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The voices in my head, December 13, 2000

BY ELIZABETH TAKACS

From November 2000 to December 2001, my husband, Kristopher Takacs (Lehigh 95) and I had the good fortune to live in Paris. During our stay, I kept a journal. The following is one of my early entries.

I speak nearly flawless French. And I speak it all day long. People on the street stop me to ask directions, and I'm always happy to oblige. I proffer just enough information to deliver them to their destination with ease, always sending them on their way with a *Bonne Journée!* Sometimes strangers strike up conversations with me. They can tell from my slight accent that I'm foreign, so usually they ask me where I come from. I tell them, and with great detail, too. I make mistakes, but for the most part, I catch them immediately. They always smile, often offer polite advice or even an insider's tip. I feel my mastery of the language improving as each day wears on and new opportunities to speak come my way. I smile as I hear myself weaving the idioms I've gleaned from these conversations into my own speech.

These are the voices in my head. We spend the day together, practicing French in silence, although occasionally you will see my lips move. The people do exist, I just make up the voices...and the conversations. The woman sitting across from me on the metro, she may say, "What a lovely scarf. What's it made of?" And I'll respond, "It's a Pashmina scarf. It's embroidered, too. It was a gift from my husband last Christmas." From here the conversation can go in any number of directions: "What does your husband do?"; "Where did he buy such an exquisite scarf?" or "Are you a practicing Christian?" With an easy, unaffected charm, I answer her questions as the train makes its way. My real conversation partner exited at Concorde, but that doesn't matter, our tête-à-tête lasts as long as I'd like it to. There's no need to politely bow out of these conversations. *Poof!* She's gone, and I'm discussing the dangers of co-habitations in the French parliamentary system with a Moroccan gentleman in a café.

People do really stop me to ask directions. It happens practically every day. When I respond it is without fail that their faces reveal the unmistakable shift from polite

eyebrow-raised inquiry to a half-smile, merci-beaucoup-anyway expression of leave-it-to-me-to-pick-the-foreigner. And when I stop someone to ask for directions I see the concern well up in their eyes as they, presumably for my benefit, strip down their response to the absolute bare bones. "Could you direct me to the Bon Marché department store?" I politely asked a woman today. "Go right here," she responded with a worried look dramatically gesturing to my right. "The store is big, you'll see." I turned right and walked and walked and then walked some more. I walked so far I wondered if my grasp of this language was so tenuous, even the simplest of directions eluded me. Then I wondered if she had done this to me on purpose, offered me the simplest set of the wrong directions so that she could rest assured that I was certain to get lost. But that was just my stranger-in-a-strange-land defensiveness kicking in. Sure enough, Le Bon Marché appeared on the horizon. She didn't have to edit out useful information such as "it's a good 10 blocks down" or "it's going to take you a good 10 minutes or so to get there" for the sake of simplicity and my ability to comprehend. But that's exactly how people react to a foreigner here. I'm sure that's true anywhere.

Twice last week I spent the afternoon conversing with a German woman named Iris. We're both students at the not-so-renowned "L'Ecole Eiffel" language school. Anxious for actual companionship and grateful for the opportunity to really practice my French, out loud and all, I happily agreed to meet her for coffee. At the first meeting I struggled to tell her why I had come to Paris. Verb tenses jumbled in my head, my tongue jumbled in my mouth, I served up my French in slow, sloppy portions, punctuated by long, awkward pauses. Iris' French was a lot smoother (and palatable), largely due to the fact that throughout her nearly 4-week stint at L'Ecole she was residing in a French household. By our second meeting, my French had calmed and settled into something somewhat passable. I could form sentences. Together we sat in the ruin of a Roman amphitheater in the middle of Paris watching pick-up Pétanque games. Pétanque, otherwise known as Boules, is the French version of Bocce ball.

"There's something strange," I commented in French. "A woman playing Pétanque."

Iris replied, "Is it a man's game?"

And to that I said, "Yes, it's typically a man's game."

My husband, a veteran student of the Spanish language, had told me about this, how a large part of communicating in a second language involves acting. As unfamiliar words spring from your mouth, you must somehow make the new feel like old-hat. As awkward sentence structures become a part of your method of communicating, you must complete the illusion and help your audience believe this is, at the very least, somewhat natural for you. How poetically just, then, that I would get my first taste of true French conversation in that Roman theater. Out loud. Before an absent audience, but an actual conversation partner.