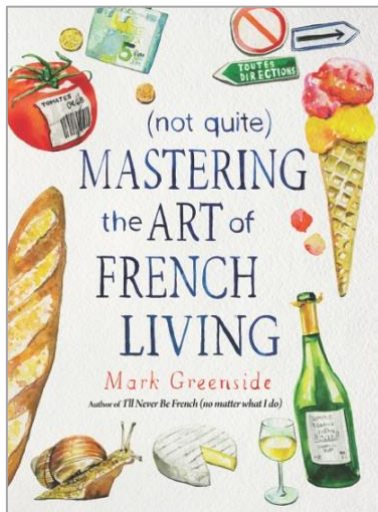


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Dear Friend,

I haven't written sooner because I've been working on my new book, which maybe, I hope, I pray, is finished. I've also been planning this year's trip to Brittany, which should be easier than last year's. 2022 was a year of renewals.

It began with my passport. I had a new photo taken—a photo that looks less like me than the older/younger photo (I think, I hope, I pray) and paid an exorbitant \$190 extortionist fee for expedited services that for any other item would be considered laggard.

Next came Global entry, a no-brainer: after an eleven and a half hour flight I do not want to wait another hour to go through customs, or worse, as has happened to me several times, not go through customs, get pulled aside, have my bags searched, and have to lie.

"Have you been to a rural area or farm?"

We live in a village of five hundred people; Monsieur Charles lives on a farm; Gerard lives on a ranch; a chicken factory is a mile away; horses and sheep graze behind the house; goats are across the street. Pigs are everywhere....

"No."

Global Entry allows Donna, me, and the government to avoid this sham. I flash my passport, and Donna and I walk out together.... So we renew. Donna's approval arrives in a few days. Mine doesn't. I go online to see what's happening and read my application is "under review". Two months later, it's still "under review". I can't figure out why: it's a *renewal* for God's sake. I've *already* been approved; nothing's changed—and then I remembered what did.

To get the approval the first time, we had to go to an office to be fingerprinted and answer questions in person. One of the questions was, 'Have you ever been arrested?' always a tricky question for me.

I was arrested at the Democratic—Undemocratic?—Convention in Chicago in 1968 for failure to disperse (I couldn't; I was in a crush of people surrounded by police who wouldn't let anyone pass through their line), and for resisting arrest (because I pulled a two hundred fifty pound police guy off my hundred pound pre-Donna wife). I paid a fifty dollar fine and pled no contest to a misdemeanor, and that was that—54 years ago. I think the record is expunged, but I'm not sure, so I never know how to answer the question. When we went to get our initial approval, I told the Global Entry guy the story, and he said, "Leave it alone. Just say no," so I did, and I got approved.

Five years later—last year—I forgot what I said the first time. Instead, I figured (always a mistake) in the age of license plate readers, cameras on every corner and store, regular yellow and orange alerts, and Chelsea Manning/Edward Snowden/Nicole Perlroth revealed cell phone, Wi-Fi, refrigerator, TV, and Alexa surveillance, the government probably knows about my arrest, so I answered, "Yes." No the first time, yes the second, no wonder my application was "under review".

Finally, after two and a half months of imagining Donna waving hello and goodbye to me as she sails through customs while I'm cuffed against the wall or being strip searched as they look for morbier cheese or some other nasty French contraband,

I got my renewal.

The first two renewals I expected. The third was a complete surprise. Rob, my car guru friend, managed to find and secure two cars for us in the summer of “supply shortages”, a rental for three weeks and a lease for five. It was while filling out the application for the rental that I realized my California driver’s license would expire while we were in France, meaning if I drove, I’d be driving illegally, hence without insurance, which given my accident record would be nuts, not that it actually mattered, because Europa and Renault would not rent or lease to me with a license that was about to expire. I could put Donna down as the driver, but that’s another story. Really! It’s a chapter in the new book....

I have no recent points, no recent tickets, and no reported accidents. *This* renewal ought to be a snap (I figure). I go online, fill out the forms, and submit them—and immediately am told I’m not eligible. It seems people like me, people over 70-years old, have to renew their licenses every five years *in person*—and have to pass a test to do so. OK. Makes sense—let’s see how the old guy drives, parks, reacts, signals, whatever—only it’s not a driving test but a written test, which makes no sense: just because I know I’m supposed to stop at a flashing red, doesn’t mean I do, or can, or even see it.

A driving test I’d pass blindfolded. A written test, holy cow!! The meager driver’s handbook that used to be twenty or thirty pages is now 125... I study it more and harder than I did for the SATs, GREs, LSATs, and my two master’s degree orals combined. The good news is there are no longer questions like, ‘If John is traveling 60 mph and Jane is 1,000 feet in front of him traveling at 35 mph and suddenly stops to avoid hitting a dog, how many seconds and feet before John hits her?’ Now, the tricky questions are about bike lanes—when you can enter them, cross them, drive in them, and what happen if you crush one of the bikers when s/he runs a red light.

I pass: eighteen out of twenty, and several weeks later, with everything renewed

except me, we arrive at SFO ready to fly. As usual, I expect the worst—Covid, crash, screaming kids, mechanical difficulties, strikes, delays, lost luggage, bad movies, but none of that happened. The international terminal at SFO was empty. Almost everyone was masked. We walked right up to the counter and checked in, then went through security like ghosts. We boarded the plane with the regular Sky Team chaos, which by now we're used to. At the next gate, we watched people form a single straight line and board an Emeritus Airlines flight that was scheduled to depart ten minutes after our flight. They boarded and left the gate and probably the ground before the 350 of us Air Francers mobbed the check-in counter to show our boarding passes.

The flight was one of the bumpiest I've ever flown, which turned out to be a good thing, because the one thing I didn't worry about—the food—was terrible: starch, starch, starch—white pasta, white rice salad, white bread, and pastry, all in one meal. Thankfully, the portions were small and the wine unlimited. This was in the economy section, which every year is more expensive and more economic, one of the major achievements of modern economics: charge more for less; provide fewer services, less privacy, print out the tickets yourself AND pay a convenience fee for doing so....

We landed on time at Terminal 2, Charles De Gaulle airport, which like New York City, never seems to stop building, which means every year the route to customs and baggage changes, the only constant being every year it's longer. With our thirty five-pound backpacks, carrying computers, phones, Kindles, pads, chargers, plugs, medicine, and files (writing for me, clients for Donna)—everything we'd need if our luggage was lost—we walk and walk and walk to customs where hundreds of people are already waiting in long, zig-zagging lines for the three open booths, two of which are for EU citizens only. It was also hot, as France seems to believe air conditioning is for the deserving and the rich, and we are obviously neither.

Customs over, we get our baggage, which is there, waiting for us, and wheel it across the street to the car rental office, and here we are. 120 minutes later we still

are—but that’s another story. For now, here’s an excerpt from a chapter in my new book:

“He’s Here”

For Sharon and Jean my arrival means English. They speak French all year, then, when I arrive, they change their thought processes and language, and speak English—even to their boys, who are French. With all my other bilingual friends—Gilles, Tatjana, Bruno, Henri, Gäel, Marie—I speak Franglish. With Sharon and Jean, it’s English all the way. Partially, I think, it’s because Sharon is Canadian and English is her first language, and partially because Jean can’t bear to hear my French without wanting to correct me, even though by now he knows not to bother.

They—Sharon and Jean—are my first line of language defense, and I utilize them often in the hope of avoiding or mitigating offense. When an official letter arrives, say from EDF, the electric company, or an item appears in the village newsletter that looks important—like about the new sewer lines—I take it to them for translation, after which I feel relieved (if they toss the papers in the fireplace) or terrified (if even they don’t know what it means, or what I should do).

They work as a team, sometimes arguing, often agreeing, always helping, or at least resolving—like the time I handed them a letter from the water company telling me I needed to purchase inside-the-house leak insurance. Jean, who can fix anything, read the letter, and said, “It’s crap, junk, a rip-off,” and tossed it away. Sharon picked it up, read it, and said nothing, which might mean she agreed with him, and might mean she didn’t. I didn’t buy the insurance, but every winter when the house is closed I worry about the pipes freezing and wish I’d bought it, and every summer, when I return and the pipes haven’t burst, I’m happy I didn’t.

Over the years, they’ve developed a highly-refined, time-tested division of labor—which means, depending on the situation, they work separately. When *I’ll Never be*

French (no matter what I do) was published in French, the Maison de la Presse in Loscoat threw me a *dédicace*—which sounds to me like something you do for the dead. I showed Sharon and Jean the poster with a big picture of me and the book, announcing the time and the date of the event, and Jean immediately said, “I’m coming with you,” and he did. He translated *and* spoke for me, and probably also explained, protected and defended himself, as he is prominent in the book, and doesn’t want another person (one already has) calling to ask him to fix their stove.

Jean is great with people and paper, but not so great with officialdom and authority, both of which make him angry and anxious. So when I said, “I made an appointment for Donna and me to meet with the *Notaire* to discuss trusts and wills, property ownership and estate taxes,” Sharon said, “I’ll go with you.” That’s how I learned France doesn’t have trusts or recognize them, and my mother has more rights to the house than Donna.

Every year, there’s something new: making an appointment with the water company, paying a bill online, finding someone who will remove a bee hive from my chimney—and every year Sharon and Jean learn more and more about their world. I like to think that’s my gift and contribution to their lives, even though I know it’s a gift and contribution they don’t need or desire.

Sharon always waits a few days after I arrive to invite me to dinner. She knows by now that I’ll arrive on American time, the time she said, “8:00,” not French time, thirty to forty minutes later—and she’s ready, but the first twenty to thirty times it was awkward.

I pull the bell—a real bell, unlock the door using the secret method only they, their family, and I know, and follow the smells up the stairs into the kitchen, where Sharon stands over the stove, holding a pot or pan or fork—some cooking implement—she puts down to give me a hug and a two-cheek kiss, which I double and return with enthusiasm. The table is set, and next to Jean’s place, ready for action, is his old, illustrated, beaten-up, stained, and creased, Larousse.

“Jean,” Sharon calls, telling him this year’s adventure in English is about to begin.
“Mark’s here.”

For Tatjana and Gilles my arrival means games. Gilles is an elite school—*école supérieure*—graduate and Tatjana is Serbian, which means both of them expect to win, though I think Gilles expects it more than she does.

Sometime after I arrive, Tatjana emails their English-speaking friends, who are many, and Matthieu, who understands English perfectly, but refuses to speak it. He speaks a French that’s so fast it makes my New York English sound like an Alabama drawl. The good news is he speaks like this to everyone. The bad news is they understand him, and I don’t. Worse, he talks to me a lot.

On the appointed day, but never the appointed hour, we arrive at different times, food and drink in hand, ready for a yummy, *Auberge Espanoley* international potluck dinner followed by an Olympic-scale competition of word games, mind games, movement games, and memory games; games that are timed; games with teams; games with different teams: French Trivial Pursuit, French Charades, French Jeopardy, French Monopoly, French (not so simple) Simon, everything but French The Price is Right, which I’d probably do OK with.

Except for Matthieu, the games are played in English, ostensibly so I’ll have a chance to win, but after losing for so many years, I now think it’s so they can practice and hone their already well-practiced and honed English skills. Several are even ringers: English teachers, who understand the parts of speech and structure of English better than I ever will.

Albine, Gaël, Yvette, Anne, Marie, and Jamilla and their husbands or boyfriends or both—I can’t tell—are poised, ready, experienced, and expectant. The only one who doesn’t care about losing is Matthieu. To him, these are only games. To everyone else,

it's the U.S. vs. France (and maybe Serbia, too).

Tatjana emails everyone the date and time of this years' Aubergy-Olympic gathering. Everyone (except Matthieu), I imagine, plans on victory, while I prepare for defeat. Like at Arles and Nimes in Roman times, the already vanquished provide the entertainment by finding new, ingenious, extraordinarily stupendous ways to succumb. In this regard, I never disappoint.

School is over. Mark is here. "Let the games begin."

To Monsieur Charles, my arrival means... And so it goes....



NEWS ABOUT *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living and I'll Never Be French (no matter what I do)*

- On January 9, 2023, I had a Zoom presentation and discussion of *I'll Never Be French* with a northern California chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma, an International Society for Key Women Educators;
- On April 12, 2023, I will meet in person with a book club in Napa, California to discuss *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living*;
- On Goodreads, *I'll Never Be French* has 2,501 ratings, 326 reviews, and a score of 3.8 out of 5. *(not quite)* has 785 ratings, 131 reviews, and a score of 3.9 out of 5;
- On Amazon, *I'll Never* has 372 ratings and a score of 4.6 out of 5. *(not quite)* has 579 ratings and a score of 4.4 out of 5.

What amuses and tickles me most is when Amazon ranks sales of one or both books higher than Julia Child, Jacques Pepin, David Lebovitz, and Bill Buford in the category “French Cooking”. It happens more often than you’d think or I’d imagine.

If you haven’t reviewed the book on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#) please consider doing so, as those reviews are critical for the book’s success and my mental health.

I want to mention and recommend two books by two friends, excellent writers who have been very kind and generous to me: [*A Long Way from Iowa, From Heartland to the Heart of France*](#), by Janet Hulstrand, author of the insightful and helpful, *Demystifying the French*. Her new book is a family saga that begins at the start of the 20th century in rural America and ends in twenty-first century France, and [*Jacqueline \(as in Kennedy\) in Paris*](#) by Ann Mah, author of two wonderful, best-selling books, *Mastering the Art of French Eating* and *The Lost Vintage*.

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If you’d like to contact me, I can be reached at:

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Thank you.

Yours Sincerely,

Mark

