

hi everyone,

first i'd like to say i'm sorry that it's been so long since i've written. i promise i haven't forgotten you but it's amazing how busy one can stay getting absolutely nothing accomplished. no, in reality i've been looking for an apartment (to no avail) which takes an enormous amount of time and energy. it's ridiculously, exceptionally difficult and expensive to find an apartment in marseille. i've seen at least a dozen places (no small feat considering there's no public transit) and called probably forty or more. i even paid a large agency fee to an apartment hunting agency and haven't found anything through them either. needless to say i'm becoming more and more disheartened and frustrated. i'm definitely not afraid to talk on the phone in french anymore, though.

keep your fingers crossed that i'll find something before the first of january, when all the students come back and the competition for apartments heightens. landlords are hesitant to rent apartments in the winter because the french have a law prohibiting eviction from september to april. the government doesn't want people on the streets in the cold. it's a good law but it makes finding an apartment difficult when you have no references and no co-signer (they will only accept a french co-signer so my parents can't do it even though they're willing). aside from the apartment hunting things are going well. teaching is a lot of fun, although it's not without its challenges. i feel like i really have no idea what i'm doing most of the time and i can't tell if the kids are learning anything or not. they're really cute, though, and all the girls run up and give me kisses when i arrive and tell me about this or that boy in the class who has a crush on me. all of the assistants seem to be having the same experience as far as that goes. apparently my friend brenden, who works in a high school, has quite the little fan club, and groupies that follow him around and bring their friends to class with them. i think the kids like it because it's a break from their normal school work, and they know that the assistants really don't have any authority over them and what they do in class with us will not really affect their grades. i just play games with the kids and teach them songs and try to get them to speak english as much as possible. i think i'm learning more french from them than they are learning english from me.

this week i decided it would be fun to do a lesson on thanksgiving. i prepared a little presentation on the history of thanksgiving (in french, of course, they would never understand that in english) and tried to explain to them all about the first thanksgiving and why the tradition has continued. i don't think they really understood it. it was pretty amazing to me that most of them had never even heard of thanksgiving, and those who had believed that we ate giant hamburgers. after the cultural part of the lesson i moved on to food vocabulary and explained what we traditionally eat for thanksgiving dinner, including turkey, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie. then i taught the structure "i like/ i don't like" and had them call out foods for me to list on the board. i asked them to name all the english words they knew first and most of them insisted they didn't know any until i asked "and when you go to McDonald's what do you eat?" hands

immediately shot up and little voices cried "hamburger" "chicken" "filet-o-fish" and "ketchup". i was pleased that they recognized these as english words but a little disappointed at the extent to which this aspect of american culture has become so widespread. teaching children gives me a really interesting perspective on how the french view my culture. i finished the lesson by having each child tell the class one thing they like and one thing they don't like, and it was really funny to hear the variety of answers.

being quite tired of apartment hunting i decided i needed to focus my attention on another project for a few days. now, for those of you who know me well you know that i have a tendency to think of some grand idea and then go ahead with it full force without necessarily thinking it all the way through. sometimes this can be a good thing as it is a product of my ridiculous determination which has gotten me far in many things, however, it can also be an extreme weakness. this time i decided it would be a nice treat for my classes to have them taste pumpkin pie. i wasn't thinking of the fact that i have almost three hundred students and that i would have to make ten pies in order for them all to have a bite, i was just thinking that it would be a good cultural experience for them to taste pumpkin pie and that it would go nicely with my food lesson. the french are not accustomed to eating pumpkin in desserts, pumpkin is for soups and ratatouille, not pie. so the first problem was that i could not buy pumpkin pie filling, i had to make the pies from real pumpkin. i don't know if any of you have ever tried to do this, but i hadn't, and really had no clue what i was doing.

i decided to do this on a sunday, and on sunday in france everything, and i mean everything, is closed. you can hardly buy a baguette, and that's saying something. luckily, the arab market in Noailles is open in marseille, and there are many fruit and vegetable stands there, so i got up early and took the metro to the market and wandered around looking for the ingredients i would need. i passed a shop that sold bulk spices and bought cinnamon, ginger, and nutmeg. then i wandered around looking for pumpkin. i finally found a little stand that had a slice of pumpkin sitting out (it's sold by the slice, not whole) and asked the vendeur if he had anymore. he said "yes, i think so, somewhere, look under that table. no? look under that table over there. no? okay, look behind the apples. yes, there. no, to the left a bit. found it? good." so i hefted the pumpkin from behind the apples and brought it to him (someday i'll write an email about french customer service, or lack thereof). he got out his knife to cut it and i said, "no i'll take the whole thing." he looked at me sideways. "the whole thing?" he asked, as if he hadn't quite understood me correctly. "yes," i said, "the whole thing." "halloween's over, you know", he told me. "i know", i said, "i'm making pies." "pumpkin pies??" "yes". he sold me the pumpkin with some reluctance, it seemed, thinking that i was going to defile his beautiful produce by doing strange and exotic culinary experiments on it. but i really needed two pumpkins and he didn't have another so i wandered to the next shop. it was the same story. he had me looking all over the store for another pumpkin and when i finally saw it i had to go back behind all the produce, move two bikes out of the crowded space,

crawl over boxes of rotten apples and moldy potatoes, and reach over a pile of tires (yes, tires, i have no idea what they were doing in a produce stand, but there they were, directly in front of the pumpkins) to get to the pumpkin. i took it to the guy and he started to cut it and i said "no, i'll take the whole thing" "the whole thing? you're sure?" he asked me, "halloween is over, you know" "yes, i know, and yes, i'm sure. i'm making pies." at this point i think he decided it wasn't worth it to try arguing with the crazy foreign lady who wants to make pies from pumpkin so he said "11 euros". 11 euros seemed like a lot, especially since i had only paid eight for a heavier pumpkin next door, so i told him so and he said "okay, i'll give it to you for ten." i said no thanks and started walking out the door and he said "okay, nine". "eight fifty" i shot back and he gave it to me for eight fifty. i was really proud of my bargaining skills and feeling very pleased with myself until i realized that now i had two really heavy pumpkins to carry on the metro and i still needed pie tins, a mixer, flour, sugar, butter, eggs and cream. luckily my friend brenden was with me so he helped me carry the pumpkins. okay, who am i kidding, he carried them, i didn't do anything. the poor guy, i kept leaving him outside (the shops were way too small for such a big guy carrying two big pumpkins) while i ran into various shops looking for cheap pie tins, a pastry cutter, a mixer, a rolling pin, etc. i found some of what i needed and decided to go to the grocery store near brenden and ellen's place for the rest, so we hopped on the metro to go back. poor brenden's carrying an 11 kg and a 10 kg pumpkin, and i've got the rest of the stuff. it's about a ten minute walk from the metro to the apartment, and about halfway we passed a stray shopping cart so we nabbed it and started wheeling the pumpkins down the street. maybe you have to know the neighborhood to find this funny, but you can imagine how ridiculous we looked walking down quai de la joliette wheeling a shopping cart that refused to roll straight full of pumpkins. we got to the apartment and started carrying them upstairs, and we passed one of brenden's neighbors who felt the need to remind us that halloween is over. yes, we know, i replied. it wasn't worth it to try and explain about the pies.

so we dropped off the pumpkins and set off to the grocery store to buy flour, sugar, eggs, and a few other things. by this time it was half past noon and we had left the house at nine in the morning. the pumpkin buying endeavor alone had taken more than three hours and i had to have four pies by the next morning. it was too late to turn back now. so we set off to the supermarket, about a twenty minute walk, only to find it closed. of course it was closed, it was sunday, what were we thinking? so we walked twenty minutes in the other direction to a different supermarket, only to find that it had closed a few minutes earlier and would not reopen for three hours. just a short lunch break, you know. i feel i must pause for a moment to insert a word about hours of operation in france. first of all, never ever try to do anything on a sunday. everything's closed. monday too. oh, and every third thursday on odd numbered days between 1:37 and 2:53, and tuesdays when the moon is full during even numbered hours...or any other time they feel like closing. in short, you can't

really plan to do anything because you never know if anything will be open. i've gotten to the point now where if i try to go to the bank at 2:30 on a friday and find it closed i think of that as normal. or course it's closed, it's (insert any hour or day here). and if it's a holiday, god help you if you need to buy anything or accomplish any business.

frustrated, we walked back to the apartment. i cut the pumpkin open (not an easy task with the dull and flimsy knife i had) and scooped out the seeds to roast later and put it in the oven to bake. then i went back out to buy the rest of the ingredients, found the store open, and found everything but a mixer and a pastry cutter.

you can imagine trying to make a pumpkin pie with no mixer, can't you? the pumpkin has to be pureed, and so i mashed it with a fork. i cut the butter into the pie crust with two butter knives. i used a wine bottle as a rolling pin. i mixed the filling for the first pie, rolled out the dough, and baked it and it turned out quite well. then i mixed the filling for the next three pies all in one batch. they looked good when they came out of the oven but when i tasted it there was something not quite right. that's when i realized that i forgot to put the sugar in. well, i thought to myself, it's too late now. and it didn't taste too bad so i decided to go ahead and serve it to the kids the next day. i think it was about midnight when i finally finished baking and then realized that i didn't have any way to get the pies to school the next day. i happened to know of a pizza place that was open near by so i went and bought three pizzas so i could use the boxes to transport the pies. you should have seen me on the metro and then walking down the street at eight in the morning carrying three pizza boxes. i got some very strange looks. i after class i stayed up until two making more pies for tuesday's classes, and spent most of wednesday afternoon making more pies for my thursday classes and for us to eat for thanksgiving dessert. (i had to do all of this at brenden and ellen's place because they're the only people i know with an oven, so i'm sure they were really sick of me by the end of the week). the second batch i forgot the eggs so they didn't set properly and were all runny, but the third batch were perfect (and quite tasty if i do say so myself, and i don't even like pumpkin pie). all that work and the kids absolutely hated the pies. i told them, if you don't like it you don't have to finish it but i want you to taste it because it's a traditional thanksgiving dish. most of it ended up in the trash, although a few of the kids actually liked it and asked for a second bite. then again, some of them told me it made them want to throw up. the polite ones ate it with a funny grimace on their face, or spit it discreetly into a napkin and threw it away when they thought i wasn't looking. if there had been a dog in class with us he'd be fat as a cow. the lesson was a success, though; now they all know how to say "i don't like pumpkin pie".

anyway, thursday after class i went to ellen and brenden's for thanksgiving. brenden's family was in town (all six of them) and it was nice to have family around for thanksgiving even if it wasn't my family. we ate chicken because you can't find turkey at this time of year in france (it's only for christmas), gluey,

garlicy mashed potatoes (my fault), instant stuffing that brenden's mom brought from the states, salad, and green beans, and of course pumpkin pie for dessert. i was finally rewarded for my week's woth of pie-making by the lip licking and "yum"s coming from all the americans. thank god it's just the weird french taste buds and not my culinary skills. although they are questionable at best, i mean, really, who has to make ten pies to finally get it right?

well, i suppose that's about it. i hope you all had a lovely thanksgiving. i'll write again soon, i promise.

lots of love to you all and i hope you are well wherever this may find you.

gros bisous,

becca