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Living in uncertainty makes me creative.

PANTEA AMIN TOFANGCHI

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FRENCH LESSONS • *Lee Haas Norris*

We cowered beside the armoire in Josette's Perpignan kitchen, my husband Chuck and I, like shame-faced children, one of whom would soon be eligible for Medicare. I was the culprit, but he'd be paying for the damage.

I imagined our hostess' horror at the confession I was about to make. And once we returned home to Maine, what would I tell Sylvie, the friend who'd felicitously arranged our visit here in France with her mother's cousins? At least we were leaving for Spain that day.

It was March 1992, cold and damp. I'd picked up a vicious cold I tried to hide as we had stepped off the train in Perpignan four days earlier. Squat, fiftyish Josette Laurent and her svelte older daughter, gilt-blonde Nicole, had waited for us on the platform, identifying themselves with pink-and-black-lettered signs bearing their names. No one in their family spoke English, my husband *only* English. But after four weeks in the country my post-college French was at its peak. I was thrilled at the prospect of total immersion in Gallic speech and cachet in a home setting.

After weeks of budget pensions and hostel cots, we found ourselves parked in the comfiest bedroom we'd seen in a month, welcomed and pampered like family, our needs taking second place only to Nicole's toddler, Hugo, who joyfully practiced ramming his tricycle against armchairs and table legs. *"Mais c'est adorable,"* cooed the indulgent family members. It was a live and let live household, with cats and pet rabbits perched companionably on sofa cushions and laundry baskets. I almost managed to ignore my clogged sinuses.

For three days Nicole's salesman husband supplied the wine, while Josette turned out casually magnificent classics: *coq au vin, lapin au moutarde, gateau chocolat.* She and the family's younger daughter, Hélène, a modest pharmacist still living at home, seemed to relish teasing Nicole about her stylish couture, her expensive coiffure and cosmetics. *"La Dépensière,"* the spendthrift, they joked. Josette's husband proudly showed off the small trucking firm he owned, where his *belle fille* Nicole worked as the accountant. We toured the cathedral, the thirteenth-century palace. We watched Hélène's boyfriend at rugby practice. The family showed us nothing but kindness and fun. I basked in their warmth.

On our last night Hélène took me aside. She'd noticed my worsening cold.

"Let me give you these pills from the pharmacy. They'll help you to sleep," she offered. My eyes ached, my head throbbed. I took Hélène's pills gratefully and slept deeply – for a while.

We all have those dreams, the dreams that tell us we have to wake up and pee. We grope our way to and from the toilet and back to sleep. For me the dream ended abruptly. I woke up in drenched sheets. Panic shot through me.

"Chuck, wake up, I've wet the bed."

Groggy moans turned to his alert denial. "You haven't." Chuck tends to look on the bright side.

"I have."

"Don't be silly." He felt the bed beside him. "Oops, I guess you have."

I tore off my nightgown, the bottom sheet, the protective under-sheet, then fingered the soaked mattress in disbelief. For a few slow seconds I couldn't move. How could this happen? I was 54 years old, for God's sake.

And for another few seconds I was also seven again, back in the junior cabin at Camp Hochelaga in Vermont, too scared to face the long path through the woods to the toilet during a midnight thunderstorm. Bedwetters at the camp were publicly shamed, made to wash our soiled sheets under the outdoor pump, remake our bunks and lie in them for three days with only cold cereal to eat. Books, puzzles, stuffed animals: all forbidden. No one could speak to us. The memory of those silent tears of shame and humiliation, my face turned to the wall, flooded back. Just those few seconds and I returned to the present.

It was four a.m. I knew Josette rose early to make coffee. I had about two hours before I'd be facing her. First, I'd get dressed and we would pack. Then?

Chuck squinted uneasily at my clenched teeth and at my hands making guilty Lady Macbeth motions.

"I know it's bad. I know you're going nuts. But what can *I* say to them?" Protected by helpless monolingualism, he pulled a blanket to the floor and escaped back into sleep, leaving me to tremble.

Could you even dry-clean a peed-on mattress? It might have to be replaced. Who knew how they treated accidents like this in France? Probably no one had them. The French never drank water except – maybe– when swallowing pills. I would have to confront Josette and lay out the options. Confession first, then the conveyance of abject humiliation: we were not worthy of their hospitality. Next, assurances that we, *mon mari et moi,* would compensate the

family. We would offer to go to the bank with our traveler's checks, fork over cash to Josette, then depart at once.

I had a rough idea of what I needed to say, but pride in my French vocabulary was crumbling fast. Now, sitting on the clothes chest, mutely reproached by the wadded-up evidence of my *faux pas incroyable,* I consulted my stubby Collins dictionary and knew I would never forget the word *matelesse*, mattress.

For two hours I rehearsed atonement. *J'ai mouillé le lit.* I wet the bed. I was ninety-five per cent sure *mouiller* was conjugated with *avoir*, not *être*, but pocket dictionaries don't tell you these things. I practiced subjunctive phrases. "You must allow me to. . . ." *"Nettoyer à sec,"* to dry clean, is embedded forever in my brain. So is *J'en suis absoluement désoleé.* I am completely devastated about it. *J'insiste sur.* I insist upon. Upon your allowing me to pay to have the mattress cleaned? Or for a new mattress? Do I offer to take the mattress in a taxi (I visualized Chuck and me wrestling it down the stairs, the Laurent family staring in shock) – or to take Josette to the mattress store? How many francs would a new mattress cost? Now I was stuck, and not just for vocabulary. J*e vous* implore. *Je veux que vous me pardonniez.* Oh, but I *couldn't* ask her to pardon me.

At 6:15 I heard a pan clatter on the tiled kitchen floor below our room, *"Merde!"* screeched, cats shooed. We headed downstairs. Josette smiled with surprise at our early appearance, her eyes quickly questioning my frightened face. Two hours of rehearsal did nothing to stop me from stumbling over the new vocabulary I'd stuffed into my brain in the last hour. I watched our hostess processing my halting syntax. She stood briefly open-mouthed, then smiled, a little too brightly. *"Comme Hugo. Mais exactement."* Just like Hugo! She pointed to her washing machine. "What else is *that* for?" she asked.

Was I off the hook? What about the mattress? Hélène padded in and Josette took her aside. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but when Josette returned and took my hand, I knew Hélène had told her mother about the pills. Surely they were being exquisitely polite, as only the French can be. Maybe Josette was waiting to consult her husband.

She wouldn't hear of us leaving early. *Mon Dieu.* Our train didn't leave until mid-afternoon! Josette produced mussels in cream sauce and olive oil bread for lunch. The family toasted us *"Bon Voyage"* with champagne. Their faces revealed nothing they hadn't the day before, but such faultless hospitality made me uneasy after the way

I'd repaid it.

Josette and Nicole drove us to the Perpignan station for the short trip to Port Bou, at the French-Spanish border, where we would change trains. Their casual chatter sounded merry enough. Just before we boarded, Nicole dashed into the waiting room café. We had no choice but to accept the sandwiches, pastries, chocolate, and bars of creamy nougat she pressed on us for our long journey to the south of Spain. You couldn't get anything decent to eat on Spanish trains, she sniffed.

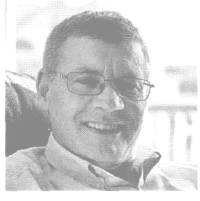
Once we were back in Portland we sent them handmade table linens and a box of Maine gourmet specialties from L.L. Bean, and hoped for the best. We got no response, but two months later Sylvie came over with a letter she'd just received from Josette's sister.

There was news of the Laurent family all right. Nicole, whose expensive makeup and stylish outfits had always puzzled the family – far beyond anything the young couple's modest salaries could afford, Hélène had insisted – had been falsifying the account books at her father's trucking firm for years, robbing him blind. (The image of that lavish assortment of trip goodies she'd bought for us flashed before me.) Just recently she'd been caught pocketing cash from the safe and the truth had come out. The business was *à genoux,* on its knees. No mention of us or the incident that had punctuated the end of our visit.

I reread the letter slowly to be sure I wasn't missing anything. As I took in the disgrace engulfing the Laurents I found myself finally letting go of my own lingering shame. I thought about the generous, seemingly ideal family that had given us three almost perfect French days. I pictured a fractured trust binding them now. What kind of dinners would Josette have the heart to prepare these days? Who had the appetite to eat them?

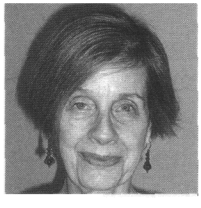
No, the state of a guest bed *matelasse* would have long been rendered irrelevant, the guest's involuntary *faux pas* now trivial. Lessons of language and consequences of greed mingled in my mind. Whatever the Laurents were going through Josette was keeping it close. I didn't suppose we'd be hearing from her any time soon.

One is about a girlfriend – who became my wife. Another is about a person just before being wounded in an accident. This poem (p. 51) is about my father, who died when I was 16 and he was 47. That was the most traumatic event in my life and I have never stopped (probably never will stop) writing about that event.



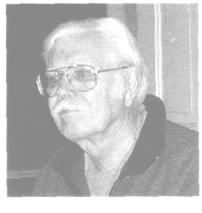
PETER E. MURPHY (NJ) My poems have appeared in *The Atlanta Review, Beloit Poetry Journal, Commonweal* and elsewhere. When not teaching at Richard Stockton College, I direct the annual Winter Poetry & Prose Getaway and other programs for poets, writers and teachers in the U.S. and abroad.

Very few Murphy men have gotten out of their fifties. "Spontaneous Combustion" (p. 33) was written after one of several cardiac episodes. One hopes to "rage, rage against the dying of the light," but when darkness comes, surrender is inevitable.



LEE HAAS NORRIS (OR) I have published nonfiction in *The Literary Bohemian, Persimmon Tree, The Gettysburg Review* and other publications. I served in the U.S. Peace Corps in Moldova in my sixties, later earned an M.A. in English, and taught in the Czech Republic. I'm an avid reader, English Country dancer, musician, choral singer and traveler.

When people ask me what I write I tend to say "stories about my life that are almost but not quite true." "French Lessons," (p. 17) however, is a true memoir. I kept a journal on that trip and I always knew I'd make a story out of this incident. Twenty years later, I finally did it.



PAUL PEKIN (IL) I was born and raised in Blue Island, IL, lived at the same address in Chicago since 1965, worked as a printer, a store owner, a college teacher, and finished up as a police officer for the Cook County Forest Preserve. Children, grandchildren, great grandchildren. Beautiful wife. Was published in *Passager* long ago.

"Silence" (p. 34) is part of a longer memoir. I've always been interested in how memory works, how the past seems to persist, but rarely in an orderly