

A SLIVER AT NIGHT

HAVING finished the Week in Review, in the *Times*, I dropped it on the floor. My wife, Lisa, set the alarm for seven and placed the clock on the windowsill, where it would be out of reach in the morning. As she sat on the bed and I turned the light out, a faint gasp came from her direction.

"Something 'n my toe," she mumbled.

"On your toe or in your toe?" I inquired.

"In. A little piece of wood. A . . . dart?"

"It can hardly be a dart. Unless," I said, attempting to be gallantly facetious. "Cupid was trying a shot at you and missed. Little pieces of wood that go in your toe are called . . ." But offhand I couldn't remember what they were called, either.

"It's out," Lisa announced, and we lay in silence, staring at the ceiling. Our American friends claim that we speak the language very well, which may be true, but it happens once in a while that no matter how hard we think, we can't remember some word, usually a very simple one. Like a freshly painted wall, our skill in English looks good, but while in some parts it is dry, in others it may still be wet, so that one can't rely on it completely.

Down the block, a fire engine wailed, and when it was out of hearing Lisa said, "A sliver."

"Of course, 'sliver.'" After a pause, I asked, "How do you say it in Polish?" I am not learning Polish, but I like to ask Lisa for words in her tongue, partly out of curiosity and partly with a view to improving in-law communications. My mother tongue is Hungarian.

"*Drzazga.*"

"Jazz-gah," I repeated after her. "That's very good. It does give you the feeling of something sneaking under your skin. It seems that you have a lot of onomatopoeic words in Polish."

One of the reasons our friends think we speak good English, I suppose, is that we know most of the polysyllabic words, which are very similar in most European languages. It's the short, Anglo-Saxon words that trip us up.

"'Sliver' is onomatopoeic, too," said Lisa.

I agreed that, to a certain extent, she was right; then, as it seemed that neither one of us was very sleepy, I went on. "In Hungarian it's '*szálka*,' which is not bad, either. I wonder what the semanticists would make of this. In Italian it's 'let's see, in Italian . . .'"

My wife waited patiently, with her

arms folded behind her head, while I groped in the darkness for the Italian word. Each time I thought I had caught it, and pulled it in for examination, it turned out to be either "sliver" or "*szálka*." I began to feel almost panicky. I had forgotten the English word, and now the Italian one. It didn't comfort me that I had remembered the Hungarian word, because I am supposed to know Italian much better than Hungarian, which I have never practiced formally. It was in Italy that I went to school, had my friends, and wrote the poems of adolescence. If I start forgetting Italian before really learning English . . .

"Isn't it crazy? I can't remember," I said.

"It's all right. I love you anyway," said my wife.

Of course it couldn't be left at that, so I worked up a concentrated attack on the Italian sliver. I pretended to think about extraneous matters, then jumped back to the image of a splintery piece of wood, and sent out question marks into the darkness. I tried to apply a sort of mental suction cup to the image of a

rough wooden surface and extract from it all its denotations; this way many words popped out, like "nodo," "venatura," "fibra," "pialla"—but no Italian sliver.

The tale of Androcles and the Lion appeared in some corner of my mind, and for a while I thought I might produce the word. I started telling myself the story in Italian, right from the beginning but blocking out the end, hoping to accumulate enough momentum to come out with the sliver at the very last. This didn't work, naturally, as quite soon I realized that it was a thorn that the lion had in its paw.

Hunting for further associations, I recalled the sermon in the Bible in which it is said that one sees the sliver in his brother's eye but can't see the beam in his own. It was in an Italian Sunday school that I heard it for the first time, so it should have come back, but all I got was the picture I had formed in my mind about twenty years ago—of a man in a blue toga (all the characters in our catechism had either blue or green togas), standing on the steps of the Temple at Jerusalem, with a (circa) twenty-foot beam sprouting from his eye. "Beam" is "trave" in Italian, but that was beside the point.

"I'll be right back," I said, getting up. "I forgot to wash my teeth."

IN the bathroom, the sudden light hindered concentration. Slowing down the brushwork almost to a standstill

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didn't help, either, because when I was through with my teeth I hadn't got any closer to my objective. There was nothing else to do to gain time but take a shower. As the cold water hit me, I remembered Valsavaranche, between the Matterhorn and the Gran Paradiso, where once our Boy Scout patrol competed in a five-mile foot race, in which we had to cross a white-crested mountain stream twice each mile without anyone getting into the water. We chopped down a few slender fir trees (with the forestry guards' permission) and took them with us as a flying bridge to be launched from bank to bank where the terrain was most appropriate. If we didn't win that race, or so my companions kept telling me, it would be because I had been stuck, early in the race, by a three-inch — in the sole of my left foot, slowing down my whole patrol.

Although the word for "sliver" was still missing, I stayed in the shower, slowly dripping, to relish the elusive fragrance of the Alps, the balanced swing of an axe. When I returned to the bedroom, my wife seemed still awake. "I just can't remember," I confessed.

"Can't remember what?" she asked, sleepily.

"You know, the Italian for 'sliver.'"

"I will look it up at the office tomorrow. Remind me in the morning," she said.

But I knew that I wouldn't remind her in the morning, because it wasn't that I wanted to know the blasted word—it was just this feeling of drifting away from a familiar shore without knowing whether one will ever get safely to a new one.

—CSIKSZENTMIHALYI MIHALY

