

This Too Shall Pass: 10 Weeks in French

by Corinne Purtill

“My pants get a lot of water.”

I was standing in the foyer of a hostel in Morocco, a towel around my waist, my jeans in my hand. They’d been soaked earlier in a sudden downpour; now the sun was out, and I wanted to hang them alongside the towels and sheets fluttering on the rooftop clothesline. To do this I had to have permission from the hijab-clad housekeeper before me, in French, a language I had not spoken aloud in longer than I could remember and had never really spoken well.

I tried again. “My pants—they make a lot of water in the crying this today. Can I make them go to the up-there? Please?”

She gave me the look of wary pity, then sighed and waved her hand—*whatever*—and gratefully, I stole up to the roof.

I was about to spend a month house sitting for friends in Morocco, where French is widely spoken as a second language. When I planned my trip, I believed that I spoke French too. In-country, it was becoming alarmingly clear that this was an inaccurate characterization of the ugly things I did to this language.

It is hard to maintain perspective when you are not pantsless in public in a foreign country. I pinned up my jeans and clutched the slipping towel tighter and thought to myself: *The embarrassing thing about this situation is that I don’t speak French very well.* And that, at least, I could fix. On a rooftop in Morocco, with my pants flapping in the wind and the wind snaking up my towel, I vowed, like Scarlett with her turnips, never to be speechless again.

As soon as I returned home I enrolled in a ten-week French conversation course at the Alliance Française, also known as FiAF. FiAF is a New York institution for locals who, after a long weekend in Paris or a chance sighting of TV5 on their RCN menu, have decided to either learn a new language or refresh skills they believe they once possessed.

The online placement test granted me permission to sign up for CG250: Conversation and Grammar. Our teacher would later explain that the course number was

not an arbitrary designation, but mandated by a strict standardized system of French language instruction presumably overseen by the same shadowy language cabal that keeps words like “hamburger” and “le week-end” out of French textbooks. This should ensure that French pupils all over the world progress steadily through the language at a pre-determined pace, in lockstep with their global language cohort. In practice, the Anglophones of CG250 turned out to be as varied and inexplicable as verb tenses.

Week One

We gather in our classroom in a semi-circle of desks, notebooks ready, pens poised, all eager *étudiants* on the first day of *l'école*. Our teacher—*le prof*, he writes on the high-tech computerized whiteboard that our course fees installed—is a young French expat with a thin nose and a curly ponytail that extends below his shoulders. “*Vous me comprenez?*” he asks, and we all nod proudly—*oui*, we understand you. This, he explains, is because he is speaking more slowly and clearly than any French-speaking human we will ever encounter. Even this minor success, he seems to suggest in his ever-so-Gallic way, sprouts from the rotting seeds of our failure.

We go around the room to introduce ourselves, a cross-section of *new yorkais* brought together by our common desire to understand *Amelie* without subtitles. Pin-striped Henry is a real estate agent (*agent immobilier*) who is a French citizen (*citoyen français*) because of his ex-wife (*ex-femme*), who was French (*française*) and also a bitch (*sorcière*).

In the next chair, Harold from Hong Kong introduces himself in English. When the prof reminds him to speak *en français*, he nods, and proceeds with a string of incomprehensible syllables that could as easily be a secret language Harold speaks with a twin brother. The prof is unfazed. Harold is a bit of a celebrity at FiAF. For the last several sessions he has enrolled in the same course, attended exactly four classes, and then dropped out. His reasons for doing so are a mystery, though it is possible that he has explained them in this language he believes is French and no one understood him.

Next to him is Rhoda, who speaks well-constructed French in the thickest Jersey accent this side of the Seine. *Elle est juif*, Rhoda explains. *L'année dernière*, in fact, *elle*

a assisté un bar mitzvah en Paris. There is a branch of the Alliance Française in Montclair, New Jersey, closer to Rhoda's home, but she chooses to come here because she prefers *la sentiment de New York.* As do we all.

My favorite classmate purrs in a voice so low and leathery that I never catch her name. Sun-dappled, crepe-like cleavage blooms from her low-cut blouse. She wears a rhinestone necklace in the shape of a cougar clawing at her collarbone, a cougar-shaped rhinestone watch encircling her wrist, and a rhinestone-encrusted cougar-head ring, as though she has arrived straight from an Early Aughties Stereotype costume party. She records her notes with a pen topped by a pink marabou puff in a notebook whose sparkly pink vinyl cover bears a picture of a kitten and the words "Keep Your Paws Off."

We are instructed to pair off and interview a neighbor, then make a three-minute presentation of our new friend to the class. I am matched with Ivan, an 82-year-old Tehran-born retired engineer. I tell Ivan that I am a writer. I live in New York City with my husband, and decided to sign up for French classes after visiting Morocco earlier this year. I am Italian *a la coté de ma mère* and Irish *a la coté de mon père.* We cover every topic suggested on the white board.

At presentation time our classmates rattle on at length about their partners, sharing professions, marital status, and hobbies. I shakily articulate as much of Ivan's history that I could glean in ten minutes. When his turn arrives Ivan says, "*Voici Corinne.*" Then he folds his hands on the desk and is silent.

"Is there anything else we should know about Corinne?" the prof asks.

Ivan regards me for what feels like a very long time. "*Non,*" he says.

Week Two

With last week's pleasantries out of the way we begin our studies in earnest. We arrive in class bearing shiny new copies of *Exercices de Grammaire En Contexte*, a workbook that takes an immersion approach to French instruction. The exercises are in French, of course, and so are the paragraphs explaining that week's concepts. In a strange Catch-22, French CG250 seems to be a prerequisite for understanding the CG250 textbook. I don't mind. To me, the blank pages are full of possibilities. The humiliating

episode with the pants and the rain is forgotten. I am Cor-*een*, student of French, soon-to-be utterer of countless *bon mots*.

The textbook is populated with generically French-named characters who inhabit a fictional world free of cares, obligations and overly complicated verb tenses. With idle afternoons before and behind them, the inhabitants of Chapter 1 chatter endlessly about their schedules: what they did yesterday, what they plan to do this afternoon, what they will do in the future if certain conditions are met. There are also many discussions about preferences between people whose relationships are not clearly defined. I like to imagine that Therese and Frederic are evaluating one another's feelings on *thé* versus *café* and *la opera* versus *le foot* as a prelude to an arranged marriage, or maybe inclusion in some kind of swinger's club.

Occasionally the book uses "votre," making the student feel deliciously complicit in this decadent life of leisure and bourgeois comfort. In our first exercise, you must plan a week's vacation in Paris—a week, the book assures us, in which you will enjoy great *liberté* with your free time. The only thing between you and the perfect Parisian holiday is the successful use of articles. Shall you take *la promenade* or *une promenade*? Will you amuse yourself at *des Folies Bergeres* or *aux Folies Bergeres*? *This is easy!* I think as I *cercle* the correct answers in the textbook. *Only an idiot would take la promenade! This is going to be the best trip ever!*

Between exercises, the prof continues to extract personal information from us. (FiAF would be, or maybe is, a great cover for the French intelligence service.) Evelyn is a quiet woman who wears Birkenstocks with athletic socks. She gives the impression of someone who travels abroad with a Rick Steves guide and her spare underwear packed tightly in her shoes. She is married to a man named Ship. This delights our French teacher. "Sheep," he repeats, savoring the bland, inoffensive syllable on his tongue like a Necco wafer. In the ensuing weeks, Sheep's presence settles over the classroom like a cheerful Nordic ghost. "Comment ça va Sheep?" he will ask, abruptly cutting off Henry's laborious attempt to define "co-op board." Every factoid he gathers about Sheep enralls him, from Sheep's profession (*vendeur des ordinateurs*) to his home state (*Wees-con-sen*). Sheep seems to represent a precious native specimen of American, one less disappointing than the ones he finds himself paid to teach.

Ivan remains as inscrutable as Bartleby. When it is his turn to read from the book, he simply folds his hands and looks up in passive silence. “Ivan?” coaxes the prof. “*Numero huit, s’il vous plait?*” Nothing. I don’t understand the game, but this motherfucker is good.

Week Three

As we progress through the textbook, the characters morph from the cheerful moneyed expatriates of Chapter One to a more reflective brood. The dialogues now have the oblique quality of a coded conversation between spies.

It is windy this morning.

Yes. A southern wind, I believe.

The context of their discussions is curiously difficult to pin down. Yves and Hugo, who keep talking about the “excellent *herbe*” in the park—are they horticulturalists, appreciative tourists, or stoned? The woman who wants to know if the Japanese clients have arrived—is she an account manager, or a call girl? The characters are still wealthy and leisurely—rarely does anyone go to work in *Exercices en Contexte*—but their conversations now hold the darkly sinister tones of Bond villains or Algerian guerrillas.

That was a marvelous evening . . . tell me, you are very close to the president, isn’t that so?

Indeed. He knows he can count on me, and I can ask him anything.

Can you arrange a meeting for me?

Gladly.

There is a new member of our class, a portly, elderly gentlemen dressed in a burgundy velvet smoking jacket. He is 92 years old, old enough that Evelyn reflexively says “Good for you!” when he reveals his age. The gentleman hails from the New York Zsa Zsa Gabor missed when she went to live at Green Acres.

The prof is reviewing the words for articles of clothing. He flashes on the white board a photograph of a muscled black male model with his thumb hooked suggestively in the waistband of cotton briefs.

“*Qu’est-ce que c’est ça?*” he asks, tapping the man’s groin impishly with his thumb.

“*J’aime ça,*” Rhoda says, half to herself, as her eyes linger over the half-clad model. “*J’aime ça.*” The Cougar nods in agreement.

“*Savez-vous le mot culotte?*” asks the prof. “*Qu’est-ce que ca veut dire, culotte?*” What does the word *culotte* mean?

“Panties,” says the old man, loudly and abruptly. He says “panties” like he has been waiting all day to say it.

The prof chuckles kindly. “*No, c’est pas ‘panties,’*” he says. “Anyone else? *Qu’est-ce que ca veut dire, culotte?*”

“Panties,” repeats the old man, louder.

“It is the word for man’s shorts,” the teacher says, flipping ahead to a female lingerie model. “And what is this?” he asks, pointing as he taps the cups of her bra.

“PANTIES!” the old man shouts, unaware or unconcerned that the discussion has moved on. Everyone looks embarrassed, except for Ivan, who is staring dreamily at the white board. “PANTIES!”

The old man never comes to class again. I think he died.

Week Four

This week is French for characters in an Edward Albee play. An entire exercise is dedicated to expressing indifference. A chatty holidaymaker asks her husband what she should pack for their weekend getaway—which blouse, the green or the blue? Which dress? Which shoes?—and to every query he shouts in reply, “It doesn’t matter which!” I’m fascinated. This is precisely the degree of fluency I wish to achieve. It is one thing to know how to order a meal in a foreign language. It is another to be able to dismissively spurn your loved ones.

Indifference is a subject with which our class seems very well acquainted. Many of our participants display a *laissez-faire* approach to the absorption of the French language. Exercise books open to blank pages. Homework goes undone. Many of my classmates seem to be operating under the assumption that FiAF works like Fresh Direct. They placed an item in their virtual shopping carts—a rudimentary grasp of French, please—and, having surrendered their credit card numbers, should do no more than sit back and wait passively for the goods to be delivered. Henry, in particular, spends class with his arms folded aggressively across his chest, hands tucked under his armpits, scowling at the floor. He gives the impression that he is there under court order, perhaps at the behest of his bitch *ex-femme* and her team of *avocats*. There are frequent absences—the Cougar, I am particularly saddened to note, makes only sporadic appearances. It’s the fourth week, which means we’ll never see Harold again.

These attitudes are unfathomable to me, because I am a huge nerd with a sad little need to please. I feel *comme ça* about doing homework, but *j’adore* the smug satisfaction of having done my homework, especially if no one else has. And this language is so fun! At the grocery store and the gym I roll the syllables around on my tongue, silently narrating my day: *Regardez les belles tomates ici a la Gristedes! Cette Stairmaster, c’est trop vite—quelle dommage!* The workbook asks if I am ready for a hypothetical party I’m giving, with all the tasks and *pronoms personnels complements* required. My pen dances across the page with Mrs. Dalloway’s *élan*. The flowers—I ordered them! The drinks—I bought them!

This language, I think to myself with dangerous complacency as the subway rumbles home. *I made it my bitch.*

Week Five

The door opens and who should walk in but Harold—Harold from Hong Kong! “Harold!” the prof says, clearly surprised. He then stands up and applauds. Whatever psychological block Harold had has been lifted. He takes his seat with an unmistakable look of pride. If Harold can mumble his way unintelligibly through this course, by God, then so can we all. This feels good.

At the end of class I step out onto 59th Street and find Ivan standing alone by the front door. He looks lost.

“Hi, Ivan,” I say. “Are you waiting for your ride?”

He turns. “Huh?”

“I said, are you waiting for your ride?”

“You want to go inside?” he says, looking confused.

That’s when I understand that Ivan isn’t rude or spacey or engaging in some odd kind of civil disobedience. He’s deaf. A class based on listening comprehension seems a perverse form of self-improvement, but who am I to judge how one spends a retirement?

“Never mind. Have a good night, Ivan.”

Week Six

Cracks appear. This week’s *leçon* in relative pronouns introduces the term *dont*. *Dont*, the book explains, replaces a verb, adjective or noun preceded by the preposition *de*. It has no discernible English equivalent. I don’t understand in the slightest where it should go in a sentence. It just sticks out, this ugly verbal “doh!” in the middle of my elegant French phrases. It’s one of those words so simple and integral to the language that it’s noticed only when used incorrectly, marking the speaker as an idiot. Here is a handy mnemonic: I *don’t* understand *dont* at all.

To illustrate the phenomenon, our book offers the following example: Our second son, *DONT* I told you, met a young Japanese *DONT* he is very much enamored.

Apart from its distracting subject material (supposing the speaker is female, does she use the plural to refer to herself and her son’s father, or is she a monarch relating the marriage prospects of a lesser prince? Is it grammatically correct in French to use a person’s ethnicity as a noun, or is the speaker just racist?) this offers little in the way of explication. Rereading the example, it appears that *don’t* means “of whom,” which still doesn’t help in subsequent practice exercises. Given the choice between *qui*, *que* and *dont*, I will blow my chance to use *dont* every single time. My performance during the read-aloud section is only slightly better than poor deaf Ivan, who simply reads a random excerpt from the textbook when his name is called.

These setbacks, though, are not enough to dull my enthusiasm for French and the tantalizing *promesse* of the lifestyle I could live once I master it. Look here at this discussion between Christian and Charles-Henri. Christian has *une probleme* with which he hopes Charles-Henri can help. He has been invited to dine at a *chateau* with a bevy of *très, très chic* guests, and he's terrified! Which glass is he to use? Which fork? Which chair? (Christian is, evidently, the hapless straight man sassy Charles-Henri will make over in a pre-dinner montage.) I can follow the dialogue right up until Charles-Henri's parting words of encouragement: *Ne t'en fais pas, ça se passera bien!* I can't quite decide if this translates to "You'll do fine!" or the slightly more ominous "This too shall pass."

Week Seven

A little language instruction is a dangerous thing and I am armed with just enough. I walk the streets of New York silently translating the world around me into a Jean-Luc Godard film. I imagine stumbling upon some native French speakers—tourists, visiting *artistes*, a UN delegation, I'm not choosy—and striking up a spontaneous conversation. All over Manhattan, every day, Francophones are missing out on the exciting exchanges we could be having, such as:

Do you like the park?

Yes.

Me too! I also like the park.

And then it happens. I'm sitting at the Union Square Whole Foods, eating my plasticky California rolls with disposable chopsticks, when I catch a *n'est-ce pas?* from the table next to mine. A middle-aged couple is bent over a map of Manhattan. I look at their footwear. Comfortable. They are tourists. French-speaking tourists. This is my moment! They need my help! *Je vous en prie, voyageurs!*

Casually I rise from the table and gather my trash. There is no need to overthink this. I am nearly almost fluent. I know all the direction words. En route to the trashcans I sidle over, place a helpful hand on their table, open my mouth, and am overcome by a wave of panic that floods my brain and sweeps all my confidence and French vocabulary into far, unreachable corners.

“I helps you?” I say in French.

The couple looks startled, then uncomfortable. “Ah, non, merci,” the husband says mercifully, but before I can retreat the wife leans in and says—and in perfect English—“Excuse me? Can I help you?”

This is all so wrong. But it’s too late. Miserably I say, “I am a male French student. I see your card there and I aspire to practice. Excuse me. You are busy. I am sorry.” The stairs are so close by; I could leap right over the balcony and end all this in seconds.

But she won’t let me go. In slow, clearly articulated classroom French—I know because it’s the only kind I understand—she says, “That is wonderful! I am an English teacher. We would be happy to practice with you.” And then this exceptionally kind and patient woman pulls out the chair next to her. I would rather she pick up her plastic fork and jam it into my eye.

I sit. Her husband, clearly resigned to his wife’s generosity, stifles a sigh and smiles politely. I deserve this. I force a non-mortified expression and ask whatever questions my shame and limited vocabulary allow. Where in France do they live? Paris. Have they ever been to New York before? They have. That’s great. Do they like it? Of course they do. In what other city in the world can you be interrupted during lunch by a half-wit eager to strangle your native tongue?

The husband is checking his watch. The fold-out map lies between us on the table. I want to ask if they need any directions, to be able to offer them something of value to compensate for ruining their lunch. It’s then I realize that although I know how to give directions—*tournez à droite, tournez à gauche* and all that—I don’t actually know how to say, “Do you need directions?” Which means I should never have approached this table in the first place.

Like a bad dream, I can’t remember how the conversation ends. I am at the table and then I am outside on 14th Street, surrounded by students in skinny jeans and vendors hawking bootleg DVDs and a man wearing a hula skirt who is arguing with a cop. I feel more shame than all of them combined.

I am quiet in class this week. I have spoken enough French.

On the subway home that night, I am puzzling over indefinite pronouns under the 6 train's fluorescent lights when I overhear the throaty catch of West African-inflected French *ricochet* (richochet) between two men seated to my right. I realize that I am much better asking for help than offering it.

Pardon, monsieur, I say. Je suis une étudiante. Voici mes devoirs. Aidez-moi? S'il vous plait?

In a short lesson that surpasses my workbook in clarity, my seatmate graciously explains the difference between *tout*, which refers to total quantity, and *quelques-uns*, which covers indefinite quantities. He points out an error so I can correct it; I thank him profusely. It's the type of interaction that should happen more often in a multicultural city of 8 million people but doesn't, because we are too busy telling each other to fuck off. I am so grateful. And, for once, I understand.

Week Eight

Occasionally I overhear snatches of French dialogue on the bus or subway platform and eavesdrop half-heartedly, identifying a stray word here and there, but my confidence is gone. I'm intimidated by the long stretches of Gallic gibberish I don't comprehend and besieged with doubt over the few phrases I do. Are they talking about their hair (*cheveux*) or their horses (*chevaux*)? Is she saying that she laughed until she cried (*pleut de rire*) or that she has pleurisy (*pleuresie*)? My high school French teacher warned us of the "false friend," or *faux ami*—a French word that resembles one English word but has the meaning of another. A *couffin*, for example, is a baby bassinet, not a dead man's casket. Ask someone to pass *les preservatifs* and you are asking not for a jar of marmalade but for condoms. The whole language feels that way now, like a fake friend who sounds sympathetic over croissants and café au lait but is really *pleuvant de rire* behind your back.

The malaise extends to class, where we review the conditional and past tenses. The whole lesson is tinged with nostalgia. When I was a child, we vacationed at the seashore. She used to be thin, but then she gained weight. I used to spend Wednesday nights enjoying myself, but now I spend them in a badly-lit room talking like a child. The

prof darkens the room and we watch a short video about tennis. The film cuts to an interview between Rafael Nadal and a French reporter.

“This probably is the day most emotionally for my *carrera*,” he says, and the prof notes snidely that he doesn’t speak French very well. I feel a surge of protective anger on Nadal’s behalf. Leave him alone! He was the number one singles player in the world— isn’t that enough for you? And what is the point of making us listen to people who speak the language as badly as we do? I suspect, not for the first time, that our prof is less than completely invested in our success. The only people who don’t seem irritated are Ivan and the Cougar, who giggles behind the marabou fluff of her pen every time the prof corrects her. If she is frustrated, it is in an entirely different way.

We segue from Nadal into a more general discussion of our feelings on sports. This is the one topic that excites Robert as much as his alimony payments. “*Comment dit ‘exciting’?*” he asks.

I know this one. At least, I think I do. Exciting is *excitée*. That is the word that leapt into my brain in Morocco the first time I grasped for words to convey my enthusiasm for something. (Probably a donkey. I was really into donkeys.) No one corrected me, so I assumed I had chosen the right word—or at least one close enough to convey my meaning. I am about to raise my hand and offer the word but the prof beats me to it.

“Exciting is *passionnant*,” he says, writing the word on the smart board. Then he writes my word, *excitée*, alongside it, and laughs in a way that is not friendly at all.

Excitée, he explains, means sexually aroused. Americans are particularly vulnerable to this mistake, given the similarity of the words and the low threshold we have for enthusiasm. This is yet another example of the *faux ami*, which in this case proves to be very faux indeed.

I sit in silence, thinking back on all the times I employed this word. “I am so sexually aroused!” I said to the solemn-faced, bearded patriarch of the family downstairs when describing an upcoming day trip to Meknes. “It is a sexually arousing place!” I said to the little girl who told me she wanted to visit New York one day.

The Cougar makes a note in her pink sparkle notebook. The pouf quivers. I hate this stupid language.

Week Nine

French and I now feel like two ex-lovers forced to share an apartment. Instead of trying to accommodate its quirks and understand its habits, I just step around it on my way out the door. I struggle with the pronouns *en*, which denotes quantity, and *y*, which I don't really understand at all. I will simply live without them. I don't need to say the word "some," ever. Would you like some coffee? Yes. Pour six ounces into my cup, please. I will never speak like a native. I will never be invited to Cannes. FiAF: where *les rêves* go to *meurent*.

In class we watch a short news clip on Belgium's ban on burqas and pair off for discussion. I get Evelyn, lover of Sheep and comfortable sandals.

"You, what do you think of the burqa?" I ask *en français*. "You support it ok, or you thinks it a problem?"

"Whatever," Evelyn says in English. "I don't like this class. This book is terrible! It makes no sense. The one we used last spring was better. I don't know why they don't use that one."

"You've taken this class before?" I ask, hoping I don't sound too surprised.

She counts off on her fingers. "Three, four . . . seven. Yeah. This is my seventh time."

Seven times! Evelyn has been enrolled in CG250 for the better part of four years. In class she struggles with basic vocabulary and blinks at the prof when asked a question. She never does the homework, is bored by the videos and considers our lame intra-class discussions a waste of time. Yet she continues to sign up for classes that have cost her multiple thousands of dollars at this point. It's possible that her commitment has less to do with wanting to speak French on her next trip to Paris and more about wanting at least one night away from Sheep.

Solace comes from an unlikely source. Later that night, while doing my final set of homework exercises, I chance upon a conversation in the book between Milena and Julie, who has just returned from an extended trip to London. At first, Julie confides to Milena, she felt like she was on another planet. The city seemed huge. She didn't know

anyone. And the language—well, let’s just say that the English they spoke was nothing like the one she learned in school.

What did you do, Julie? I wonder.

Comment est-ce que tu as fait alors? Milena asks.

She followed her professor’s advice and immersed herself in the language. She found a local pub and sat there every night absorbing the conversations around her. She also made the acquaintance of a young man named Peter, of whom she speaks winkingly. Once she did that, English felt like the easiest language in the world. And the trip became *super génial*.

As I conjugate their verbs I feel a wave of gratitude for Julie and Milena, and a bit of compassion for myself. By no measure do I speak this language fluently, or even well. But is it possible that my expectations for a ten-week course were just a tad high? It’s not like I haven’t learned anything. My vocabulary has expanded and my listening comprehension improved. I can use multiple tenses in a single sentence. If nothing else, I now know the word for boxer shorts.

Language can’t grow in isolated 100-minute blocks once a week. It needs the oxygen of daily conversations and spontaneous encounters with speakers who talk fast and sloppy, the way normal people do. It needs to sprawl everywhere, onto the posters at the bus stops and the radio playing in stores and in shouted asides overheard on the street. One day, like Julie in London, I will once again be in a place where I will have no choice but to speak French, poorly and awkwardly, and make do the best I can. And it will get better. It may even become super genial.

Week Ten, and Beyond

At the final session of the term FiAF throws a small party for its students with plastic cups of wine and die-sized cheese cubes. The prof leads us in to the reception room, ushers the last person through the door, then turns and bolts down the stairs. *Au revoir, le professeur*. May you one day earn enough from this job so that you never have to speak to another American again. Not long after, I spear a few cheese cubes on a toothpick and slip out the door. Evelyn and the Cougar are talking to each other. Ivan

can't hear me, I can't understand Harold, and Henry hates women. Better to go out on a high note.

When the email arrives about registering for the next session, I delete it. I may return to FiAF one day, but for now I am going to let whatever I've just learned marinate for a while.

A few months later, I'm at my job at a non-profit, coordinating the French translation of the organization's annual report. I am the project manager, not the translator (obviously); my job is simply to mediate the increasingly hostile emails between the office chief in Paris and the designer in Zurich, neither of whom cares about the other's deadlines. The translated French text has just come back from Paris. I am about to forward it on to the designer when a paragraph catches my eye.

“Suite a notre rapport, nous avons”

And then nothing. After our report, we did . . . what? I read it a second time, then a third and fourth. Half a sentence seems missing. Is it? I'm sure I'm wrong. I have to be wrong. But what if I'm not? I send a tentative email to the director, confessing that my French is poor, and I am mistaken, but it looks, to this untrained eye anyway, like there might be an incomplete sentence on page 4, and we should fix it. Maybe?

Fifteen minutes later, the harried office director fires back:

“yes you are right”

I cannot believe this is happening. As I paste the prodigal text back into the report and hit “send,” I feel a physical flutter of happiness in my belly. I didn't think this day would ever come, but here we are: My limited knowledge of French has a practical application in the real world. This is how it starts. One day you casually catch a typo at work; the next, you're chatting with a chateau owner in Loire about this year's *pinot gris*.

They say the pain of childbirth is designed to fade in memory to ensure that women will bear more offspring and the species will survive. Embarrassment is the same way. My clumsy, awkward, endearing affair with French will go on. My dreams are resilient. Just thinking about it is enough to get me *excitée*, all over again.