

Mother Tongue

by

Leona Francombe

Anyone who has lived abroad long enough soon discovers that language is the real key to happiness. The mastery of a new language, of course. But even more, the cozy refuge of one's own. Think about it: the cadence of our mother tongue was with us even in the womb. Of all the murmurs in that echo-chamber, our mother's voice lodged the deepest. We fall into her language as easily - as unthinkingly - as we fell into her arms.

Especially when we venture far.

I arrived in Belgium over twenty years ago, alone, with only a smattering of French. The first day was a study in runes. The landlord's babble was completely lost on me, swallowed by the cavernous entryway of the old building. I followed him mutely up seven flights of steps to the attic apartment I had rented, feeling robbed of even my own language. The suitcases bumped against the narrow stairwell; a smell of boiled cabbage laced the air. *How will I get my piano up here?* I wondered, out of breath. Then, stricken, I thought: *How do you say that in French?*

The landlord paused at the topmost door and turned to me: *Bienvenue!* he said, smiling for the first time. His tobacco-stained teeth were like old ivory. *Welcome.* I knew the word, all right. And at that moment, it carried a weight far beyond its size.

I stood alone in the empty garret. Outside, a mist had settled over the jumble of dark-red rooftops. The northern light was fretful, pale, as if melancholy had wrapped herself in shimmery grey silk. It was hard not to sink into her mood. The tram rails sighed far below; wind whistled under the eaves. The sounds were as foreign as the landlord's speech.

Come to think of it, how *was* I going to tell him that a piano was arriving next week?

I unpacked my grammar book.

*Je suis...*I am.

*Je serai...*I will be.

Not a bad start. I could already say: 'I am a musician.' *Je suis musicienne.* 'I will be in Belgium for a long time.' *Je serai en Belgique pour longtemps.* Two pigeons landed on the window ledge and watched me in alarm. They were right to be wary: one is not really oneself speaking another language. A mother tongue is a garment fitted to the skin. A foreign language, on the other hand, is like a costume, and rarely does it fit perfectly.

It was clear that I would have to tailor my verbs. The subjunctive, perhaps? Brussels is a complex place, after all, full of nuance and illusion. It takes skillful maneuvering to avoid confrontation here. Consider Belgian history: The French, Dutch, Spanish, Germans – all of them passed through here over the centuries. The cobblestones still gleam where their armies scuffled, unable to agree grammatically. Imagine how they would have benefited from the subjunctive: *Soyons amis!* Let us be friends!

But never mind the Spanish and the Germans. I had the landlord to confront...and that piano, scraping up his narrow stairwell. Back to the grammar book. *J'aurais été...* I would have been. Now *that* was a useful tense, as in: *I would have been smarter learning a more portable instrument.*

It was exhausting.

At night I dreamed in English, crawling gratefully back into that womb of effortless expression. I had never imagined my language as a place of retreat - a refuge when one is tired, confused, afraid. After all, a crisis is no time for translation. No one ever yells “help!” in a foreign tongue. And one word usually suffices. The French, to be different, use two: *Au secours!* There's always time for an extra word or two in French – even if the German army is just around the corner.

Au secours indeed, I thought, as the landlord considered my case.

'*Un piano?*' He tapped a forefinger against his lips, a clear sign of Belgian displeasure.

'*Oui,*' I said. 'Yes, a piano.'

He rubbed the stubble on his chin. I began thinking of graceful exits in the conditional mode, such as: 'I really should be going now,' or 'It might be better to talk tomorrow.' But then a stained tooth appeared, and another, until the yellowed ivory smile was complete.

'*Alors,*' he said, '*que vous soyez contente avec votre musique!*'

'Well then, may you be happy with your music!'

Who would have thought that the subjunctive could be so welcoming?