand

A set of eight Limoges dessert plates custom made for a pharmacy and hand-painted with the names of various lethal drugs

Suede fetus complete with umbilical cord
 French eye chart that unintentionally includes the word

FAT

Illustrated guides to skin rashes and war wounds

I ran out of room long before I could mention my outdated surgical instruments. Hugh told me that I was wasting my time, that they were looking for people who'd bought platinum watches, not rusted cranial saws. My customs form was, for me, a list of reasons to return to France and master the language. Conversation would be nice, but the true reward would be the ability to haggle fluently and get my next two-headed skull for the same price as a normal one.

Back in New York I took full advantage of my status as a native speaker. I ran my mouth to shop clerks and listened in on private conversations, realizing I'd gone an entire month without hearing anyone complain that they were "stressed-out," a phrase that's always gotten on my nerves. People in New York love to tell you how exhausted they are. Then they fall apart when someone says, "Yeah, you look pretty tired." I kept an eye out for foreigners, the Europeans shopping on my SoHo street and the cleaning women who'd answer "Poland" or "El Salvador" when asked a yes-or-no question. I felt that it was my responsibility to protect these people, to give them directions they didn't want and generally scare them with my kindness. As an American abroad, you're bolstered by an innate sense of security. Something goes wrong, and you instinctively think, "We'll just call the embassy and see what

they have to say." People know where America is on the map. They know that it's loud and powerful. With certain other countries there's no such guarantee. "Oh, right, Laos," I once heard someone say to a dinner guest. "Didn't we bomb you a couple of times?"

Hugh and I returned to Normandy the following summer, and I resumed my identity as the village idiot. "See you again yesterday!" I said to the butcher. "Ashtray! Bottleneck!" Again I hid indoors, painting and scraping until my knuckles bled. I left promising to enroll in a French class and then forgot that promise as soon my plane landed back in New York.

On the following trip I sanded the floors and began the practice of learning ten new words a day.

exorcism

facial swelling

death penalty

I found my words in the dictionary, typed them onto index cards, and committed them to memory while on my daily walks to the neighboring village.

slaughterhouse

sea monster

witch doctor

By the end of the month, I'd managed to retain three hundred nouns, none of which proved to be the least bit useful.

The next summer we went to France for six weeks, and I added another 420 words, most of them found in the popular gossip magazine *Vóici*. "Man-eater," I'd say. "Gold digger, roustabout, louse."

"Who are you talking about?" my neighbors would ask. "What social climber? Where?"

On my fifth trip to France I limited myself to the words and phrases that people actually use. From the dog owners I learned "Lie down," "Shut up," and "Who shit on this car-pet?" The couple across the road taught me to ask questions correctly, and the grocer taught me to count. Things began to come together, and I went from speaking like an evil baby to speaking like a hillbilly. "Is therns the thoughts of cows?" I'd ask the butcher, pointing to the calves' brains displayed in the front window. "I want me some lamb chop with handles on 'em."

By the end of our sixth trip to France, the house was finished and I'd learned a total of 1,564 words. It was an odd sensation to hold my entire vocabulary in my hands, to look back through the stack and recall the afternoon I learned to effectively describe my hangovers. I kept my vocabulary in a wooden box built to house a Napoleonic hat, and worried that if the house caught fire, I'd be back to square one with *bottleneck* and *ashtray* and would lose the intense pleasure I felt whenever I heard somebody use a word I'd come to think of as my own.

When the cranes arrived to build a twelve-story hotel right outside our bedroom window, Hugh and I decided to

leave New York for a year or two, just until our resentment died down a little. I'm determined to learn as much French as possible, so we'll take an apartment in Paris, where there are posters and headlines and any number of words waiting to be captured and transcribed onto index cards, where a person can comfortably smoke while making a spectacular ass of himself, and where, when frustrated, I can lie, saying I never wanted to come here in the first place.