

French Lesson

Judith Edelman

Être

Gregory is studying French today; he's trying to conjugate the verb 'to be'—*être*. *Je suis*, he learns. I am. *Je suis Gregoire*. *Gregoire*, he knows, is what they will call him in France. It's what his wife Claire has been calling him for weeks. To prepare, she said. Claire speaks some French already and Gregory promised her he would learn before their trip.

Yesterday, he said to Claire, *Je suis Gregoire*, and she said, "It's better to say, '*Je m'appelle Gregoire*,' I call myself Gregory."

He told her, "I haven't gotten to that yet. I'm still working on 'to be.'"

"Okay, go be," she said. "But you won't remember it tomorrow."

Claire has always teased him about his memory. Not his memory for dates, which is excellent—he can remember, for example, the exact day Claire cut her hair short: Monday, April 9th. He remembers because it was chilly in Boston and all he could think about when he saw her with her new haircut was her neck, how cold it must be without her hair.

"It's more chic this way," she told him. "I don't want to look like a hippie in Paris."

But Gregory wondered how she was going to keep her neck warm. Claire has never worn scarves. Her neck looked exposed without her hair. He blew on it—quiet *baaas* of warm air—as they walked along the windy Charles. She called him the human space heater.

He isn't as good about remembering lists of things. Claire teases him about this.

She would say, "Get onions, milk, ground beef, toilet paper. You're not writing it down."

"I'll remember," he would reply. Then he'd bring home cheese, paper towels, ground beef, and potato chips. Sometimes on the phone he tells her he is writing things down, when he isn't.

Claire thought he would benefit from having a French teacher. "I don't need a teacher," he said. "I have you."

But it's true, conjugations are hard for him. They're like lists.

"Maybe you should just learn phrases in French," Claire said. "Like 'Excuse me, where's the bathroom?' or 'Could you tell me where I can buy an expensive hat for my beautiful wife?'"

"How do you say, 'Where can I buy a beautiful scarf for my expensive wife? Her neck is cold.?'?" Gregory said.

"*Une belle écharpe*, a beautiful scarf. *Ma femme chère*, my expensive wife. Not to be confused with '*ma chère femme*,' my dear wife."

He blew on her neck. "My dear expensive wife."

Gregory feels as though he's been studying French forever and not getting anywhere. He remembers certain words from yesterday, but not many, and he's back to square one with the conjugations. Gregory is crying but he can't remember why.

Avez-vous faim?

His French teacher thinks Claire is right: Gregory should learn phrases. But she doesn't seem to know any. She sits across from Gregory at the kitchen table in his house and she looks through his book. She reads out loud to him, so he can repeat them back to her. Her accent is worse than his.

"Are you sure you want to study French today?" she says.

"My wife and I are going to France on our anniversary."

"Do you remember that date?"

"June 17th."

"My husband doesn't have the faintest idea when our anniversary is," she says.

Gregory tells her that while they are speaking French together, she can call him *Gregoire*.

"Would you like anything to eat or drink, Gregwaahr?"

"Shouldn't you be asking me that in French?" he says.

“Oh, right.” She rifles through the pages of his French book until she comes to a picture of people eating in a restaurant. She squints at the dialogue underneath. “Let’s see. *Avez-vous faim?*” Gregory doesn’t know French, but he knows this woman is butchering it.

He can’t wait for Claire to come home so he can ask her where the hell she found this woman. Today is Sunday, so she’s working a short day at the Williams-Sonoma store at Copley Place—she’ll be home by three. He slept late and the French teacher was already at the kitchen table drinking coffee and flipping through his French book when he got up. Claire must have let her in before going to work.

They’ve been at it a couple of hours already, and Gregory thinks they are making shitty progress. The French teacher sure eats a lot, too.

“Look—,” he hunts around in his memory for her name, but can’t come up with it. She must have told him her name. Too late to ask again. “Look, Madame,” he says.

“Suzanne,” she says.

“No offense, Suzanne, but I think I’d make better progress on my own.”

“That’s fine,” she says. “But can you tell me who I am?”

“Don’t you know?” he says. “Can I have my French book back?”

She pushes the book across the table toward him. He is never going to let Claire live this one down. It’s after one. She’ll be home in a couple of hours.

Gregory turns his back on the woman, thinking she’ll get the hint and leave. She pours him a glass of orange juice although he didn’t ask for one. She puts some pills on the table.

“Take your meds, Greg.”

Gregory ignores her. He’s conjugating *avoir*, to have. I have hunger, you have hunger, he has hunger, we have hunger. Everybody’s hungry, Gregory thinks. He lays the book on the table and tries to recite the conjugation from memory but he can’t remember what comes after *j’ai faim*.

The French teacher looks in the refrigerator again. She makes two sandwiches with their ham and their bread. Gregory is beginning to get annoyed. He *has* to learn something before Claire comes home from work. He wants to show her he’s trying to learn French for their trip.

Gregory doesn’t care about going to France. He would be just as happy to stay here in Cambridge, but the trip means everything to Claire. June 17th is their five-year anniversary. Other people wait until bigger anniversaries to take a big trip, but he and Claire are going now. It’s what Claire wants. She’s been fixated on it ever since she started working at Williams-Sonoma a couple of years ago. They sell lots of French products there and she caught the bug—the French bug. She got herself a French tutor then, a college student who came to the house. Claire got pretty good, pretty fast, with the help of that skinny French kid. He was studying at Boston University and needed extra cash. He tutored Claire, and she fed him big meals. They would finish their lesson and she would ask him if he wanted something to eat. “*Oui, j’ai faim!*” he always said.

Gregory looks down at the people in the picture. They are eating at an outdoor café in France. He assumes it’s France; it sure isn’t Boston. Also, the people in the picture look like the French kid who gave lessons to Claire. Black turtlenecks and skinny pants. French, all right.

Bon

Going to France for their anniversary was his idea. They’d been disagreeing a lot. Over stupid things, like his not bringing home the right groceries, which usually was a joke between them. “Write it *down*,” she’d say, but with her teeth set on edge, which was the difference. He wanted to tell her to relax, but he wasn’t a stupid man.

Back then, when Claire’s hair was still long, she wanted a baby. That was one thing Gregory did *not* want. No kids, he told her before they got married. She said fine, she didn’t care about kids. But somewhere along the line, she started caring about kids.

“Look at that one. She’s so cute,” she said, pointing to one on their daily walk along the Charles.

“She’s a beaut all right. Nice lines.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That blue sailboat. What are *you* talking about?”

She hit him in the arm.

“Boat’s cuter,” he said.

She didn’t laugh.

Seeing Claire unhappy made him unhappy. He thought French lessons would help, which was why he kept his mouth shut about the French kid hanging around and eating all their food. But he came home from work one day and found her crying in front of a PBS special where they showed a baby growing in the womb. It wasn’t a real baby, but it looked pretty real and it was making Claire cry. Before he knew what he was doing, the words were coming out of his mouth. “Let’s go to France,” he said.

She looked up from the pretty-good fake *in utero* baby on the television as it was putting its thumb in its mouth. “You want to go to France?”

He stood in front of the screen, blocking the baby. “With you,” he said.

Claire cried some more, but she was also smiling, so Gregory felt he’d hit on the right thing. France. For their fifth anniversary.

He thought that was it—he had distracted her from the baby thing—but after a few months she started asking him to learn French.

“I can say ‘*bon voyage*’ and ‘*bon appetit*’ and ‘*Au Bon Pain*,’” he’d said. “That’s ‘good’, right? *Bon?*”

Then, at the beginning of April, Claire cut her hair and that PBS baby special went into reruns, so he agreed to learn French.

“*Bon*,” she’d said.

Excusez-moi

It’s incredible, but the French teacher has picked up the telephone. The phone rang and she went over and answered

it. Now she’s talking to someone. Someone who called Gregory and Claire’s house. Gregory gets up from the table and walks over to where the woman is leaning against the wall, talking on the kitchen phone. “*Excuse me*,” he says. She holds a finger up. One minute, says the finger.

She’s talking as if she knows the person so it must be Claire, because who else would call his house that the French teacher would know? He holds out his hand for the telephone and she turns her back on him to face the wall.

“I’m not sure being at home is working out for him,” the French teacher whispers into the phone. Then she writes a list. “Deodorant, chips, beer. Do we need paper towels?”

“*Excusez-moi*, can I talk to my wife now please?” Gregory says to the French teacher’s back. She is wearing a short-sleeved, V-necked cotton shirt and coordinated pants. Scrubs. Her shirt has neon fish all over it and pulls at her armpits. He can see where her bra is cutting into her back fat.

This time he gets a whole hand held up in his face. All five fingers yelling “wait” at him. “Around seven,” she says into the receiver. Her hand is frozen in the air, telling him to wait.

He can’t wait for Claire to come home so he can kill her. But before he kills her, he is going to say something in French, so she’ll know that despite this crazy, crappy French teacher she hired, who is now talking on their phone and eating their food, he has actually learned something today. She’ll know he’s committed to learning French for their trip. To making her happy. Then he’ll kill her.

“I love you,” says the French teacher and hangs up the phone. “That was my husband. Do you remember Bill?”

She is acting as though Gregory should know who the hell Bill is. He racks his brain to remember if Bill is somebody Claire mentioned. Someone he should know. He’s not sure.

He looks at the clock. It says it’s 3:05. Gregory says to the French teacher, “Claire will be home any minute.”

He planned to make lots of progress before she got home, but the French teacher has royally screwed that up.

“Go home,” he says.

“It’s not time for me to go home yet,” she says. “Take your meds, Greg.”

“You take your meds,” he says.

The French teacher hands him the glass. She watches him put the pills on his tongue and take a big mouthful of orange juice. “That’s better,” she says.

Gregory spits the juice and the pills into the French teacher’s face. “*Excusez-moi*,” he says.

Chevals

Claire’s long brown hair was the first thing Gregory noticed about her, the first time he saw her. He saw how her hair slid down her back between her sharp shoulder blades like a sunny brown creek around rocks. Gregory is no poet, but he sees a river when he looks at Claire’s hair. *Saw* a river, because since she cut her hair short last week, there’s no river, no rocks, only a chic cut and a white neck which must be cold. And there’s a trip to France in that haircut. Her new *cheval*, she called it, or that’s what Gregory thought he heard.

Claire accused him of not liking her new hair.

“That’s not true,” he told her. “I love your new *cheval*. I love every *cheval* on your head.”

“You just said you love every horse on my head.”

“I do. Every horse.”

Then they argued yesterday, or was it a few weeks ago—he doesn’t remember. They argued about how to get to Quincy in time for dinner with Claire’s parents. Gregory wanted to drive. Claire wanted to take the T. It was another chilly day, and a rainy one. He was only thinking about her neck, he told her, her cold neck.

“See,” said Claire, “you *don’t* like my hair.”

He said he didn’t want them to be late for dinner. Claire gave in, but only because she didn’t want them to be late either, not because she thought her neck would be cold.

Gregory didn’t really care if they were late. Gregory hates his mother-in-law’s meatloaf. And Quincy is a haul—across the Charles and clear the other end of the Bay—especially when you factor in eating dinner with Claire’s parents. Gregory likes them, but they want grandchildren and he already has his hands full, keeping pictures of babies off the television screen, joking Claire out of noticing kids on the street, diverting her attention with their trip to France, and learning French, keeping all those verbs conjugated and words straight. At Jack and Louise’s house, he would try to keep everybody’s mind on France, a place he never wanted to visit in the first place.

On the drive, he was exhausted thinking about all that work ahead, on top of Louise’s meatloaf. Claire shook her hair at herself in the sun-shade mirror. Shook her brown hair that used to be a river down her back, but was now a bunch of horses on her head. Then she told him that she hired a tutor to come teach him French in the morning, while she’s at work, selling French things at Williams-Sonoma. She hired a French teacher and didn’t ask him. Gregory was glad not to be on the T, since it was raining and Quincy is practically on the other side of the world, but at that moment, he didn’t want to be in the car with Claire either.

Something—fury? fear? despair? he doesn’t know what—flashes through Gregory’s mind as he remembers that awful drive to Quincy. His head hurts so much he cries out.

Dimanche

The clock tells Gregory it’s 4:30. He panics. “I have to find Claire,” he yells at the French teacher. “She should have been home an hour ago.” He grabs the phone, but the French teacher won’t let him use it. He puts on his light-weight windbreaker, the one he wears in the spring, but when he moves toward the door, she blocks him. She’s a big lady. Gregory thought she was just fat, but now he can see that she’s got some muscle on her.

“It’s okay,” she says. “We just have to remember.” She leads him into the living room and they sit. She holds his hand in her fat

one. Hers is cool and dry and, though he doesn't want her to touch him, it feels pretty good against his damp palm.

"I have to call the police," he says.

"Do you remember the accident? Eight months ago. Do you remember your injury? Your head?"

Now that she says this, he does remember, but she is wasting precious minutes with conversation. He needs to get to Claire wherever she is.

"And do you know that Claire was killed? She's dead."

The French teacher has knocked the air out of him without landing a punch. "I know," he says, and thinks he does.

"Here," she says, opening up the French book and handing it to him. "Let's study the days of the week. We'll feel better."

Gregory looks at the list of days. *Lundi, Mardi, Mercredi, Jeudi, Vendredi, Samedi, Dimanche*. They look like girl's names to him. Except *Dimanche*. *Dimanche* isn't a girl. It's not a boy either, though, he thinks. It's nothing, except that it's today. Sunday.

"What day is it today?" she says.

"*Dimanche*," he says, looking at the list of days.

"*Dimanche* means Wednesday?" she says.

"You're not really a French teacher," Gregory says.

She smiles with all her teeth and he sees that her top teeth are white and even, but her bottom teeth are crooked. He doesn't know which to look at.

"A nurse," she says. "Yours."

She gives him his meds again and, as he swallows, Gregory reads through the days of the week and thinks at least he'll have something to recite to Claire when she gets home. Then he remembers she should have been home a long time ago.

The French teacher sits with him a while and then says, "Better?" Gregory does feel different. Stranger, weaker. She says she's going to use the bathroom quickly. "Stay right here, okay?"

"Okay," says Gregory. When he hears the bathroom door close, he gets up and opens the front door. He's still wearing his spring jacket. He closes the door quietly behind him and the wind

knocks him sideways into a snow bank. Yesterday, it was raining, a hard, chilly spring rain, when they drove to Jack and Louise's house in Quincy for meatloaf. Today, it is frigid and snow is piled three feet high. Gray snow, old snow. Gregory pushes himself up out of the snow and staggers away from the house. It's turned to winter overnight. Gregory can't remember how to get to Williams-Sonoma. He'd like to turn his steps that way, but he doesn't know which way that is, and he thinks it's far. Farther than Quincy, maybe. Practically as far as France. But he will walk to France if he has to, to find Claire.

He thinks the Charles River is near. Decorations hang in people's windows and on their porches—wreaths, strings of lights, red ribbons, reindeer. As he walks, he is trying to remember how to conjugate verbs: to be, to have. He's forgotten to bring his French book. It's still on the couch, so he has to recite the French words by heart. This will steady him; this will keep him warm on this unaccountably frozen day. How to say I'm hungry. How to say he loves every horse on Claire's head. But there's nothing in there, in his mind. Not nothing, just today. He remembers an accident, and he remembers that Claire is alarmingly late, and he remembers *Dimanche*, the French word for Sunday, not a girl or a boy, and he says it over and over in time to each step he takes away from his house. He finds the river.

No translation

If they hadn't already crossed the Charles and been halfway to Quincy, Gregory might have turned the car around, he was that angry. Steaming. Claire didn't ask him if he wanted a French teacher—she just went ahead and hired one for the next morning.

"Because you don't think I can learn it on my own," Gregory said.

"I just think it'll help," she said.

"Because you don't think I can learn it on my own," Gregory said.

"I thought it would be fun, *Gregoire*."

He thought of the skinny French kid in his black turtleneck, eating their food. It was dumping rain outside now. Buckets of cold water. Gregory couldn't see the road ahead.

"Aren't you glad we aren't taking the T?" he said.

She shook her horses at herself in the sun-shade mirror. "Did you know there's no direct translation for the word 'fun' in French?" she said.

That didn't surprise him at all. "I don't want a French teacher," he said.

"Well, I'm not cancelling on her and it won't kill you to spend the morning learning something." She shook her horses. The rain pounded. Gregory sped up to get through the night faster.

The last thing Claire said was something in French. "Can we give the French a fucking rest for one night?" said Gregory. And the rain pulled the road out from under them.

Claire

There are no boats on the Charles, no sailboats. It's too cold for boats, though it's the middle of April, Gregory thinks. The wind off the Charles slices through his thin jacket, right into his chest. His eyes hurt but he can't close them; they are frozen open.

A bundled-up woman holds the mittened hand of a tiny child in a snowsuit. The two walk haltingly by the river, by Gregory. The woman points to the Charles and says "water"; she points to a pigeon, says "bird"; to Gregory, "man." The child is silent, but looks where the woman is pointing.

The child is beautiful, Gregory thinks, beautiful, but terribly cold. The wind has turned the baby's cheeks bright red. Gregory lurches a few steps, reaching for the cold baby, and the French teacher appears at his side, huffing and stern and pink in the face. As she grabs Gregory's arm, he is trying to remember the verbs he'll need in France, but all he can remember is how to say Claire's name in French: Claire. ❧