

By Anne Fadiman

r/ Inset a Carrot e/

DURING A RECENT VISIT TO THE FLORIDA ISLAND where our parents live, my brother and I had dinner with them at a fancy restaurant. As we bent our heads over our menus—all of us, that is, except my father, who lost most of his sight three years ago—I realized that our identically rapt expressions had nothing to do with deciding what we wanted to eat.

“They’ve transposed the *e* and the *i* in Madeira sauce,” commented my brother.

“They’ve made Bel Paese into one word,” I said, “and it’s lowercase.”

“At least they spell better than the place where we had dinner on Tuesday,” said my mother. “They serve P-E-A-K-I-N-G Duck.”

We stared at one another. You’d think that after all these decades, we Fadimans would have mapped every corner of our deviant tribal identity, but apparently there was one pan-familial gene we had never before diagnosed: We were all compulsive proofreaders.

My brother revealed that in a 364-page computer software manual he had consulted the previous month, he had found several hundred errors in spelling, grammar and syntax. His favorite was the oft-repeated command to “insert a carrot.” He had written the company, offering to trade a complete list of corrections for an upgraded version of the software, but had not received a reply. “They *want* to be wrong,” he sighed. I knew that by “they” he meant not just the software company, but everyone who was not a Fadiman.

Our mother confided that for several years she had been filling a large envelope with mistakes she had clipped from her local paper, the *Fort Myers News-Press*, with the intention of mailing them to the editor when they achieved a critical mass.

My father, who had once been a proofreader at Simon & Schuster, admitted that in the full flush of his youthful vanity he had corrected menus at posh Manhattan restaurants and handed them to the maître d’s on his way out. He had even corrected *library books*, embellishing their margins with ¶s and *lc*’s and #s, which he viewed not as defacements but as “improvements.” After he lost his sight, he had spent an insomniac night trying to figure out what kind of work he might still be able to do, and had hatched the following plan: He would spend 12 hours a day in front of the television set, prooflistening for mistakes in grammar and pronunciation. He figured that if he charged \$5 a mistake, he would become a rich man. His plan had evaporated in the

harsh light of morning, however, when he decided that, like the software company, the networks were not Fadimans and would therefore not wish to be improved.

I myself owned up to a dark chapter from my own hubristic youth. When I was 23, I had discovered 15 misprints in the Pyramid paperback edition of Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*. (Samples: page 99, paragraph 1, line 28: “acytelene” for “acetylene”; page 147, paragraph 1, line 27: “rocco” for “rococo.”) Nabokov had always struck me as a bit of a fusspot—had he not once observed, “In reading, one should notice and fondle details”?—so I wrote him a letter listing the errors I had noticed and fondled, on the pretext that he could incorporate the corrections in the next edition. I deserved a kick in the pants for my meddlesomeness, but lo and behold, three weeks later a fragile blue aerogramme with a Swiss postmark arrived from the Montreux-Palace Hotel. In it, Véra Evseevna Nabokov—she who had detonated, on page 219 of the book in question, Nabokov’s “slow-motion, silent explosion of love”—thanked me on her husband’s behalf for my “thoughtfulness.” Her typing was faint but 100 percent error-free.

I know what you may be thinking: What an obnoxious family! What a bunch of captious, carping, pettifogging little busybodies! It is true—and I realize this is damning



GARY HOVLAND

evidence—that once, when I ordered a chocolate cake to commemorate the closely proximate birthdays of my three co-Fadimans, I grabbed the order form from the bakery clerk, who had noted that it was to say “HAPPY BIRTHDAY’S,” and corrected it. I knew my family would not be distracted by the silver dragées or the pink sugar rose; had I not narrowly averted the punctuational catastrophe, they would all have cried, in chorus, “There’s a superfluous apostrophe!”

Of course, if you are a compulsive proofreader yourself—and if you are, you know it, since for the afflicted it is a reflex no more avoidable than a sneeze—you are thinking something quite different: What a fine, public-spirited family are the Fadimans! How generous, in these slipshod times, to share their perspicacity with the unenlightened! If you had been alive in 1631, it would have made your day to come across the seventh commandment in the edition of the Bible specially printed for King Charles I, which read, “Thou shalt commit adultery.” In 1976, if you read Beverly Sills’s autobiography before it was cleaned up in the second printing, its very first sentence *did* make your day: “When I was only three, and still named Belle Miriam Silverman, I sang my first aria in pubic.” Your favorite part of *The New Yorker* is the column fillers. No McPhee profile, no Updike story could satisfy you as completely as the recent extract from the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* that read:

Meanwhile, Richard Parker Bowles, brother of Camilla’s ex-husband, Andrew, said that from the beginning Camilla approved of Charles’ marrying Diana while she remained his power mower.

My own power mower, George, does not understand the thrill of such discoveries. He does not think me a lovable helpmeet when I wander past his computer screen and find my fingers, as if animated by an inner gremlin, inserting the second *r* in *embarrass*. I am certain, however, that the gene has passed to our six-year-old daughter. She can’t yet spell well enough to correct words, but she has definitely inherited the proofreading temperament. When she was two and a half, George said to her, pointing at our bird feeder, “Look, Susannah, a rufous towhee!” Susannah said, witheringly, “No, Daddy, a rufous-sided towhee.” It is only a matter of time before she starts adding those missing *r*’s herself.

AFTER OUR FAMILY DINNER, I ASKED MY MOTHER if I could borrow her envelope of clippings from the *Fort Myers News-Press*. I spread them out on a table at home. There were 394. (What kind of person would count them? The daughter of the kind of person who would clip them, of course.) The offenses included 56 disagreements between subject and verb, 8 dangling participles, 3 improper subjunctives, 3 double negatives, 12 uses of “it’s” instead of “its,” and 3 uses of “its” instead of “it’s.” Hunters shot dear; lovers exchanged martial vows; mental patients escaped from straight jackets; pianos tinkered; and Charles celebrated his 25th anniversary as the Prince of Whales. “There’s a huge demographic out there,” commented the *News-Press* film critic, “who appreciate good film and shouldn’t be taken for granite.” Even before I bumped into the large boulder at the end of that sentence, I had the feeling that I was reading a language other than

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English. I vowed I would never again take an intact declarative sentence for granite.

Swallowing 394 errors at a sitting gave me indigestion. One is enough. One is delicious. One is *irresistible*. My former editor John Bethell, who admits to sharing my compulsion, says that when a typo swims into his field of vision, he can’t *not* notice it. He remembers his first act of proofreading—at age seven, he saw a sign in a shopwindow that read DIABETEC FRUIT—and recently restrained himself from correcting VINAGER on a grocery-store sign only because he feared that passersby might think he was a graffiti vandal. The Bethell family, like the Fadiman family, presents irrefutable

proof that the trait is genetic. John’s daughter, Sara, grew up to be a copy editor, a profession she compares to walking behind an elephant in a parade and scooping up what it has left on the road. Her prize find, to date, was a sentence in a manuscript for a San Francisco publisher: “Einstein’s Theory of Relativity led to the development of the Big Band Theory.” In her mind’s ear, she still occasionally hears the strains of the cosmic orchestra.

The proofreading temperament is part of a larger syndrome with several interrelated symptoms, one of which is the spotting mania. When Brian Miller, *CIVILIZATION*’s copy chief, was a boy, he used to sit in the woods for long stretches, watching for subtle animal movements in the distance. The young John Bethell was a whiz at figuring out What’s Wrong with This Picture? Compulsive proofreaders tend to be good at distinguishing the anomalous figure—the rare butterfly, the precious seashell—from the ordinary ground, but, unlike collectors, we wish to discard rather than hoard. Although not all of us are tidy, we savor certain cleaning tasks: removing the lint from the clothes dryer, skimming the drowned bee from the pool. My father’s most treasured possession is an enormous brass wastebasket. He is happiest when his desktop is empty and the basket is full. One of my brother’s first sentences, a psychologically brilliant piece of advice offered from his highchair one morning when my father came downstairs in a terrible mood, was “Throw everything out, Daddy!”

Alas, there is no 12-step program for us. We must learn to live with our affliction. Perhaps we could even attempt to extract some social benefit from it by offering our faultfinding services on a pro bono basis. Had a Fadiman been present in 1986, when the New York law firm of Haight, Gardner, Poor & Havens misplaced a decimal point in a ship’s mortgage, we could have saved their client more than \$11 million. Had we been present in 1962, when a computer programmer at NASA omitted a hyphen from *Mariner 1*’s flight program, we could have prevented the space probe from having to be destroyed when it headed off course, at a cost to taxpayers of more than \$7 million.

And had we been present last year at the Tattoo Shoppe in Carlstadt, New Jersey, we could have saved Dan O’Connor, a 22-year-old Notre Dame fan, from having *Fighting Irish* tattooed on his right arm. He has sued the employer of the tattooist who omitted the *t* for \$250,000 in damages. I hope O’Connor wins. I can imagine few worse fates than walking around for the rest of one’s life wearing a typo. As the authors of my brother’s software manual would agree, it would be so hard to insert a carrot. ■