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## Hot Dogs and Wild Geese

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FIROOZEH DUMAS

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comfort in knowing that my father spoke English. Having spent years regaling<sup>1</sup> us with stories about his graduate years in America, he had left us with the distinct impression that America was his second home. My mother and I planned to stick close to him, letting him guide us through the exotic American landscape that he knew so well. We counted on him not only to translate the language but also to translate the culture, to be a link to this most foreign of lands. He was to be our own private Rosetta stone.<sup>2</sup>

Once we reached America, we wondered whether perhaps my father had confused his life in America with someone else's. Judging from the bewildered looks of 2  
store cashiers, gas station attendants, and waiters, my father spoke a version of English not yet shared with the rest of America. His attempts to find a "vater closet"<sup>3</sup> in a department store would usually lead us to the drinking fountain or the home

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2. Rosetta stone: carved stone tablet, the key to translating ancient Egyptian writing

3. "vater closet": *water closet*, the British term for *bathroom*

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furnishings section. Asking my father to ask the waitress the definition of “sloppy Joe” or “Tater Tots” was no problem. His translations, however, were highly suspect. Waitresses would spend several minutes responding to my father’s questions, and these responses, in turn, would be translated as “She doesn’t know.” Thanks to my father’s translations, we stayed away from hot dogs, catfish, and hush puppies, and no amount of caviar<sup>4</sup> in the sea would have convinced us to try mud pie.

We wondered how my father had managed to spend several years attending school in America yet remain so utterly befuddled<sup>5</sup> by Americans. We soon discovered that his college years had been spent mainly in the library, where he had managed to avoid contact with all Americans except his engineering professors. As long as the conversation was limited to vectors,<sup>6</sup> surface tension, and fluid mechanics, my father was Fred Astaire<sup>7</sup> with words. But one step outside the scintillating<sup>8</sup> world of petroleum engineering and he had two left tongues.

My father’s only other regular contact in college had been his roommate, a Pakistani who spent his days preparing curry. Since neither spoke English but both liked curries, they got along splendidly. The person who had assigned them together had probably hoped they would either learn English or invent a common language for the occasion. Neither happened.

My father’s inability to understand spoken English was matched only by his efforts to deny the problem. His constant attempts at communicating with Americans seemed at first noble and adventurous, then annoying. Somewhere between his thick Persian accent and his use of vocabulary found in pre-World War II British textbooks, my father spoke a private language. That nobody understood him hurt his pride, so what he lacked in speaking ability, he made up for by reading. He was the only person who actually read each and every document before he signed it. Buying a washing machine from Sears might take the average American thirty minutes, but by the time my father had finished reading the warranties, terms of contracts, and credit information, the store was closing and the janitor was asking us to please step aside so he could finish mopping the floor.

My mother’s approach to learning English consisted of daily lessons with Monty Hall and Bob Barker.<sup>9</sup> Her devotion to *Let’s Make a Deal* and *The Price Is Right*<sup>10</sup> was evident in her newfound ability to recite useless information. After a few months of television viewing, she could correctly tell us whether a coffeemaker cost more or less than \$19.99. How many boxes of Hamburger Helper, Swanson’s TV dinners, or Turtle Wax could one buy without spending a penny more than twenty dollars? She knew that, too. Strolling down the grocery aisle, she rejoiced in her celebrity sightings—Lipton tea! Campbell’s tomato soup! Betty Crocker Rich & Creamy Frosting! Every day, she would tell us the day’s wins and losses on the game shows. “He almost won the boat, but the wife picked curtain number two and they ended up with a six-foot chicken statue.” The bad prizes on *Let’s Make a Deal* sounded far more intriguing than the good ones. Who would want the matching La-Z-Boy recliners when they could have the adult-size crib and high-chair set?

My mother soon decided that the easiest way for her to communicate with Americans was to use me as an interpreter. My brother Farshid, with his schedule full of soccer, wrestling, and karate, was too busy to be recruited for this dubious<sup>11</sup> honor.

“After searching fruitlessly for elbow grease, I asked the salesclerk for help.”

4. caviar: fancy fish eggs

5. befuddled: confused

6. vectors: mathematical quantities

7. Fred Astaire: American dancer and film star of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s

8. scintillating: sparkling, brilliant

9. Monty Hall and Bob Barker: early television game show hosts

10. *Let’s Make a Deal* and *The Price Is Right*: television game shows of the 1960s and 1970s

11. dubious: doubtful, questionable

At an age when most parents are guiding their kids toward independence, my mother was hanging on to me for dear life. I had to accompany her to the grocery store, the hairdresser, the doctor, and every place else that a kid wouldn't want to go. My reward for doing this was the constant praise of every American we encountered. Hearing a seven-year-old translate Persian into English and vice versa made quite an impression on everyone. People lavished<sup>12</sup> compliments on me. "You must be very, very smart, a genius maybe." I always responded by assuring them that if they ever moved to another country, they, too, would learn the language. (What I wanted to say was that I wished I could be at home watching *The Brady Bunch*<sup>13</sup> instead of translating the qualities of various facial moisturizers.) My mother had her own response to the compliments: "Americans are easily impressed."

I always encouraged my mother to learn English, but her talents lay elsewhere. 8 Since she had never learned English in school, she had no idea of its grammar. She would speak entire paragraphs without using any verbs. She referred to everyone and everything as "it," leaving the listener wondering whether she was talking about her husband or the kitchen table. Even if she did speak a sentence more or less correctly, her accent made it incomprehensible. "W" and "th" gave her the most difficulty. As if God were playing a linguistic<sup>14</sup> joke on us, we lived in "Vee-tee-er" (Whittier), we shopped at "Veetwood" (Whitwood) Plaza, I attended "Leffingvell" School, and our neighbor was none other than "Valter Williams."

Despite little progress on my mother's part, I continually encouraged her. 9 Rather than teach her English vocabulary and grammar, I eventually decided to teach her entire sentences to repeat. I assumed that once she got used to speaking correctly, I could be removed, like training wheels, and she would continue coasting. I was wrong.

Noticing some insects in our house one day, my mother asked me to call the exterminator. I looked up the number, then told my mother to call and say, "We have silverfish in our house." My mother grumbled, dialed the number, and said, "Please come rrrright a-vay. Goldfeeesh all over dee house." The exterminator told her he'd be over as soon as he found his fishing pole. 10

A few weeks later, our washing machine broke. A repairman was summoned 11 and the leaky pipe was quickly replaced. My mother wanted to know how to remove the black stain left by the leak. "Y'all are gonna hafta use some elbow grease," he said. I thanked him and paid him and walked with my mother to the hardware store. After searching fruitlessly<sup>15</sup> for elbow grease, I asked the salesclerk for help. "It removes stains," I added. The manager was called.

Once the manager finished laughing, he gave us the disappointing explanation. 12 My mother and I walked home empty-handed. That, I later learned, is what Americans call a wild-goose chase.

Now that my parents have lived in America for thirty years, their English has improved somewhat, but not as much as one would hope. It's not entirely their fault; 13 English is a confusing language. When my father paid his friend's daughter the compliment of calling her homely, he meant she would be a great housewife. When he complained about horny drivers, he was referring to their tendency to honk. And my parents still don't understand why teenagers want to be cool so they can be hot.

I no longer encourage my parents to learn English. I've given up. Instead, I'm 14 grateful for the wave of immigration that has brought Iranian television, newspapers, and supermarkets to America. Now, when my mother wants to ask the grocer whether he has any more eggplants in the back that are a little darker and more firm, because the ones he has out aren't right for *khoresht bademjun*, she can do so in Persian, all by herself. And for that, I say hallelujah, a word that needs no translation.

12. lavished: heaped or poured

13. *The Brady Bunch*: an early 1970s television sitcom

14. linguistic: relating to language

15. fruitlessly: without success



#### TEACHING TIP

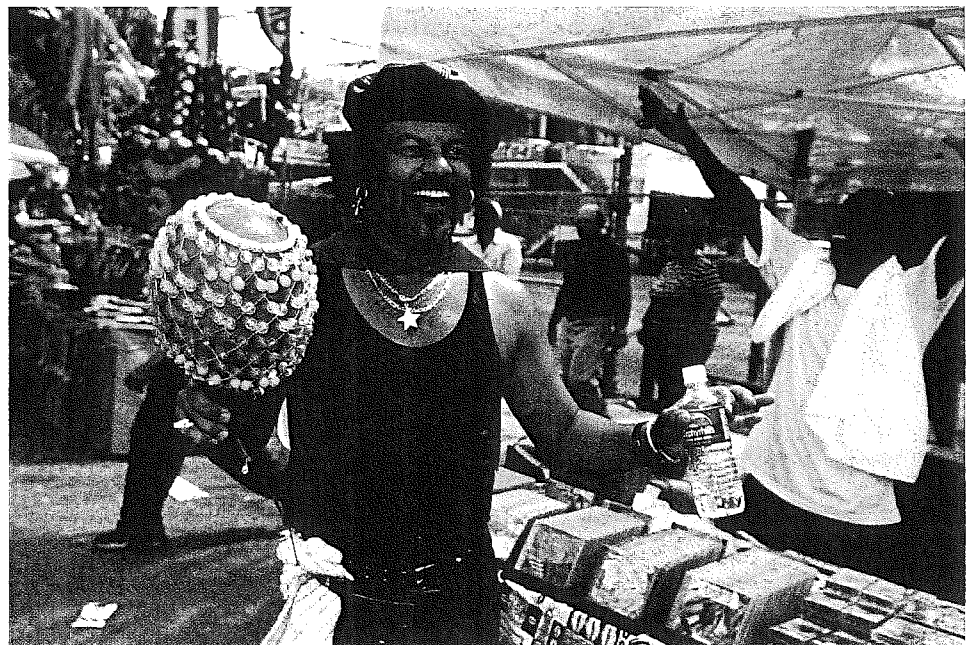
For a multimedia activity on overcoming prejudice, see *In the News 9, Trekking for Tolerance*, on the student website.

## Discussion and Writing Questions

1. Why was Dumas so sure that her father would guide the family easily through the mysteries of American life (paragraph 1)? Why was he, in fact, so little help (paragraph 2)? How do you guess that he translated the words *hot dogs*, *catfish*, *hush puppies*, and *mud pie* so that his family refused to eat these foods?
2. The author humorously describes the weird skills her mother learned by watching so much American television. What did the mother learn?
3. In paragraph 7, Dumas writes, "At an age when most parents are guiding their kids toward independence, my mother was hanging on to me for dear life." If a child of immigrants must serve as a translator for his or her parents, parent-child roles sometimes can be reversed. Is this a problem?
4. Dumas uses funny examples to show how confusing English can be. If English was not your first language, what words or aspects of American culture especially confused you? What was funniest (or most frustrating)?

## Writing Assignments

1. The United States, with its many races and ethnic groups, has been called a "melting pot." In a group with several classmates, decide whether the United States is more like a *melting pot* (where various ingredients melt together into one soup or goo), a *salad* (where different ingredients are tossed together but keep their separate flavors), or a *grocery store shelf* (where many foods in sealed containers do not mix). Write a paper presenting your own ideas.
2. Have you ever found yourself in a place where you did not understand the "rules"? This place might be a new country, a new school, a new job, or the dinner table of your future in-laws. Describe the challenges you faced in this strange new world and tell how you dealt with them. Use humor if you wish.
3. Does your town have ethnic shops, markets, restaurants, or neighborhoods that you have never explored? Choose one place that you would like to learn more about and visit there, chat with people, and perhaps have something to eat. Take notes on the sights, sounds, smells, and details; then write a vivid account of your adventure.



A musician enjoys Miami's annual Calle Ocho festival, named after a street in the heart of Little Havana.

Tony Arruza/CORBIS.