

Squirrel Pie and the Golden Derrière

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At the cheese shop in Paris the other day, a woman with a strong chin and dark curls labored over my order. First she cut a strip of potent *Comté* with a double-handled scimitar better suited to removing a king's head. Next came the crumbly *Roquefort*, which she sliced with a wire garrote. (All her tools seemed designed for more sinister purposes.) When she turned and asked me what else I'd like, I reviewed the landscape of wheels and pyramids.

My gaze fell upon something new—a stippled little hockey puck of beige.

“*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*” I asked.

When her eyes lit up, I realized my blunder. Alas, too late.

“Well,” she said, sucking in a breath. “For starters, it's cow's milk.” That was the last thing I fully understood before the hail of information. It was a “pressed” cheese, she explained, rather than a “cooked” one, produced deep in the Alps, beyond Grenoble, near the Chartreuse monastery, where the liqueur used to be distilled. She took another gulp of air and plunged back in, telling me how much fat the cheese had, in what conditions it had been aged, how the molds formed on the crust, which way the mountainside faced, how much the cows ate for breakfast, and what their names were.

“I'll take one,” I said, hoping to close the breach before the tide of details reached my chin.

“In France,” she went on, her dimples deepening with excitement, “we eat it with a bit of jam”—and then she was suggesting flavors, launching into the technology of fruit preservation.

“Okay,” I said. “Two.”

“In France,” she harped, “you can make a whole meal out of it.”

It was time for the ejection button. I patted my pocket in mock surprise and pulled out my phone, pressing it to my ear. “What?” Then I forced my eyebrows up and spaced out my words. “Oh... my... god! I'll be right there.” I looked at the cheese lady and pointed accusingly at the phone, giving the universal gesture for “It's not my fault.” Her shoulders rounded, but she conceded to ring me up.

I'm not proud of lies like this, but sometimes that's the price of self-preservation.

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As a kid, whenever I told my dad more than he wanted to hear, he'd cut me off. "Just tell me the time," he'd say. "Not how to build a watch." Sometimes I like to imagine how Dad would have fared stranded in France, where they don't merely tell you how to build that watch, but also how to design it, how to smelt the metal for the cogs, and how to make that ticky noise, all before wrapping up with an explanation of how minutes are tied to the rotation of the planet.

You could kind of understand this if the person you're talking to happens to be a watchmaker, but here it's just as likely to be an Uber driver or a mailwoman. People take pleasure in teaching you about things, and if you're a foreigner, their eyes close happily as they open each sentence with, "*In France...*" Should the conversation roll toward certain national subjects (cheese, for instance—or wine, sausage, colonialism, World War II, steel-hulled ships, or atomic energy), you want to stand back so you don't get splashed by their enthusiasm.

Back when we bought our apartment, our friends Guy and Sabine came over with a housewarming gift. Hoping for a bottle of wine, I hid my disappointment when Guy grinned impishly and whipped out, of all things, a book. (It's quaint: people still read in France.) The volume was all about the area we now lived in, and it told how the Bièvre river used to cut through this neighborhood en route to the Seine. That's why there'd been tanneries close by, not to mention windmills on the hill, quail in the woods, yadda yadda yadda. At least, I assume that's what it said. Guy was reeling off all the information, shoveling details into me as if he'd already read the damn book—or possibly even written it.

It's all part of the pedagogic reflex, which in France is as common as acid reflux, an involuntary burping up of knowledge. In this part of the world people are still infatuated with knowing things, whereas in the States we have outsourced that pesky task to Google.

It's René Descartes' fault. When he came along, back in, oh, whenever it was (if you really want to know, ask a French person), he laid a foundation for figuring everything out: divide your problem into parts, and then conquer the sucker, step by goddamned step. Pretty soon you could be absolutely sure about absolutely everything. Knowing stuff became important. Even today it's a linchpin of French identity: I know, therefore I am.

I'm not just referring to know-it-alls, which also exist here, under the names Monsieur or Madame "Je-Sais-Tout." They are as much a blight in France as elsewhere on the planet. But in

France even ordinary people accumulate bits of knowledge the way they might collect stamps, pasting in their trophies one tiny square at a time. No one has them all, of course, but certain knowledge stamps are more or less required for being French, and each person then develops his own niche—the way people’s stamp albums branch into Chilean airmail or South African shipping labels. And as any collector knows, half the fun is sharing your triumphs with others. It’s what we call education.

French schools don’t just promote the passion for information collection; they provide you with your own starter kit. That’s because kids here still memorize things, including whole poems they recite for class, lists of kings, and the dates of big events. We witnessed this first-hand as our daughter underwent brainwashing in the cult of knowledge during the eighth-grade. Over dinner she would lecture us about the universal rights of citizens, or the history of silt deposits on the Nile, or even... well, God only knows. We weren’t really paying attention.

In any case, that’s a far cry from the US, where memorization is so routinely poo-hooped that many of us barely remember attending school at all. During my own early education, only a couple of facts stuck, and it wasn’t information likely to help me get ahead. The first cropped up in a fourth-grade report about Davy Crockett, which I plagiarized from the *World Book Encyclopedia* with the care of a medieval scribe. Even now I recall how the words traveled unimpeded through my brain to the tip of my number 2 pencil. Then I paused over the print, my eyes widening. Our great American hero, the august authorities asserted, had grown up so poor that his family was sometimes reduced to eating *squirrel pie*. My imagination bubbled over. At last: a detail worth remembering! This delicacy became the focus of my report, and when I brought home a B for my work, Mom offered to make a celebratory dish, and I requested the obvious. (To her credit, it wasn’t even the squirrels that threw her off: *we don’t have pie for dinner*, she shot back.)

The second notable *oeuvre* from my elementary days was a one-act play about the rollicking adventures of Sir Francis Drake. The only historically accurate detail was the ship’s name, the *Golden Hind*, which allowed me to declaim what I took to be a synonym for butt in front of the entire class, generating the kind of tittering usually reserved for the word titter. Boy, Sir Francis sure loved talking about that ship!

Somehow I graduated from elementary school. Nobody cared about facts, so I fit right in.

Thus, while little French kids were busy pasting hard-earned stamps onto the pages of their knowledge album, in the US we just made things up. It's like that poster that hung in my school's media center, the one that said: "Knowledge is the accumulation of facts, but wisdom is knowing how to find them." This was an influential quote in my childhood, although I can't recall who said it. It pretty much exonerated me from knowing anything, urging me to take the wisdom route, which had the added benefit of sounding like the high road. And it's not just me: lots of Americans get huffy about folks who know too much and make sure you know they know it. Keep things short and simple, that's the American mantra. Politicians have learned this especially well. Some of them are naturally stupid of course, but others go out of their way to dumb things down for fear of being branded a wonk or an elitist or, worst of all, a Francophile.

One of the most annoying things about French knowledge is how much of it is tied to history. It's not enough to collect your stamps—you have to arrange them in chronological order and even know something about their production. Because I try to be a good friend, I cracked open that book Guy had given me about our neighborhood. It was a kind of coffee-table volume—you could tell because it included pictures, which is a concession French publishers make only when they're aiming for a low-brow readership. (A famous travel guide series, the *Guide du Routard*, includes no photographs at all in order to leave more room for facts.) But even so, Guy's book got technical fast, starting in 1376 and then presenting six hundred years' worth of maps, statistics, and public works, explaining how the city diverted or covered over this old waterway in our neighborhood, erasing it entirely from view. There'd been some urban planning, and somehow it was all connected to the construction of sewers. Water still flowed toward the Seine, but entirely underground. The bottom line was that, before looking at this book, I had no idea there was a river here, and afterwards I understood that there wasn't. The Bièvre drained away invisibly—just like all the details that slipped through the fishnet of my memory. It was hard to imagine trotting this information out at cocktail parties.

I retired the book to my shelf. I hadn't retained many of the facts, but at least I'd know where to find them—which, after all, was the definition of wisdom.

For an American I'm pretty tolerant of knowledge, but even I have a hard time with certain situations. Guided tours in France are the worst. Sometimes I get stuck accompanying visitors for a bus tour of the city—or worse, a Bateau-Mouche. Some information specialist drones on over the loudspeaker, and my eyes glaze over. For the eight-hundredth time I'll hear

how tall the Eiffel Tower is or how many tons of iron it took to build it, and five minutes later my brain will snap back to its virginal state, entirely untainted. Sometimes even my American visitors are surprised. “When did she say this was built?” they’ll whisper to me thirty seconds after the guide has told them. When I confess I have no idea, they are slightly affronted. It’s OK for facts to slip from *their* brain like an egg from a non-stick pan, but I’m supposed to know better because I live here.

The American disregard for detail raises some eyebrows here. To the French mind, facts are bricks in the rampart of knowledge, and each one is crucial to the integrity of the structure. It’s not enough to be an expert about Davy Crockett’s tarte à la squirrel and Sir Francis Drake’s Golden Derrière—you’re also expected to know something about... well, whatever else it was that got Crockett and Drake into the record books.

However, Americans are not total idiots. We’re merely interested in something other than details. Americans like to *get the feel* of things. That’s why living museums are so popular in the States. Why spend a bunch of time reading books about Benjamin Franklin when you can just go and chat with him in person? To the American way of thinking, French education is like one of those pointillist paintings by Seurat—an oddly precise yet bloodless picture composed of a million dots. Americans prefer Monet—those vague and watery images where everything runs together but still gives you the gist of things. Americans want the Big Picture, even if it’s a bit blurry.

A Parisian I know was asked to give a talk to a group of American students. Philippe is a specialist on Jews in France, and because he wanted to make sure the encounter went well, he asked me for advice. Though he’s a large fellow with the kind of beard that announces confidence, his eyes showed terror.

“I know American students are different,” he said. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Don’t slather on the facts,” I warned him. “Americans like things to be interactive. They want to participate.”

The answer rattled him. “Interactive?” he mumbled to himself as he moved to the front of the room. Students were already filing in. “*Participate?*”

I pulled up a chair. They didn’t really need me for this class, but I wasn’t going to miss it for anything.

He began with a little lecture about the history of Jews in France. Philippe had done this talk a million times for French students, and he had it down pat—all the dates and famous people. Soon he was revved up, reaching cruising speed for information delivery. There was so much to cover in the next half hour! But after a few minutes the students were fidgeting in their seats. One young woman snuck her cell phone from her backpack and was scrolling through Facebook. Philippe sensed he was losing them and he started to panic, which meant going faster and faster, as though the trick to capturing their attention was to give them more and more, cramming it in as if they were geese whose livers he needed to fatten. *Too many dots*, I wanted to cry out. *Less Seurat, more Monet!* I caught his eye and made a scissors with my fingers. He paused, stricken, and then started again with hesitation. I saw him swallow hard as he began eliminating things. Specific dates were the first to go. Maybe it was enough for students to know in what decade the Dreyfus Affair started. Or maybe just what century. He swallowed down the names of some of the second-tier political figures. The students were a little more attentive now, though it was hard to say what had caught their eye: was it the information he'd been scattering like handfuls of grain, or was it the wincing look on his face? Each time he sacrificed a fact, he grimaced as if he'd lopped off one of his own fingers.

When he finished, the room was perfectly still, and Philippe's eyes darted back and forth, wondering from what side the students might attack. Because he'd cut so much out, there were ten minutes left. I could tell the cogs were spinning as he pondered his next move. From the back of the room I drew a question mark in the air. He went ashen, as though I'd pronounced a death sentence.

"Any..."—his voice cracked, and he looked like he was in the midst of a painful bowel movement—"...questions?"

For a while the only sound was the fluorescent light buzzing overhead.

Finally a student's hand went up. She wanted to know about Philippe's background, how he got into this work.

The question stymied him. That wasn't the topic on the table. The talk wasn't about *him*, it was about history. But he stammered out a sentence or two, and the girl nodded.

Another student had a question, more on topic. This time Philippe answered with a five-hundred-word essay, complete with footnotes. A third question produced a second essay,

somewhat longer. He was back in his element, the captain of his own Golden Hind. But that put an end to it—no one was foolish enough to raise a hand a fourth time.

As they left, he staggered back toward me, panting.

“How did it go?” he asked.

“Not bad.” And I meant it. He was trying to meet them halfway.

“Any thoughts about how could I make it more...”—he cringed—“...interactive?”

I stroked my chin. “I suppose you could try asking *them* a question. Sort of like a conversation.”

By the way his beard sank, I could tell this went too far. Why on earth would he ask *them* anything? Hadn't they come to hear *him*? He was the scholar, the specialist. They were the empty vessels he was meant to fill.

“It's like Davy Crockett,” I explained. “You can only reach Americans at their own level.”

He searched my eyes with his. “What do you mean?”

I put it as plainly as I could. “You have to start with the squirrels.”

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For an American, it's not at all clear what to do. I'm reminded of a friend who came to Paris and put her daughters in the local schools. After the first day, the older one came home shell-shocked, lamenting how much French she was going to have to learn. The younger one, infinitely more practical, showed up with a look of grim satisfaction. “How did it go?” her mother asked. “Well, it's going to be a lot of work,” she said, putting her fists on her hips, “but by the end of the year, I'll have taught them all English.”

That's the question: Do we become them, or should they become us? The two systems are like joining a metric bolt with an American nut. They look like they ought to fit, but after the first couple of turns, they bind up.

I tell people the systems are equally good, but that's not how I feel in the midst of humiliations. Usually it happens at a dinner party somewhere. The guests are debating the merits of various Merovingian kings or the articles of the European Constitution, when, eager to join the fray, I make the mistake of raising my finger to ask for some kind of clarification. In the States there's no such thing as a stupid question, but that's not the case in France. Usually the

question I ask makes the table go still, and people stare down at their plates out of embarrassment, as if I'd just released a gust of intestinal exhaust.

In my fantasies it's everybody else who gusts. There will be an obscure conversation about Charles de Gaulle, and I'll intervene with, "Yes, and wasn't his dog named Pepper?" Their mouths will form small O's of amazement. "This cheese," I'll tell the lady at the shop, "it tastes like it came from the south wall of the aging cave." She starts asking me for recommendations. Sometimes the fantasies soar to even giddier heights. In these, I don't just place a cherry on top of the cake of knowledge; I actually knock someone else's cherry off. It should happen quite publicly—preferably in a lecture hall or on television. Some blowhard will be prattling on, making rising circles with his hand, and I'll lean forward. "Excuse me," I'll say, "I believe you meant to refer to the troglodytic drawings in the grotto of Lascaux," and he will blanch.

But for this to happen, I'd actually have to add some stamps to my collection. I would need to know a few things—or at least be better at Googling them really fast on my phone. Instead, I've gone a different route: I make things up.

Not long ago we had dinner with friends, and while Anne helped Pascale get the coffee going, Jacques was talking to me about the history of Paris. While he expounded about architecture and urban planning, all I had to do was utter the occasional "uh-huh" or "you don't say," the way a circus performer gives the occasional touch to a spinning plate.

He pointed out their living room window at the rue de Vaugirard, which he claimed was the longest street in Paris, cutting from the edge of town and going right toward the center.

"Do you know *why*?" he quizzed me with a sly grin.

Why *what*? I rolled around possible answers in my mind: Because all cities have roads? Because lots of them probably go toward the center? Because one of them has to be the longest?

The dinner they'd given me had been delicious, so I decided I should reciprocate with a small gift of my own. "No," I sighed. "Tell me."

And he did. It had to do with pilgrimages to Notre-Dame Cathedral, ages ago. People would stream in from the plains, throngs of them trudging toward that steeple on the Seine.

His words stirred a bubble of memory that wiggled its way to the surface of my brain. It had to do with that book Guy had given me all those months ago—the one about roads and rivers in our neighborhood. I kind of remembered it, but the details were vague, like a Monet painting. I did have wisdom on my side, for I knew where the facts were located; unfortunately, they sat



on a bookshelf halfway across the city. For now, I was going to have to wing it, adding dots of knowledge on my own.

“Speaking of roads,” I began. Then I listed a few streets in my own neighborhood that formed a straightish line to the Seine—though not toward Notre-Dame. “Any idea why they’re aligned?”

Jacques’ eyes gleamed.

With great care I unfolded my explanation of the Bièvre, of this river that had fueled the tanneries and mills, and that had disappeared more than a century ago, paved over by streets that led toward the Seine.

He nodded hungrily. Not wanting to disappoint, I told him more and more, squeezing out new facts from the few details I kind of remembered. I could practically see his stalactite of knowledge growing.

Best of all, when I got back home and pulled out the book, I found I’d been about 25% right—a lot better than I’d done in my play about Sir Francis Drake’s backside. I wondered what my dad would have thought. It turns out that if you go into enough detail about how the watch is made, nobody checks to see if it works. They don’t even care what time it is.

Living here has taught me to become specifically vague, foggily precise—combining the best of France and America. Or is it the worst? Frankly, it’s hard to tell.

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