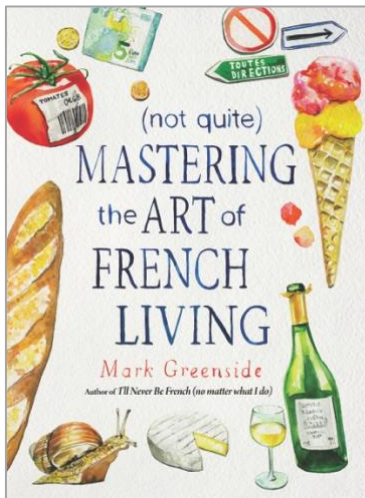


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Dear Friend,

I meant to write sooner and more, but life intervened and I got distracted. I'm ready now, though, to tell you about our summer. I hope it's not too late....

In June, Donna and I, who are double boosted, who have not been in a plane, train, bus, or taxi in two and half years, who still wear our N-95 masks when shopping, who have been to the theater twice in three years (proof of vaccination and masks required), who dine out out, not in, got on a plane with three-hundred-seventy-five masked and unmasked strangers and flew eleven-and-a-half hours to Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, where we got our rental car—eventually—and drove twenty miles east to Chantilly, once again successfully avoiding the Périphérique, still one of the major aims in my life.

We spend two days in Chantilly visiting the Château, its illuminating library of illuminated books, and savor the most divine whipped cream ever—*Chantilly*—where it was invented by the great chef Vatel, who killed himself because Louis XIV was coming to dinner and the fish order hadn't arrived, and then it did—one of the many reasons, I'm sure, theater of the absurd flourished in France. We drive north after that—away from the Périphérique—to Honfleur and spend two days on what the English call The Channel and the French call *La Manche* (the sleeve), ferrying under the *Pont du Normandie*, eating oysters in *le vieux port* with its six story slate houses, visiting Erik Satie's home and museum, which, like Satie, is over-the-top minimal, interactive,

playful, and amusing. Then we go west and back in time to Dinan, a walled medieval village, cobbled streets, half-timbered houses, and a fourteenth century fortress castle with a moat, *donjon*, draw bridge, artillery tower, and ramparts. Once fierce and feared, it's now quaint, because that's what time does, whittles and tames....

I drive into Plobien six days after arriving in France, excited, and not sure what to expect with much of France burning and in drought. I drive past the church, the *Mairie*, the bar, *patisserie*, Rick and Ella's former house, under the viaduct, past Bruno and Françoise's house, and see lots of cars, more boats than usual, bigger boats, newly painted houses, manicured lawns, and groups of people on the quay. Everything looks the same or better, something I wish I could say about California. I stop at the park where five black sheep are grazing, happy to see them even though I know what happened to the ones who were here before, and what's going to happen to these guys and gals, too.

I wave hello—or goodbye—and cross the street to unlatch and open the gate. Facing me is the new cobble stone and gravel driveway Rick built two years ago, the year after we left. Now, if it ever rains again, we'll no longer step in puddles when we get out of the car and carry mud into the house. Behind the house is my new neighbor's house. It wasn't there when we left, but it's here now, and I'll have to get used to it and him. I know he's a he because, except for me and my French, I don't think gender neutral pronouns have arrived in Plobien—and because Monsieur Charles told me his name is Pascal.

I go back to the car and sit there taking it all in—the house, boats, viaduct, river, sheep, yard, neighbor's house, knowing this is going to be a summer unlike any other—and it is!

Usually, Brittany is the wettest place in France, raining up to two hundred days a year. In the eight plus weeks we're there, it rains only once, an early morning storm that's dry by the time the sun comes up.

Brittany is also often the coolest place in France—and it is this summer, too, but what was cool in the past and what is cool this summer has changed. In the past, the average summer daily high was 69 degrees, and anything over 80 was hot. This summer, the average temperature was in the low 80's, the high was 104, and thrice we

had five consecutive days over 90. Luckily, the house has three foot thick granite walls, is across the street from a river, twenty minutes from the Atlantic, and Bruno and Françoise have a new pool an hour and a half away at their primary residence.

My gardener friend, Louis-Charles, said, "I'm 55 years old and I've never seen anything like this." It was too hot and dry for the moles to plow their way through my yard; too hot and dry for Monsieur Charles to cut the grass. All over Brittany, cypress trees died, including the last six at *chez nous*.

One night, I woke and smelled smoke, thinking it was kids across the street having a late-night party and bar-b-q. The next day Monsieur Charles told me it was from a fire in a village about twenty miles away—either arson, started by a fire person who was a little too passionate about his/her job or needed the overtime—or someone burning garbage in 100-degree heat.

Fire, heat, drought—it was like three of the ten plagues, or the apocalypse, but nothing like what was happening in southwest France, southeast France, northeast France, or the rest of Europe, and it didn't interfere with our plan....

Every year, we make plans to see friends and visit new and old favorite places—Ouessant, Perros-Guirec, Cap Fréhel, Saint-Malo, Bordeaux, Nantes, Paris. This year our plan is to see friends. That's it. That's the plan. After the shutdown, that's *all* we want to do—see friends we haven't seen in three, four, and more years—and we do, and once again, I become a socialist, albeit a socialist of a different kind: I call, reach out, initiate, invite, schedule, plan, and we see almost everyone we want to see. I give us an A+ for effort and an A- for results.

And here's the thing: I look at myself and at Donna, and I think nothing has changed in the past three years. I look at everyone else, and holy cow!!

Three boys who were kids when we last saw them are young men. Four girls are young women. One girl who was dating is a mother. One kid is a rapper. Another is gay. There are new tattoos, piercings, braces, glasses, and hickeys. One friend has sciatica. One had a serious bike accident and was healing. Three had surgeries, two had chemo, two are in wheelchairs, one uses a cane, another a walker. Four families had Covid.... People had more hair, less hair, no hair; different color hair, different cut, hair where none was before. They were taller and shorter, wider and narrower, straighter and bent,

more linear, curvilinear, square, and triangular. They were faster, slower, smoother and bumpier; more convex and more concave. Some have retired, some have changed jobs; some have moved, most have stayed. We attended five birthday celebrations and a funeral—and we met new people, including our new neighbor Pascal, whom we invited to dinner, and three Americans who read my books, liked them, tracked me down, and invited us to meet them for drinks.

On the way home, we spent eighteen days in a friend's apartment in Paris, where I proceeded to hurt my knee (turns out it's arthritis) and get the flu—not Covid, I tested twice—and spend three of the eighteen days in bed. Oh....

I also wrote while we were in Plobien. I bought a new computer and printer and worked on French book number three, which I hope to finish and give to my agent in January. The working title is, "Bonjour, Au Revoir, I'm Finally, *Finally* French." Here's a teaser.

The Wedding of Tanguy and Emilie

Donna and I are going to our first French wedding. My friends Bob and Loni's daughter, Karen, had an American wedding in France, but this is a *vrai* French wedding—civil *and* church—the whole shebang.

We've been invited to other weddings, but missed them because we were in California, and once because I had the wrong village. I thought it was in Montauban in Brittany, near Rennes, three hours away, not Montauban in the Tarn, nine hours away, and too far to go when I discovered it the day before the fête. This time, though, I'm confident—as confident as I can be in France—that I've got it right, and I feel that way until the day I see Bruno and Gerard dressed to the nines, tens, and twelves, and then I don't.

Bruno wears shorts all summer—as far as I can see the same shorts. If he must wear pants—like at work—he wears Dockers, though I suspect there are days he wears his doctor's gown over his shorts. I've never seen a French person—a professional!—who cares so little about dress or appearance. Gerard, too. He's a cattle rancher with a herd of three hundred Charolais cows, the best beef in France. He always wears jeans

and cowboy boots, work jeans for the beef, pressed jeans for the rest of his life. I've known Bruno and Gerard for years, traveled with them, gone to restaurants and parties with them, stayed at their homes, and never, ever, have I seen either of them wear anything but the most casual clothes, and then, here, on the two-lane country road in front of my house—at two o'clock on a hot Saturday afternoon—they're going to a friend's daughter's wedding dressed like the beaus of the ball: Bruno in a black suit, white shirt, black bow tie, and straw hat—a *boater!* Gerard in a fitted, looks bespoke, brown suit, white shirt, and tie. They are dapper, dapper, dapper—which means trouble for me: my wedding clothes look nothing like theirs.

A week later, Donna and I are apéritifing with Bruno and Françoise on their terrace. “Un moment,” I say, and walk back to our house and return in my full dress-up regalia—what I wear in the U.S. to weddings, funerals, sit-down birthday dinners, and retirement parties: polished black shoes (Mephistos, finally!), black socks, black slacks, a mauve shirt, and a charcoal-grey vest with thin white pin stripes, à la Elliot Ness, holding my ‘in case of emergency’ hand-painted, silk, rainbow-colored tie in my hand.

“Oh la la,” Françoise says.

“Beau,” Bruno says.

Donna says nothing.

“Merci, merci, merci” I say, smiling, relieved. “C'est bon pour le mariage?”

“Non,” they say in unison. The verdict is unanimous. I look fine, handsome, beau—and I need a jacket, which is what Donna told me in California, and why she's been quiet until now.

For Bruno, it's over. He's given his verdict, and that's all he's going to do. Except for wine and food, he hates shopping. Everything else is Françoise's bailiwick, which is why a few weeks later she takes Donna and me jacket shopping, something I dislike doing in the U.S., and suspect I'll dislike even more in France.

In the U.S., I go to Macy's or the Men's Wearhouse and buy something sedate, conservative, and classic—a navy blazer or Harris tweed—that I won't have to replace for a decade or longer if I'm lucky and don't spread, shrink, or spill. In France, I go to Leclerc *supermarché* and the Armor Lux factory for *troisième mariage* sales. But not today. Today, I'm going where Françoise takes me. I've had three suits in my life, one

for my Bar Mitzvah, and one for each marriage, each one worn once, and I don't want another. That leaves sport coats, which is a problem. French men wear bright red, green, blue, yellow, and plaid jackets; jackets that are form-fitting-tight, too short, with wide lapels, narrow lapels, or no lapels; too many buttons or not enough buttons; cut pockets, uncut pockets, no pockets—nothing I'd even try on, which is why two hours and five shops later, I'm still jacketless and ready to quit. Looking uncourant can be fashionable in its own independent anti-hero Jean Paul Belmondoish way, but looking like a clown is looking like a clown. I don't have much choice about being a fool, but a clown, Non. I won't do it.

“Une plus,” Françoise says, and drives to a shop in a mall that has the same selection as the others: boring suits and unwearable phosphorescent sport coats. Those are my choices. I'm ready to leave, but Donna and Françoise have begun shopping, so I roam the thirds, fourths, and fifths rack and find what apparently no *Façonnable* French man would wear: a silvery-grey, twill, two button, light-weight, normal size lapel, cover most of my ass, western-fitted sport coat that's been marked down—*troisième marquage*—three times. I put it on, and from across the shop, Françoise, who rarely speaks English, yells, “YES!” I look in the mirror: it fits and will look good with my black slacks, mauve shirt, and ‘in case of emergency’ tie, which I now guess I'll be wearing. Sixty years ago, in high school, I wore white dress shirts, skinny black ties, and brightly colored Frankie Avalon horizontally striped cardigan sweaters and was voted *second-best* dressed in my class. Now, all I want is not to be worst dressed. Such is how my world turns....

I buy the jacket, and Donna, who has packed several wedding outfits and pairs of shoes (and paid extra for baggage) so she has choices—depending on her mood, the weather, what others are wearing, and not wearing—buys two more outfits.

One more thing remains to be done. Weeks before, I received an e-mail from one of the wedding planners about something called *La Boulette*. I looked it up and saw that it means ball or blunder or dumpling, none of which seemed immediately important, though I was a little concerned about blunder. I had enough to worry about with my electric bill, bees, and what to wear to the wedding, so I set it aside—until now, two weeks before the wedding, and ask Françoise, “Quec-que-c'est La Boulette?”

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

- On July 1, 2022, I Zoom discussed *(not quite) Mastering...* with Janet Hulstrand (author of *Demystifying the French*) and her class “Linguistic (and Other) Adventures in France” at Politics and Prose bookstore in Washington, D.C.
- On January 9, 2023, I will Zoom discuss *I'll Never...* and *(not quite)...* with Delta Kappa Gamma, an organization for women educators in northern California.
- *I'll Never Be French (no matter what I do)* has 2,460 ratings and 313 reviews on Goodreads, and 328 reviews on Amazon.
- *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living* has 714 ratings and 124 reviews on Goodreads, and 469 reviews on Amazon.
- 151 people (none of them family members) are following me on BookBub.
- *I'll Never...* and *(not quite)...* are being used in a French class—God help those students!—at the University of Southern Mississippi.
- As part of our very social(ist) summer, we lunched with:

Keith Van Sickle and his wife Val, he, the author of *Are We French Yet, One Sip at a time, An Insider's Guide to Provence*, and *An Insider's Guide to St-Rémy-de-Provence*.

Judith Mitrani and her husband Ted, she, the author of *The Most Beautiful Place in the World*.

Sophie Picon, her husband, Dominique, and grandson; she, the editor of *Jamais Je ne Serai Français... j'aurai beau faire!* the French version *I'll Never Be French*.

Beatrice Vierne and her friends Emmanuelle and Bruno; she, the translator of *I'll Never be French* into French.

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. 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 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. 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

