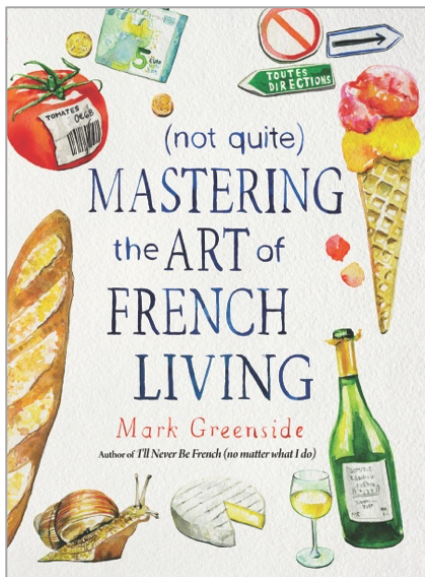




Volume 5, Number 1, February 2021



Hello Friend,

Happy New Year, Happy Valentine's Day and VERY happy new Presidents' Day. Like many of you, I've had plenty of time this past year. Time is one of the things I value most, as many of my refrains are about the lack of it: not now, later; I don't have time; I have to do this first; if only I had more time. For me, the strangest thing about Covid time is how slow and monotonous day to day is—Groundhog daze—and how quickly each week and hour, and the year, go by. I chastise myself for not doing more—learning

French, for example, or reading all of Chekhov—and not writing more, though I have written three new chapters and have only three more—I think—to finish French book #3. Below is an excerpt from a chapter I'm working on. Let me know what you think.

Monsieur C

I'm worried about my furnace. The last renter last year emailed me about the lack of hot water in the house. I told her to push the button on the furnace and hold it, and if the burner didn't ignite—or explode, I didn't say—call Monsieur C, my ever-ready, trustworthy, totally-reliable plumber-friend.

I met him years before when I had a problem with my *bac dégraisseur*, though at the time I didn't know I had a *bac dégraisseur*, or what it does. For twenty years, I stepped on it and walked around it—a three foot long, two foot wide, three inch thick cement slab placed in the middle of the concrete path that encircles the house, never once wondering what was inside. It was like those water and sewer cement covers in front of houses in the U.S.: *something* is under there, but whatever it is, it's their business, not mine—and that's how I thought of my French cement cover until the day before Donna and I were returning to California, and I went out to bring the terrace furniture in for storage, and smelled death.

Plobien is a small town in a regional park. It's rural, and there are lots of farms and animals nearby. I've smelled lots of things over the years, the worst being pigs knowing they're on their way to market and the industrial chickens in a factory a mile away—and this stench was worse than those. This stench was something else: forget Hemingway, *this* was death in the afternoon.

I walked around the yard looking for something dead—something large and dead and decomposing—or, maybe, on the bright side (I hoped), Monsieur Charles finally wiped out the mole metropolis living under, deconstructing, and re-landscaping what used to be my beautiful lawn. I'm walking around looking through bushes, into tunnels and holes, flattening craters and mounds, and see nothing. I walk back toward the house... The closer I get, the stronger the smell. I follow my nose and see the source: a puddle of reeking water seeping from under the cement slab, slowly, incrementally increasing in size and smell. The good news is I don't think it's sewage; the bad news is I don't know what it is, and it smells worse.

I run into the house and call Madame P. "Bonjour, Yvonne. J'ai une probleme a la maison. Dans l'exterior j'ai un peu l'eau avec pas bonne perfume." I have a problem at the house. In outside, I have a little water with not good smell.

“Telephone Monsieur C.”

Qui?”

“Monsieur C, le plombier, il est un artisan,” and using single digits and speaking slowly she gives me his phone number: neuf, huit, huit, six, zero....

I call and leave a message. “Bonjour, Monsieur C. Je suis Monsieur Greenseed, l’americain habite en Plobien...” I’m the only American in the village, and after *I’ll Never Be French* was published in French, and I received a letter addressed to me in a fictional village at a non-existent address, I’m fairly certain most people know who and where I am... “J’ai un problem avec l’eau dans le exterior et je parti France demain.” I have a problem with the water in outside and I leave France tomorrow. In the U.S., I would never tell a worker I’ve never met that I’m leaving the country the next day, but in Plobien it doesn’t matter. The car is gone, my shutters are closed, the gate is locked, and everyone knows everything anyhow.

An hour later there’s a knock on the door. I open it. Standing in front of me is a short, stocky, dark-haired fellow wearing regular clothes, not blue worker overalls, who—like me—hasn’t shaved in days. He’s built like a halfback and looks serious, and except for the facial growth—and his handshake, which is like a vise—he could be selling insurance. Actually, he is insurance, but I don’t know that then.

“Monsieur C?” I ask, just to be sure.

“Oui. Monsieur Greenseed?”

“Oui,” I say, and lead him to the side of the house, embarrassed by the smell and the leak, as if they were mine—me—my fault and personal failing, which it turns out they are.

“Bon,” he says when he sees the puddle, not in the least surprised. I don’t know if he’s nonchalant because I’m American, and this is what foreigners are expected to do,

or because it's no big deal, nothing new, and he sees it every day. I'm hoping for the latter, but expect the former.

He pushes the cement cover off the lip and releases a plume of putrescence: think rotten eggs and double it. I gag, cover my mouth and nose with my hand, and step back. He kneels and gets closer. I figure he's a plumber, and he's seen and smelled lots worse. Somehow, that comforts me— but not for long. He slides the cover away and exposes a tank of stagnant, scuzzy, rancid, polluted water. He dips a branch in the water and stirs—all I can think is double, double toil and trouble as icebergs of solidified fat and grease, like chunks of frozen whale blubber, rise to the surface and sink.

“Qu'est ce c'est?” I ask? What is it?

This is how I learn I have a *bac dégraisseur*—a grease trap—and what it does, and I didn't.

Rural France (maybe rural everywhere) has this ingenious water filtering system. Unbeknownst to me (as most things seem to be), my kitchen sink drains into a pipe that feeds into a tri-part filtering system that through some combination of magic, chemistry, and physics separates the gunk from the water, allowing clean water to flow freely into the septic tank—unless, of course, you never clean the system, as I haven't in twenty years, allowing grease and fat to grow into glaciers that break into icebergs that block the flow of water into the septic tank, causing the *dégraisseur* to overflow, puddle, and stink.

He swirls the stick to show me a chunk of blubber lodged in the bend of the exit pipe, blocking the water and causing the overflow. With a long-handled screwdriver, he picks at the grease, and sees it will take him all day. He blasts it with an air compressor, and barely Kirk Douglas dimples it. He drills a snake-like thingie into the heart of it and stalls. He then does what I want to do: he bangs the hell out of the pipe to dislodge the fat, and when that doesn't work, he takes a saw from his toolbox and does elbow

replacement surgery, cutting out the blocked one and replacing it with a new, clear one that works.

“Voilà!” he says, and stands. Then, seeing the look of chagrin and disgust on my face, kneels, and does what I’m sure he would for any disadvantaged person—which clearly he’s observed me to be. He scoops out the remaining chunks of fat, puts them in a plastic garbage bag, and leaves me with a good-as-new hundred and fifty year old tri-partite *bac dégraisseur* that I fear and worry about until I get the new sewer connection that bypasses *the dégraisseur*. At least, I think it does. I *hope* it does. I could lift the cover to find out, but I won’t.

He packs his tools away and puts them in his van. Then, to my surprise, gets in the van and starts the engine.

“Monsieur,” I wave my checkbook, “La facture!”

“L’annee prochaine,” he calls as he drives away—and he’s right.

The next year he fixes a leak in the attic toilet.

The following year he replaces the toilet on the second floor (which French people call the first floor) with a new, designer signature toilet—yes an actual signature on the tank, as French people like these haut-couture flourishes even on toilets.

After that, he replaces the second/first floor bathroom faucet, and stops leaks in the kitchen faucet and shed, where the now non-polluting washing machine lives.

Meanwhile—*all* the while—he’s been nurturing, sustaining, and life supporting my furnace, which was already old when I bought the house.

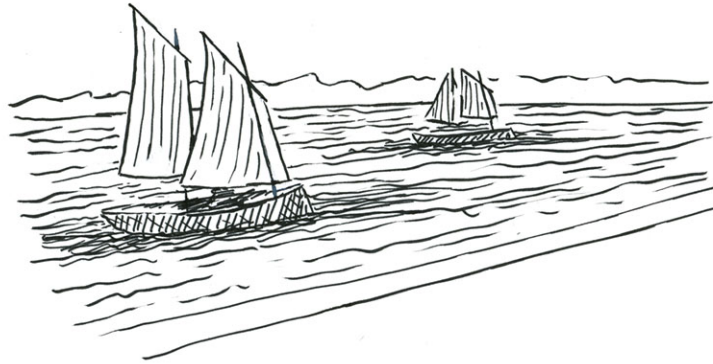
The woman who emailed me called him three different times to tell him about the lack of hot water. Each time, he came and fixed it: cleaning the burner; replacing a part; making adjustments. Once, he even brought her a portable heater from his own house. Every time she called, he came, and every time he came he fixed it, and every time he

fixed it, something else went wrong. By the time she left, she was calling him “Charlie,” something I haven’t had the nerve to do in the twenty years I’ve known him.

Luckily, the weather was warm, and the woman was gracious and understanding, and when I refunded several hundred dollars, she was even more so.

Now, I’m here, and I’m trying to decide if I need a new furnace....

to be continued...



NEWS ABOUT *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living*

- On May 4 the paperback version of *(not quite)* will be released with a new, funny, generous introduction by Ann Mah, author of *Mastering the Art of French Eating* and *The Lost Vintage*, two wonderful books I heartily recommend reading.
- In April, a new listserv will begin with fifty authors, me among them. I’ll give you the link in the next newsletter.
- On March 18, I have been invited to Zoom with the Los Gatos-Saratoga chapter of the American Association of University Women to discuss *(not quite)* and I’ll Never...

- On March 4, I've been invited to Zoom with Alliance Française in Charlottesville, Virginia to discuss both books.
- In December 2020, I Zoomed with a bookclub in Maine.

I never thought I'd like it, but I do, and I am happy and willing and VERY available to Zoom with book clubs, Alliance Française, and any other legal group, enterprise, organization, or gang. As mentioned, I have plenty of time, and as all writers will tell you, there's nothing we do better than finding pleasant things to do instead of writing.

If you haven't Amazon or Goodreads reviewed the book, please consider doing so, as those reviews are critical for the book's success and my mental health. If you'd like to contact me, I can be reached at:

- Email: mark@markgreenside.com
- Web site: www.markgreenside.com
- Facebook author page: facebook.com/markgreensideauthor
- Amazon author page: amazon.com/author/markgreenside

Please, feel free to share this newsletter with anyone. If you'd like to read previous newsletters, they are available on my website and Facebook.

Thank you. Be careful out there, and be well.

Yours Sincerely,

Mark

