

Keeping Up

My street in Paris is named for a surgeon who taught at the nearby medical school and discovered an abnormal skin condition, a contracture that causes the fingers to bend inward, eventually turning the hand into a full-time fist. It's short, this street, no more or less attractive than anything else in the area, yet vacationing Americans are drawn here, compelled for some reason to stand beneath my office window and scream at one another.

For some, the arguments are about language. A wife had made certain claims regarding her abilities. "I've been listening to tapes," she said, or, perhaps, "All those romance languages are pretty much alike, so what with my Spanish we should be fine." But then people use slang, or ask unexpected questions, and things begin to fall apart. "*You're* the one

who claimed to speak French." I hear this all the time, and look out my window to see a couple standing toe to toe on the sidewalk.

"Yeah," the woman will say. "At least *I* try."

"Well try *harder*, damn it. Nobody knows what the hell you're saying."

Geographical arguments are the second most common. People notice that they've been on my street before, maybe half an hour ago, when they only thought they were tired and hungry and needed to find a bathroom.

"For God's sake, Phillip, would it kill you to just ask somebody?"

I lie on my couch, thinking, *Why don't you ask? How come Phillip has to do it?* But these things are often more complicated than they seem. Maybe Phillip was here twenty years ago and has been claiming to know his way around. Maybe he's one of those who refuse to hand over the map, or refuse to pull it out, lest he look like a tourist.

The desire to pass is loaded territory and can lead to the ugliest sort of argument there is. "You want to *be* French, Mary Frances, that's your problem, but instead you're just another American." I went to the window for that one and saw a marriage disintegrate before my eyes. Poor Mary Frances in her beige beret. Back at the hotel it had probably seemed like a good idea, but now it was ruined and ridiculous, a cheap felt pancake sliding off the back of her head. She'd done the little scarf thing, too, not caring that it was summer. It could have been worse, I thought. She could have

been wearing one of those striped boater's shirts, but, as it was, it was pretty bad, a costume, really.

Some vacationers raise the roof — they don't care who hears them — but Mary Frances spoke in a whisper. This, too, was seen as pretension and made her husband even angrier. "Americans," he repeated. "We don't live in France, we live in Virginia. Vienna, Virginia. Got it?"

I looked at this guy and knew for certain that if we'd met at a party he'd claim to live in Washington, D.C. Ask for a street address, and he'd look away, mumbling, "Well, just outside D.C."

When fighting at home, an injured party can retreat to a separate part of the house, or step into the backyard to shoot at cans, but outside my window the options are limited to crying, sulking, or storming back to the hotel. "Oh, for Christ's sake," I hear. "Can we please just try to have a good time?" This is like ordering someone to find you attractive, and it doesn't work. I've tried it.

Most of Hugh's and my travel arguments have to do with pace. I'm a fast walker, but he has longer legs and likes to maintain a good twenty-foot lead. To the casual observer, he would appear to be running from me, darting around corners, intentionally trying to lose himself. When asked about my latest vacation, the answer is always the same. In Bangkok, in Ljubljana, in Budapest and Bonn: What did I see? Hugh's back, just briefly, as he disappeared into a crowd. I'm convinced that before we go anywhere he calls the board of tourism and asks what style and color of coat

is the most popular among the locals. If they say, for example, a navy windbreaker, he'll go with that. It's uncanny the way he blends in. When we're in an Asian city, I swear he actually makes himself shorter. I don't know how, but he does. There's a store in London that sells travel guides alongside novels that take place in this or that given country. The idea is that you'll read the guide for facts and read the novel for atmosphere — a nice thought, but the only book I'll ever need is *Where's Waldo?* All my energy goes into keeping track of Hugh, and as a result I don't get to enjoy anything.

The last time this happened we were in Australia, where I'd gone to attend a conference. Hugh had all the free time in the world, but mine was limited to four hours on a Saturday morning. There's a lot to do in Sydney, but first on my list was a visit to the Taronga Zoo, where I hoped to see a dingo. I never saw that Meryl Streep movie, and as a result the creature was a complete mystery to me. Were someone to say, "I left my window open and a dingo flew in," I would have believed it, and if he said, "Dingoes! Our pond is completely overrun with them," I would have believed that as well. Two-legged, four-legged, finned, or feathered: I simply had no idea, which was exciting, actually, a rarity in the age of twenty-four-hour nature channels. Hugh offered to draw me a picture, but, having come this far, I wanted to extend my ignorance just a little bit longer, to stand before the cage or tank and see this thing for myself. It would be a glorious

occasion, and I didn't want to spoil it at the eleventh hour. I also didn't want to go alone, and this was where our problem started.

Hugh had spent most of his week swimming and had dark circles beneath his eyes, twin impressions left by his goggles. When in the ocean, he goes out for hours, passing the lifeguard buoys and moving into international waters. It looks as though he's trying to swim home, which is embarrassing when you're the one left on shore with your hosts. "He honestly does like it here," I say. "Really."

Had it been raining, he might have willingly joined me, but, as it was, Hugh had no interest in dingoes. It took a solid hour of whining to change his mind, but even then his heart wasn't in it. Anyone could see that. We took a ferry to the zoo, and while on board he stared longingly at the water and made little paddling motions with his hands. Every second wound him tighter, and when we landed I literally had to run to keep up with him. The koala bears were just a blur, as were the visitors who stood before them, posing for photos. "Can't we just . . .," I wheezed, but Hugh was rounding the emus and couldn't hear me.

He has the most extraordinary sense of direction I've ever seen in a mammal. Even in Venice, where the streets were seemingly designed by ants, he left the train station, looked once at a map, and led us straight to our hotel. An hour after checking in he was giving directions to strangers, and by the time we left he was suggesting shortcuts to gondoliers. Maybe he smelled the dingoes. Maybe he'd seen

their pen from the window of the plane, but, whatever his secret, he ran right to them. I caught up a minute later and bent from the waist to catch my breath. Then I covered my face, stood upright, and slowly parted my fingers, seeing first a fence and then, behind it, a shallow moat filled with water. I saw some trees — and a tail — and then I couldn't stand it anymore and dropped my hands.

"Why, they look just like dogs," I said. "Are you sure we're in the right place?"

Nobody answered, and I turned to find myself standing beside an embarrassed Japanese woman. "I'm sorry," I said. "I thought you were the person I brought halfway around the world. First-class."

A zoo is a good place to make a spectacle of yourself, as the people around you have creepier, more photogenic things to look at. A gorilla pleasures himself while eating a head of iceberg lettuce, and it's much more entertaining than the forty-something-year-old man who dashes around talking to himself. For me, that talk is always the same, a rehearsal of my farewell speech: "... because this time, buddy, it's over. I mean it." I imagine myself packing a suitcase, throwing stuff in without bothering to fold it. "If you find yourself missing me, you might want to get a dog, an old, fat one that can run to catch up and make that distant panting sound you've grown so accustomed to. Me, though, I'm finished."

I will walk out the door and never look back, never return his calls, never even open his letters. The pots and pans,

all the things that we acquired together, he can have them, that's how unfeeling I will be. "Clean start," that's my motto, so what do I need with a shoe box full of photographs, or the tan-colored belt he gave me for my thirty-third birthday, back when we first met and he did not yet understand that a belt is something you get from your aunt, and not your boyfriend, I don't care who made it. After that, though, he got pretty good in the gift-giving department: a lifelike mechanical hog covered in real pigskin, a professional microscope offered at the height of my arachnology phase, and, best of all, a seventeenth-century painting of a Dutch peasant changing a dirty diaper. Those things I would keep — and why not? I'd also take the desk he gave me, and the fireplace mantel, and, just on principle, the drafting table, which he clearly bought for himself and tried to pass off as a Christmas present.

Now it seemed that I would be leaving in a van rather than on foot, but, still, I was going to do it, so help me. I pictured myself pulling away from the front of our building, and then I remembered that I don't drive. Hugh would have to do it for me, and well he should after everything he'd put me through. Another problem was where this van might go. An apartment, obviously, but how would I get it? It's all I can do to open my mouth at the post office, so how am I going to talk to a real estate agent? The language aspect has nothing to do with it, as I'm no more likely to house-hunt in New York than I am in Paris. When discussing sums over sixty dollars, I tend to sweat. Not just on my forehead, but all over. Five minutes at the bank, and my shirt is transpar-

ent. Ten minutes, and I'm stuck to my seat. I lost twelve pounds getting the last apartment, and all I had to do was sign my name. Hugh handled the rest of it.

On the bright side, I have money, though I'm not exactly sure how to get my hands on it. Bank statements arrive regularly, but I don't open anything that's not personally addressed or doesn't look like a free sample. Hugh takes care of all that, opening the icky mail and actually reading it. He knows when our insurance payments are due, when it's time to renew our visas, when the warranty on the washer is about to expire. "I don't think we need to extend this," he'll say, knowing that if the machine stops working he'll fix it himself, the way he fixes everything. But not me. If I lived alone and something broke, I'd just work around it: use a paint bucket instead of a toilet, buy an ice chest and turn the dead refrigerator into an armoire. Call a repairman? Never. Do it myself? That'll be the day.

I've been around for nearly half a century, yet still I'm afraid of everything and everyone. A child sits beside me on a plane and I make conversation, thinking how stupid I must sound. The downstairs neighbors invite me to a party and, after claiming that I have a previous engagement, I spend the entire evening confined to my bed, afraid to walk around because they might hear my footsteps. I do not know how to turn up the heat, send an e-mail, call the answering machine for my messages, or do anything even remotely creative with a chicken. Hugh takes care of all that, and when he's out of town I eat like a wild animal, the meat still pink, with hair or feathers clinging to it. So is it any wonder that he runs

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from me? No matter how angry I get, it always comes down to this: I'm going to leave and then what? Move in with my dad? Thirty minutes of pure rage, and when I finally spot him I realize that I've never been so happy to see anyone in my life.

"There you are," I say. And when he asks where I have been, I answer honestly and tell him I was lost.