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Les Mots Justes and Other Things Impossible to Find

Katherine Tasseff
kit4@zips.uakron.edu

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Les Mots Justes and Other Things Impossible to Find

by Katherine Tasseff

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1. Kate Est Là

I'd never been a nanny before. I didn't know what I was getting into.

To be fair, I'd never been much of anything yet. Close friends around me were leaving town and taking on big, important titles—student, employee, wife, mother—but my life was the blankest of blank slates, the whitest of white bread. Had I had a resumé at the time, it would have read, “Kate Tasseff, age 22. Past Experience: Has been bored and stagnating in a post-high-school limbo for three and a half years. Still lives at home with her parents and five siblings. Skills include daydreaming, being anxious, and going nowhere fast.”

Fortunately, I had no such resumé. Even better, the woman trying to hire me didn't seem to require one. Her name was Cécile: she was a very pregnant, very French doctor who attended my church in Akron, Ohio with her American husband, Seth. I didn't know either of them personally, but they intrigued me: both tall, thin, flawlessly dressed, only speaking whispered French with each other. I used to watch them from afar, hoping they were actually international spies walking among us. But it turns out they were just young, first-time parents under a maternity leave time crunch, and they were looking for someone to watch their soon-to-be born son. And by sole virtue of the fact that my mom mentioned to them that her oldest daughter had absolutely nothing but time on her hands and was great with kids, I was the someone they were looking for.

At first blush, I felt woefully unprepared. Sure, I had done a lot of freelance babysitting over the years, but this was a full-time gig. Plus, my new bosses weren't your average John and Jane Q. American. I didn't know what they'd expect from me, a shy ex-homeschooler who'd never set a toe outside her nation's borders and whose knowledge of French culture was limited to *The Pink Panther* and other baguette-toting, cigarette-fuming stereotypes. Should I brush up on my "Frère Jacques"? Sport a French maid outfit? More importantly, would I have to *speak* French?

Quite the opposite, they said. They wanted their son to be raised bilingual, and since they, as a family unit, spoke French, it was their hope that I would be his, well, English connection. Get paid to watch a baby and talk to him?

All right. I'll give nannying a shot.

Jeremy, my new job, was born on October 8, 2013, and I started watching him the day after Christmas. He was not a cute baby: his scrawny head and buggy eyes gave him an air more Martian than human, but when I held him up to show him the Christmas lights on his living room tree, and he snuggled into my neck with a happy hum, I guessed there could be worse job perks.

If you've ever spent much time with an infant, you know their entertainment value isn't exactly on par with Cirque du Soleil. Besides the classic cycle of feeding, changing, and napping, there wasn't much to do during my 40 hours alone with this strange baby each week. And what about this English connection thing? I'm not by any means a talkative person, but when your conversation partner is a two-month-old, it's not exactly a fair contest anyway. After a

few weeks of talking *at* Jeremy (aka talking to myself), I was starting to feel my youthful sanity wobble. There had to be a better way.

Books! Of course. Nothing had marked my own childhood stronger than reading stories. So one week, I brought a stack of favorite tomes from my family's bookshelf, and I began to read them aloud to Jeremy as he lay on his back, tangling his fingers in the crinkly, wildly-colored mobile that hung over his playpen: *Hop on Pop*, *Brown Bear Brown Bear*, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. He had a book series on his shelf called BabyLit, where characters from classics like *Sense & Sensibility* and *A Christmas Carol* taught basic concepts like opposites, colors, and counting to ten, and as he slumped next to me on the couch in his 101 Dalmatians footie pajamas, I read them, too. I had no idea if he was getting a single thing out of it, but it was a cozy way to spend long winter afternoons.

I sang to him, too. When I put him down for a nap, I always began with "Stay Awake" and "Feed the Birds" from *Mary Poppins* (two very sensible selections), and followed up with "And I Love Her" by The Beatles and "For Baby (For Bobbie)" by Peter, Paul & Mary (these ones are harder to explain; I was going through a 60's/70's phase and they sounded kinda lullaby-ish). But singing was something I did unconsciously in everyday life, so I would often break into song while warming Jeremy's milk or mixing his baby cereal.

"First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is," I'd serenade him as I coaxed a gluey white spoonful into his mouth. His saucer-like brown eyes would stare back, blankly but amiably (an appropriate reaction to most of Donovan's lyrics, really).

It was a lopsided relationship for the longest time, like I was a one-woman show for an audience that refused to offer feedback (or rather, screamed or slept through most of my routine).

Then one day, in early spring, when Jeremy was laying on the floor after I'd changed and dressed him, he started making funny noises with his tongue. I started making similar noises back to him, and he grinned toothlessly, then started making his noises again. Back and forth we did this for a minute or two. Communication at last.

His very first word was "car." Oh, yes, before "Mama," "Papa," or any other logical first choice. It's my fault, I think; his absolute favorite book during his first year was *Go Dog Go*, and man, do those dogs have a lot of cars.

He was growing into a little tankard of spirit, with a large, bald Charlie Brown head and a cute round belly, babbling constantly and laughing at the smallest things. Over the months, I coached him to crawl, to stand, to put one foot in front of the other. He walked to me across the ugly forest green carpet of his playroom a week before his first birthday, throwing his arms around my neck at the end. Until that moment, I hadn't known it was possible to love a child who wasn't my own.

Therein lay the rub: he wasn't my own. But whenever he was in my care, it was *as if* he was. And he was in my care for a significant part of his waking hours. Because of this, Seth and Cécile seemed to be witnessing his landmark events far later than I did.

"Jeremy just took his first steps over the weekend!" they'd say.

Or, "Did you know he's spoon-feeding himself these days? He's a leftie!"

"Oh, really? That's great!" I'd say, knowing full well I had already observed him doing all of those "new things" myself. But I kept quiet, letting them believe that they had been the first witnesses. This, I had come to learn, was one of the cardinal rules of nannying.

It was a hard rule to keep, though. As Jeremy passed his first year and ran pell-mell into his second, his vocabulary started to develop like a lopsided cake, rising much higher on one side of the pan—the English side—and his parents couldn't understand a word he was saying. It's not like they couldn't speak English; Seth was born and raised in Ohio, same as me. But you know those parents who can miraculously translate their child's gibberish into sense?

“Yes, when Billy says ‘Sfpwezle,’ he’s asking for a soft pretzel. It’s his favorite treat.”

I was becoming that parent for Jeremy.

I knew that “Gudaww” meant “Good job,” that “Shh Shh,” meant “shoe,” that “Haaoo” accompanied by a frantic hand wave meant “I can't eat that, it's too hot.” I taught him all the moves to Patty Cake, Itsy Bitsy Spider, I'm A Little Teapot, the American baby standbys. Even the little humming noise he always made after we finished a book was an imitation of me saying “The end.” And he “read” books all the time, even when I wasn't there. His parents, who almost never read books and never sang, knew he wasn't getting this from them.

“So, she wouldn't want me to say this,” Seth said to me one morning as he poured me a cup of French press, “but Cécile's really been down this week. She hasn't been home for a long enough stretch to see Jeremy much.”

I hoped he read in my eyes the genuine heartache I felt. It killed me to think that by working as much as she did, she was missing out on the tiny and marvelous changes her son was going through every day. How could it feel as parents to know your child was learning so little from you and so much from an interloper? Being said interloper, I felt guilty as uncharged.

Despite—or, perhaps, because of—the love I had for Jeremy, I started looking for an exit strategy. The fun of bringing up a baby in my own words had awakened a dormant interest in

language and storytelling, and so, in January 2015, one year into the job, I enrolled part-time as an English major at The University of Akron, taking night classes after work. Seth and Cécile seemed happy with this new arrangement. I wondered if they, too, were thinking about calling this nanny experiment off.

And then, in February 2015, Cécile was diagnosed with breast cancer.

The news changed the rhythm of their family life, and by consequence, mine. While Cécile spent that year fighting, she was forced to slow down, just as Jeremy was speeding up. As his blonde, feathery curls finally began to grow in, she lost her own dark, feathery bob; as his energy sparkled and fizzed, hers waxed and waned. She worked less and stayed home more, especially during chemo weeks, and on the days when she couldn't leave her bed, I kept Jeremy out from under her feet. It was a great mercy that he was too young to understand what she was going through.

Personally, I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Just when I had thought it was time to bow out, I was now entrenched even more firmly into this position as Jeremy's caretaker. Long hours turned into overtime and overnights whenever cancer appointments had Cécile and Seth out the door before dawn. And as they made it increasingly clear that they could not do without me, Jeremy seemed to be telling me the same thing, in his own babyish way.

Every morning, as I opened the door to his house, I heard the same refrain float toward me from the kitchen.

Seth would say, "*Jérémy, qui est là?*"

“*Kate est là!*” Jeremy would reply. He’d come running on his tubby legs into his playroom and greet me with a baby-toothed grin. He looked at me like I was sunshine itself. It was quite hard not to melt.

But I remember the day he won my heart for good. He was two months shy of two years, and I was reading him stories before his nap, like usual. He picked an old favorite, the BabyLit *A Christmas Carol*, and I opened it to the first page.

“Black Hat,” I read aloud, pointing to the picture of grumpy Ebenezer Scrooge.

“Bah, ‘umbug!” Jeremy piped up.

I did a double take. Was I crazy, or did he just—? I flipped to the next page.

“What does this one say?” I pointed to Marley’s ghost.

“Silvew chains,” he said. “Ooooooh!”

I could barely speak over the lump in my throat. He had memorized the whole thing. I tried the same with some of his other books, and he lisped entire pages by heart. So he *had* been listening all along.

The more verbose he grew, the more he entertained himself *and* me. He loved words, and was enchanted with finding patterns in their sounds. For a while, he was obsessed with the “L” sound: his favorite word was “lemon,” and he would inexplicably dissolve into a giggle fit every time he said, “Love you!” He asked me to sing the song “American Pie” again and again solely for the line “Drove my Chevy to the levee,” because its rhyme drove him wild. Trips to the library were the highlight of his month, and at the park, he’d make me push him on the swing until I thought my arms would fall off, but it made him so happy, I didn’t mind.

Yet even as Jeremy and I bonded during that long, hard year, while Cécile ran the course of her treatments and turned the corner onto a path of recovery, I laid awake some nights worrying I had gotten in too deep. His parents had once jokingly called me “Mommy 2.0,” and somehow it didn’t feel like a joke at all. What was I to Jeremy?

“You know, as soon as the door closes behind you when you leave, he always says, ‘*Kate est partie,*’ in this sad little voice,” Seth told me.

No time clock says that after an employee punches out. This wasn’t a job anymore. This was something else.

Parents always talk about how they blinked and their children’s childhood was over. I wasn’t exactly a parent, but without that aforementioned time clock, time at work passed in a strange way. Before I knew it, almost four years had gone by, and I was still a fixture in Jeremy’s life, and he in mine. The *petit prince* I’d taught to walk was now tooling around his driveway on a mini John Deere tractor, mixing his own chocolate milk for breakfast, and going to a Montessori preschool a few mornings a week. Whenever I’d pick him up, he’d run down the hall and make a flying leap into my arms, his Lightning McQueen backpack flapping behind him.

“He is so devoted to you,” one of his Indian teachers said to me. “He is always telling the other children, ‘My babysitter did this! My babysitter did that!’ ”

The feeling was *almost* mutual. Now that my little shadow was fully conversant, he was a real kick in the head. We had about a million inside jokes, references taken from years worth of library books, Pixar movies, and classic pop/rock music (his favorite was Carole King’s “Where You Lead,” because it made mention of a train). His parents didn’t “get” this side of him, but

though that was technically my fault, it also wasn't: I was raising him in English the only way I knew how. And my mark on him was, in a sense, stronger and more relevant, so long as he lived in an Anglophone world.

I say *almost* because the truth is, it had all become a bit too much. I was no longer the bored and stagnating 22-year-old I had been when my nannyhood began, but a nearly 26-year-old woman who was halfway through her English degree. Working full-time and going to school full-time meant that I was either at work, at school, or sleeping, with nothing else in between.

And as Cécile beat her cancer and life found a new normal, she and Seth seemed to take my sticking around for granted. Sure, it was nice to be trusted, but man, was it confining. The hours they kept meant I could only take early morning or night classes, and they would often show up late to relieve me of Jeremy with no warning, to the point I would be late for class. And studying was impossible on the clock: whenever I pulled out my laptop to peck away at a paper, a little blonde head would show up at my elbow.

“Kate, you are doing what?”

“Some work, bub.”

“I will do some work, too.”

He would bring over his “computer” (a defunct keyboard from the 90's) and sit down next to me, pounding the keys with the fury of José Iturbi. Then, ten seconds later, “Kate, let's make the biggest train track ever. With four crossings.”

A few days before enrollment for my senior year, I was at a bit of a crossing myself: some of the courses I needed were smack-dab in the middle of the work day. Normally I

eschewed afternoon classes for just this reason, but these ones were vital: without them I couldn't graduate. Maybe now was finally the time to put in my four-months notice.

When Cécile got home from work that day, I cleared my throat and told her my dilemma.

“So, I'm thinking it maybe would be best if I stepped out so that you could find someone else to watch Jeremy,” I said.

She stared at me with familiar saucer-like brown eyes.

“I don't want someone else to watch Jeremy,” she said.

“You don't?” I faltered.

“No,” she said. “With you, he's calm, he's comfortable, he's...happy.”

I blinked back tears. She wasn't fighting fair, but I knew she was right. If I left, who would understand him? Who would bake his favorite applesauce coffee cake or snickerdoodle scones? Who would build him snow tunnels in the winter? Who would take him to chase the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad from Bath to Peninsula? Who would be his Mommy 2.0?

If I had known four years earlier that this job would have cost me half of my heart, I don't know that I would have accepted the terms. But here I was.

In the end, we compromised: if I would stay on as Jeremy's nanny until at least my graduation, they promised to rearrange their schedules around me. It wasn't a job with room for advancement, but at least my seniority gave me negotiating power.

And so, in the blink of an eye, Jeremy was riding his bike, writing his name, cleaning his room, counting by tens, making school friends, blowing out five candles.

And I was purchasing my cap and gown.

“Kate, what will you do for your work after you graduate in Dee-cember?” Jeremy asked me the other day, as he periodically does.

“I don’t know yet, bub,” I said honestly.

He bowed his nose toward his bowl of soup, eyebrows raised to wistful slants.

“You can take care of me. That’s a good work,” he whispered with a thick, forced-cheerful tone, the sound of a child pretending not to be sad.

That tugged at the old heartstrings. I realized suddenly that I could never plumb the depths of this boy’s love for me. By virtue of the fact that, so far in his life, I’ve *always* been there, he can’t fathom a future where I am not. I wonder if I ought to feel more guilty about planning for that very future. My work can’t be you forever, Jeremy.

“It is a good work,” I said.

2. *Une Tasse Efficace*

One Monday lunchtime at work, while I was unpacking groceries from a Mustard Seed paper bag, Seth went over to the kitchen light switch and said, as he always did, “*Que la lumière soit. Et la lumière fut.*” And, as he always did, he asked me if I knew what he’d just said.

“You’ve told me before. ‘Let there be light, and there was light.’”

I sat with him and Jeremy at the table while they held hands and prayed in French, and then I got up to heat some black bean soup as they crunched baby carrots.

“Jeremy, do you think Kate understood any of that?” he asked his full-mouthed son.

“I got the general gist,” I said, punching Start on the microwave.

“Kate’s like, ‘Enough of your speaking in tongues!’”

I was tired of it, not going to lie. After more than a year of working for this French-American family, I felt I knew the American side of them tolerably well. But the French side was a complete enigma. On one hand, it didn’t seem like it was my business to understand their other language—and it literally wasn’t, since they had never required it of me. But being out of the loop often made my job difficult.

For example, there were words that Jeremy knew in French, but not in English. One time, when he was quite tiny, he was trying to reach something on his tall bookshelf.

“What do you want, bubby?” I asked.

“*Escabeau.*”

“A scarf bow? What are you saying?”

“*Escabeau.* Want my *escabeau.*”

I lifted down each item on his shelf, asking which one was this mysterious *escabeau*. He pushed every one of them away. Finally, quite fed up, I took a video of him saying the word and texted it to his parents, adding, “What is he asking for?”

“His stepladder,” Cécile replied.

Oh.

So it was as much a survival technique as it was a desire to be better at my job that led me to start learning French on my own. Nothing more than that.

A French podcast, the app Duolingo, and Jeremy’s various French baby books were the tools I used to get started. It was all independent study, mind you—I didn’t tell my bosses about it and frankly, I never intended to. How could I eavesdrop on their conversations if they knew I was really listening? (I’m just kidding. But sort of not.)

To this day, I’m not sure how they found out about it; maybe my parents casually mentioned my new hobby to them at some church function. At any rate, a few months into my studies, as I walked in the door, Seth was waiting for me with a wry grin.

“*Bonjour, Kate. Comment ça va?*” he asked.

I blanched. “*Ça...bien,*” I said.

“*Ç’est bien,*” he corrected, shaking his head. He went into the kitchen, and I followed him, trembling.

“So, you are learning French,” Cécile said, peering at me from behind her espresso cup.

“I mean, I’m picking up a little bit, here and there,” I said.

“I was about your age when I started learning French myself,” Seth said. “I took some crash courses in Germany with a bunch of German housewives. It was the only way I could learn how to impress Cécile.”

He grinned at her, and she rolled her eyes, swatting him with the back of her hand.

“Just remember,” he said, turning grave, as he passed me my own fresh-brewed double-shot. “What makes it all worth it, the one thing to hold onto, is that when you start speaking it around others, and they don’t understand you, you get to say, ‘Pardon my French’.”

“Do not hesitate to ask if you want to practice with us,” Cécile said.

“Okay, I won’t,” I said.

I meant it. I wouldn’t want to practice with them.

If that seems unreasonable, hear me out. I was already struggling with the boundary lines in this unique work relationship. A long-term nanny is so inextricably tied to her charge that it’s hard to find where love ends and making a living begins. Keeping a professional distance, leaving work at work, and all that jazz was becoming increasingly impossible to do as the years went by, especially after Cécile’s cancer scare. That news had changed us from polite business associates to natural disaster victims almost overnight.

In my mind, one thing I could do to ensure I never overstepped my bounds was to keep the language barrier up. French was the language of their family unit, and so long as I only spoke English with them, I could maintain my proper place as an employee.

Here's the thing: I didn't know how to tell them that. I was afraid they'd find it a silly excuse, or that they'd see it as my attempt to keep one foot out the door. So, instead of being upfront, I continued my studies in private, and just hoped that if I never brought up French with them again, they'd do the same.

Sacré bleu, was I wrong.

"J'ai une question."

"I don't know what that is."

"You don't know what that is? It's basic. *J'ai une question.*"

I shook my head, feeling my temper spark. Seth was already a fast talker to begin with, but his French accent slurred at the speed of light.

He had begun to offer his services as a French tutor. Offer is a strong word—he just started giving unprompted lectures when I showed up for work. He would toss me a sentence in French and ask me to translate it into English (or vice versa) and when I got it wrong (which I always did), he would launch into long grammatical lessons to explain just how wrong I was.

Cécile, if she was present, tried to deflect his challenges away from me.

"You would know it if you saw it," she said kindly.

"Yeah, I'm such a visual person when it comes to languages," I said, breathing deeply.

"Oh, yeah, me too, I need to see the words," she said. "Seth is really not like that."

He didn't like being left out.

"Well, no, I'm visual too," he protested. "But I need to hear *and* see. I mean, really, when I say a word, I can see it in my mind."

Mmhmm, sure, genius, I thought. Must be tough dealing with the rest of us simpletons.

If I had taken the time to explain my English-only policy to him, I would have saved us a lot of trouble. But his on-the-spot lectures had dragged my pride into the ring. There was nothing that hurt me more than being made to feel stupid, and he was doing it, unintentionally, every single day. So as he threw French at me like flicks of water from wet hands, I bit my tongue and resented him in silence.

A TED Talk once said that when you are learning a new language, you ought to find a “language parent,” a partner of sorts who will see you through your baby steps until you can walk on your own. This language parent should follow a few simple rules: they must work to understand what you are saying, confirm understanding by using the correct words in response, use words the learner knows, and, above all, never correct your mistakes.

Seth broke all these rules. There was no way I would let him be my language parent.

To my chagrin, being an English major meant I had to pick up a second language, too. Because of Seth’s “Forced French Lessons,” I was feeling very insecure about my French abilities, despite months and months of personal study. That’s why my socks were knocked clean off when I tested into the highest level of college French at The University of Akron.

I was so skeptical, in fact, that I refused to sign up for that upper level course. I settled for the one just below it, Intermediate I, and enrolled in a five-week summer class.

The timing of this course happened to coincide with an extended visit from Jeremy’s French grandparents, Blanche and Bernard.

“This is great,” Cécile said. “It will be like your own language immersion experience!”

It certainly was, whether I liked it or not. Her parents were quite the characters. Bernard was a retired scientist who filled his days with yard work and baking rock-hard loaves of bread; he spoke some English, but Blanche, a rail-thin redhead with a hawkish nose, spoke almost none. She had a lot to say in French, though, and I understood enough to hear her tell Cécile that she thought Jeremy was becoming a spoiled *petit prince*. But she seemed to like me.

My French course at Akron was a walk in *le parc* compared to what I had faced with Seth. The atmosphere was non-judgmental and we were free to make all the mistakes we needed to. And to my continued surprise, I was getting consistently straight A's.

"Do you have any background with French?" my professor, Madame Snyder, asked me after I answered a particularly tough question.

"Well, I work as a nanny for a French-American family."

"Mm, I can tell. It's your accent. It sounds legit."

My success at school gave me a small boost of courage to try out my French in real life. One afternoon, as Bernard cut up a watermelon for an after-lunch dessert, he offered me a slice.

"*Merci, la pastèque est bon,*" I said, barely audible over the watermelon rind in my teeth.

"*Bonne. Est bonne,*" he corrected without missing a beat. He set the watermelon on a tray and strode out onto the deck, the door slamming behind him.

Well, I thought as my cheeks flamed, excuse me for your silly genderized grammar rules. I don't think the watermelon cared if I implied it was masculine; I'm sure it was flattered by the compliment on its tastiness, if it had any feelings at all on the matter.

Except for that one blunt example, Blanche and Bernard were really quite compassionate with my French. They didn't mince words when I was wrong, but their brevity was constructive.

And when I was right, they praised me to the skies. I once asked Blanche to proofread a French paper I was writing, and after she finished, she looked up at me with her mouth agape.

“No meestakes,” she said.

A day or two before they left, Blanche made a pizza for lunch with fresh basil, olives, and goat cheese. I usually avoided dairy, but it looked so lovely, I made an exception.

“And, eh, how did you like this pizza?” Bernard asked.

“*Délicieuse, super,*” I said.

Blanche cooed in delight. “When are you ready to visit us in Paris?”

I laughed. “Ready when *vous êtes.*”

After I passed both Intermediate French classes at Akron, I wasn’t required to go any further. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to anyway. It was always a pleasure to discover I was good at something, especially something I had picked up so incidentally, but I chalked it all up to beginner’s luck. My professors thought far more highly of my abilities than I did, and like Old Hollywood agents, spoke to me of scholarships, internships, and study abroad programs that had my name all over them. I politely declined.

Though my French skills had grown brighter than before, I still hid them under a bushel, a bushel in which Seth seemed determined to poke holes. His pop quizzes were always just beyond my grasp, custom-tailored to make me look bad—or so it felt. I knew he thought he was being helpful, but I didn’t want his help. I was just too cowed to tell him.

But one day, he poked at me a little too hard.

“*As-tu des devoirs ce week-end?*” he asked, holding out my daily espresso.

“Nope, no homework,” I replied, reaching out.

But just as I was about to touch it, he yanked it back, smiling.

“J’ai dit, as-tu des devoirs ce week-end?”

“And I said no, I don’t have any.”

He slowly set down the cup and leaned forward on the counter.

“As...tu...des...devoirs...ce week-end?”

“I don’t—”

“En Français, s’il te plaît!” he burst out, clapping his hands with every syllable.

“No!”

My conscience slapped me the second it left my lips. But Seth was the one who flinched.

Then the faraway voice of Cécile floated from upstairs. “Eyy, good for you, Kate!”

Seth began to laugh, and so did I, and for the moment the tension was cut. But I was scared. I had protested too much, and now I’d have to wait for him to double down or retreat.

Later that August, Seth and Cécile asked me to join them on a visit to see French friends of theirs in Washington D.C. During the long, long drive, Seth decided to take advantage of us all being trapped together in that air-conditioned metal box to ask the question he’d probably been dying to ask for over two years: “Kate, are you embarrassed to speak French with us?”

I sighed, avoiding his eyes in the rearview. Here we go. I looked to Jeremy, buckled up tight nearby, for comfort, but *he* was avoiding *me*. Little OCD creature that he was, he hated the fact that I was learning French: to him, it meant his worlds were colliding, and he’d always shriek like George Constanza if he overheard me practicing. So I looked out the window instead.

“Yes, and no,” I said. “I preferred to speak it in my classes, because everyone there was at the same level. And my professors would always accept what we said as being right, even if we said it wrong, and instead of correcting us, they would just repeat back our answer in the proper way. Somehow this made us feel less stupid, I don’t know.”

“And you’re saying I correct you?” Seth said.

“Well, yeah, you do,” I said, angry bile at the back of my throat. “You usually break down every single wrong thing that I said.”

“And he always goes on and on,” Cécile groaned, teasingly shoving his shoulder.

An awful silence filled the car. I’d struck the nerve I was hoping never to touch.

“Wow. Well, I had no idea,” Seth said at last, sounding hoarse. “I’m sorry. I will try to cut back in the future.”

For the remainder of the trip, Seth conducted all his conversations with me on tiptoe. He punctuated his remarks with hedges like “I hope I didn’t sound too mean,” or “I hope I’m not annoying you.” I knew he was trying to make up for lost ground, but it was my fault that the ground had been lost in the first place, so his extended penitence shamed me.

The night before we left D.C., Seth and Cécile’s friends Oscar and Amandine invited us out to dinner. And, seeing as they were all French, they would accept *absolument* no substitutes for the best: a French restaurant on H Street called Le Grenier.

Grenier means attic, and I’ve never seen a shabbier chic attic in all my life: peeling Victorian wallpaper, dismantled bed frames and dress mannequins, bare bulbs inside of bird

cages, and ghostly white curtains at every turn. We ascended a steep, rickety staircase to the second floor, and were seated at a table set with six mismatched chairs.

Surely, I thought, as I nervously flipped through the menu, seeing as we're in America, the cuisine might be French, but the service won't be. But, alas, *je me trompais*.

"Are we ready to order?" said the waiter, with a not-quite-twirlable mustache.

Seth leaned back in his torn upholstered chair to look at him.

"Est-ce que vous parlez français, monsieur?"

"Oui, oui," said the waiter, switching seamlessly.

My table mates all smiled broadly, but I felt faint. I was not at all ready for this.

As the others placed their orders in French one by one, I tried to decide which would make me look more stupid: ordering in English, or ordering in even the most butchered French.

"Et pour vous, madame?"

My heart throbbed in my ears. But I cleared my throat, handed up my menu, and made my choice:

"Je voudrais le jambon fromage, avec la petite salade aussi. Merci."

Instantly I was showered with a chorus of "Eyyys!" and "Bravos!" Oscar raised his cider to me, and Amandine complimented my accent: "The 'r' sound, that is so hard for Americans."

But Seth was beside himself. He beamed at me across the table, heaped praise upon me, and when I brushed it off, he was flustered.

"How can I ever get through to you?" he said.

"You can't," I said, laughing.

Later that night, he still wasn't over it. "What made you decide to order in French?"

“Because I knew I didn’t have to, and you weren’t making me do it,” I said.

“And for that, I’m proud of you,” he said.

November 11th was a ways off, but it sure felt like *la jour de l’Armistice* to me.

The Forced French Lessons had come to an end, but I made the choice to keep learning anyhow. I took another French class, won a French scholarship, and took another French class after that. I even tacked on a French minor, just because I could.

Periodically I would text in French with Jeremy’s grandma Blanche, and every time I did, she said my French was flawless and asked when I would *rendre une visite*. Soon, I said. *Bientôt*.

That *bientôt* came in the form of a summer study abroad trip, one that my French professors had been begging me to take for the last three years. When I brought it up to Seth and Cécile, they couldn’t have been more supportive.

“I haven’t heard you speak French since that restaurant in D.C. almost two years ago, and that was spot on, so I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Seth said.

Ever since that night, he only brought up French for kicks and giggles. As he was preparing my lunchtime coffee one day, he said, “So, Cécile and I came up with a phrase in French that uses your last name.”

“Really?” I said. “What is it?”

He lifted the espresso cup and held it out to me.

“*Une tasse efficace.*”

“An effective cup?” I laughed. “I don’t get it. But I’ll take it.”

3. *Le Voyage, C'est La Destination*

Google Maps said it would take two hours to get from Paris to Le Mans. Google *said*.

This fret played in my head over and over as I rode silently in the back of Blanche and Bernard's Peugeot on my very second day in France. Jet-lag, politeness, and the language barrier stopped me from voicing my concerns to my gracious hosts, but I didn't understand: why had we left their house at nine o'clock in the morning to drive to my study abroad program in Le Mans when I wasn't due to arrive there until three in the afternoon? Yes, my English studies do get in the way of my math skills, but even I knew nine plus two didn't equal three. And, as far as I knew, no crack in the space time continuum hanging solely over this country made hours move at one-third of the classic pace.

As we blew past a sign for *l'autoroute*, Blanche placed a hand on Bernard's shoulder and turned back to look at me.

"Bernard never likes to take the highway," she said, smiling. "He prefers *le détour*."

Détour. I knew that word. I hated that word. My Ohioan blood began to boil as images of orange cones and crawling car bumpers flashed before me. Now it dawned on me why we had left the house so early: they were going to show me as much of France as they possibly could on a long-cut that neither I nor Google Maps saw coming.

In total, I spent six hours in and out of their Peugeot, and I was miserably carsick. The roads in the French countryside were made for ye olde paysans and their horse-drawn wagons, not for cars, especially not ones driven by elderly men with lead feet: each *petit village* has about 76 roundabouts and 84 narrow cobblestone streets set at 90 degree angles, which, if each approached at a speed of 100 kilometers per hour, equals a 350% chance of nausea. It certainly didn't help that we stopped to eat lunch at a *brasserie* whose menu offered just three choices, the only non-dairy option being a heaping, steaming bowl of chili con carne.

Along the way, we also hit up a 12th century church, a small country cemetery where Bernard's mother was buried, and a hilltop neighborhood of the deliberately rustic summer homes of rich and bored Parisians. At one point, to my disbelief, Bernard decided to get out of the car and strike up a conversation with a homeowner in this neighborhood who was outside sweeping his stone-carved stoop. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed as these old French men shot the breeze in the hot May sun, while Blanche and I sat glued to our sweaty seats in the non-air-conditioned car. After awhile she turned to me, smiling apologetically.

"Bienvenue en France," she shrugged.

The *détours* didn't end with the road trip to Le Mans. Similar fits and starts, twists and turns, understandings and misunderstandings cropped up in my earliest weeks abroad.

We Akronites had to take a French competency exam on the third day of our program. We all dreaded it, certain it was going to expose us as frauds. Four out of ten of us had had the gall to sign up for French internships, so our stakes were highest. None of us wanted to show up for work and report that we had the communication skills of a four-year-old.

On the evening of the test, we met with Manuela and Pauline, two French grad students who were to be our good shepherds in the month ahead. Manuela was short and sturdy, with the well-planted feet of an athlete and a shock of straw-colored hair in no particular style; Pauline, a featherweight redhead, looked like a living doll, with Barbie eyes and burgundy lipstick extending far beyond her natural lip line. They herded us gently to our computer stations and bid us take our time.

“Do not worry at all about your scores you might get from this test,” Pauline cooed. “It is just for us to know where you are in your skills so we can best help you.”

Amidst a gale of sighs, we commenced.

Test taking absorbs me completely; I lose all track of time and place. When I finally clicked submit, I looked up to see an empty room.

Glancing back at the screen, I saw my score: B1, Intermediate.

I hopped off my chair and went to find the French grad students, who were chatting with Amanda, the other remaining Akronite.

“*J’ai fini*,” I said.

“And what score did you get?” Pauline asked, already composing a sympathetic face.

“B1.”

Her sympathetic face vanished. The winged tips of her doll eyes flew up to her painted eyebrows. “B1?” she repeated.

Manuela, at her side, pursed her lips in approval. “Wow,” she said.

“You are the only one to get this score,” Pauline whispered.

“Really?” I said, hands flying to my cheek.

They sent me off with still-stunned looks, and Amanda and I headed back to the dorms.

“I only got an A1,” said Amanda. “My internship is going to be a shitshow.”

“Mine too, I’m sure,” I added, though I was no longer quite so sure.

The news of my score spread among the other students, and before long they decided that I would be their translator-in-chief. “I don’t know, ask Kate,” became a popular refrain. I didn’t mind too much. When it came to reading directions on the back of pasta boxes, or asking strangers to take our group’s photo in front of a castle, I knew enough to *se débrouiller*.

The first Sunday in Le Mans, a few of us grew restless laying around campus and decided to take a tram downtown and explore the city.

Here’s the thing about Sunday in France: everything goes quiet. When the tram dropped us off in the town square in the early afternoon, I could hear my own footsteps on the pavement. The streets that had been buzzing like a hive earlier in the week were absurdly empty; windows were shuttered, lights off, and you could walk two or three streets without seeing another person. Just picture yourself in a New York City suddenly bereft of humans and you’ll catch the drift.

We hobbled over cobblestones, admired petite public gardens, and marveled at the unusual presence of 15-foot snails scattered around town. Soon we grew hot and hungry, but street after street only revealed another closed restaurant. Not even the grocery stores were open. After we had resigned ourselves to eating stale vending machine sandwiches at the dorms, we saw signs of life through the wide open doors of one lone bakery.

“Food at last!” Amanda cried.

We shuffled inside, shyly mumbling “*Bonjour*” to the proprietress behind the counter.

As I was peering into glass cases laden with quiches, the woman started speaking to us in rapid-fire French.

“Um, Kate?” whispered Alec, side-eying me.

I looked at him, and then at the others, who had all backed away, leaving me alone to face our hostess. I inched forward.

“Uh,” I started auspiciously, “*vous avez dit quoi?*”

The woman, with sun-burned cheeks and an updo of tight gray curls, squinted at me.

“*Quoi?*”

“*Vous avez dit quoi?*” I repeated slowly, my temperature spiking.

She shook her head, and repeated whatever phrase she had said in the first place, which, for the second time, I could not understand.

Desperately, I looked over at Amanda for aid, but one search of her eyes told me she was just as lost. The silence in the room, and the town behind us, was apocalyptic.

There was no way out but retreat. So, with blood boiling in my ears, I smiled politely, turned around, and strode out of the bakery. Y’all can fend for yourselves, I thought. The translator-in-chief hereby resigns.

Minutes later, the three of them came out with fresh, hot, cheese-crusteds *croque monsieurs* and tiny tarts glistening with ambrosial fruits.

“Aren’t you going to get something, Kate?” Addy asked, biting into her sandwich with an exquisite crunch.

Leaning against a light pole on the sidewalk, I smiled, jaw clenched.

“Nah, that’s okay. I’m not hungry.”

I couldn't U-turn out of every French interaction, though: eventually I had to find my way forward. One evening, I was in my dorm room eating a two-day old chocolate croissant. Croissants are real heartbreakers in France: if you eat them within a few hours of their creation, they're a piece of heaven, but if you're a silly cheapskate American who buys a whole sack of them at the supermarket because they're *à prix discount*, you'll end up eating sad lumps of dried-out flakes for the rest of the week. French architecture may be built to last, but their food is ephemeral.

As I was mournfully chewing, Tarike, another Akron student, knocked on my door.

"Could I borrow your frying pan?" she asked, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

"Sure," I said, going to fetch it.

"Actually," she said, her voice dropping, "will you please come and stay with me in the kitchen while I cook? There's a creepy guy in there who keeps trying to talk to me in French and I don't want to be alone with him."

One never turns down such a sisterly request. I grabbed my laptop and joined her in the community kitchen down the hall.

The kitchen, like our dorms, was spare: the closest thing to *décor* was the exposed plumbing of the sinks against the white tile wall. "Dorm life" in France isn't a concept like it is back home. The colleges provide it begrudgingly, offering the bare minimum of accommodation, as if to say, "You're not here for fun, you're here to learn, so don't get cozy."

I saw the guy Tarike was talking about. He was sitting backwards on a barstool, legs swinging, elbows leaned back on the table behind him, as if hoping if he posed just right, he'd

turn into the Cameroonian version of Clint Eastwood. Tarike went to an open stovetop and began hurriedly frying her turkey burger. I took a barstool at another table and browsed social media, making light conversation with Tarike. We tried to wall ourselves in with rapid English, hoping to keep out French intruders.

But although he didn't speak, the creepy guy stared. Not at Tarike anymore, but me. I felt it in the back of my head, and saw it for myself when I'd turn to talk to Tarike. As pricks of panic crossed my skin, I wished for both our sakes that the lousy French burners would hurry up and cook her dinner so we could escape.

I finally heard the snap of the burner knob. Tarike and I swept up our things as casually as we could and slipped out the swinging kitchen door.

"Thanks, I really owe you," she whispered as we parted ways in the hall.

Later that night, I went down to the vending machine to get a bottle of Evian. As I opened the door to the stairwell on my way back up, I almost smacked into someone.

"*Desolée*," I said, trying to scoot past him. But he stood firm in front of the staircase, blocking my path.

"Excuse me," he said in a high-pitched, dusty voice, strange for one so imposing. As I looked up, he stared down: it was the kitchen creeper. My mouth went dry.

"Hello," I croaked.

He cleared his throat, licked his lips. Then he began gesturing with his hands in slow, awkward circles, like the rods of old train wheels.

"I...please...want...go...you...with," he said, eternity-long pauses between each word.

“You can say it in French if it’s easier,” I said, though what I meant was, “Oh for heaven’s sake, please just get this over with.”

But when he shifted into French, it was with such a strong Central African accent that I could no more understand him than I could an opera record played backwards. I asked him to repeat himself, to slow down, but nothing helped. We were going to be trapped here in this stairwell forever because he could not find the words to ask me out. And because he couldn’t directly ask me, I couldn’t directly say “no.”

Still, as I watched his confidence sputter and stall with each passing second, I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. I’d never have the guts to ask out somebody I literally could not communicate with.

“Sorry, but I...I mean, I’m with this group, we just kind of hang out together, we’re really busy with excursions and stuff,” I said. The old beat-around-the-bush, my standby. I prayed it would stick.

His expression, besides a few sharp puffs of air through his nostrils, didn’t change at all.

“I can have...your contact, please?” he said.

He doesn’t understand I’m saying no.

I gripped my water bottle. Trapped between fear for my own safety and fear of hurting his feelings, I surrendered in the smallest way I could. “You have Facebook?”

“Fass-book? Yes, yes...” He pulled out his phone, and I mine.

We friended each other, and he seemed assuaged—finally his broad shoulders stopped blocking my exit, so I dashed past him up three flights of dingy faux-marble stairs to my room, my sandals flapping awfully with each flying leap.

I know the legend of French men and their romantic abilities stretches back through the ages, wafting expectations high. If this was my only experience, trust me, it ain't that great.

The biggest obstacle course of all was *La Stage, Jour Numero Un*: the first day of my language immersion internship at *l'Arche de la Nature*. "Nature's Ark" is a curious nomenclature for the space that it is: there is no giant boat, no animals in monogamous pairs. It's a vast nature reserve on the outskirts of Le Mans, committed to keeping the inner-city folks in touch with the outdoors. They've got a real working farm, a thriving forest, and a "water" park (not so much tube slides and wave pools as freshwater aquariums and an ancient hydraulic power plant).

I wasn't really sure why they placed me there: nature and I aren't exactly on a touchy-feely basis. But I'd heard the job included working with kids on their field trips, and for that I felt qualified. Beyond that, I was told little else about the job. Would I be asked to hoe a pumpkin patch? Give a lecture on goat cheese? More importantly, when could I go home? I had no idea.

I showed up 45 minutes late on my first day to *La Maison de la Prairie*, the working farm. I'd been told that beyond a bus and a tram, the commute involved a short hike, which was actually not short at all; maybe the French think a short hike means "you'd better wear shorts because you'll be sweating your ass off."

My supervisor, H el ene, was mercifully not upset. "I was going to ask you to help me feed the animals if you were here earlier, *mais, tant pis*," she said.

Tant pis indeed; I thanked heaven I'd been late.

"What time will my internship end today?" I asked in hesitant French.

"*Je sais pas*," she shrugged.

Hélène said she was off to her office, but that I should go to the stables. Why? I couldn't understand her response, so I awkwardly wandered into the *écurie*, where the Percheron horses, absolutely massive French beasts along the lines of our Clydesdales, stood around, like myself, waiting to be useful.

Two of the stable hands peeked out from behind the horses. I smiled uncertainly.

“Je m'appelle Katherine,” I said. *“Je suis ici pour un stage.”*

“Okay,” they said, introducing themselves as Marc and Julie, and resuming their work.

I toed the scattered straw on the floor.

“Do you have anything for me to do?” I asked.

“Well, we're about to hook the horses up to *la hippomobile* so we can fetch the first group of children,” Julie said. “You're welcome to ride along.”

A hippomobile, it turned out, was a covered wagon with truck tires and bench seats that carried guests from the parking lot to the farm, a round trip of, believe it or not, almost an hour. Despite their monstrous appearance, those Percherons moved at the pace of an arthritic snail.

As we crawled along the dirt road, my new *collègues* asked me the basic questions my French classes had prepared me for all along: what do you study at school? How many siblings do you have? Where do you live?

“Ohio,” Marc mused. “Is that close to New York City?”

“Uh,” I said, not entirely sure if there was a right answer. “Sort of.”

They both smiled widely. “Ah, the Big Apple,” Marc sighed.

But once we ran out of the basics, conversation pattered out. They talked to the horses, or to each other at lightning speed.

“Do you know at what time my internship will finish?” I asked politely.

“*Non, désolée,*” they said, offering apologetic smiles.

Once we finally fetched a passel of kiddos, I hoped all would become clear. The group we picked up looked to be about three years old, dressed in a pretty spectrum of raincoats and boots, sporting backpacks with American icons like Lightning McQueen. I smiled at them, and they, with fingers tucked shyly between their teeth, smiled back. The universal language.

Back at the farm, a rather short woman with a stubby brown ponytail and rain-speckled glasses was waiting for us by the barn. As I hopped off the hippomobile, she strode up to me and shook my hand.

“*Katherine? Je suis Agnès, l’animatrice pour l’Arche de la Nature,*” she said, gesturing to herself. “I’m told you’re going to accompany me during our *animation* today.”

Ah, so at least somebody’s got the lowdown. “*Oui,*” I said. “*Je vais le faire.* And do you know roughly what time my *stage* will end today?”

She shrugged (French people shrug more often than any population group I’ve ever met). “*Je sais pas.* Whatever they told you at the university.”

My heart sank. Fantastic, I thought. I’m never getting out of here.

And so I followed the school group around the farm like a confused stepmother duck, unable to lead the ducklings because I scarcely knew what I was doing myself. Every once in awhile, one of the kids would waddle up to me to ask a question about what cows eat, or whether or not pigs liked when it rains. I think I said “I don’t know” more times in the space of three hours than I’ve said in all my 27 years. I at least tried to say it in a different tone every time

so it seemed like something profound. French kids are pretty sharp, though: their miniature shrugs proved they weren't buying it.

The worst was lunchtime. I'm an American student: we eat lunch (if at all) on the go, in our cars, at our desks—in short, as quickly as possible. That simply isn't the French way. The lunch break at this particular establishment? Two hours long. I had finished my ham-on-stale-baguette sandwich, bag of olive oil potato chips, and green apple in the time it took for one of the employees to chop fresh vegetables for sautéing. I had no choice but to twiddle my thumbs for the remaining hour and forty minutes, while the rest of the employees chattered together at an unintelligible speed.

When I thought I could stand the *ennui* no longer, Agnès and Hélène told me that because of the rain, there would be no more field trips for the day, and I was free to go. When Agnès dropped me off at the tram station, I was never so happy to get out of a car in my life.

Despite the awkwardness of the whole thing, I was proud of myself for surviving my first day of total immersion, so I decided to treat myself to a second lunch on my way home. I took the tram to Paul, a beloved French bakery chain, and strode to the front of the line.

“Je prends le sandwich grainé poulet, et une bouteille de l'eau, et pour dessert, une tarte aux framboise,” I ordered, with a particular emphasis on the last syllable, as if I'd just introduced myself as Blanche DuBois. This cashier wasn't going to mistake me for some tourist.

Yet she was staring at me, eyes narrowed.

“Frambois?” she asked drily. *“Voulez-vous dire framboise?”* She pronounced the tail end of the word with a buzzing “z.”

I blanched, all right. “*Uh, oui, oui, framboise,*” I stuttered. How could I forget how to pronounce my favorite berry?

Meekly I paid for my meal and skedaddled back to the tram. To sooth my hurt feelings, I bit into my dessert first, the cold raspberries, sweet yellow custard, and buttery crumb crust melding together on my tongue. As the tram rocked gently to and fro, I relished the rest, choosing to ignore the way my stomach bellyached, “Are we there yet? Are we there yet?”

No, we aren’t there yet, I thought. And I don’t know when we’ll get there either. But it’s okay: we’re on our way.

4. *Minuit à Café Crème*

I stepped off the tram onto the sunlit square of Place de la République. Well after 9 p.m., and still the sky was blue, and the carousel and the open-door brasseries and the McDonald's with 17th century architecture were bathed in orange beams. That's June in France for you.

Caitlyn and Jess's faces popped out of the Thursday evening crowds.

"Thanks for coming to escort me," I said. "Where are we going again?"

"Café Crème," Caitlyn said.

She pronounced this in the flattest Midwestern American accent known to man, but I forgave her for it, of course. *Crème* in French rhymes with phlegm, and you actually have to hawk up a little of that bodily fluid in order to properly land the r. Only the Scots can rival the French for verbal expectoration.

"Everyone's already there," she added, guiding us down a narrow cobblestone road, the iron streetlights not yet lit.

"Yeah, and there's this new guy," Jess said, turning back to look at me with wiggling eyebrows. "Super attractive. We think he's hitting on Emily."

"Oh boy," I said from the very depths of my soul. It was an exhausted "Oh boy." I was already not wild about the idea of this night in the first place. One of the French students—well, actually, he was Chinese, to be exact—named Denis had invited the ten of us Akronites to the

“It” spot for young people in downtown Le Mans, so we could get to know some of the other kids from the Université. It was a nice thought, but why it had to happen at a bar, I didn’t know. What I did know from the past couple of weeks was that most of these kids loved to party, loved to club, loved to cut loose (do the young people still say that?). At a month shy of my 27th, I already felt like a retiree next to them, half of them too young to drink back at home in the States. Theoretically speaking, I had already passed my college partying age—and even back then, I didn’t party. To quote Jane Austen, I infinitely preferred a book.

At any rate, the addition of some super attractive guy into the mix held no interest for me. With my luck, he’d be too young anyway, and I’d have to sit back with my gin and tonic while he flirted with all the other lively American girls and ignored the old bag in the corner.

As we came upon Café Crème, a two-story stucco building with its name in neon sci-fi font, I felt its pulsing music in the cobblestones under my feet and immediately felt 70 years older. I sucked in my breath and followed my friends inside.

“Hey, this is great, you are all here now!” Denis exclaimed as I squashed into a pew-like seat in the back corner of the bar. There were about fifteen kids crammed into a dim seating area that looked like it was personally decorated by a teenage version of *Beauty and the Beast’s* Gaston, with splintery dark wood against old tan-colored plaster, and a Star Wars pinball machine near the steep spiral staircase to the attic restrooms. The Americans sat against the wall and the French faced them down across squat, knee-high tables.

“Order a drink, and then I have a great drinking game for us all to play,” Denis urged me.

I grimaced politely at him and looked at the sticky plastic menu Jess handed me. Where’s the gin? A gin fizz, okay, that’ll sell. I put in my order and then sat back to orient myself.

Catty-corner from me, there sat a boy in a red jacket, as bold a red as ever a human being dared to wear. He looked, I couldn't deny it, like a living, breathing cologne ad. Tousled brown hair, a five o'clock shadow, and thick, brooding brows over dark brown eyes. Of course this must be the guy.

I could have guessed it just by looking at my fellow American girls. Not even one full drink in, they were already flushed and falling over themselves, cupping their hands around one another's ears to whisper and giggle hysterically like they were middle schoolers again. I shook my head, smiling, and glanced back at him.

He sat back in his chair, a hand at his chin, one finger thoughtfully grazing his lips, gazing at the spectacle before him. Here, I thought, was the legendary Frenchman in action, radiating the aura, handed down to him through the ages, that can turn a woman's kneecaps to jelly and make her fancy herself in love in 0.9 nanoseconds. It was all I could do to dodge that aura before it infected me, too.

"What's wrong?" Caitlyn asked me.

"Nothing," I grinned. "I'm too old for this."

Once I had my goblet of pale green bubbles in hand, Denis tried to flag down the group's attention once again. Seeing as he was sitting next to the modern-day Alain Delon, this wasn't easy for him.

"Okay, so, before we play the game, we must all go around and introduce ourselves. Say your name, how old you are, what you are studying at your university, and what you do for fun."

He nudged Red Jacket Boy to start us off. The girls all leaned in with bated breath.

The boy sat up, tossing his head.

“So, I am Antoine,” he began, “and I am nineteen years old.”

Knew it, I thought, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“I study the law at Université of Le Mans, and I want to be—or, that is, to become a barrister someday.”

This he said with gorgeous self-confidence. Barrister is a far sexier word than lawyer, especially coming from a talking French cologne ad.

“And for fun, he plays tennis,” Denis chimed in, fist-bumping his friend’s shoulder a little too eagerly. “We play tennis together all the time. He’s really good.”

Antoine looked askance at Denis, then patted him on the arm with great condescension.

Everyone else took a turn, the French kids putting their best English forward, and we Americans not even trying to experiment with our French. When red-headed Emily finished introducing herself, Antoine leaned forward and looked intently at her.

“And you come from Ireland, *non?*” he asked, a crooked smile on his lips.

She dissolved into giggles. “*Oui!* I mean, *non, non,*” she stammered.

“Oh, you know, I just thought, because of this beautiful hair...” he gestured towards it, then sat back to watch the effect of his magic.

It came to my turn. I took a long swig of my drink.

“I’m Kate, I’m twenty-six, and I specialize in English literature, and, I don’t know...for fun, I like to cook,” I said.

I looked up at Antoine, who stared unblinking back at me.

“You’re old,” he said flatly.

The room burst into laughter. Some of the girls' jaws hung open in disbelief, but the boys slapped their knees.

I stared back, smiling, amidst the noise. "I am, it's true," I said.

He had the grace to flinch. "I think I mean to say, you are the most old, here, of all of us."

"The *oldest*, you mean," I said. "True again."

He smiled, lifted up his cup, full of the same green fizz as mine, and took a long, cool sip.

The next couple hours passed as I predicted: the noise grew noisier, the laughter grew crazier, and the heat of so many summer bodies in a dank, non-air-conditioned bar grew hotter. Antoine quickly outstripped Denis as the leader of the group, telling jokes and dropping pick-up lines (most pointedly on Emily's head, to her infinite delight), to the point that Denis shuffled off into the night and never returned. I did pity him. Being Antoine's wingman must be a drag.

One by one, most of the kids went home or moved on to other bars, but the most besotted stayed behind. And me.

"Let's go somewhere else," Antoine said, jumping out of his seat. The alcohol had cast off his model poise and he was growing saucier by the minute. "I will be your geed around Le Mans. This is my city!"

It was closing in on midnight as we followed Antoine out into the empty street. I knew the last tram back to the Université would be coming soon, and I wanted little more than to get on it and be back in my bed at a slightly human hour. But I was worried about the less sober girls in my group, the ones under Antoine's spell, and I didn't want to leave them alone. So I joined

in, trying to live in the moment, as the Minion memes that my mom's friends share on Facebook always say.

“Stay close, stay close,” Antoine said in a loud whisper, walking backwards, swinging his red-coated arms in circles. “Thees area is really very scary, it is not safe.”

These were back streets, narrow and wanly lit, almost Dickensianly so. The clientele of the cafés here were nearly twice the age of fearless Antoine, and twice his weight, and they made rude remarks in broken English as we passed by.

“Then why is he taking us through here?” I muttered to Caitlyn.

A pumping bass line began to echo off the quaint buildings around us as we went deeper into the city center. As it grew louder, Alec skittered up to me, his cheeks pale.

“I really don't think we should be here,” he whispered. He, like Antoine, was nineteen, but, except for his tiny mustache, his baby face could pass for twelve. “The girls are kinda wasted, and this guy's kinda weird, and we're going to get lost and miss the tram. Can you talk him into turning us around?”

I sighed. “Fine. I'll see what I can do.”

“So, this is The Elephant Pub,” Antoine said, as we approached a glowering bar with a flock of shady characters smoking outside. “Super cool. And do not worry, because beautiful girls can get in *gratuit*.” The beautiful girls giggled.

Alec, beginning to wring his hands, looked pleadingly toward me. I cleared my throat.

“Actually, you know what, it's getting late,” I said.

Antoine turned around and locked eyes with me, his brows furrowing.

“We don’t want to miss the tram home, right?” I said to the girls, who glowered at me like I was their stodgy grandma.

“You want to go home?” Antoine asked.

“Yes, we want to go home,” I repeated firmly.

We maintained eye contact for a moment, and then he grinned.

“Alright, mother. I will take you back.”

“You know what? I am the mom friend, and proud of it,” I said, jutting out my chin.

A flash of red in the night, Antoine leapt past us and galloped toward a fountain in the middle of a roundabout. On cue, the three most far-gone Akron girls gasped and giggled, holding onto each other for support. The two French girls who still remained in our bevy rolled their eyes; clearly they’d been around Antoine long enough for their rose-colored glasses to fall off.

As we weaved back through the maze-like streets under the moonlit sky, Antoine eventually slowed down and began to stroll at a more conversational pace. He was only a few feet away from me now, his long, lithe figure casting me in a shadow at his side.

“So, will you be hanging around downtown for the *Vingt Quatre Heures Du Mans* next weekend?” I asked him casually. “Is it like a big deal for you guys?”

“The twenty-four hour race, yes,” he said, sounding amused. “You pronounced that very well.”

“Yeah, Kate speaks better French than any of us,” Caitlyn said, suddenly stepping up like some kind of wingwoman. “She’s really good.”

“Come on, no, it’s not that great,” I protested.

Antoine shot me a look from up above. I hadn't been this close to him before, and didn't realize he was so very tall. *"Tu parles Français, eh?"*

"Oui," I conceded, hunching my shoulders as we strode on.

"Okay, comment l'as-tu appris?"

I had to smile. He'd fallen into the perfect trap: the answer to that question was one I'd rehearsed a million times, should anyone ever ask how I picked up this language.

"Alors, je travaille comme nounou pour une famille Franco-Américaine aux États-Unis depuis cinq ans, et donc, j'entends la langue tous les jours, tout le temps," I said, the words rolling off my tongue in an unbroken stream. My heart skipped with pride, as though I'd just killed the last verse of an Eminem song.

"Ah, bon," he said, rubbing his stubble with his hand to cover his smile. "So...have you been able to understand us when we talk to each other, all this time?" He gestured to Roxane, one of the French students, who walked at his left side.

"Ouais, presque," I admitted. *"Peut-être soixante, soixante-dix percent."*

The two of them pretended outrage. "We'd better watch what we say around her," Roxane said, hands on her hips.

Antoine cupped his hands around Roxane's ear and fake-whispered, *"Ces Américains, ils sont si stupides, non? Quels idiots."*

Then he straightened up, laying his hand on my shoulder. "Wow, it's been so nice to meet you, you are all such wonderful people," he said in his best American accent.

I couldn't not laugh. He was charming, just a little.

We turned the corner back to the Place, where the last tram should have been waiting for us. The fact that it was nowhere in sight troubled me.

“Le tram n’est pas ici,” I groaned. *“Oh là là.”*

Antoine, at my side, let out a ringing laugh.

“ ‘Oh là là!’ ” he repeated, his hand on his chest. *“Les expressions, quand même!”*

I laughed too, amused that such a small thing could impress him so much. But as I thought about it, it’s true: being able to properly handle the expressions of a language is a mark of fluency. And for the record, *“Oh là là”* as a French colloquialism isn’t the wolf-whistle *Pépé Le Pew* makes it out to be: it’s a complaint, a whine, frustration capsulized in one sound bite. I’d only heard it 6,000,000 times from my employers over the years.

But it won Antoine over in a heartbeat. As we waited for the tram in the ghost town of the midnight city square, our voices echoing off the *bâtiments*, it was many minutes before I realized that Antoine and I stood far apart from the group. He had switched almost completely over to French, and we were chatting rapidly back and forth, about music, pop culture, and politics.

“So, Donald Trump,” he said, cocking an eyebrow. “Did you vote for him?”

“I, you know...it was a horrible election,” I hedged, avoiding his gaze.

“You did, didn’t you?” He was gloating, his tongue between his teeth.

“Okay, I did, I did, but I regret it now, okay?” I blurted. “I don’t know why I did it.”

He patted my arm, squeezing it briefly. “It’s okay, I don’t blame you. After all, you had a choice between evil and the devil.”

I laughed. Leave it to the French to romanticize our political bloodbaths.

After awhile, a moment of silence fell. He looked down, contemplating me. I looked back, wondering why.

“Your French is wonderful,” he said finally. “It’s not easy, *ma langue*, with all the grammar and the gender and all that. But you do it quite well.”

I was floored. For the first and only time that night, he succeeded in making me blush.

“Thank you,” I said, adding lamely, “Your English is good, too.”

We heard the sound of the tram coming down the road, and we turned our heads. Three of the Akron girls were slumped together on a bench, and Alec and Caitlyn stood talking with the last French students.

“Well, here’s my ride,” I said.

Antoine swooped down toward the sidewalk and swiped something up between his fingertips. He stuck that hand inside his red jacket and, with his other hand, held up his collar over his face, like a 1950’s comic book spy.

“Hey, wanna buy some stolen tram tickets?” he said, his voice gravelly. He winked.

“Nah,” I said, waving my own. “*J’ai le mien.*”

The tram squealed to a halt, and I walked backwards towards the opening doors.

“*Bonne nuit,*” I said, giving him a salute.

He kept his eyes on me, then just before the doors closed, he burst into the chorus of “My Heart Will Go On,” which he was still singing, badly, as the tram pulled away.

I grabbed onto a pole and planted my feet.

“Oh my gosh, he was so hot, though,” I heard one of the girls saying.

“Personally, I thought he was rude,” Caitlyn said, scrunching her nose to push up her glasses. “Did you hear him tell me to move my ass because it was blocking his view of Emily?”

“Emily, did you hear that? He was so into you,” Addy gushed.

Emily put her hands on her chin like Shirley Temple, batting her eyelashes, then leaned affectionately on Jess’s shoulder. “I hope we see him again.”

I smiled at my reflection in the tram window, tuning out their chatter. Antoine’s spell still hung over our heads in varying measures, but to tell the truth, what I liked about him was what he brought out in me. I’d never spoken so much French so long and so freely and so well before. He’d been the first *Français* to show me what I was capable of, to draw out of me what I’d been keeping mostly to myself. He may not have praised my hair (which would be a stretch for any man), but he praised my tongue.

And coming from a Frenchman, there can be no higher compliment.

Épilogue

Nightfall found me on the platform at the Auber station in Paris. I was exhausted, sweat-covered, and a tad bit anxious, but still, a thread of electricity ran through me: I was going home.

The program in Le Mans had come to a close the day before, and, to toast our success, Caitlyn and I had spent a day in Disneyland Paris before going our separate ways: she to join her parents at their resort, and I to catch a train back to my gracious hosts, Blanche and Bernard, in the Paris suburbs.

If only someday my train would come. I stared at the TV hanging from the ceiling, my eyes starting to twitch. Why didn't it show an ETA for my ride? I pulled out my phone to text Bernard; maybe he'd know why.

My battery was taking the last train to glory itself. I fetched my portable charger and adjusted the patchwork of ancient duct tape on the cable before plugging it into my phone.

As I hit send on Bernard's message, the progress line at the top of the screen shot forward, skidded, then screeched to a halt mid-send. Of course, of course...why should I expect service here, down at catacomb-level? I glared at the line, willing it to move.

Suddenly, a dark, waving hand appeared between my eyes and the screen.

"Excusez-moi, excusez-moi!"

I stumbled back and looked up, startled.

A young woman in black hijab hovered in front of me. Her pretty eyebrows arched in panic, arms fluttering like wings under her robes. And her mouth moved at one million miles an hour.

My heart thudded. I tried to grab hold of a single one of her words, but they all darted past me. What did she want? Was something wrong? Should I run?

Her gestures grew wilder in response to my silence, so I jumped ship.

“*Desolée, je ne parle pas français,*” I stuttered, spreading my hands, backing away. It was a lie, yes, but this moment seemed to nullify years of proof to the contrary.

She was breathless, gesturing helplessly, eyes darting back and forth. It was then I noticed a baby girl in a pink stroller behind her, her lower lip beginning to tremble.

Then the woman’s face lit up. She lunged toward me again, and pointed one finger at me.

“Charger! Charger!” she said in a burst of English. She held up her own phone with a pitch black screen, gesturing with it towards the little box in my hand.

“You need my charger?” I said.

“*Oui...yes!*” she panted. She folded nearly in half, hands on her knees. The baby behind her began to cry.

I stepped closer, one hesitant foot before the other.

“My boy, it’s my boy,” she said, like a strangled half-sob. “At home. *Tout seul...* alone. And I cannot...my phone...I need to say him...that I am *en retard...* that the train is...that I am late for coming home.”

Maternal fright sat bolt upright in my veins. “*Ton fils est tout seul?*”

“*Oui, madame, s’il te plaît,*” she cried.

She need say no more. I unplugged my phone and handed over my cable.

“Merci, merci beaucoup, tu es très gentille,” she said over and over again, her eyes echoing the sentiment. I smiled, nodded.

I watched over the next several minutes as she made a series of phone calls, rolling her stroller-bound child in short strokes and bending down to shush her sweetly, all the while tethered to me by a white and duct-taped cord. She called on neighbors to check on her son, and when the neighbors discovered the boy was not home, she called her son’s friends’ parents to track him down.

Her tenacity mesmerized me. She hadn’t collapsed in fear; she’d been willing to approach a complete stranger to ask for help. Anything to make sure her son was safe.

Before I knew it, our train pulled into the station. She asked if she could sit with me and keep charging just until her stop.

“Bien sûr,” I said.

As the train zoomed into the night, the mother continued her long-distance hunt for her boy. She let her little girl out of her stroller, and as she toddled between her mother’s legs and mine, I smiled at her, played peek-a-boo, buckled her little sandals when they fell off.

In between calls, the mother asked me about myself: where I was from, what brought me to France, what I did back home. And, now, at ease, I answered her simply in French.

“Tu parles très, très bien français,” she said, with a purse of her lips and a short wave, as if to brush away my earlier excuses.

“Merci,” I said, smiling. “I hear it all the time.”

Her phone buzzed, and she picked it up swiftly.

After a moment, she gasped. “*Tu l’as trouvé? Il est avec toi?*” Her shining eyes met mine.

“They found my boy,” she grinned.

I grinned back.

The mother and her baby got off at the next station, and I rode on alone, watching the last of the sunset dip behind the waning cityscape. I wondered how tightly she would hold her little boy when she got home, how she would cry and look him in the face and promise never, never to leave him again. I realized I never asked her how old he was; maybe he was quite big enough to be on his own.

I folded my own arms against my chest and swallowed back my own tears. It was high time for me to go home, too. I had found myself in France, or at least, *une partie* of myself, and that was good. But there was a little boy 4,000 miles away who was probably wondering if I was lost.

I opened my phone and found an old video I’d taken of us singing Carole King together, one that I’d watched a million times. Jeremy was only three then, off-beat and off-key, but he knew every word.

“If you’re out on the road, feeling lonely and so cold,

All you have to do is call my name, and I’ll be there on the next train.”

I’m on the next train, Jerm. Coming home.

“This is a jolly world, and delightful things go on in it”:

Finding Laughter and Light in the Genre of Creative Nonfiction

Believe me, I know—I know we’re all supposed to be a little sensitive about Mark Twain these days. That son-of-a-gun had no respect for racial inequality and played fast and loose with his vocabulary to the point that reading his books can be as wincingly painful an experience as watching someone fall down four flights of stairs. But despite his dysfunctions, I can’t help loving him. He’s inextricably linked to one of the defining moments of my childhood. I must have been 13 years old, sitting at my family’s dining room table on a Saturday morning, with a bowl of Marshmallow Mateys at my elbow and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in my hand. I don’t recall whether I was reading it because I had to, or because I’d chosen to, but as I went over those passages of Tom and Huck inventing their overly-convoluted rescue plan for Jim, I was absolutely crying with laughter. When other members of my family sat down to breakfast, I said, “Listen, listen, you gotta hear this,” and I began to read the book aloud, until the rest of them were laughing with me.

A good book affects you: picks you up, shakes you like a dog, and sets you down again a changed soul. At 13, I knew what I had in my hands was good, because it delighted me, and I instinctually felt it would delight others around me. Twain, of course, had been delighting people for far more years than I’d ever existed, ascending so far that he’s fabled by some to be our best

candidate for Great American Novelist; and while *Huckleberry Finn* was fictional, Twain drew from his own childhood memories and experiences to craft it. I didn't know about that at the time, but I could recognize the elements of greatness in his work. To have the skills to pick and choose, mix and arrange, play with and knock about the words of your native language into a singular collection that not only makes perfect sense, but also makes you laugh—that is the one true magic in this world. And I knew then and there I wanted to be such a magician.

For my Honors Project here at The University of Akron, I've opted to exercise my writing abilities in the genre of creative nonfiction. It's a genre I admire and stand in awe of, because in one sense, I believe it is more difficult to write *well* than fiction. Anyone can play God, inventing a world of one's own and peopling it with never-before-seen characters. But, in a manner of speaking, it's harder to take what God hath already wrought and make it just as jazzy as make-believe. How to tell the story of a life, or a season of life, or even one happenstance, in a way that doesn't put people to sleep? Michael Bay can't be the director of *everyone's* life (more's the pity!). Not every life is wholly romantic, wholly tragic, or wholly bad, but good nonfiction proves that every life can be framed to highlight the dramatic elements that *do* pop up along the way, and, by doing so, evoke a response from readers who can empathize with the real people and real problems about which they read. In this essay, I'd like to lift up some of my favorite authors, whose nonfiction works have held the greatest influence in my exploration of the genre, and whose styles have spurred me on to curate a writing voice of my own.

Since I've already brought up Mark Twain, it's only fair to bring him up once more, to talk about his beautifully absurd work of nonfiction, *The Innocents Abroad*. Mashing up travel memoir with satire, Twain offers a record of his trip across Europe and the Holy Land with a

group of American tourists in 1867. These aren't just journal extracts with day-to-day logs of "we went here," but lavish chapters chock-full of more anecdotes than your laugh-o-meter can conceivably handle. Or, at least, that's what it was like for me. Twain has such fun with the classic travel writing tropes—those of confronting cultural stereotypes, awkward conversations in a non-native language, and the good, bad, and ugly of transportation—that you have to wonder how much of it was *really* true and how much did he decide to ramp up to eleven? On the other hand, sometimes that's the charm of creative nonfiction: getting to play with a story, choosing where to exaggerate for a desired effect. One of my favorite tales in *Innocents* is when Twain and his companions seek out the legendary French barbershop experience, only to be cruelly let down by reality:

From earliest infancy it had been a cherished ambition of mine to be shaved someday in a palatial barbershop in Paris. I wished to recline at full length in a cushioned invalid chair, with pictures about me and sumptuous furniture; ... with perfumes of Araby to intoxicate my senses ... At the end of an hour I would wake up regretfully and find my face as smooth and soft as an infant's. Departing, I would lift my hands above that barber's head and say, "Heaven bless you, my son!"

... The [French] barber ... took us into a little, mean, shabby back room: they got us two ordinary sitting room chairs and placed us in them with our coats on. ... I sat bolt upright, silent, sad, and solemn. One of the wigmaking villains lathered my face for ten terrible minutes and finished by plastering a mass of suds into my mouth. ... Then this outlaw stropped his razor on his boot, hovered over me ominously for six fearful seconds, and then swooped down upon me like the genius of destruction. The first rake of his razor loosened the very hide of my face and lifted me out of the chair. ... I went away from there with my handkerchief about my face, and never, never, never desired to dream of palatial Parisian barbershops anymore. (79-81)

The glory of this scene is not simply that it seems like a Three Stooges romp, but that Twain turned it into one. Going to the barbershop and getting a bad shave would ordinarily warrant little more than a Yelp review, but who wants to read "Don't get your beard trimmed at Pierre's, it sucks"? Twain excels at making the banal seem monumental, earth-shaking, whether or not it

deserves it. It is this comedic inflation of real life that I admire most about his writing, his luxuriating bath of humor.

When it comes to charm, some authors, like Twain, cheerfully beat you about the head with it, but others, like Ernest Hemingway, slip it to you like a note in class. His expatriate memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, is a masterwork of subtlety: what he can't tell you in five words, he'll tell you in three, and those three words will probably knock your socks off. I love this book because, unlike any other book I've read, it has a glow to it, an atmosphere, as though it were a painting instead of a work of literature. I don't just read about Paris, but I see it, I feel it. In fact, it set me up for disappointment once I went to Paris for myself and found it to be nothing like the shining series of romantic *arrondissements* that Hemingway made it out to be. But that was his prerogative: to write Paris as he knew it.

What his work teaches me is that the setting to a story can be nearly as important as the characters and plot that inhabit it. Frankly, I find this to be my greatest area of writing weakness, because I tend to think that setting belongs far, far in the background, or that it doesn't make a difference. But Hemingway shows that, if done properly, it doesn't take much description to give your story an effective stage that unifies the work, that bathes it in a sepia tone or a tense red or whatever shade offers the right foundation. His description of dawn in his Paris quartier is simple but vivid:

In the spring mornings I would work early while my wife still slept. The windows were open wide and the cobbles of the street were drying after the rain. The sun was drying the wet faces of the houses that faced the window. The shops were still shuttered. The goatherd came up the street blowing his pipes and a woman who lived on the floor above us came out onto the sidewalk with a big pot. The goatherd chose one of the heavy-bagged, black milk-goats and milked her into the pot while his dog pushed the others onto the sidewalk. The goats looked around, turning their necks like sight-seers. (43)

None of this description advances the plot or carries deep symbolism, but it captures a snapshot from Hemingway's memories and gives real texture to his text. His appreciation for the small moments in life is part of his genius, and is something that nonfiction writers should seriously consider when crafting their version of the real world.

Hemingway's *Moveable Feast* orbits around life in the quietude of post-war Paris, but there are other memoirs I love set in places far less idyllic. Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is one of the most inspiring real-life stories I've had the privilege to read. Nafisi was a literature professor in Iran during the 1980s-1990s, a female teacher, no less, in a religious culture that constantly threatened to pull the rug out from under her feet. In her memoir of her teaching years, she narrates how she used classic British and American novels to inspire the minds of her Iranian students, comparing the themes of the works to contemporary cultural battles they were facing. When she is forced to quit her job after refusing to wear the veil in the classroom, she forms a secret book club with some of her dedicated female students, and in so doing she shines the spotlight on feisty, clever, enchanting secondary characters who jump off page after page and whose personal stories haunt you ever afterwards.

Nafisi's strength is in the recreation of these book club conversations: their cozy atmosphere and witty dialogue make you feel as though you're sitting on the couch alongside them:

"Some men, even the most educated," Nassarin continued fiercely, "think of this as progressive. I had to argue with a friend—a *male* friend—that the only way he could convince me this was progressive was if the law gave women the same rights as men. You want to know how open-minded these men are? I'm not talking about the religious guys—no, the secular ones," she said, tossing another orange peel into the fire. "Just ask them about marriage. Talk about hypocrisy!"

“It’s true that neither my mom or my aunts married for love,” Yassi said, frowning her brow, “but *all* my uncles married for love. It’s strange when you think about it. Where does that leave us—what sort of legacy, I mean?”

“I suppose,” she added, brightening up after a moment’s reflection, “that if [Jane] Austen were in our shoes, she’d say it’s a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife.” And this was how we started our play on Austen’s famous opening sentence—a temptation that almost every Austen reader must have felt at least once. (259-260)

It is wonderful to know that Jane Austen’s works are just as beloved by the women of nations and cultures so different from my own, and it is through the spyglass of Nafisi that a reader can discover this common ground. While memoirs like Hemingway’s feature celebrity big shots and their quirks, Nafisi’s book tells of remarkable individuals that no one would ever encounter if it were not for her act of commemoration. This is one of creative nonfiction’s greatest opportunities: the chance to reveal the hidden gems in the stories of everyday people, to give loving testimony to their acts of day-to-day courage in the face of oppression and instability. I appreciate *Reading Lolita in Tehran* because it demonstrates that all lives, no matter how seemingly small, have a story worth telling.

Speaking of seemingly small, another nice thing about creative nonfiction is that it doesn’t have to be long-format at all. The humorous essay, for example, is the most delicious literary snack around, compacting life into bite-sized pieces to be enjoyed over afternoon tea. I believe that this form is a lost art in need of renaissance: when everyone and their second cousin can make a blog, a truly pithy article can be drowned out in the noise. That aside, there have been some heavyweight champions in this lightweight arena who have broken my funny bone beyond repair (in the best way possible!), and I want to speak now about my two favorites: Nora Ephron and A.A. Milne. While both of them were best known for their work in other genres

(screenwriting, children's literature), they both spent time as columnists for news or literary magazines, especially in their early careers.

Ephron sweats the small stuff, and we love it because so do we. Her Mona Lisa of essays, in my opinion, is one entitled "I Hate My Purse." It is a mundane pet peeve, this idea of hating purses, but she makes it so relatable it hurts. In the essay, Ephron describes the random contents of her bag—"loose Tic Tacs, solitary Advils, lipsticks without tops, ChapSticks of unknown vintage, little bits of tobacco even though there has been no smoking going on for ten years" (541)—and her lack of instincts when it comes to which types of purses go with which season, and why the hell anyone should care about all that anyway. At the end, she tags along on her friend's quest to find a rare vintage purse at a Paris flea market, only once the purchase has been secured, horror of horrors: it begins to rain, and the purse hasn't been waterproofed!

My friend's eyes began to well with tears. Her lips closed tightly. In fact, to be completely truthful, her lips actually *pursed*. ... She would have to sit there all afternoon and wait for the rain to end rather than expose the bag to a droplet of moisture. It crossed my mind that she and her Kelly bag might have to sit there forever. Years would pass and the rain would continue to fall. She would get old (although her Kelly bag would not) and eventually she and her bag would, like some modern version of Lot's wife, metamorphose into a monument to what happens to people who care too much about purses. Country songs would be written about her, and parables. At that point I stopped worrying about purses and gave up. (544)

There is no doubt Ephron is having way too much fun with this. Once again, like Twain and his French barbershop, Ephron inserts drama where there was none, gently poking fun at her own idiosyncrasies and, by doing so, she offers readers the liberty to do the same. Self-deprecation is one of her strongest suits, and she always doles it out in tasteful measure, using her "otherness" not as a main ingredient but as a spice. This is a balance I am constantly trying to strike as I cultivate my own narrative voice, because my comedic instinct is to point out my many faults

and the troubles they get me into, but I don't want to end up sounding like George Constanza monologuing before the apartment board. Ephron inspires me with her beautiful blend of putdowns and upbeat, and to be compared to her would be the highest compliment anyone could ever pay me.

Like the conceit of *Seinfeld*, writing an essay about nothing, and making it funny, is an act of pure genius. A.A. Milne manages to pull this off again and again in the essays he wrote for *Punch* magazine and other newspapers in the 1920's. In one of his essays, I don't know if he was perhaps suffering from a case of writer's block, and, with mere hours left on the clock, the only thing within reach was his dessert plate, but at any rate, he jots down an adorable little piece about absolutely nothing except "Golden Fruit":

Of the virtues of the orange I have not room fully to speak. It has properties of health-giving, as that it cures influenza and establishes the complexion. It is clean, for whoever handles it on its way to your table but handles its outer covering, its top coat, which is left in the hall. It is round, and forms an excellent substitute with the young for a cricket ball. The pips can be flicked at your enemies, and quite a small piece of peel makes a slide for an old gentleman.

But all this would count nothing had not the orange such delightful qualities of taste. I dare not let myself go upon this subject. I am a slave to its sweetness. I grudge every marriage in that it means a fresh supply of orange blossom, the promise of so much golden fruit cut short. However, the world must go on. (92)

He spends the rest of the essay pitting other fruits against his beloved orange—"Raspberries are a good fruit gone wrong" (93), he sneers—and by the end of the last paragraph, you can't believe you just chuckled your way through a thousand words about *fruit*. As he once observed, "This is a jolly world, and delightful things go on in it" (105), which is a lovely motto, and the perfect attitude for any nonfiction writer to have. If someone ever challenged me to write a thousand words about, say, glove compartments, or beanbag chairs, or unnecessarily long receipts from

Giant Eagle, I only hope that I could live up to the Milne standard of making the ordinary extraordinary.

In fact, that should be the ultimate goal of creative nonfiction: make the ordinary extraordinary. Make small lives loom large. Make little moments belt their hearts out and do a tap dance. Make others see the laughter and light in places where they might not have looked for it before. Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Azar Nafisi, Nora Ephron, and A.A. Milne are just a few of the diamonds in this treasure chest of a genre, but they are the ones who hold the biggest value to me. I know that most magicians never reveal their secrets, but I hope that as I study the greats, and watch them closely, I will be able to pick up their tricks and eventually delight my own audiences the way the greats delighted me.

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Nothing Funny Happened On The Way To My Honors Project: A Self-Analysis

I would love to tell you that my Honors project came to me out of the blue, like an angel pointing out the burial spot of golden plates gleaming with holy inscriptions, or a bald man in highly reflective glasses pushing red pills and kung fu to free the mind. I would love to tell you that I got up at 6 a.m. sharp every morning of the semester and spent a productive hour plugging away at my page count, or that, rather than my deadlines creeping up on me, *I* crept up on *them* and crushed them like a boss every time.

I would *love* to tell you all of those things.

And in theory, I could do it, if I wanted to execute a kickflip of irony. After all, my Honors project was meant to demonstrate my skills in the genre of creative nonfiction. This genre is known for doing what the fictional version of Geoffrey Chaucer in the movie *A Knight's Tale* called “giving the truth scope”—the stretching of real happenstance into a dramatic canvas, contoured here, puffed up there, and given a final coat of glossy veneer.

But I won't. Because in this case, it wouldn't be mere truth scoping: it would be what Merriam-Webster describes as “an assertion of something known or believed by the speaker or writer to be untrue with intent to deceive,” also known as a lie.

My Honors English project did not come easily to me. There were roadblocks, many of them mental, some of them artistic, all of them intensely personal. It tested my patience, my

endurance, my inner demon of perfectionism, and, like Dr. Frankenstein, it was a creation so overwhelming that I may toss it out into the wilderness and hope it never comes back to murder me on an ice floe. Nonetheless, I'm glad to have told my story. It needed to be told. To quote Cosmo Brown, at last I can stop suffering and write that symphony. But before I do that, allow me to tell you all about my suffering (in the key of E, *bien sûr*).

Ideally, the Honors project should be something that an Honors student has set in his or her sights from the beginning of the college experience. For me, it was something that I knew I'd run into down the road, but I was so enchanted with all of the other stops along the way that it was nearly eclipsed. The other stops were crucial, though: without them I wouldn't have known what to do for the project in the first place.

The germination point for my project happened at the end of my Junior year in Fall 2017, the most productive and happy semester of my time here at The University of Akron. Not only was I taking a course on Charles Dickens, one of the authors closest to my heart, but I was engaged in two writing workshops: Intro to Fiction and Intro to Creative Nonfiction. Never before in my life had I been so incredibly productive: between those two workshops, I finished over a dozen pieces of creative writing. It felt impossible and taxing when I was in the midst of it, but in the end, the exercise was so good for me. I left that semester absolutely certain that my Honors project would be a creative one.

Fiction or nonfiction—that was the question. Although I love writing short stories and short films, I was short on inspiration when my project proposal deadline crept up. Due to the absence of a fictional world, I turned to the real one, but even that seemed a terribly blank slate, at first glance. I've always considered my life to be interesting only to myself: the journals I've

been keeping for the past fifteen years are proof of that. But my creative nonfiction course taught me to reconsider. In fact, I'd written a piece for that workshop about my experience as a nanny for a French-American family that was instrumental in changing my mind: for the first time, I was writing about a crucially personal time in my life for an audience, and the audience gave it a toast. It was a good feeling, and I wondered if it could be replicated, or, even better, amplified.

So creative nonfiction it was, and just as I decided this, life was getting interesting: I had signed up for a study abroad program in Le Mans, France to complete my French minor. It would be my first time abroad, and the longest time spent away from home and family to date. Sight unseen, I declared it ripe for storytelling, but I was unsure of the potential crop size. Page limits and other such strictures have always given me hives, and I didn't want to under- or overshoot my estimate in my project proposal. But my project faculty sponsor, Professor David Giffels, helped me solve the problem: why not, he suggested, write about my trip to France *and* my experience working for a French-American family? Two ten-page chapters for each subject would turn the project into an interesting balancing act between the familiar and the unfamiliar, and a chance to show how the sausage got made (the sausage being me speaking French in France). I was both thrilled and nauseated by this idea—because really, who wants to see sausage being made? The challenge would be to make it all come out nicely in the end. Challenge accepted.

The preliminary work on my project was just business as usual: I kept my journal as faithfully as I could while I was abroad in France in June and early July 2018. Keeping the project in my periphery made it easy to see which events would work well as stories and which wouldn't, and I set aside the winners in a list for future reference. The harder part came later,

back at home, when I had to decide what to cover for the other half of the project. At that point, I had been working as a nanny for nearly five years, which amounts to approximately a “hugemongous” amount of material, in five-year-old boy lingo. So over the summer, I sifted through my box of old journals, putting sticky tabs on relevant entries, and eventually I typed up the handwritten pages into my computer. It was grueling, both physically and emotionally. You know how sometimes you’re haunted out of the blue by something stupid you said five years ago? Imagine having all those stupid things written down in thousands of lines of permanent ink: intentionally reading them back to yourself is a unique form of self-torture. 10/10 would not recommend.

When it came time to actually get the ball rolling on my project, I started with France. It was freshest in my mind and far more wieldy. I knew I wanted to talk about my myriad language *faux pas*, and there were many to choose from, but I tried to pick the ones that would evoke the most relatable emotional responses. These emotions ran the gamut from embarrassment, discomfort, and frustration, to amusement, relief, and triumph. I wanted readers to feel not only the tension of my outsider status, both in terms of my language in a foreign country, and in terms of my age in a group of much younger students, but the insecurity and fear inherent in being somewhere completely unfamiliar. On a technical level, I had to decide how to handle the inclusion of French into the narrative. To keep all conversations in their original French would be overkill, but translating them all into English would be too bland. In the end, I hope the balance I struck was tenable: just enough context to give the stories flavor, but not too little to leave the uninitiated guessing.

I saved the first part for last, which, in retrospect, I'm not sure was the best plan. Paring down five years of nanny experiences into approximately twenty pages was excruciating: the angles I could have taken were almost infinite, and, being but a lowly English major, I didn't know what to subtract from infinity to get twenty. My journal entries were both a help and a hindrance: some of them I'd originally written in long narrative format (like the scene in the car in the second chapter), but others were annoyingly brief and unspecific about events that I wanted to cover. To make the best use of space, I made some editorial moves: I took conversations that actually happened on separate occasions and combined them into single settings, sped up timelines by only mentioning the highlights of given years, and kept the scenes of my French classes and solo French studies to a bare minimum in order to keep the conflict focused on the workplace.

These nanny chapters were also much harder to write, simply because the subject matter has far deeper roots in my heart. Turning the people I met in France into characters was easy: my connections with them were brief, memorable, and specific. But I found writing about Jeremy and his parents to be almost impossible, and for the longest time, I couldn't put a finger on why. But I came to the conclusion that it may simply be the nature of my job: because they've been so close to me nearly every day for the past five years, right in front of my nose, I can't always see them well enough to write adequately about them. I was also torn between sugarcoating the less sanguine parts of our relationships and keeping it real. I don't know if this plight is common to the creative nonfiction writer, the process of trying to firmly but faithfully pin down family and friends to words on a page, but if so, I can relate hardcore.

The biggest lesson I learned through this project is that I have far less self-discipline than I thought I did. I fancy myself to be a self-motivated and independent hard worker, but it turns out that that fancy is a little too fancy. Having deadlines for each portion of my project was absolutely vital, and on a macro level it kept things on track, but the seemingly luxurious three weeks between each deadline often led me to eat bonbons and take long bubble baths for two weeks and leave the entirety of the chapter until week three, instead of responsibly spacing out my work. (I do exaggerate, of course: I don't quite know what a bonbon is, and I vastly prefer a shower.) I often chalked up my procrastination to the lack of a muse, but really it was more like the presence of my perfectionism. The times when I sat down to write and hated everything I was writing, I bailed and put the project away until I couldn't possibly delay any longer. Sometimes this last-minute method resulted in some really good material; other times I turned it in with a grimace. In retrospect, I wish I had instead written a little bit each day, even if I despised the results in the moment, so I could have had more time to reflect and proofread *and* relax.

So, now you know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about my creative nonfiction Honors project. There were no ghostwriters, no homework-eating dogs, no seances with Hemingway and Salinger (even if that did happen, I wouldn't tell you)—it was just me, my hopes, my self-doubts, and my work ethic wrestling all the way until the final buzzer. From where I stand, the finished product looks less like a Monet and more like Charlie Brown's Christmas tree. But even that tree deserved a little love, and I imagine that, with time, my affection for my story will grow. Even if it doesn't, I know that I have grown from the mere telling of it, and I am humbled and grateful for those who have been kind enough to read it.