

Robert R. Hellenga

I Speak a Little French

It was December and I was forty-nine years old, going on fifty. I tried not to let it get me down, but when my daughter wrote to say that she wouldn't be coming to Florence for the holidays, I didn't see how I could hang on in Italy for another seven months. On the other hand, I didn't see how I could go home before June without losing face. After all, hadn't I always carried on about Florence as if it were the Garden of Eden, the earthly paradise, the promised land? How would I explain? What would I say? That I was lonely? That there was no one to talk to? That I had fallen from grace?

I needed to talk; I needed to get things into words, needed to get them out into the open where I could hear them. When I was a boy I had so much energy I used to say that my legs hurt from not running. That's the way I felt. My whole being hurt from not talking. So I talked to myself, told my own story to myself as I walked along the Arno in the morning on my way to the Uffizi, or on my way from the Uffizi to the British Institute in the afternoon, using a sort of *aria parlante*; and in Italian the story of my wife's affair with and subsequent marriage to our family dentist took on an operatic dignity that it lacked in English. The cramp of jealousy was relaxed; the sting of humiliation drawn; the ache of incomprehension eased.

Coming back to Italy after the divorce had seemed like a good idea, but things hadn't worked out the way I'd expected. The dollar was down; rents were up; and I was on leave without pay. Instead of walking home at night through narrow streets to my own little apartment in an old palazzo — inconvenient but interesting — I found myself living in a furnished room — no cooking privileges — in the very upper left-hand corner of the map, an hour's ride from the Piazza del Olio where I picked up the no. 23 bus. I sent postcards to everyone with whom I'd ever exchanged addresses during previous visits, but by the end of October I had received only two invitations. Instead of juggling a busy social

schedule, I found myself eating salami sandwiches in my room. I entertained myself with the fantasy of finding an Italian wife, someone stunning and raven-haired, someone who still believed in the sanctity of family life, someone I could talk to. But no such someone materialized, and I found myself stretched out on my bed looking through the personals in *La Pulce*:

RAGAZZA 38enne, carina,
colta, sensibile, estrema pul-
izia morale, cerca uomo
stessi requisiti, per un rap-
porto affettivo serio ed even-
tuale matrimonio, gradita foto
restituibile e telefono. F.
P. C. FI P.A. 281.901.1/P

But at the last minute I lost my nerve; instead of sending the photo which I'd taken of myself at one of the automatic machines outside the station, I signed up for cooking lessons in the basement of the *Istituto Culturale*, where I learned to prepare a number of elaborate dishes, including pumpkin soup and truffled capon, that I'd never eaten before and have never eaten since.

I'd reserved a double room for Sara — my daughter — at a small *albergo* on the Arno, not far from the Biblioteca Nazionale, but I put off cancelling the reservation till the very last minute — till the night of her intended arrival, in fact. The night clerk, Volmaro, with whom I'd discussed her visit several times, refused to return my deposit, and we had a regular argument with shouting and gesturing. Afterwards, nervous and upset, I took one street and then another and soon found myself at the little Piazza San Pier Maggiore, where I had a drink at the *bettola* under the Arc of San Piero. It was one of the few places in the city where men gathered to drink in silence, as they do in American bars, though the *bettola* was so small that the patrons had to stand outside.

I drank a glass of cheap red wine, then another, and then a third. From where I was standing I could see the *friggitoria* where Bill — Bill is my son — and Sara had spent their pocket money on french fries and hamburgers; I could see the bakery where I'd bought bread every morning and the *latteria* and the *pizzicheria* and the lighted windows of our old apartment. I had another glass of wine and then I had one of those revelations that come from time to time to almost everyone who drinks

more than occasionally: everything suddenly becomes sparkling clear, like a fruit tart painted with apricot glaze; you see things as they are; you experience viscerally what you've known all along: that you should return good for evil, that material possessions aren't important; that in the light of our mortality what's really important is love.

At least that's the way it was with me that night. I was overwhelmed with love for all humankind: for my six or seven drinking companions who, like me, had their collars turned up against the cold; for distant friends; for my children; for my enemies (i.e., my wife and her husband, D.D.S.).

Spurious? Undoubtedly, but spuriousity wasn't the immediate problem. The immediate problem was that wisdom of this sort demands expression. The emotions become too big for the body and have to be released through the mouth.

Which I opened, and said, not addressing anyone in particular, "That Baggio is really something, isn't he." (Baggio was a sort of Florentine Michael Jordan; I didn't really care for soccer, but I read the sports pages in *La Repubblica* so I'd have something to talk about.) "Three goals in three minutes," I said. There were some grunts of agreement in response, but no actual words. "Against Napoli," I said. "Must be some kind of a record."

I was about to order another glass of wine when I noticed a young woman crossing the piazza dragging the largest suitcase I'd ever seen. The suitcase had wheels on it so that you could pull it down long airport corridors, but the wheels were too small for the rough paving bricks of the piazza and the suitcase kept tipping over, like a large dog that keeps flopping itself down. She wasn't able to go twenty feet without the suitcase falling, and it was so big and heavy she had trouble setting it upright again. I stepped out from under the arc to get a better look, and when she saw me, in the light of the piazza, she cried out: "*Acqua, acqua.*"

I shrugged my shoulders. After all, there were two bars in the piazza, in addition to the *bettola*. We were in the center of a modern city, not in the middle of the desert.

"*Acqua, acqua.*"

I could hear the tears in her voice.

"*Acqua Arno,*" she said, and it dawned on me that she was looking for the river.

"*Right down the Via Verdi,*" I said, in Italian, pointing to the street.

The suitcase tipped over again and this time she left it. "*Acqua Arno,*" she repeated.

"*Parla Italiano?*" I asked, helping her right the suitcase.

"Acqua Arno."

"English?"

"Je suis française."

"Ah," I said. "*Non parla italiano? o inglese?*"

"*Française*, she repeated. "*Je suis française.*"

I'd had two years of French in college and said the first thing that popped into my head: "*Je peux parler un peu de français.*"

"*Dieu merci.*" A look of relief rose to her face. "*Je cherche l'Arno, s'il vous plait . . .*" She kept going, but too fast for me to follow. Quite naturally she expected more, but unfortunately there was no more. To her rapid questions I could make only a single response: "*Je peux parler un peu de français,*" which I kept repeating, hoping that something would click. But nothing clicked. I was imprisoned in a single phrase. What had looked like an open door was a *trompe l'oeil*.

"Acqua Arno?" This time it was a tentative question. She had given up. She was a damsel in distress, and I was her knight errant; but without the sword of language I couldn't come to her rescue, so I pointed her, once again, down the Via Verdi towards the river — *acqua Arno* — and watched as she crossed the piazza. She reached the post office; the enormous suitcase teetered, tottered, and fell over again. She struggled to set it on its wheels, and then she disappeared around the corner and was gone.

Je peux parler un peu de français. It was ridiculous. It was maddening. *Je peux parler un peu de français.* It didn't occur to me at the time that if I'd gone on in French, in school, instead of switching to Italian I'd probably be in Paris instead of Florence, or that if she had spoken Italian, she wouldn't be in the middle of the piazza asking for *acqua Arno*. No, all I could think of was that my whole life had been leading up to this point, and I'd studied the wrong language.

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I caught up with her in front of the Banco di Lavoro on the Via Verdi. I hadn't made a decision; I'd just paid for another glass of wine, and then, without drinking it, I'd started to run after her. She hadn't gotten far because of the suitcase which, between the two of us, we managed to keep upright — two police officers escorting a troublesome drunk — until we reached the river.

"*Pension*," she said, looking up and down the *lungarno*.

"*Pensione*," I said, not knowing if she had a particular *pensione* in mind or if she were *looking* for a *pensione*, any *pensione*. "*Indirizzo*," I

said; "address." No response. "*Uhndrezz.*" I gave the English word a French twist, but she didn't understand.

It was the third week in December. The weather was not cold as we understand cold in Chicago, but it was chilly and I thought she needed more clothes, warmer clothes.

The small *albergo* where I'd reserved a room for my daughter was not far away, just past the Biblioteca Nazionale. Since I hadn't collected my deposit earlier in the evening — I'd paid in advance for two nights — I considered the room reserved.

Volmaro, with whom I had quarreled bitterly only an hour earlier, gave me a puzzled look, as if there'd been some mistake. "*Professore,*" he said. "Your daughter has arrived after all?"

I explained the situation and Volmaro smiled. Nothing enigmatic, just a smile.

"You can put my deposit toward her bill."

"Of course, but let me remind you that the policy of the hotel. . ."

"Please." I interrupted him. "Let me help you with the suitcase and I'll be on my way."

Together we maneuvered the suitcase up a small flight of stairs while the French woman watched, her image reflected *ad infinitum* in a pair of gilt mirrors on opposite sides of the landing. She was a woman in her mid-thirties, dressed from top to toe in the very latest fashion: a short jacket, cinched at the waist, *pantaloni* tight as leotards but softer and clingier. She had forest-green boots on her feet; her hair had been dyed a metallic auburn; and on her wrist she wore a bulky Russian watch. She was fashionable rather than beautiful. But she was beautiful too.

Volmaro pushed a button and the elevator door clanked open and he rolled the suitcase into the elevator and my left knee began to quiver and quite suddenly I remembered another phrase in French. It came to me as a gift, rising to the surface like a cork that's been held underwater: "*Dans le fonds des forêts votre image me suis.*" In the depths of the forest your image follows me. It was a line from Racine, something that had stuck in my mind because as a young man I'd once written it on one of those little cards that florists give you when you send flowers.

She colored slightly and smiled.

"*Alle undici,*" I said; "eleven o'clock." I held up two forefingers, side by side.

"*Onze?*" she said.

"*Onze,*" I repeated. "*Qui.*" I pointed at the floor, the ceiling, the four walls.

"*Ici*," she said, nodding her head as she stepped backwards into the elevator.

In the morning I bought a shirt and a pair of corduroy pants at Raspini, across from the Baptistery. There was a jacket in the window, too, that I looked at, a really splendid jacket. I'd never seen such a jacket before, rich dark-chocolaty suede, soft as butter. It fit perfectly, but it wasn't really any warmer than my windbreaker. It was totally impractical, in fact; "**DO NOT WASH**," said a tag, in English, that I pulled out of the inside pocket; "**DO NOT DRY CLEAN**." And the salesman admitted that it would be ruined by rain. Besides, it was outrageously expensive — I could have spent two weeks in Rome for what it cost — and when I asked, just to double check, I found that the price in the window was incorrect. The jacket really cost a great deal more, so I settled for a green silk scarf, which I knotted around my neck, like a tie.

Leaving my jeans and turtleneck at Raspini, to be picked up later, I crossed the Via Cavour and admired my new clothes in the window of the Marzocco bookstore, where I picked out a French-Italian dictionary that was small enough to fit into my jacket pocket, but which included a brief outline of French grammar. I also bought a Michelin guide to the city, in French. Then I made my way to the *albergo*, where I found the French woman waiting in the lobby, dressed in black stockings, a short apricot-colored skirt and a flowered silk blouse. Her make-up, minimal but skillfully applied, matched the skirt.

"*Bonjour, madame*," I said.

"*Bonjour, monsieur*."

I gave her a complete tour of Santa Croce, because it was close and because I didn't know what else to do, and because I had the *Guide Michelin* and could read to her in French, which took her completely by surprise so that she laughed and covered her mouth with her hand, on which I noticed a ring. The more I read, the more she laughed; but when, embarrassed, I handed *her* the book, she handed it back. "*Lisez*," she said, "*lisez*."

It was one o'clock by the time we left the church. I ordered sandwiches — *schiacciatta* with *prosciutto arosto* and *peccorino* and *salsa di funghi* — in a bar in Piazza San Pier Maggiore, and while she ate I read from the guidebook:

the tower (N.14) that dominates the piazza was built by the Donati family at the beginning of the thirteenth century. In 1308 Corso Donati, captain of the Black Guelphs and brother of Piccarda, Dante's inconstant nun, was besieged in the tower by his enemies. In an attempt to escape he was dragged to his death (according to Dante, *Purgatorio* 24:82ff.) by his own horses on the present-day Via Pietra Piana.

I could understand the guidebook French because the subject matter was familiar; but I couldn't talk, couldn't put together a sentence, couldn't tell her that I myself had lived in that very tower, with my family, that I used to stand in the window with a glass of *gallo nero* waiting for my wife to come back from I Tatti, how she'd get off the bus in front of the post office looking beautiful in the red dress I'd bought for her on the Via Tornabuoni, how happy we'd been then, that my image of happiness was bound up with that tower apartment, with that piazza, with the *pizzicheria*, the *forno*, the *latteria* and the *polleria*, even the dry-cleaners with its peculiar odor; and how our neighbors, and the teachers at the language school, and the parents of the children's classmates, and even people I met on the bus, had been happy to sit at our table, to talk: food, love, philosophy, religion. But I tried, with a handful of words from my French-Italian dictionary: *famille*, *femme*, *enfants*, *appartement*, *convives*, *table*, *manger*, *parler*. She leaned forward so as not to drop crumbs in her lap. "*Heureux*," I said. She looked at me thoughtfully, the way an adult looks at a child who is trying to explain a complicated dream that he doesn't fully understand.

She nodded. She was a nodder, and she nodded that evening in the Trattoria Maremmana, where my wife and I, on our last night in Florence, asked if we could have the last of our *bistecca alla fiorentina* for our dog, and the waiter, after he'd taken our plates, brought us a large sack full of old bones: *femme*, *dernier nuit*, *bistecca*, *bourse pour les os*, *garçon*, *os pour le chien*.

That night I made a frontal assault on the French language: I studied the grammar in my dictionary, conjugated *parler*, *finir*, and *répondre* in the present indicative (which is all you really need), memorized a list of irregular verbs, reviewed prepositions from *à* to *vers*, tried to formulate some hypothetical phrases, fell asleep with the dictionary in my hand.

In the morning we went to the Uffizi. Aesthetic response is my special subject, my academic *raison d'être*. What is aesthetic experience

like? Why do we value it? How can we translate it into words? After four months it was nice to experience the real thing again — the tug of beauty, like a kite on a long long string. If only I could speak; if only I could tell her; but all I could do was read from the *Guide Michelin* — clichés as universal as international traffic signs: *cette Venus couchée . . . , symphonie harmonieuse de couleurs . . . , intense et vibrant . . . , chiaroscuro doucement modelé . . . , le réalisme du petit chien endormi sur le lit . . .*

Her response was more physical, and when she took my arm for the first time, I thought immediately of Cardinal Milotti's strange conviction that Titian and others of his circle had been using works of art "diabolically" to excite the baser passions. Another French phrase rose to the surface of my imagination, one of the first things a young man learns, or figures out, in French 101: *Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?* But surely, I thought, *vous* is the formal form. Wouldn't you ask such a question with a *tu*?

At lunch I posed some of the questions I had formulated the evening before. She answered absently, paying more attention to her slippery *bucatini*, which sent tomato sauce splattering off in all directions, than to me. Her name was Yvonne. She was from Dijon. She was on holiday. She worked for an architectural firm. . . . But I couldn't figure out what I really wanted to know: why had she come to Florence alone? how had she landed in Piazza San Pier Maggiore with her enormous suitcase?

In the afternoon I wanted her to notice how the streets in the city center run at right angles to each other — the old Roman *castrum* — but she led me back to the *pensione*. Her room was dark. I opened the shutters. I needed air and light. She sat on the edge of the bed and I thumbed through my dictionary, searching for the words I needed to explain: that it was perfectly all right . . . , just the way it was . . . , to talk . . . , that it wasn't necessary . . . , that in all the years I'd been married I'd never . . . , that I really didn't think. . . . I kept on turning pages while she removed her clothes. I was still turning when she took the dictionary out of my hands and put it in the drawer of the bedside *commodino*, where it remained for the rest of her stay.

When I looked into her eyes, I saw my wife, Maggie, and I could see in her eyes that she too was seeing someone else. And I could see not only that this was so, but that she knew it was so and knew that I knew, and knew that I knew that she knew . . .

An infinite regress? Yes and no. Maybe this mutual knowledge united us more firmly and closely than our embraces. I couldn't be sure.

In the mornings we went to the museums; in the afternoons we walked around the city or took the bus up to Fiesole or Settignano. We walked down the narrow *mulattiera* where the carriage scenes in *A Room with a View* had been shot. We paused at the field full of flowers where the young lovers meet, though the field was bare and I would never have recognized it if I hadn't in fact watched the scene being filmed. Maggie and I had been walking from Fiesole to Settignano But I no longer tried to explain.

The city itself seemed brighter and sharper, like a fresco that's been recently restored. The steady hum of traffic provided a basso continuo to the ringing of bells, and the smells of roasting chestnuts and boiled tripe drew us from one street corner to another. We ate our way through the menu at Trattoria Maremmana and walked home, holding hands, to Albergo Medici, where Volmaro turned a blind eye to our comings and goings. In the darkness we came together in silence.

On Christmas morning we had the city to ourselves. Empty *pannettone* boxes and champagne bottles were tucked into doorways. She had a ticket on the night train for Paris.

In the afternoon I stood at the window while she packed her suitcase. The clothes that she hadn't worn made me think that she'd had something else in mind. Something fancier, more hightoned.

At the station she waited at the taxi stand while I looked for a luggage cart for the suitcase. I helped her onto a second-class carriage, and then a young man helped me lift the suitcase up onto the luggage rack. I got off the train and she stayed on. I waited outside her window till the train pulled out of the station, and then I went home and cleaned up my room. We hadn't exchanged addresses.

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The next day I bought the soft leather jacket I'd seen in the window at Raspini. I couldn't afford it, but I couldn't help myself. It was too beautiful. It was the sort of jacket that the Archangel Gabriel would wear in a modern-dress version of the Annunciation, and walking out onto the Via Cavour I felt as conspicuous as Gabriel himself must have felt, wings spread, halo glowing. How all eyes must have turned to him.

I walked around the city center till it began to grow dark, and then I took a no. 13/ bus up to Piazzale Michelangelo and walked back down. And yet no crowds gathered. No one followed me. No one even looked at me. The jacket, far from making me conspicuous, had made me invisible.

That night — and every night for a long time — I could feel her presence in the bed, beside me, on top of me, under me. For many years, whenever I looked back on that difficult time, I could summon up her presence, and she would be there.

I'd never discovered why she'd come to Italy, never understood how she'd happened to turn up in Piazza San Pier Maggiore with her huge suitcase. But my curiosity about these things no longer ran very deep. What ran deep was the memory of what she had given me. The gift of her body. No small thing, even in this age of casual affairs. But there was another gift too, more durable than the memory of her caresses — the gift of silence. Leaving behind my stories and anecdotes, I had followed her across the border into another country. Without words, at first I was afraid I wouldn't know who I was; but in the silence, I no longer needed to know.