La fiesta era divertida?   February 6, 2017

On the subject of language barriers, and communication:

      I deliberately began my trip in countries where I speak the language. The UK and Ireland, done, easy. My mother tongue is already the dominant language, so I don't look like a dick for starting conversations in English.

      Then France, and while my French is sub-par now, I did used to speak tolerably well. After a few days in Paris, a lot of it came back quite quickly, mostly because any sentence beyond "Good morning," and "I would like a café au lait," I would practice in my head first.

      Like when trying to leave a bar, I imagined telling the waitress, "Excuse me? I would like to pay now, but could I stay here for a little bit after? Because I would like to wait until I'm sure I've finished needing to pee for the moment, as I'd like to walk back to my house and it takes about an hour and I don't want to have to stop and pee along the way."

      But then what if she asked, Oh, *vous habitez ici a Paris?* And I'd have to explain that when I said *chez moi*, it wasn't *really* chez moi, because I'm traveling and I don't actually live anywhere at the moment, and I could not for the life of me remember the French word for "nowhere." (It's *nulle part*.)

      So I just paid and sat there for a bit until I had to pee again and then left and no one asked me anything about it. Crisis averted.

      Paris, being the one place in Western Europe where you can pretty much expect no one will let you speak English, made me feel constantly on edge and in need of showing off my ability to communicate in a second language. And actually, that anxiety brought back my French a lot faster than I was expecting.

      While taking endless walks around the city, instead of thinking through the usual slew of absurd anxieties or imagined fantasy scenarios in which I'm world famous and ten pounds skinnier and manage (without trying) to make all of my ex-boyfriends feel bad about themselves, I found myself concocting whole elaborate fantasies in French.

      Turns out, being an insane narcissist in your own head is actually a great way to learn a foreign language.

      Like when a homeless man asked me for change and I didn't have any and he muttered something rude that I didn't fully understand, I walked away and went on to spend over an hour wandering around Montmartre hammering out an imagined conversation in which I explained to him in perfect French that Life is cold and hard and full of pain and the full responsibility for his circumstances was not solely mine, and I didn't really have enough money to be in Paris right now either, and if he really wanted to change his life he could go become a revolutionary because Paris is like the global capital for protests and the thing to do was to organize and agitate and never vote for conservatives or the Front National or Marine fucking Le Pen and fight against neoliberal policies and anti-immigrant laws and the criminalization of poverty and maybe work towards a socialist utopia for himself and all the other *SDF*s and everyone.

      Naturally, of course, I would say this in a crowded area and everyone would turn to look and start applauding the radical revolutionary American chick who can argue about neoliberalism in perfect French and knows not only who Marine Le Pen is but that it's cool to dislike her. That is, assuming I'm correct in thinking the French word for neoliberalism is just néolibéralisme.

      I just checked. It is.

But the thing is, even though the whole scenario was absolutely ridiculous, it got me thinking in French again. It got me remembering words and grammatical constructions I'd forgotten, so that when I actually did end up in a conversation about anti-immigrant politicians in French with a homeless man (which, naturally, did actually happen) I was able to explain to him much more clearly why his desire to move to the US as a homeless undocumented black immigrant from a Muslim-majority country was maybe not a smart move right now. And in particular, his plan to move to Chicago might not be a great idea in February because it's like negative ten degrees there.

But then I couldn't translate Fahrenheit into Celsius in my head.

In Spanish, I don't fare nearly as well.

I'm reminded of the morning after my old roommate's birthday, coming back from an under-the-sea themed rave in Walthamstow forest where a small French man in a tutu sprayed the crowd with a silver glitter cannon. My friend and I walked into another friend's boat, tired, coming down, dressed like dead pirates and covered in glitter, to ask if he had painkillers. And for some reason unknown to me, the three of us made some spontaneous unspoken mutual agreement to have the whole conversation in broken Spanish.

Hola!
  Buenos dias!
La fiesta era… divertida?
  Si! Mucho! Es posible que tu tienes paracetamol...o?
No, lo siento. Tengo diazepam?
  Bueno!

I also have this terrible fear of being That Obnoxious American Tourist Who Refuses To Speak Anything Other Than English In Someone Else's Country. It's not like I really speak anything else, even my French is pretty bad, but I just hate the idea of being that person. I apologize instantly when I speak English to anyone, or I avoid speaking to anyone when I'm not certain I can complete the necessary conversation in the tiny scraps of whatever language it is that I do know.

Like buying tobacco today, I walked into the shop and said "Hola!" And he said, "What can I get for you?" (I think) and I pointed to the tobacco and said "Golden Virginia" and he said "Grande o pequeño?" and I said "Grande" and paid the 10 euro and said "Gracias" and left, thinking, *Fuck yeah. Nailed that social interaction. Bet he doesn't know I don't speak Spanish.*

Let's ignore the fact for now that I'm in central Barcelona, in prime tourist country, where pretty much everyone speaks better English than I do. I still like to pretend I'm getting by. But then there are moments when I can't, when I need to say something *really* important and I don't have the vocabulary to express myself in any language other than English.

Like earlier, I was walking up the street and I saw a brunette man wearing sunglasses and a brown leather jacket and blue jeans walking some sort of white and brown pointer dog. The dog stopped to pee, and up the sidewalk came another brunette man wearing sunglasses and a brown leather jacket and blue jeans walking a white and brown pointer dog.

Both men briefly nodded at one another in a mutual "I don't know you but hello fellow dog parent" way, and I just stopped and said in loud English, "Hang on. Am I the only one who notices there's a fucking glitch in the Matrix right now?"

Both men looked at me for a moment and shook their heads and shrugged, universal sign

language for, "I don't speak English, or I do, but I have no idea what you're talking about." And then they kept on walking.

I stamped my foot in frustration.

When I first started traveling, I made myself a list of arbitrary things that always make me feel safe. Hot showers, watching *Lord of the Rings*, sitting in corners of rooms drinking coffee. Things that make me feel warm, protected, in my element. And one of the first things on the list was "Speaking English."

It's not just that English is so thoroughly in my element. It's also that I have tolerably well- concealed social anxiety, and being able to crack constant jokes and speak to people in weird, unexpected ways is the only way I have to deal with it and make myself feel comfortable. If I can't randomly start blabbing about my digestive system or how my childhood hamsters died or give directions to a Starbucks entirely in faux Elizabethan-era vocabulary, then I don't know how to interact with people.

"Hi, I'm Anna. I'm from California. I like philosophy and beer." Something about having to be that simple and direct makes me anxious.

But maybe it's good for me. I've been thinking so much about language, about how important it is to say what you mean, and about how I have a tendency to be overly verbose and complicated in all things. Yes, precise language allows you to get across your exact point. But having to simplify doesn't allow you to hide anything, and I'm all about interactions that don't try to hide.

It pushes through areas in which our social expectation is to be fairly dishonest through politeness. I'm pretty honest and not that polite anyway, but even I cover up my own vulnerability through over-talking or sharing embarrassing personal details without being asked. I talk so much about finding pride and comfort in the things that make us feel vulnerable, and openly talking about them really does help. But also, maybe turning vulnerability on its head isn't necessarily the same as being comfortable with vulnerability.

Proudly proclaiming "I'm socially anxious and I overthink everything and I masturbate too!" may help me to not feel embarrassed by things that are perfectly normal and I don't need to be embarrassed about, and it does make me feel safe. But not in the sense that I'm protected, that giving into fear can benefit me. Only in the sense that I don't allow anything to touch me.

I believe in owning who you are. Being comfortable in how you feel, in what you've done, whether or not everyone else agrees with it: to me, that's a strength. And I think it's a good thing to be strong in yourself, at least, it is for me.

But I'm also thinking, maybe it isn't the same as being comfortable in vulnerability. Because for everything I proudly (or at least loudly) proclaim, there are still so many things that make me feel vulnerable. The more I talk about them, the less vulnerable I feel about them. In being honest, in feeling all emotions fully, in some ways I start to remove myself from my own feeling.

I remember listening to a song a lover told me reminded him of me the day he left. I listened to it because it made me cry. I kept on listening to it, over and over again, until it didn't make me cry anymore. Maybe that's strength. Maybe that's dealing with suffering head-on instead of running from it. Maybe that is being openly vulnerable until the vulnerability doesn't feel like vulnerability anymore. That's always been my view of it.

It's not that I think the goal is to get to a state of no vulnerability: to be so upfront about

everything that nothing makes you feel vulnerable. To me, that's almost not that different from lying about everything and completely emotionally withdrawing. Like, what if you suffer so much that you never suffer again, feel so much that you never feel again, open so much that there's nothing left to open? That's never been the goal for me. The goal is to flow through it, to be able to feel everything without fearing to feel it, to feel fearing it fully, feel fearing feeling it and still feel it.

And I don't know how to talk about that in any language but English. And maybe, what I need is to not talk about it for a while.

In Ireland, I was chatting to a Romanian man who asked me why I was traveling. He'd already told me I spoke too fast, so I tried to pare down everything I wanted to say, the paragraphs I could spew, into the simplest sentence I could. And it was this:

"I wanted to simplify my life, without getting bored."

And that's it. There's so much more to the story, about why I want to simplify, why now, why the countries I've chosen, what the goal is. But that's not what he asked, not really. He asked, Why are you traveling?

Because I want to simplify my life without getting bored.

Maybe I need the language barrier right now, because I'm afraid of it. Afraid of not being able to communicate the way I'm comfortable with. Afraid of not being funny. Afraid of not being able to speak any language other than English. Afraid of not being able to express myself.

Be afraid, and do it anyway. Not in spite of my fear, but because of it.

Not running from the fear, but leaning into it. Using fear as the only means to get me past fear. Breaking my comfort zone so that it can grow stronger.

And I'll just be that American Tourist who can't speak Spanish. And I'll mess up, and feel embarrassed, and I'll learn. I'll fear, and I'll learn, and I won't have the same fear anymore. I'll see what that does to me, because I'm already getting to the point where I've had enough of even the person I've been since I moved out of London. Even of the person I've been in the past week. I'm ready to throw myself into a different situation and see how I react. I'm ready for the next me.

Some people travel because they're endlessly curious about the world. I travel because I'm endlessly curious about myself.