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Marquis de le Renard

Brian W. Engelsma

Gettysburg College, engebr02@alumni.gettysburg.edu

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Marquis de le Renard

Author Bio

Brian is a Political Science and Philosophy double major from Orono, Minnesota. He has also written for The Gettysburgian and The Gettysburg Forum. In addition to writing, Brian enjoys long walks on the beach and male fashion.

Marquis de le Renard

Brian Engelsma

The gooey sardines sat delicately in the middle of the table, their stench slowly rising above and smacking everyone's nostrils like a slap in the face. My stomach begins to ache, I can feel it rumbling up and down like the saltiest sea in the depths of a storm. Sardines? Again? This was my family's idea of a meal: all five of us, myself, Mom, Dad, Louis and Marie gathered around the table, mechanically shoveling those sardines, floating in a puddle of mustard, onto our plates like we're lunch ladies. I couldn't take it anymore, that tangy twinge in my mouth, the salty aftertaste, it's too much for a kid to handle.

Looking over at my brother and sister I can see they have the same idea I do. Every Sunday we pour in around this oak table, force feeding ourselves these strange little critters. It was about a year ago that we, that is my brother, sister and I, started a few experiments on getting out of our predicament. There was, of course, the famous dog caper of June, when we let Max, our black-and-white rambunctious little pup, with his dalmatian spots and thirst for attention, out of his cage, letting him distract our parents long enough to toss our sardines in the trash.

Then there was Louis's tragic glass half full trick, where he discreetly dropped as many sardines as he could into his glass of milk. That worked for a good 15, maybe 20 minutes until my mother went to pour his half glass out into the sink. Now thanks to him there are no more drinks at dinner.

The rest of our tricks have always been fairly pedestrian-stuff like feigning illness and spitting out as many of those sardines as you can into the toilet, or pretending to wipe your face off with a napkin, all while you're jettisoning out lumpy globs of fish and mustard from your mouth. But all of those tricks were minor league at best, and for the last few days I've been working up a real major league plan to bring us one less night of sardines.

Glancing out of the corner of my eye I see my brother, he was the only one I could trust, and waited for him to give me the signal to know he's ready. Taking a bite of sardines, I see him wheeze and cough up a deep hack of a cough. He raises his pale fingers up to his face and cups his mouth in his hand. He's ready, and so am I. Taking a moment to get pumped up and convince myself that this will work, I set it all in motion.

Pushing my plate of sardines and mustard aside with one swoop of

my right hand, I look at my father and tell him defiantly that no more, no more will I sit in silence as Bumblebees Sardines in Mustard is foisted before us for our dining displeasure, that those deep yellow and rustic orange cans will no longer define mealtime for the Dumont family.

The look on his face is one that no kid ever wants to see on their parents. He was shocked, he was devastated, he was completely and in all ways dumbfounded that this could be happening. His emerald green eyes opened up real wide like little dessert plates or a lace snowflake, his nostrils flared up like a sail flapping in the wind, and all life and emotion seemed to disappear from his face in the time it took his fork to come crashing down on the table with a solitary clack. For a couple of moments everyone stood still, eyes parked on my father waiting to see what he would do next. After what felt like an eternity of an awkward stare-down between the two of us, he began to quickly shutter his eyes open and shut as fast as a hummingbird's wings.

Then Louis follows through perfectly with his part. Resting in the chair he brushes his thick brown hair from his eyes, looks toward my father and tells him in the high-pitched whiny tone of a child who perceives injustice, "If he doesn't have to eat them I don't see why I have to! You guys always do this, it isn't fair at all." Louis begins to slump back in his chair and cross his lanky arms, trying his best to scrunch up his face and force a frown. With any luck we've done it now, the stakes are so high that my father will have to go big to stop this mutiny on his hands.

Slowly, my father raises his handkerchief to his face and wipes a few drops of mustard off of his thick, Magnum P.I. moustache. Turning his head away he takes in a deep breath, and then refocuses his attention squarely on me.

"Sons," he says to the two of us now, "do you remember why we eat sardines with mustard sauce?"

"Well," I answer, "I was just thinking it might be nice to try something new for once, like maybe anchovies or pickled herring. Shoot, maybe we could try something that isn't even seafood."

Sluggishly my father looks down and shakes his head, and with a subdued voice he looks back up at me and says, "I didn't ask about what you thought, I asked if you remembered why we eat sardines with mustard."

I know full well why we eat this devilish concoction, but now I need to really sell it, make him believe I have no clue at all. "Ummm, well, no not exactly. I remember you saying something about it before but to be perfectly honest I don't really remember why we always eat sardines with mustard sauce."

Almost relieved my father pushes back his chair, "Very well then,

we shall go over this again, and soon enough you all will see why this family eats mustard with its sardines.”

Standing up, my father beckons us to come with him as he walks through the kitchen and toward his study. As my mother stays behind to clear the dishes, the three of us walk through the door leading from the kitchen to my father's study, following him like a gaggle of baby geese. Looking over at my brother and sister, I give them a little nod, we've done it. If we can get him distracted with another story we can waste the entire night, and by the time we're done, it will be so late that there won't be any time for sardines, or so we hope.

My father's study was an oddly imposing place. We kids never go in there, it was understood that this was his place. Obscure books about failed French revolutions and European aristocracies line the bookshelves, while a bizarre statue of a green winged frog, with warts like a bubbled-in Scartoron, sits on the floor next to the door. Moving in, we all grab a seat, Marie and Louis on my father's brown leather couch off to the side and me on a black studded armchair opposite his desk.

Sitting next to me is a peculiar side table, well it isn't really a side table at all. It's more of an old wooden statue of a short, bald man with bushy gray eyebrows, dressed in a butler's outfit and hunched over like a scurvy-riddled henchman. The statue is as tall as the chair, but this decrepit man is politely holding a platter with a smattering lump of something, what exactly I could not tell, nestled right in the middle.

My father takes a seat behind his desk, flashing on his old lamp with a long and skinny green lamp cover. Reaching into his drawer he snatched a cigar and promptly lights it up with strike anywhere match.

“Listen children,” he puffs as he lets some cigar smoke come flowing out of his mouth like an upside down waterfall, “do any of you remember me talking about your great-great-great-grandfather Jacques Dumont?”

Softly my younger brother Louis speaks up. “I think I remember you saying something about him before, didn't he live in Cleveland?”

This was another part of the game now. Getting him to start a story is one thing, but getting it to drag on is an entirely different challenge. We need to come up with as many stupid answers, and even stupider questions, as we can to drag this out.

“What, no, that's a terrible answer,” my father responds, blinking heavily, almost startled by the reply, “he lived in France, not Cleveland, why would you ever think we came from Cleveland?”

“Well what was he doing in France?” I ask my father, trying my best to put on a puzzled face.

“That's where he lived. He was born there, he died there.”

“Why didn't he move to like England? Or if he liked French he

could of gone to Quebec, I think either of those places would be better than France.”

Getting flustered, my father puts down his cigar and begins to gesture wildly with his hands, “it doesn't really matter where he lived, just remember he lived in France. Now can any of you guess what he did for a living.”

My sister Marie begins to realize the game we are playing, and joins in herself. “Was he an electrician?”

“What? No, they didn't have electricity back then.”

“Oh, was he a bank teller?”

“No, they didn't really have banks then either, at least not like we do now.”

“Ohhh,” she says, slowly rolling her hazel eyes, “so he raised gerbils.”

“Why would you ever think he raised gerbils,” my father chirps out in a high-pitched squeal.

“I thought you said he raised gerbils to sell on the black gerbil market.”

“No, I never said that,” my father retorts defensively, closing his eyes and shaking his head back and forth, “you can't talk anymore, your talking privileges have been revoked for the rest of the evening.”

Marie starts to protest, but my father hunches up in his chair, raising one finger and cutting her off immediately. I look toward my brother and he makes a motion like he is rolling something in the air, letting me know that we need to slow down, spread this out slowly.

“Now that your sister is no longer distracting us we can get on with the story. You see your great, great, great grandfather worked as a cook for the most powerful man in town, the Marquis de le Renard.”

“The what?” I ask my father squinting my eyes, pretending like I don't understand what he said.

“The Marquis, it's an aristocratic title like a count or a baron or a duke, so if that confuses you just think of him as the Duke de le Renard. Anyways, so he worked for the Marquis de le Renard as a cook. Now the marquis, he was well known throughout all of France, from Brittany on down to Burgundy, and even worse he was known for his insatiable appetite and a demanding palate, that is he was very picky about what kind of food he would and would not eat.”

“Alright, so our great, great, great grandfather worked for a fussy duke and had to make him food, now what does that have to do with us eating sardines with mustard?” I ask as I bend my head down forward and look at him through the top of my eyes.

“I'm getting there, hold your horses,” my father responds as he

taps his cigar on a stained glass ashtray, causing a cascading tower of black ash to come falling off the tip of his cigar, “so day in and day out Jacques worked to find something new to present to the marquis.”

My father delicately leans back in his chair, puffing his cigar and letting the smoke slowly ebb out of his mouth and up towards the ceiling.

“The marquis, he was a man of a certain, *je ne sais pas*, vanity I guess. So one day the marquis calls Jacques into his chambers. The marquis always stayed in the same room all day, this foreboding room in the center of his estate, with damp stone walls that seemed to sweat for no reason, and a dozen torches lining the walls to provide some light, although the lack of windows certainly made things dim.”

You can tell my father was starting to get impressed by the sound of his voice. He just loves giving these talks, where he can spend countless moments dwelling on such trivial minutiae. That's how we knew this plan would work, get him distracted and this can go on for hours. I notice that Louis and Marie haven't said anything in a while, and looking back I notice that Marie has fallen asleep, tilting her head back and letting her mouth hang slightly ajar. Next to her my brother is only slightly more sentient, he appears to be running his bony fingers around my father's couch, pretending to be drawing something. I'm all that's left, I need to try and keep my guard up or else he could end the story at any moment.

“Anyways, I'm getting sidetracked, so the marquis calls Jacques into this almost dungeon-like room, has him walk right up where he is sitting, and tells him that he needs something bold, something fresh, some type of new dish that he can name after himself. He tells him that the Earl of Sandwich got some food named after him, some droll creation called a 'sandwich,' and that he wanted Jacques to create a 'le renard' to rival the sandwich.”

Interrupting my father I lean forward in his oversized leather chair and ask him, “Why did the marquis care so much about getting a food named after him?”

“Well son,” my father responds, tilting his head to the side, putting a little smirk on his face and arching up his bushy brown eyebrows, “the marquis wasn't exactly a modest man, he wanted everyone to know his name. It didn't help that the Earl of Sandwich had something named after him, their families had been notorious rivals back in those days.”

I nod along as my father faithfully answers my question, occasionally squinting to give off the impression I was lost in some deep thought.

“Alright then, so Jacques was tasked with finding a new recipe to present to the marquis,” continues my father, jumping right back into the story. “Jacques put all of his cooking prowess into giving the marquis a suitable dish. He made a paste combining olive oil, mayonnaise and a sweet

mustard, which could then be put on different meats like pheasant or duck, but the marquis sent the 'renard sauce' back and called it unfit even for his dog. So next Jacques prepared a dish where he stuffed artichokes and cauliflower, some of the best in all of France, into a herring and served it over strawberry jam, and once again the marquis sent it back, saying it resembled the foul stench of a horse barn in June. So finally your great, great, great grandfather came up with one last creation, a new dish the likes of which the world had never seen. He took some fine blue cheese, some hard boiled eggs, radishes, and oysters, cut them up and wrapped bread dough around them, creating a cheese, egg and oyster infused bread."

As my father reads off the last ingredients I can feel my stomach get restless, it was like someone had shaken up a soda can, and I was just waiting to pop open the lid. Whether it was the remnants of yet another mustard and sardines dinner, or the ongoing list of of putrid dishes my ancestor had created, something triggered this sea change in my belly. I bring my right hand up to my face and clutch my mouth between my thumb and forefinger, trying to make sure I can keep it shut if something tragic were to happen.

While this was happening my father takes his almost completely smoked cigar and stamps it out in his ashtray. He leans forward, dropping his elbows onto his desk and nestling his interlaced fingers beneath his chin.

As my stomach starts to settle some he continues his story. "So there Jacques was, with what he felt was the best dish of his career. Just as soon as it was done baking he brought it out to the marquis personally to see the pleasure on his face. Unfortunately the marquis took one bite of it and erupted into a fit of coughs and deep hacks, throwing the bread back at Jacques. Needless to say your great, great, great grandfather was entirely defeated at this point. Retreating back to the kitchen he decided to calm himself with one of his favorite treats, sardines in mustard, an old family recipe passed down to him. Walking from the kitchen to his quarters, Jacques quickly passed the marquis. When the marquis saw that his cook had a new food he beckoned him closer, asking to see what he had worked up. Jacques tried to refuse, insisting it was just a little treat and nothing more, that it is not even on the same field as the sandwich. The moment those sardines hit the marquis's mouth his face underwent a metamorphosis, his eyes grew as large as biscuits, and his face struck a grin as wide as the English Channel. He knew that this was something special."

Somewhat confused I stare at my father with questioning eyes, asking him, "So we eat sardines and mustard because our great grandfather..."

"Great-great-great-grandfather," he interrupts me, raising his eyebrows and striking a grin.

“Alright, so we eat sardines and mustard because our great, great, great grandfather made some marquis happy with them?”

“Well not exactly, there's more. After the marquis told him to run back to the kitchen and make more of these delicious little slimy fish Jacques realized he had a million franc idea here, so instead of going back to the kitchen he ran away, hopping the tall wooden fence that lined the estate, and making his way to the city to start a restaurant. Before long sardines in mustard were the talk of Paris, and everyone wanted to go to Chez Jacques, home of the original Dumont sardines. He was making so much money he didn't know what to do with it all. Eventually he tired of managing his own restaurant, so he sold off his recipe to the highest bidder, a canning company by the name of Bumblebees, with the stipulation that every year his descendents get one big case of the tasty treat.”

“So we eat sardines in mustard because you and mom are too cheap to buy other food and would rather take the free sardines,” I ask my father in a cutting tone, shifting my eyes from left to right and back again.

“Well that's part of it, but I mean once we've got all of these sardines, what else are we going to do with them,” he asks us. As I glance back I see that my sister has woken up, but is still not paying full attention. My brother, well, by the glazed over look in his eyes I can tell he's not all here either.

“Alright, I think that's enough of a history lesson for one night, why don't you guys head to bed.” I feel a weight lift up off my shoulders, we've done it, one less evening filled with sardines and mustard. As we walk toward the door there is a slight hop in my step. I make eye contact with my siblings, biting my lower lip, raising my eyebrows and I bob my head up and down slowly, letting them know that victory is ours. Just as we are about to leave my father's study he calls back to us, “Hey kids, wait up for a second.”

We can see him reaching into the drawer of his desk for something, “Don't tell your mother I'm doing this,” he tells us, tossing some indeterminate objects towards us, “she'd never forgive me for giving you food this late.” Looking down we see the old, dusty cans of those familiar sardines. “It'll be our little secret.”