

FINDING WILKIE

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Some people go to France for the food; some for the wine; some for the tennis, or the cycling; some for the café culture which refuses to hurry or be hurried; some for the light as it reflects off the Seine after a morning of rain; some for the Riviera; some for the brilliant fields of mustard, yellow as a dream. I know, because I used to be one of these people. All these aspects of the Good Life I once sought. But over time I have changed. Now, I go to France for the Bouviers des Flandres.

In fact my wife and I have just returned with a four-month-old puppy named Wilkie. (Not a very French name, I realize, not exactly Pierre or François – but then, we live in Brooklyn.) He is cuddly and playful, a miniature bear with soft, thick gray hair all over his body, and a pitch-black face. His cropped ears point north, curved slightly toward each other if he is thinking hard, like parenthesis over the question mark of his perpetually curious gaze. His docked, fur-covered tail is hardly even a stump, making for a fluffy, rounded rump of inherent hilarity, like a small baked ham dressed up in a fur coat. When he wags, which he does often, the little candle-stub of tail seems to harness in its truncated house enough vibrational exuberance to actually cause levitation.

Wilkie is my second Bouvier from France, and my wife's third. The French may claim that Americans are not buying French goods, but this is obviously not the case. When she was eleven and living in Paris, Aleksandra's parents brought her home a puppy from Normandy. His name was Romeo, and he grew, like his champion father before him, to be 120 pounds. Romeo had impeccable manners and the calm, watchful air of a sage. After school, Aleksandra used to sit with him at the Café de Flore, where without being asked the normally recalcitrant waiters would bring him bowls of milk. Nine years later,

when I first rang the doorbell of her parent's apartment, it was Romeo's deep, Kujo bark that nearly sent me packing before I had ever gotten my foot in the door. (What did I know? I'd grown up with miniature dachshunds.) Fortunately for me, my sense of romantic mission was greater than my instinct for self-preservation. Soon Romeo and I bonded, and I was inducted into the realm of Bouvier worship, a kingdom I have never left.

Our last Bouvier, Pico, came from a well-regarded breeder just outside Paris. From the start he was, and grew up to be, quite different in temperament from Romeo – less overtly the watchful Wise One, far more emotional, exquisitely, sometimes painfully attuned to our every last change of feeling – while still at all times exhibiting the strong, endearing characteristics of his cattle-herding breed: an exuberant, highly intelligent nobility of spirit and mind; a sense of unshakeable loyalty to those he considers his family; an instinctive desire to arrange that group, whenever possible, into a literal herd, so that he might keep his watchful, loving eye on all his charges at once. A Bouvier will sometimes express his fullest appreciation simply by leaning against your legs like a soft, warm, breathing wall; or by pressing his large, beautiful head into your palms for a minute or two, until the long, unspoken moment becomes, unexpectedly, a communication you will not soon forget.

Pico died suddenly last September, at the age of eight, of a brain seizure. Suffice it to say that our deciding to get another Bouvier from France was in every way an homage to that remarkable dog, and to those who came before him.

During the winter, Aleksandra's parents, aware of our lingering grief over Pico's death and obviously suffering from their own, decided to surprise us with the gift of a new Bouvier puppy. But to attempt to buy a Bouvier in France is to enter into a ritualized world of lovers and fanatics, in which obscure codes and customs of behavior must be followed to the letter; and so my father-in-law,

unbeknownst to us, began his long search for the right dog by stepping into the Labyrinth.

A number of futile transatlantic phone calls finally produced an initial conversation with the president of the *Club de Bouviers* in France, the estimable Keeper of the Flame, Madame Maury-Gable. Madame, naturally, was at first skeptical of my father-in-law's intentions, and needed to be convinced, over the course of countless further phone calls, that we were a family who truly understood the difference between a run-of-the-mill Bouvier and a champion French Bouvier, and, most of all, who possessed a degree of heart and nobility commensurate with the dog himself. My father-in-law, a writer and anthropologist, called on all his formidable reserves of feeling in recounting to Madame the life histories and, indeed, geneologies of both Romeo and Pico. In short, it was a hell of a story, and had the advantage of being true. Madame Maury-Gable was swayed, and it only took another bankrupting series of calls to elicit from her the recommendation of a particular breeder.

Enter Madame Nicolas, of *Élevage du Clos de la Louette*, near La Rochelle, in the gourmand's paradise region of Poitou-Charente on France's Atlantic coast. (This is the region of Cognac, that magical brandy which, all by itself, has been known to turn a trip into an adventure.) Another dozen or so phone calls to La Rochelle, a recounting of the entire Romeo-Pico time continuum, and at last my father-in-law had the information he wanted: there was a three-month old male puppy available, *toute de suite*. He was such a winner that Madame Nicolas had been planning to keep him for herself – indeed, she had bestowed upon him the incongruously Spinal Tappish name of Urban Legend – but she allowed that she might be willing to part with him if it was to the right people. That very day, my in-laws began making preparations to go to France to pick up the dog.

It was around this time, after a long gray winter, that Aleksandra and I decided that we could wait no longer to have another Bouvier in our lives. We said as much to her parents, who then confessed their plans to surprise us with

a puppy. The rest, as they say, is a blur – or maybe that was the Cognac. The next thing I remember we were all on a plane to France, then heading southwest from Paris in a car large enough to hold a traveling dog crate as well as our luggage. By the next morning, foggily recovering from a five-course dinner at a local hotel (did I mention the Cognac?), we were driving the last hour to *Élevage du Clos de la Lurette*.

If you have never seen fifteen or twenty Bouviers of various sizes scampering around at once – racing each other, six at a time, from one end of a long fence to another; massing curiously, sniffing and woofing, around the feet of a group of visitors (Americans, no less!); pawing and nipping at each other, as puppies will do – then you have missed a grand sight. *Clos de la Lurette* sits on about three flat, grassy acres. As we made our way through the surging, sniffing pack to the house, Madame Nicolas, a friendly, forthright woman of about forty with russet-colored hair, pointed ahead to a grayish, thick-furred puppy with a black face sitting placidly on the porch steps. “Voilà, Urban,” she said, adding that he had just eaten a huge meal and was “complètement crevé”. I reached him first. He looked up sleepily, sniffed, licked my nose once, then fell back into a waking snooze, seemingly unsurprised by our arrival.

An hour later – after much clinical observation of Urban in his environment; a warm lick of approval from his statuesque, impressively bearded dad; a ritualized but highly practical discussion with Madame and Monsieur Nicolas about training and development issues (this took place in a room whose floor-to-ceiling shelves were entirely filled with first-place competition trophies and pictures of *Clos de la Lurette* Bouviers pulling milkcarts and the like); and the ceremonial handing-over of papers confirming pedigree, date of purchase, and all required vaccinations (the dog actually has a kind of passport, without which he would not be allowed to leave the country) – Madame Nicolas finally picked up Urban and sadly hugged him goodbye. Then I put him in Aleksandra’s lap in the backseat of our car, and we set off. He was Wilkie now, and we were his parents.

It is almost a cliché these days to mention that the French love dogs. But they really do. And just as it is not difficult to find, anywhere in France but especially in Paris, a café, however renowned, that will not accept your little pooch (or mighty big pooch, in the case of a full grown Bouvier) as a welcome friend under the table for a few hours, so it is more than possible to locate hotels that will take your dog as a paying, dignified guest (some establishments charge a supplemental fee of ten or twenty euros for the privilege), and lavish on him many of the same refined services that they do on you. We found such a place – Abbaye des Vaux de Cernay, an imposing old Cistercian monastery, beautifully renovated by the Rothchild family, in the serene Rambouillet forest between Chartres and Versailles – for Wilkie’s first night away from home. (This after a five-hour drive during which, at a gas station off the autoroute, he was the object of an impromptu mosh pit of appreciative truckers.) My wife had called ahead and explained the situation to the hotel management, and the restaurant, normally off-limits to pets, had agreed to let Wilkie dine with us.

The dining room was vast, 12th century, with ribbed vaults and sandstone capitals and columns. It was off-season and quiet. A large table of businessmen occupied one corner; a couple with an infant boy in a bassinet were at the table nearest ours. The menu and wine list were impressive. After a long, full day we were ready for a feast. Given the circumstances, however, perhaps five courses was a bit optimistic. Wilkie threw up twice before the first course arrived. Since he was lying on the floor between my wife’s chair and mine, out of sight of the other diners, all that was apparent to the rest of the room was a gut-wracked dry-heaving emanating from the vicinity of our table. They took it well, I’ll say that for them. Nobody made a peep. Meanwhile, bent-over from my chair, I was scooping prodigious amounts of dog vomit into my napkin. In between my oddly mechanical torso dips I would raise myself and beam a strained smile out at the room, as if to say: We are Americans, it is true, but we really love France! When the napkin was full to bursting and the floor more or less free of high-projectile pellets, Aleksandra surreptitiously stuffed the

whole thing into her purse like a heisted bag of truffles. Then, under the stunned collective gaze, she hurriedly left the dining room, ostensibly to look for the toilet.

Through all this the waiters, with superhuman discretion, appeared to take no notice. Heroes, they were, and I for one will never forget them. Unasked, they brought the by now sagging Wilkie a bowl of water. And they acted as if the faintly acrid vegetable odor coming from the floor beneath our table was just the usual *eau de chien*, and we the usual sort of American tourists who hurl our way through the countryside. And when, after the meal was over and we were drinking tea in the “salon Gothique,” my mother-in-law returned to the dining room to fetch her purse, she discovered two waiters amiably scrubbing the floor where Wilkie had been, and three others, including the rather tight-lipped sommelier, fondly reminiscing about the little Bouvier pup who had briefly been their ward.

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