

A Château of One's Own

RESTORATION MISADVENTURES IN FRANCE



SAM JUNEAU

A CHATEAU OF ONE'S OWN

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*Dedicated to Bud, Blue, Grim and Oak
and in loving memory of Hill*

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CHAPTER ONE



‘It Will be Lovely...’

We are sitting quietly behind a vast and elegant seventeenth-century chateau. We have just poured the last of many glasses of a rich, not overly sophisticated, Loire Valley red wine. There is half-melted bleu d’Auvergne cheese curling over the edge of a yellow plate. Laid casually within arm’s reach is the manna of the local *boulangerie*.

The chateau spreads out behind us in stately languor, dominating all around it. It is 10.30 p.m. and the sun only now decides to drift down, sprawling tendrils of light into the forest just beyond. The men have been working on the property for the better part of the day. The gardener brings the richest bounty of tomatoes we have ever dared to desire. The beekeeper unloads a few jars of honey taken from

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fastidious and well-fed bees in the woods. These are our neighbours. This is our chateau.

The Château du Bonchamps resides in all its grandeur in the broad, never-ending river valley of the Loire. It is the seat of noble and almost-noble families going back to 1507. There have been six owners since this time. We are the sixth. Most of our predecessors have served as minor vassals of the Plantagenet dynasty of Anjou. Yes, those Plantagenets, that dysfunctional, ruthless ruling clan made famous by Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn in *The Lion in Winter*, the kings with big appetites and a fondness for ruling Britain and France. We are comforted by the fact that Richard the Lionheart and Eleanor of Aquitaine are buried nearby. The climate is mild, the summers long, the days even longer. We do not serve the Plantagenets. Just the bank.

We have always loved the country house. We have hungrily devoured countless hours of period dramas where the house is often the primary and most interesting character. How many times have we wanted to meet Darcy and the other characters from *Pride and Prejudice* just to spend time at their splendid country houses? How many times have we soaked up the immensity of *Brideshead's* Castle Howard? So, here we are. Delighted and sometimes crushed by the getting of what we asked for. Here we are, drinking wine alongside a half-millennium-old forest, behind a massive castle that some visitors have too generously likened to Versailles. Château du Bonchamps was meant to be our salvation.

IT WILL BE LOVELY..

Like the violent scratch of a needle across an old record, a guest hurries down, out of breath and red-faced. Our reverie pauses.

‘I’m afraid there is a leak in our room. I think it is coming from the bathroom above,’ the rattled Dutchman explains.

‘Let me take a look,’ I say.

I’ve heard it before. I am sure I will hear it again. The thing about the chateau is only emergencies are dealt with. And there are infinite circumstances that can set off an emergency, especially in the summer, when our home turns into a bed and breakfast and guests roam the grounds while the building plots its next ‘incident’. The chateau has surely seen many changes over its lifetime. I think it is safe to say Richard and his lions did not have to run a guest house.

We pad quickly up to the Poplar Room. All the rooms are named after trees on the property. A bit quaint but appropriate. The chateau is embraced by thousands of exquisite trees of all shapes and sizes, young and old. The most spectacular array is a set of twenty-odd sequoia trees in the shape of a ‘V’. To enter the grove is to enter nature’s cathedral. The thick, bulky, tremendous waists of these giants stretch skyward in endless arcs.

I accompany the Dutchman into his bathroom and there is in fact a leak from above. Drip, drip, dripping onto polished marble floors.

‘Hold on. I will check upstairs.’

‘That’s good. But please know, it is not a problem for us. We love your house. I just thought you should know,’ he kindly offers.

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I run up another flight of stairs and burst into the bathroom in the Oak Suite. I was sure the friendly English family there had left for the day. Evidently not. There, in all her splendid womanness, is an early thirty-something mother and her three-year-old child, both as nude as the day they were born. They are in the bathtub doing what people do on holiday; namely, lounging in the bath. The toddler is throwing water everywhere. The ceiling is not exempt from the sweet thing's earnest attempts to express herself.

'I am so, so sorry. Please excuse me. There was a leak,' I explain sounding like a 15-year-old in the first throes of puberty. I stare briefly, unable to help myself. I recover and step out of the bathroom, red-faced and stammering again, 'There was a leak.'

The contented mother understands and is not in the least perturbed.

'It's really OK. We are making a terrible mess, but we will clean up when we get out.'

'Fine. Fine, please take your time.'

I trot downstairs to my curious Dutchman.

'I've found the leak. Just a bit of mess from playtime with baby in the tub. I will have it cleaned up *tout de suite*.'

'That's good. I just wanted you to know. Like I said, we love your chateau. It will be really lovely when you finish the works.' His words are meant to comfort, but they hit an especially sensitive nerve. The house has been 'finished' now for two years. We have not undertaken significant works in all that time. Just disaster relief.

IT WILL BE LOVELY..

I hesitate and refrain from reacting. I want to yell, 'For Christ's sake, can't you see all of the work we've put into the thing already? Do you know how hard we've laboured to bring it to this level? Do you realise we've spent everything we have to make your room comfortable?'

Instead, I assent, 'Yes, it will be lovely.'

CHAPTER TWO



Origins of a Specious Venture

We are first-time homebuyers. But unlike other couples starting out, our first home is a massive seventeenth-century chateau in the French countryside. Five years ago, this hulking French creation became our lives for the near future. Possibly forever. Or so we hoped.

Visitors often arrive at the front door of our chateau with a look of incredulity and awe. The first question to pop from hitherto speechless lips is usually, ‘So, did you inherit this place?’ Impossible, they imagine, a young couple foolish enough to buy such a beast. An old friend of mine recently met me for lunch after a long absence. I was sporting a nice, large, shiny silver watch that my wife Bud had given me, and he noted, ‘That’s quite a large watch. Overcompensating for something?’ I paused. ‘You should see my house.’

ORIGINS OF A SPECIOUS VENTURE

I don't believe every family should buy an unwieldy carcass of refined stone, plaster cornices, endless windows and a centuries-old forest. But I do believe everyone should have a 'chateau', a grand or modest dream that they can call theirs. A chateau of one's own.

Several years ago, we took stock of our lives. Most families in the States and the UK today have two parents working 40 to 50 hours per week, drowning in credit card debt, struggling with a sizeable mortgage, juggling costs for university, worrying about the quality and availability of health care, and dealing with all the other struggles that come with modern life. Combine this with an average commute of 45 minutes a day and the puny reward of a few weeks' holiday, and today's family is, to say the least, living a truly harried life.

As we peered down the road of our respective careers (TV producer and fashion designer), we realised we weren't completely happy with what lay ahead. We were climbing steadily in modestly stimulating jobs, fighting gamely in the hustle of modern urban existence. We couldn't help but feel that there had to be something better than the daily grind, something that would give us more time for each other and for our future children.

It was at our wedding that we realised what this something better would be.

We were married happily in a nineteenth-century castle one hour due west of Dublin. That's where my wife Bud (short

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for Brigid) is from. There's not a whole lot to recommend her part of Ireland except for a few hills and a picturesque mountain range called the Slieve Blooms. But there is a lovely Georgian bed and breakfast stood at the foot of these Irish mountains, named Roundwood House. A destination in its own rights, we chose it as a base for throwing together the last-minute details of our wedding that would take place across the mountains at Kinnitty Castle.

I called the owner of Roundwood from our cramped apartment in New York to enquire about availability. Always on the alert for authenticity, I asked the owner a fairly presumptuous, American-style question.

'Hi. I'm calling from the States. We're looking for a B&B not far from Kinnitty. But I need to know whether or not your house is 'genuine', not overly modernised.'

Frank, in unflappable deadpan, didn't miss a beat. 'Often we are accused of being too authentic.'

I knew we'd found our place to stay.

I won't rattle on with details about the wedding. Weddings always tend to be the same, with the climax coming at the beginning of the marathon – namely, when two enthusiastic souls say 'Yes'. But the event bore fruit in more ways than is normally expected from the union of two.

Frank and Rosemarie had run Roundwood House for some eighteen years when we met them. They managed to raise six beautiful and smart children while living just outside the mainstream. Frank found the world of nine-to-five too constricting. Rosemarie's attention to detail and boundless patience with guests is what made the thing go.

ORIGINS OF A SPECIOUS VENTURE

We were enchanted by their devotion to a dream that was solely created and maintained by them. Not a bad way to spend a life.

We realised that this was the very solution we'd been searching for. What could be better than shedding all of our mundane day-to-day concerns, moving to Europe, and opening our very own chateau bed and breakfast? It would be an escapade of a lifetime.

We had no idea what we were getting into.

And so our journey began.

We searched almost endlessly in Ireland, but as we looked, prices went up, and our hopes drained away. Three years after our wedding we still hadn't found our 'country house'. We did, however, give birth to our baby, Blue. She was a girl born on an island, in a village, at a crossroads – that is Manhattan, in the West Village, at the intersection of Fourteenth and Hudson. With the birth of our perfect baby girl – her only fault was that she breastfed 42 times a day – our dream to own a chateau and live in the country became even more pressing. Like so many parents, we considered our careers less important than our growing family, and we thought opening a bed and breakfast would allow us the freedom to spend countless hours together. Shortly after Blue's birth we decided to head across the great pond to visit Bud's family. We thought it would be good for the Irish, especially Bud's mammy, to see Blue in

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all her infant glory. Luckily, Blue did have eyes to match her name, and a solid disposition.

While we were back in Ireland, we took the opportunity to continue our property hunt. We were having awful luck in our pursuit, and an incident involving an estate agent in Limerick led us to other greener, pastures.

Long known as 'Stab City', Limerick was a beaten and desperate town and its surrounds were only slightly better than the city itself. I arranged the meeting by Internet so the agent knew nothing of our background (specifically 'rich' Americans coming from New York City). This kind-looking, solicitous gentleman suffered from a fairly common disease. For the sake of argument, one might call it 'greed'. We met at a pub in central Limerick and set off in his late-model Mercedes.

'I wanted to let you know, the price of this house has changed slightly,' he began.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I know the listing said £250,000, but the owner wants £350,000,' he ventured tentatively.

If I had a sliver of sense, I might have excused myself from the car right there. But hope springs eternal.

We drove well into the countryside, down twisty lanes and around impossible curves until we arrived at the house. Set majestically on a hill, surrounded by a few stately trees, the mansion seemed perfect, if not at all ideally situated (no one, and I mean *no one*, holidays in Limerick). Even at the new price, the mansion's distinguished eminence seemed well suited to our oversized ambitions.