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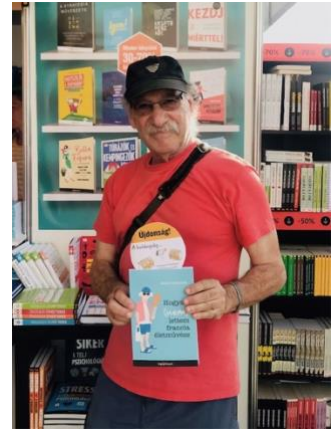


Dear Friend,

Donna and I just returned from Budapest, land of my roots. Thanks to my aunt we had the address of the building where my grandfather (1900) and father (1920) were born. It's now a twenty-seven-unit apartment building in the old Jewish quarter of Pest, and the only nineteenth century building still standing on the street as, like everywhere, Budapest is being gentrified. The ground floor of the building contains a single shop, which I like to think is the very place my great-grandparents had their candy store. It was exciting and humbling to be there, imagining my dad playing on that street and my grandfather and grandmother meeting and courting there, and later setting up house there, two newlyweds and soon to be parents beginning a new life and new family in a new country, all full of hopes and dreams after the end of the war to end all wars (in which my grandfather fought on the side of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire).

Also exciting—and the reason we were there—was the publication of *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living* in Hungarian in May and the Budapest Book Fair in June. I had no idea what to expect, but imagined something small and quaint, like a senior center arts and crafts fair. Ha! There were 150-200 different publishers' booths on a four or five block promenade along the Danube. *Along the Danube!* The fair lasted five days and thousands of people visited *and* bought books. (Hungary has a 99%

literacy rate). The biggest surprise, though, was when I arrived at the fair and saw *Hogyan (nem) lettem francia életművész* featured on its own table *and* on the publisher's publicity poster for its spring offerings. Later, when the person who illustrated the cover saw a picture of me at the book fair wearing shorts, tee-shirt, cap, and sandals—it was ninety degrees—she said, “Wow! He *really* looks like that.” (I do, except for the hair: less grey and less hair).



As we were leaving Budapest, on our way to the train to Vienna, we saw a copy of the book prominently featured in the main window of a large bookstore. It was a wonderful trip to a gorgeous city, and after being there, seeing my father's and grandfather's birthplace, and reading John Lucaks' *Budapest 1900*, I now know I'll always be Hungarian (no matter what I do).



Standing in front of my father and grandfather's building

While we were there, a review of the book appeared in a high-end cultural magazine. I Google Translate(d) it, but the translation was worse than my worst French. I know it's a positive review, though, because it has five stars. I was also interviewed—in English. I know what I said, but the interview hasn't been published yet, so I don't know what it says, and given my experience with Google Translate, I probably never will.

When we returned to California, a friend told me (*not quite*) was being featured by BookBub as a recommended ebook. I'd never heard of BookBub, but now I'm a member of this very smart and discerning company.

The blog, *My French Life*, previously published a lovely review of *I'll Never Be French* by Keith Van Sickle (author of *Are We French Yet?* and *One Sip at a Time*, two of my

favorite books about foreigners living in France). In May, *My French Life* published Keith's equally lovely review of (*not quite*)... Click [here](#) to see his review. Also, for the past several weeks (*not quite*)...has been Kindle's number one seller in the categories French Cooking and French Travel. In my not so spare time, I've been working on the next book. Below is an excerpt I recently wrote:

## Déjà Vu and Déjà New

I arrive at the house expecting to see everything as it was when I left (*déjà vu*), knowing I've been away nine months, and it's never the same when I return (*déjà new*). You'd think by now I'd know better, but I don't. Even changes I initiate myself surprise me—like the color of the shutters on my house.

For years, they were white. They were white when I bought the house, and they were white after each of the three times I repainted. For all I know, they have only and always been white—one hundred and fifty-years of whiteness—like most of the houses in Plobien, Loscoat, and Brittany. So when Rick, my friend, contractor, and all-purpose bespoke artisan, said, "It's time to repaint," I didn't think twice. I like the clean, smooth, satin whiteness of the wood against the craggy black, browns, blues, and greys of the granite and slate walls—and I like that white is old, even retro, and resists the invasion of the new Provençal colors of sand, egg, apricot, and peach. So when Rick said, "It's time to repaint," I said, "Keep everything as it is," consciously upholding the tradition of white, albeit an English white, because Rick and Martin, both Brits, told me French paint is crap.

And that's what would have happened, except for Donna. For her, painting means new and different; it means color; it means change, things I resist to the bone. How my politics can be change-the-world left-liberal radical when everything about me is leave-me-alone conservative, is one of the mysteries of my life, and probably why I long-ago abandoned Sartre and Mao and embraced Camus, and why I want to keep my shutters white.

I know Donna would relent and accept white if I pushed it. *That's* not the problem. The problem is she's usually right. When we were painting the California house—*her* house, the house she bought before we were married—I was adamant about white walls. The house is a pre-1906 modified Queen Anne with lots of windows and eleven-foot ceilings. I wanted white walls to maximize the light: white walls, white ceiling, white moldings, white doors. As in most things like this, she ignored me. She wanted color, change, *déjà* new. You'd think since it's her house, *I'd* relent, but I didn't.

"You can't go wrong with white," I said, 'Can't go wrong,' apparently becoming the chief motivator and lowest common denominator in my life.

"Let's get it right," Donna responded—and right there is the difference between us: half-empty and half-full, Jewish and Buddhist. That story.



A few days later, right before I was leaving for Plobien, I walked into the living room and saw swatches of paint on the walls—not one of them white, and not one I liked. There was a sickly green, like mucus; a yellow-orange, like tobacco-stained teeth; beigish-brown, like hospital walls; dark-brown, like dookey. The only color I liked was a cream or sand or ecru or egg-shell that was close to white, but wasn't. I expressed my preference and left for France. When I returned, the walls were celadon, wheat, corn, and gorgeous. It gave me pause. It still does. So when Donna arrived at the house a month later and said, "I think you should paint the shutters green," after I told Rick to paint them white, I listened.

I also asked my friend Sharon, who is a painter, and she said, “Why not?” I asked her husband Jean, a writer and film-maker who has an opinion about everything, and he didn’t disagree, which is as positive as he gets. I asked Rick and Ella, Monsieur Charles, Bruno and Françoise, Yvonne and her son Henri, Gilles and Tatjana, and everyone said green was OK: blue, green, and white for sky, sea, and clouds, are the primary colors of Brittany, though the Breton flag is black-and-white and those Provençal colors are seeping in.

That was the easy part. The hard part was choosing which green, as there are hundreds of shades on the internet and a newly painted chartreuse house on the quay. Clearly, if you can’t go wrong with white, you certainly can with green.

The rest of the summer Donna and I drove around observing the colors of shutters and taking photos of different greens—absinthe, artichoke, lime, teal, olive, moss, granny smith, pistachio, mint—until finally, doubtfully, queasily, certain I was making a mistake and ruining the house, the village, and Breton tradition, I settled on forest green, because Donna said, “It works best. It complements the trees in front and behind the house.”

“There’s been a change,” I told Rick. “The shutters get painted forest green,” and I showed him a photo of a house with forest green shutters and handed him a sample color swatch. A few days later, before we returned to California—more for my sake than his—I gave Rick a detailed list of the work we agreed he would do and attached another color swatch, “Just in case.” Over the next nine months, I sent multiple emails for birthdays, anniversaries, holiday greetings, thanks, get-wells, hellos, and how-are-you, and in each one mentioned the forest green shutters, concluding with, “I think they’re going to look great. I can’t wait to see them.” And now, after twenty-one hours of travel, sitting in my car, parked in the driveway, looking at the forest green shutters, I’m shocked that they’re not white.

They look good, and they do complement the trees behind and in front of the house, but they're different, and I'll have to get used to them—at least until the next time Rick paints the house and I go back to white... How I ever bought a house in France is beyond me....

Thanks again for your emails and reviews on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#), and [BookBub](#). Whenever I need a boost, I reread them. If you haven't reviewed the book yet, 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:

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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. I'll be attending my third book club in a few weeks in Oakland. Meanwhile, I just heard from **Michele Williams**, the person who won the book prize, who is currently at the house in Brittany, having a cool time, avoiding the heat wave, and enjoying her free two-week vacation.

Yours Sincerely,

Mark

