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 débutant." 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 concerning 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 meimslixp or lqzdmurct by this time, then you should not be in this room. Has everyone apzkiubfxowx? 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 ah?”

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 it. 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 rabbit 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 women 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 scurried 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. “Turns,” our mother said. “I love Tums.”

The teacherKill 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 *palićmërësis*?" she asked. "Even a *fiuscrzsa 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 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 *kšùtnufm*, 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 vkkdyo more kdeynfull.”

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

"And 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 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 monotonous chant 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 be 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
and recently recovered alcoholics. Fabienne, Carmen, and Eric spent a great deal of time in outdoor restaurants, discussing their love of life and enjoying colas served without ice. Passing acquaintances were introduced at regular intervals, and it was often noted that the sky was blue.

Taken one by one, the assorted nouns and verbs were within my grasp, but due to drug use and a close working relationship with chemical solvents, it was all I could do to recite my zip code, let alone an entire conversation devoted to the pleasures of direct sunlight. Hoping it might help with my memorization assignments, I broke down and bought a Walkman — which surprised me. I'd always ranked them between boa constrictors and Planet Hollywood T-shirts in terms of vulgar accessories, but once I stuck the headphones in my ears, I found I kind of liked it. The good news is that, as with a boa constrictor or a Planet Hollywood T-shirt, normal people tend to keep their distance when you're wearing a Walkman. The outside world suddenly becomes as private as you want it to be. It's like being deaf but with none of the disadvantages.

Left alone and forced to guess what everyone was screaming about, I found that walking through New York became a real pleasure. Crossing Fourteenth Street, an unmedicated psychotic would brandish a toilet brush, his mouth moving wordlessly as, in my head, the young people of France requested a table with a view of the fountain. The tape made me eager for our move to Paris, where, if nothing else, I'd be able to rattle from memory such phrases as "Let me give you my telephone number" and "I too love the sandwich."

As it turns out, I have not had occasion to use either of these sentences. Though I could invite someone to call me, the only phone number I know by heart is Eric's, the young man on my French tape. My brain is big enough to hold only one ten-digit number, and since his was there first, I have no idea how anyone might go about phoning me. I guess I could stick with the line about the sandwich, but it hardly qualifies as newsworthy. Part of the problem is that I have no one to talk to except for the members of my current French class, who mean well but exhaust me with their enthusiasm. As young and optimistic as the characters on my cassette tape, they'll occasionally invite me to join them for an after-school get-together at a nearby café. I tried it a few times but, surrounded by their fresh and smiling faces, I couldn't help but feel I'd been wrongly cast in an international Pepsi commercial. I'm just too old and worn-out to share their excitement over such innocent pleasures as a boat ride down the Seine or a potluck picnic at the base of the Eiffel Tower. It would have been good for me to get out, but when the time came, I just couldn't bring myself to attend. Neither can I manage to talk with the many strangers who automatically seek me out whenever they need a cigarette or directions to the nearest Métro station. My present French class involves no dialogue memorization, but still I find myself wearing the Walkman, mainly as a form of protection.
ME TALK PRETTY ONE DAY

No great collector of music, I started off my life in Paris by listening to American books on tape. I'd never been a big fan of the medium but welcomed them as an opportunity to bone up on my English. Often these were books I would never have sat down and read. Still, though, even when they were dull I enjoyed the disconcerting combination of French life and English narration. Here was Paris, wrongly dubbed for my listening pleasure. The grand department store felt significantly less intimidating when listening to Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business, a memoir in which the busy author describes a childhood spent picking ticks out of her grandmother’s scalp. Sitting by the playground in the Luxembourg Gardens, I listened to Lolita, abridged with James Mason and unabridged with Jeremy Irons. There were, I noticed, half a dozen other pasty, middle-aged men who liked to gather around the monkey bars, and together we formed a small but decidedly creepy community.

Merle Haggard’s My House of Memories, the diaries of Alan Bennett, Treasure Island: If a person who constantly reads is labeled a bookworm, then I was quickly becoming what might be called a tapeworm. The trouble was that I’d moved to Paris completely unprepared for my new pastime. The few tapes I owned had all been given to me at one point or another and thrown into my suitcase at the last minute. There are only so many times a grown man can listen to The Wind in the Willows, so I was eventually forced to consider the many French tapes given as subtle hints by our neighbors back in Normandy.

The Tapeworm Is In

I tried listening to The Misanthrope and Fontaine’s Fables, but they were just too dense for me. I’m much too lazy to make that sort of effort. Besides, if I wanted to hear people speaking wall-to-wall French, all I had to do was remove my headphones and participate in what is known as “real life,” a concept as uninviting as a shampoo cocktail.

Desperate for material, I was on the verge of buying a series of Learn to Speak English tapes when my sister Amy sent a package containing several cans of clams, a sack of grits, an audio walking tour of Paris, and my very own copy of Pocket Medical French, a palm-size phrase book and corresponding cassette designed for doctors and nurses unfamiliar with the language. The walking tour guides one through the city’s various landmarks, reciting bits of information the listener might find enlightening. I learned, for example, that in the late 1900s my little neighborhood square was a popular spot for burning people alive. Now lined with a row of small shops, the tradition continues, though in a figurative rather than literal sense.

I followed my walking tour to Notre Dame, where, bored with a lecture on the history of the flying buttress, I switched tapes and came to see Paris through the jaundiced eyes of the pocket medical guide. Spoken in English and then repeated, slowly and without emotion, in French, the phrases are short enough that I was quickly able to learn such sparkling conversational icebreakers as “Remove your dentures and all of your jewelry” and “You now need to deliver the afterbirth.” Though I have yet to use any of my new commands and questions, I find that, in learning them, I am finally able to imagine
myself Walkman-free and plunging headfirst into an active and rewarding social life. That’s me at the glittering party, refilling my champagne glass and turning to ask my host if he’s noticed any unusual discharge. “We need to start an IV,” I’ll say to the countess while boarding her yacht. “But first could I trouble you for a stool sample?”

With practice I will eventually realize my goal; in the meantime, come to Paris and you will find me, headphones plugged tight in my external audio meatus, walking the quays and whispering, “Has anything else been inserted into your anus? Has anything else been inserted into your anus?”

Make That a Double

There are, I have noticed, two basic types of French spoken by Americans vacationing in Paris: the Hard Kind and the Easy Kind. The Hard Kind involves the conjugation of wily verbs and the science of placing them alongside various other words in order to form such sentences as “I go him say good afternoon” and “No, not to him I no go it him say now.”

The second, less complicated form of French amounts to screaming English at the top of your lungs, much the same way you’d shout at a deaf person or the dog you thought you could train to stay off the sofa. Doubt and hesitation are completely unnecessary, as Easy French is rooted in the premise that, if properly packed, the rest of the world could fit within the confines of Reno, Nevada. The speaker carries no pocket dictionary and never suffers the humiliation that
inevitably comes with pointing to the menu and ordering the
day of the week. With Easy French, eating out involves a sim-
ple “BRING ME A STEAK.”

Having undertaken the study of Hard French, I’ll overhear
such requests and glare across the room, thinking, “That’s Mis-
ter Steak to you, buddy.” Of all the stumbling blocks inherent
in learning this language, the greatest for me is the principle
that each noun has a corresponding sex that affects both its ar-
ticles and its adjectives. Because it is a female and lays eggs, a
chicken is masculine. Vagina is masculine as well, while the
word masculinity is feminine. Forced by the grammar to take a
stand one way or the other, hermaphrodite is male and inde-
centiveness female.

I spent months searching for some secret code before I
realized that common sense has nothing to do with it. Hyste-
rria, psychosis, torture, depression: I was told that if something is
unpleasant, it’s probably feminine. This encouraged me, but
the theory was blown by such masculine nouns as murder,
toothache, and Rollerblade. I have no problem learning the
words themselves, it’s the sexes that trip me up and refuse to
stick.

What’s the trick to remembering that a sandwich is mas-
culine? What qualities does it share with anyone in posses-
sion of a penis? I’ll tell myself that a sandwich is masculine
because if left alone for a week or two, it will eventually grow
a beard. This works until it’s time to order and I decide that
because it sometimes loses its makeup, a sandwich is un-
doubtedly feminine.

I just can’t manage to keep my stories straight. Hoping I
might learn through repetition, I tried using gender in my
everyday English. “Hi, guys,” I’d say, opening a new box of
paper clips, or “Hey, Hugh, have you seen my belt? I can’t find
her anywhere.” I invented personalities for the objects on my
dresser and set them up on blind dates. When things didn’t
work out with my wallet, my watch drove a wedge between
my hairbrush and my lighter. The scenarios reminded me of
my youth, when my sisters and I would enact epic dramas
with our food. Ketchup-wigged french fries would march
across our plates, engaging in brief affairs or heated disputes
over carrot coins while burly chicken legs guarded the
perimeter, ready to jump in should things get out of hand.
Sexes were assigned at our discretion and were subject to
change from one night to the next — unlike here, where the
corncob and the string bean remain locked in their rigid mas-
culine roles. Say what you like about southern social struc-
ture, but at least in North Carolina a hot dog is free to swing
both ways.

Nothing in France is free from sexual assignment. I was
leafing through the dictionary, trying to complete a home-
work assignment, when I noticed the French had prescribed
genders for the various land masses and natural wonders we
Americans had always thought of as sexless, Niagara Falls is
feminine and, against all reason, the Grand Canyon is mas-
culine. Georgia and Florida are female, but Montana and Utah
are male. New England is a she, while the vast area we call
the Midwest is just one big guy. I wonder whose job it was to
assign these sexes in the first place. Did he do his work right there in the sanitarium, or did they rent him a little office where he could get away from all the noise?

There are times when you can swallow the article and others when it must be clearly pronounced, as the word has two different meanings, one masculine and the other feminine. It should be fairly obvious that I cooked an omelette in a frying pan rather than in a wood stove, but it bothers me to make the same mistakes over and over again. I wind up exhausting the listener before I even get to the verb.

My confidence hit a new low when my friend Adeline told me that French children often make mistakes, but never with the sex of their nouns. “It’s just something we grow up with,” she said. “We hear the gender once, and then think of it as part of the word. There’s nothing to it.”

It’s a pretty grim world when I can’t even feel superior to a toddler. Tired of embarrassing myself in front of two-year-olds, I’ve started referring to everything in the plural, which can get expensive but has solved a lot of my problems. In saying a melon, you need to use the masculine article. In saying the melons, you use the plural article, which does not reflect gender and is the same for both the masculine and the feminine. Ask for two or ten or three hundred melons, and the number lets you off the hook by replacing the article altogether. A masculine kilo of feminine tomatoes presents a sexual problem easily solved by asking for two kilos of tomatoes. I’ve started using the plural while shopping, and Hugh has started using it in our cramped kitchen, where he stands huddled in the corner, shouting, “What do we need with four pounds of tomatoes?”

I answer that I’m sure we can use them for something. The only hard part is finding someplace to put them. They won’t fit in the refrigerator, as I filled the last remaining shelf with the two chickens I bought from the butcher the night before, forgetting that we were still working our way through a pair of pork roasts the size of Duraflame logs. “We could put them next to the radios,” I say, “or grind them for sauce in one of the blenders. Don’t get so mad. Having four pounds of tomatoes is better than having no tomatoes at all, isn’t it?”

Hugh tells me that the market is off-limits until my French improves. He’s pretty steamed, but I think he’ll get over it when he sees the CD players I got him for his birthday.
shit? Nobody would do that but a crazy person.” He called to his four employees. “Get over here and listen to what he’s saying, the crazy nut.”

In trying to communicate why an Academy Award-winning actress might walk down the beach carrying a plastic bag full of dog feces, I got the sort of lump in my throat that other people might get while singing their national anthem. It was the pride one can feel only when, far from home and surrounded by a captive audience, you are called upon to explain what is undoubtedly the single greatest thing about your country.

“Well,” I said, “it goes like this...”

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Picka Pocketoni

**It was July**, and Hugh and I were taking the Paris Métro from our neighborhood to a store where we hoped to buy a good deal of burlap. The store was located on the other side of town, and the trip involved taking one train and then switching to another. During the summer months a great number of American vacationers can be found riding the Métro, and their voices tend to carry. It’s something I hadn’t noticed until leaving home, but we are a loud people. The trumpeting elephants of the human race. Questions, observations, the locations of blisters and rashes — everything is delivered as though it were an announcement.

On the first of our two trains I listened to a quartet of college-age Texans who sat beneath a sign instructing passengers to surrender their folding seats and stand should the
foyer of the train become too crowded. The foyer of the train quickly became too crowded, and while the others stood to make more room, the young Texans remained seated and raised their voices in order to continue their debate, the topic being “Which is a better city, Houston or Paris?” It was a hot afternoon, and the subject of air-conditioning came into play. Houston had it, Paris did not. Houston also had ice cubes, tacos, plenty of free parking, and something called a Sonic Burger. Things were not looking good for Paris, which lost valuable points every time the train stopped to accept more passengers. The crowds packed in, surrounding the seated Texans and reducing them to four disembodied voices. From the far corner of the car, one of them shouted that they were tired and dirty and ready to catch the next plane home. The voice was weary and hopeless, and I identified completely. It was the same way I’d felt on my last visit to Houston.

Hugh and I disembarked to the strains of “Texas, Our Texas” and boarded our second train, where an American couple in their late forties stood hugging the floor-to-ceiling support pole. There’s no sign saying so, but such poles are not considered private. They’re put there for everyone’s use. You don’t treat it like a fireman’s pole; rather, you grasp it with one hand and stand back at a respectable distance. It’s not all that difficult to figure out, even if you come from a town without any public transportation.

The train left the station, and needing something to hold on to, I wedged my hand between the American couple and grabbed the pole at waist level. The man turned to the woman, saying, “Peeeeeew, can you smell that? That is pure French, baby.” He removed one of his hands from the pole and waved it back and forth in front of his face. “Yes indeed,” he said. “This little froggy is ripe.”

It took a moment to realize he was talking about me.

The woman wrinkled her nose. “Golly Pete!” she said, “Do they all smell this bad?”

“It’s pretty typical,” the man said, “I’m willing to bet that our little friend here hasn’t had a bath in a good two weeks. I mean, Jesus Christ, someone should hang a deodorizer around this guy’s neck.”

The woman laughed, saying, “You crack me up, Martin. I swear you do.”

It’s a common mistake for vacationing Americans to assume that everyone around them is French and therefore speaks no English whatsoever. These two didn’t seem like exceptionally mean people. Back home they probably would have had the decency to whisper, but here they felt free to say whatever they wanted, face-to-face and in a normal tone of voice. It was the same way someone might talk in front of a building or a painting they found particularly unpleasant. An experienced traveler could have told by looking at my shoes that I wasn’t French. And even if I were French, it’s not as if English is some mysterious tribal dialect spoken only by anthropologists and a small population of cannibals. They happen to teach English in schools all over the world. There are
ME TALK PRETTY ONE DAY

no eligibility requirements. Anyone can learn it. Even people who reportedly smell bad despite the fact that they’ve just taken a bath and are wearing clean clothes.

Because they had used the tiresome word froggy and complained about my odor, I was now licensed to hate this couple as much as I wanted. This made me happy, as I’d wanted to hate them from the moment I’d entered the subway car and seen them hugging the pole. Unleashed by their insults, I was now free to criticize Martin’s clothing: the pleated denim shorts, the baseball cap, the T-shirt advertising a San Diego pizza restaurant. Sunglasses hung from his neck on a fluorescent cable, and the couple’s bright new his-and-her sneakers suggested that they might be headed somewhere dressy for dinner. Comfort has its place, but it seems rude to visit another country dressed as if you’ve come to mow its lawns.

The man named Martin was in the process of showing the woman what he referred to as “my Paris.” He looked at the subway map and announced that at some point during their stay, he’d maybe take her to the Louvre, which he pronounced as having two distinct syllables. Loo-rah. I’m hardly qualified to belittle anyone else’s pronunciation, but he was setting himself up by acting like such an expert. “Yeah,” he said, letting out a breath, “I thought we might head over there some day this week and do some nosing around. It’s not for everyone, but something tells me you might like it.”

People are often frightened of Parisians, but an American in Paris will find no harsher critic than another American. France isn’t even my country, but there I was, deciding that these people needed to be sent back home, preferably in chains. In disliking them, I was forced to recognize my own pretension, and that made me hate them even more. The train took a curve, and when I moved my hand farther up the pole, the man turned to the woman, saying, “Carol — hey, Carol, watch out. That guy’s going after your wallet.”

“What?”

“Your wallet,” Martin said. “That joker’s trying to steal your wallet. Move your pocketbook to the front where he can’t get at it.”

She froze, and he repeated himself, barking, “The front. Move your pocketbook around to the front. Do it now. The guy’s a pickpocket.”

The woman named Carol grabbed for the strap on her shoulder and moved her pocketbook so that it now rested on her stomach. “Wow,” she said. “I sure didn’t see that coming.”

“Well, you’ve never been to Paris before, but let that be a lesson to you.” Martin glared at me, his eyes narrowed to slits. “This city is full of stinkpots like our little friend here. Let your guard down, and they’ll take you for everything you’ve got.”

Now I was a stinkpot and a thief. It occurred to me to say something, but I thought it might be better to wait and see what he came up with next. Another few minutes, and he might have decided I was a crack dealer or a white slaver. Besides, if I said something at this point, he probably would have apologized, and I wasn’t interested in that. His embarrassment would have pleased me, but once he recovered,
there would be that awkward period that sometimes culminates in a handshake. I didn’t want to touch these people’s hands or see things from their point of view, I just wanted to continue hating them. So I kept my mouth shut and stared off into space.

The train stopped at the next station. Passengers got off, and Carol and Martin moved to occupy two folding seats located beside the door. I thought they might ease on to another topic, but Martin was on a roll now, and there was no stopping him. "It was some shithead like him that stole my wallet on my last trip to Paris," he said, nodding his head in my direction. "He got me on the subway — came up from behind, and I never felt a thing. Cash, credit cards, driver’s license: poof — all of it gone, just like that."

I pictured a scoreboard reading MARTY o STINKPOTS 1, and clenched my fist in support of the home team.

"What you’ve got to understand is that these creeps are practiced professionals," he said. "I mean, they’ve really got it down to an art, if you can call that an art form."

"I wouldn’t call it an art form," Carol said. 'Art is beautiful, but taking people’s wallets... that stinks, in my opinion."

"You’ve got that right," Martin said. "The thing is that these jokers usually work in pairs." He squinted toward the opposite end of the train. "Odds are that he’s probably got a partner somewhere on this subway car."

"You think so?"

"I know so," he said. "They usually time it so that one of

them clips your wallet just as the train pulls into the station. The other guy’s job is to run interference and trip you up once you catch wind of what’s going on. Then the train stops, the doors open, and they disappear into the crowd. If Stinky there had gotten his way, he’d probably be halfway to Timbuktu by now. I mean, make no mistake, these guys are fast."

I’m not the sort of person normally mistaken for being fast and well-coordinated, and because of this, I found Martin’s assumption to be oddly flattering. Stealing wallets was nothing to be proud of, but I like being thought of as cunning and professional. I’d been up until 4 A.M. the night before, reading a book about recluse spiders, but to him the circles beneath my eyes likely reflected a long evening spent snatching flies out of the air, or whatever it is that pickpockets do for practice.

"The meatball," he said. "Look at him, just standing there waiting for his next victim. If I had my way, he’d be picking pockets with his teeth. An eye for an eye, that’s what I say. Someone ought to chop the guy’s hands off and feed them to the dogs."

Oh, I thought, but first you’ll have to catch me.

"It just gets my goat," he said, "I mean, where’s a polizioni when you need one?"

Polizioni? Where did he think he was? I tried to imagine Martin’s conversation with a French policeman and pictured him waving his arms, shouting, "That man tried to picka my frienda’s pocketoni!" I wanted very much to hear such a con-
versation and decided I would take the wallet from Hugh’s back pocket as we left the train. Martin would watch me steal from a supposed stranger and most likely would intercede. He’d put me in a headlock or yell for help, and when a crowd gathered, I’d say, “What’s the problem? Is it against the law to borrow money from my boyfriend?” If the police came, Hugh would explain the situation in his perfect French while I’d toss in a few of my most polished phrases. “That guy’s crazy,” I’d say, pointing at Martin. “I think he’s drunk. Look at how his face is swollen.” I was practicing these lines to myself when Hugh came up from behind and tapped me on the shoulder, signaling that the next stop was ours.

“There you go,” Martin said. “That’s him, that’s the partner. Didn’t I tell you he was around here somewhere? They always work in pairs. It’s the oldest trick in the book.”

Hugh had been reading the paper and had no idea what had been going on. It was too late now to pretend to pick his pocket, and I was stuck without a decent backup plan. As we pulled into the station, I recalled an afternoon ten years earlier. I’d been riding the Chicago el with my sister Amy, who was getting off three or four stops ahead of me. The doors opened, and as she stepped out of the crowded car, she turned around to yell, “So long, David. Good luck beating that rape charge.” Everyone onboard had turned to stare at me. Some seemed curious, some seemed frightened, but the overwhelming majority appeared to hate me with a passion I had never before encountered. “That’s my sister,” I’d said. “She likes to joke around.” I laughed and smiled, but it did no good. Every gesture made me appear more guilty, and I wound up getting off at the next stop rather than continue riding alongside people who thought of me as a rapist. I wanted to say something that good to Martin, but I can’t think as fast as Amy. In the end this man would go home warning his friends to watch out for pickpockets in Paris. He’d be the same old Martin, but at least for the next few seconds, I still had the opportunity to be somebody different, somebody quick and dangerous.

The dangerous me noticed how Martin tightened his fists when the train pulled to a stop. Carol held her pocketbook close against her chest and sucked in her breath as Hugh and I stepped out of the car, no longer finicky little boyfriends on their overseas experiment, but rogues, accomplices, halfway to Timbuktu.