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ENDPAPER

Being a Mathematician

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My name is Véronique and I am a mathematician. I have probably been one for years now, but it took me a long time to acknowledge it.

As an undergraduate, I always thought of mathematicians as these weird people who roamed around the department. There was this very polite professor who would always apologize to the trash can whenever he ran into it. And also the professor who stayed seated throughout his lectures. Of course this meant that he could only write on the half-circle of the blackboard that was accessible from that chair.

As I moved to graduate school, mathematicians were my eccentric friends. There was the graduate student who thought that having a girlfriend and having a car were equivalent. Apparently the type of car you drove completely determined the type of women that you ended up with. (He was very depressed when he had to settle for an old Cadillac.)

There was also the graduate student who would play eBay to win. He was very proud of the fact that he had never lost an auction. He would proudly talk about his perfect record to anyone who would listen.

Mathematicians also included the foreign student who once took me out for a drive in his car. When I pointed out to him that he was running low on gas, he simply told me, "I don't know how to put gas in my car. Whenever I run out, someone helps me." And then he explained, "I know the theory behind putting gas in my car, but the details elude me."

But now I am a mathematician. I came to this conclusion recently on my way back to the US. The American custom agent asked me if I had my passport and I said, "Of course I do!" He waited. I waited. We waited some more. Finally he asked me, "Can I please see your passport?"

And someday, you will also be real mathematicians. And the world will not understand.

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