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C'EST LA Vie







Adventures of an English Grump in Rural France

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Funny, charmingly grumpy. I loved this expat take on the ups and downs of life in rural France.
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C'EST LA VIE

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Adventures of an English Grump in Rural France

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For Samuel, Maurice and Thérence
– mes petits gars

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SCHOOL DAZE

'Do you really live in France?'

Quite often I get asked this question in awe, with a barely concealed hint of jealousy. This was outright hostility, though. It was one of those gigs a comedian has nightmares about. One of those moments when no matter what you do, no matter what you try, no matter how much you turn on the comedic charm or, failing that, poke the wasp's nest with a metaphorical stick, the audience just isn't buying it. You've brought out the old infallible material, you've joked about your jokes not working, you've insulted the bloke with the nasty jumper on the front row… and no, nothing. It's the comedian's worst enemy: indifference.

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The implication from the heckler's question was clear: how could I possibly be successful enough to commute from rural France when I was patently (on tonight's shambolic evidence at least) not good enough for a sparsely attended, poorly lit room above a pub with a cheap microphone and an even cheaper backdrop?

He had a point. I was exhausted, though; the constant travel had finally worn me down, so now, when I needed to dig in,

when I really needed to work the room, there was nothing there. All I could think of, all that was running through my head was, 'But I shouldn't even be here…'

'Whereabouts in France?'

The heckler continued contemptuously, as if by testing my geographical knowledge the whole thinly constructed France charade would come tumbling down.

My half-French wife Natalie and I, together with our young son Samuel and old Jack Russell Eddie, had made the leap from small-town suburban England to the unfashionable end of the Loire Valley, where Natalie's family originates from, seven years previously. We'd bought a property that was far too big for us, in the middle of nowhere, and we loved it. It wasn't just home for us, it was paradise. The plan had been simple: fill the house with a large family and work towards the inevitable (in our eyes at least) time when Natalie would get a job locally and I would give up stand-up entirely and concentrate on writing. It was a plan painted in broad strokes and short on detail, but it didn't seem to matter; it was just obvious to us that one day it would happen.

And pretty quickly we got halfway there; we filled the place with a large family. Samuel, now 11 years old, had two younger brothers, Maurice (seven) and Thérence (three). Eddie had enjoyed her last few years as master of her domain and had died peacefully, only for Natalie, with the zeal of a nineteenth-century missionary, to replace her with two more dogs, two horses, two cats and two hens (not counting many other animal comings and goings), creating a menagerie which collectively had about as much idea of 'peace' as an excitable school trip on a car ferry.

'Don't you miss England?'

A different heckler chirped up now, a woman who tragically – and fatally for a comedian trying to stamp his authority on the room – had apparently taken pity on me.

The truthful answer was a straight, unequivocal 'no', for the simple reason that I was spending more time in England than I was at home anyway. I was fast becoming history's most uncommitted *émigré*. A lot of expats – and I know because I've gigged for them all over the world – will give you a whole list of things they miss about 'home', from Marmite to pubs to *Antiques Roadshow*, to drinking in the street and swearing at traffic wardens. Well, I am an expat and all I was missing was the country that I'd ostensibly moved to in the first place! It didn't seem right. And I was missing my family, animals included if I was pushed. I just wasn't seeing them. Not just 'I wasn't seeing them often enough', but a more upsetting, far more hurtful and damaging, 'I wasn't seeing them much at all.'

'Why?' interrupted the angry heckler again.

The whole gig seemed to be descending into a good-cop, bad-cop heckle-off, while the rest of the audience either checked their watches or stared at the grubby, 1970s-style patterned carpet, all a little embarrassed.

'Why did you go there? Were you run out of the country?'

He laughed at his own joke, thankfully getting even less response than I was getting.

The plan (and that really is giving what was actually just 'a vague notion' far too much gravitas) concerning my retirement from live performance comedy was largely scuppered by the very real need to earn money. We live in a relatively poor area

of France, an agricultural backwater, and any job that Natalie had previously been able to find was minimum-wage and necessitated being away from home all day – hardly possible when trying to care for a sizeable human family, alongside what had become a burgeoning and practically full-time animal rescue centre. In fact it was difficult enough trying to fit everything in even while she was, at this point, on maternity leave.

The only thing bringing in any regular money, therefore, was stand-up comedy and that, for a number of reasons – not least of which my brain's rank inability to remember anything other than a few stock French phrases – was happening everywhere in the world except France. Whereas when we had first moved abroad I would commute back to the UK to work on a Thursday, Friday and Saturday in metropolitan comedy clubs, I was now spending weeks away gigging in the Middle East, other parts of Europe, sometimes North America and especially, for some reason, India – basically anywhere in the world with an expat community, a microphone and a desire for some entertainment from 'the old country'. I was doing well on the corporate circuit in the UK, too, as an after-dinner speaker and awards host. So while the ambition may certainly have been to be at home more, in truth, financially speaking, we'd never been better off.

But we had also never been more apart – and, physically and emotionally, it was taking its toll.

About a year before this Natalie and I had hit upon an idea that we thought could help make our plan a reality, and on paper it looked bulletproof: why not turn our large property to our advantage, make it work for us? Not in a *gîte* or *chambres d'hôtes* way – that idea had been mooted but quickly discarded

on the basis that my social skills, that is, my almost total lack of tolerance for other people, would be tested too quickly and possibly disastrously if people actually had to stay with us. Our idea was to use the space we have, in particular the number of outbuildings, to set up a kind of school – a holiday school – for paying adults to come and learn a skill: painting, writing, pottery; the kind of thing that you see advertised everywhere and that seems quite popular. The intention was to use local hotels and *chambres d'hôtes* to house our students, which meant that local businesses would benefit but also that we would still have our place largely to ourselves. We would call the school 'Les Champs Créatifs' – the 'Fields of Creativity'.

We had done a mountain of research, which had even included going to other places in France to try out courses for ourselves, and decided that as we had contacts in writing anyway we should start with writing courses. There had been a multitude of options obviously: Natalie had been away and done a course in needlecraft that seemed very popular and I had taken a two-day course in French cookery, but we settled on writing. Natalie had done some teaching and could easily have taught a course in languages; I suggested some kind of doctorate in animal rescue and chaos theory, with an extra module in soft furnishings, to which she responded swiftly with a barb of her own: 'Let's concentrate on your skills then, shall we? How about a course in Verbal Abuse of Equines or How Not to Dress in Rural France, or, here's one, a PhD in Moody Git.' Despite this extensive in-house expertise, however, we made the decision to 'hire in' the tutors.

We were genuinely excited by the prospect of what we were trying to create, and although the classic advice is that married couples should never work together, we were loving

it. We decided not to do anything until the necessary building work had been completed, as we simply didn't want the stress. Suppose the building was delayed and it wasn't finished in time? It would mean cancelling the courses and notifying both the tutors and the pupils, and the enterprise would hardly recover from that kind of start. It also meant that we could take our time. It seemed to us that the most important thing was the tutors. Obviously we were providing a peaceful, hopefully creative, location in one of the most beautiful places in the world, but it was the tutors who had to be interesting enough and, to a certain extent, well known enough, to attract paying punters.

Another idea we had was that the writing courses shouldn't be just open-ended 'creative writing' but genre-specific. By appealing to genre enthusiasts we reckoned that we would get genuinely committed people on the courses; by narrowing our market, we thought, we would actually be increasing our chances of success. We chose crime fiction (a hugely popular genre), historical crime fiction (one of the fastest-growing genres and an obvious choice with the châteaux of the Loire Valley as our setting) and travel writing, again making use of our location.

Eventually, the building work was completed (late, naturally) and we began to get excited. I had gained an office, a bolthole where I could work on my writing, and Natalie had done wonders with the classroom itself, despite my mocking the process. A few months earlier it had been a damp storage room and she had transformed it into a shabby-chic, Laura Ashley Mecca with more cushions than there are balls in an IKEA soft-play area. We couldn't wait to get started. Over the

course of our first summer we planned to run four courses (two for crime fiction, one for historical crime fiction and one for travel writing), all of five days each, and with enough space in-between for our students to learn, and hopefully, rest. We'd even left a space at the end of August for us all to take a well-earned holiday ourselves if we could persuade someone to house-sit the 'home-zoo', which wouldn't necessarily be that easy.

We put out an advertisement for potential tutors and couldn't believe the response: hundreds of authors replied, some household 'genre' names, and we went about matching people to dates and suitability. Our confidence grew as more than one friend told us that, on paper at least, we had a winner. The location was perfect, the courses were well thought out and, as we were paying above the going rate, the tutors were going to be first-class too. We were quietly confident; finally we thought we had hit upon something that meant, even if it was only for the summers to begin with, we would be together as a family. I gleefully and confidently left my gig diary blank for the two months that we would be doing the school and it felt good to know that I would be at home.

Now, I'm not one for portents – and for the most part everything had gone smoothly anyway – but, looking back, there were signs there if I had been inclined to look for them. The only time I had been nervous was when I was interviewing a famous crime writer in his local pub over a generously portioned ploughman's. We were very keen to acquire his services; he is a well-respected writer and an experienced 'writing school tutor', so we thought adding his name to the roster would give the opening year an added push. He also

seemed enthusiastic and we were now getting down to the nitty-gritty of dates and finances.

We had just reached the point where I was explaining his fee when his face turned purple. He began to have difficulty breathing and started coughing violently, a hacking cough that tore apart the bucolic serenity of this quiet country pub.

'Were you expecting more?' I said uselessly, misreading his swift descent into a choking death as some kind of elaborate wages protest. 'Other people have said that it's quite generous…'

He loosened his tie with difficulty and staggered off towards the toilets. The few other customers in the bar stared at me as if I'd poisoned the man, and after 20 minutes the barmaid came over to me and quite rightly asked if I thought I shouldn't go in and check on him. My phone rang – it was Natalie.

'Well?' she asked, excitedly. (We had rather pinned our hopes on persuading this author to join us if we could arrange our diaries effectively, hence I was paying for lunch.)

'Erm, I'll call you back,' I replied nervously. 'I think I may have killed him.'

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I hadn't, obviously, and he returned to the table a short while later looking flustered and apologetic – and just as I was very obviously writing the word 'INSURANCE' on a handy beer mat.

'It went down the wrong hole,' he offered, by way of explanation, but in the end we never could match our diaries up well enough for him to teach a course for us, which was possibly just as well if he nearly choked to death every time he ate cheese.

The first writing course was due to start at the end of May and advertising had begun the previous November. We weren't

really sure when we should start our publicity campaign but it seemed best to cover all bases and just go for blanket coverage: the website was up and running, and looked warm and inviting; at the end of the year a well-known glossy magazine did a two-page spread on me as a stand-up and this, 'our new departure'. We began receiving magazines from all over the world, particularly North America and Australia, copies of publications where our full-colour, beautifully photographed and written adverts were featured. Everything was geared up and on time, all we had to do was wait for the enquiries…

Not one came.

Not one enquiry. Not one solitary spark of interest. It got to the point where I asked friends to test the website email link for us and then I would go to the inbox and all that would be there were emails from those friends jokingly asking if there were still any spaces going. It wasn't necessarily even that depressing at first, we were just dumbstruck, absolutely stunned. Every business has its setbacks and we'd even talked about the possibility of not filling 'all' the places on offer and maybe cutting one course out of the schedule if we needed to. But no-one?! Not even by mistake? No-one?

In early spring, when disaster seemed imminent, we had to make a decision. We hadn't banked on absolutely no-one signing up for the courses, but as this was clearly going to be the case our projected income for the entire summer was now a worrying 'nil'. Not only that, we had no savings left. A combination of building work, furniture, preparation, publicity costs and reams of Laura Ashley material meant that we had spent almost £30,000 on our school. We needed money quickly.

I have been in charge of booking my own live performances for years – it has its many advantages and is relatively straightforward, with my diary normally full of gigs at least six months in advance – but at this point I could have done with an aggressive agent standing by ready to fill my diary for me. I got on the phones, as they say, and did my best…

And so here I was. On stage in a room above a pub somewhere in the West Midlands, under a glaring, unforgiving light, the audience for the most part disinterested, as warm banter and genuine laughter filtered up from the bar below. I was lucky to be working at all and, not only that, I was going to be busy too. I would be away most of the summer, when I should have been at home for most of it. At least we were still, ostensibly, in France; me, Natalie, the boys and the flotsam and jetsam of the animal kingdom; we still had that.

What we also needed now, though, was a Plan B.

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